

FOXTROT FOR BEGINNERS

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## Chapter 1

I couldn't believe it. It was my twenty-ninth birthday, a day when I should have been eating salmon pate, drinking champagne, and dancing till midnight in a sexy backless dress, but instead I was sitting in my parents' lemon chintz kitchen being plied with hamburger patties and ice cream cake. This might have been fun when I was eight years old, but seeing as I was no longer a child and that I had just experienced one of the worst days of my life, I couldn't help but feel a touch mortified that I was wearing a paper hat and extinguishing a cake lit up like a bonfire.

It felt like a disorienting dream. I was not supposed to be there. Steve and I had made reservations, I had bought a new dress, and I had eaten apples and rice cakes for the last two days to counterbalance the predicted onslaught of three million calories. I was not supposed to be there!

Don't panic, I thought, stay calm. Think serenity. Think ocean waves. Think glass of wine.

"Jane-darling, make a wish," sing-songed my mother. "And don't forget to specify how many carats. A-hahaha!"

God. Bottle of wine, then.

"Jane, did you see *Fear Factor* last night?" asked my dad. "They had to wear plastic pants filled with cockroaches."

Okay, two bottles.

"Where *is* Steve tonight?" asked Mom. "I set a place for him, too."

"I told you earlier," I grumbled. "He couldn't make it."

“Cockroaches can survive nuclear war, you know.” Dad shook his fork at me in warning. “If we ever have World War Three, they’ll be the only creatures left on the planet!”

“He couldn’t make it to your *birthday party*?”

God, it was like being drunk on a carnival ride.

I’ve never liked birthdays. Who the hell gets happy about getting older? I’m supposed to celebrate the fact that I’m sprouting white hairs at my temples and that an extra ten pounds is roaming nomadically below my waist? I’m supposed to be happy that another year has passed and still not a single goal has been accomplished? I hadn’t been to Europe, learned to tango, or gone sky diving. I hadn’t gotten past *Cinema Paradiso* in my attempt to appreciate foreign films. I hadn’t even conquered frizzy hair, nor grown thin enough to fit into my Max Azria jeans, and still hadn’t ever, *ever* been able to successfully apply liquid eyeliner. And I’m supposed to feel festive? Psh! I’ve had jollier times at the dentist.

Even as a teenager I got depressed about aging. Ever since my fourteenth birthday I’ve calculated what fraction of my life was over and announced it to the assembled party guests: “One fifth! I tell you, one *fifth* of my life is over and done with forever!” I only recently had to revise my calculations, because when I turned twenty-eight I took a test to determine my lifetime expectancy and discovered that due to my smoke-free, drug-free, virtually saint-like lifestyle (how embarrassing) I could hope to live to the age of ninety-seven.

This news was actually quite disappointing, because the previous calculations had been based on an ETD of seventy years, and now my Fraction of Life Used Up figures were seriously less dramatic than before.

But now this. Forced to surrender to the well-meaning but utterly maddening attentions of Bill and Vicky, two alien creatures who called themselves my parents. By this time Steve should have been feeding me tiramisu and massaging my thigh under the table.

I thought I might start to cry.

“Mom. Dad. I have an announcement to make.”

“A-hahaha!” laughed Mom. “We know. One third, right? Ninety-seven’s just around the corner!”

She didn’t think it was so funny when I told her that Steve had just dumped me for a twenty-two-year-old Russian masseuse.

It happened like this: About a month before, Steve had been flipping through my latest issue of *Cosmo*, ostensibly to get the female perspective, but really because he wanted to read “Seven Tips for Mind-Blowing Sex.” And then he found the cards. You know, the little illustrated how-to cards with the different sexual positions on them. Ones like “The Flying Tilt-A-Whirl” and “The Hurricane.” Positions that you should only attempt if you and your partner are both gymnasts, certified scuba divers, and medically

insured. Steve was none of the above, but his enthusiasm for “The Cantonese Hammer” couldn’t be checked.

He hurt his back. (Which might *sound* like a great recommendation for the “Hammer,” but I think it was overrated.) Because of the injury, Steve had booked an appointment to get a deep tissue massage at some fancy spa downtown, the kind with a black marble and chrome postmodern reception room and a ridiculous unpronounceable name like “Zyz” or “Joi” or “Ohm.” Which is where he met Stacia, whose inherent evil was manifested in platinum hair, blue eyes, and very, *very* large breasts. Oh, yes, and apparently she was good with her hands, because Steve didn’t hesitate to schedule her for several private house calls.

I didn’t know about any of it at the time. Steve seemed healed and back to his usual self, which meant he wanted to try “The Golden Dragon” and “The Underwater Death Grip.” I had only found out about the affair that morning, when Steve decided to clue me in to some minor changes he was making to our relationship.

“Jane,” he said. “We need to talk.”

“If this is about tonight,” I said, “the answer is still no. You can’t wear your Nirvana t-shirt to The Stillwater Cafe.”

“Uh, no. It’s not that.” He scratched his head and shifted from foot to foot. “The thing is...”

“Yeah?” I was busy searching the closet for any clean non-wrinkly shirts. “I’ve got to go to work.”

“The thing is, Jane, I’m not going tonight.”

That had my attention. “What?”

“I can’t go tonight. Something’s come up.”

“But it’s my *birthday*.”

Silence.

“Come on, we’ve been planning this for ages!” I was quickly building up steam for a full-fledged scream-a-thon. Steve had been putting in a lot of overtime lately, and I had tried to be an understanding girlfriend, but it was all just a ruse. I’m not an understanding person. Selfishness and bad temper come much more easily to me. “Steven Christopher Jones. You can’t possibly be thinking of working late *tonight*. The twenty-ninth anniversary of the day your cherished girlfriend was born.”

“Uh, no,” he said, guiding me into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He looked so sweet, with his dark, damp, fresh-from-the-shower hair falling into his eyes. Like an innocent child--which he was, almost. He was only twenty-five, a matter which had occasionally caused me some pangs of self-disgust. But he was just so cute, in a Jeff Spicoli sort of way. He sat next to me and held my hand reassuringly.

“What I meant to say was, I’m leaving you.”

Huh, I thought. That can’t have come out right.

“I’ve met someone else. I’m sorry, Jane, but I’m in love with her.”

Although *that* seemed pretty clear.

He told me all about Stacia of the Magic Hands and Breasts of Wonderment, and how they had fallen in love at first sight and couldn’t bear to carry on such a pure love in secrecy. Steve was moving in with her. Immediately. It would do no good to try to talk

him out of it. He was leaving me for his exotic blond beauty ASAP, but he hoped I had a nice evening anyway.

I don't know how I made it through the day. After Steve left, I numbly put on a sensible outfit and drove to school, where I taught five English classes without having any consciousness of what I was saying. I might have told the poor things that Shakespeare was the greatest American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for all I know. If they bombed the SATs it would be my fault.

Or maybe I could blame Steve.

I wandered to the teachers' lounge at lunch time, where there was a garish white mountain of a cake with my name written in pink icing, the kind of cake made entirely from sugar and Crisco and designed to clog arteries and arrest heart function instantaneously. Mindless of the danger, I ate three pieces.

"Happy Birthday!" said Molly, breezing into the room. She's the only other teacher at my school who's not eligible for the senior specials at IHOP. We started teaching the same year, and even though she had one of those scary-genius science minds that are normally stupefying to a Left Brain like me, we got along famously. Like Thelma and Louise, but without the tragic death at the bottom of a canyon. So far.

I looked at her and tried to reply, but what I think I said is "Bwaa?" In the back of my mind I recognized her pale blond hair, heavy-lidded blue eyes, and Mona Lisa smile, but I was still in shock from the morning's revelations, and now also near to sugar-induced catalepsy.

“Oh my god, are you all right?” She was looking at me as if I were an aberrant specimen under her microscope. I might have had a glob of white frosting on my cheek.

But then the bell rang and we jumped up like trained monkeys. “I’ll call you tonight,” she said as we rushed out the door and back to our classrooms.

At 2:30, after all the kids had gone home and I was supposed to be organizing the next day’s lesson plans, my cell phone rang. Maybe it was Steve!

I picked it up on the first ring. “Hello?”

It wasn’t Steve. It was my mom. The last person on Earth I wanted to talk to just then. But after she had sung me the entire birthday song I thought it would be rude to slam the phone down and run into the ladies’ room to drown myself in the toilet.

“Hello, Mom.”

“Hello, Darling! Happy Birthday! What are you doing tonight?”

Panic! What could I say? It was as if, from miles across town, she had been able to sense that my life, as well as my birthday plans, had all gone to hell.

“Oh, actually, I already have-”

“Nonsense! You’ll bring Steve over for a family dinner. I’m making all your favorites. Six o’clock. See you then. Byeee!” And she hung up before I could say no.

She was obviously getting wise to my tricks.

I set down the phone and put my head on my desk. The day had officially reached tragic proportions. I was discarded. I was old. And I was due at my parents’ house in just a few hours. Things could not get any worse. I spent the remainder of the afternoon



enjoying my electric pencil sharpener, grinding twelve new packs of Dixons down to nubs.

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I told Mom and Dad the whole story, except, of course, the bit about how Steve injured his back.

“The little piss-ant,” said Dad. “Want me to beat him up?”

I looked his skinny little old-man arms. “Thank you, Dad, but no.”

He patted my shoulder. “I never liked him, anyway. Never trust a man with long hair.” He gave me a watery smile, hitched up his corduroys, and shuffled into the living room to watch a *Road Rules* marathon. I heard the TV come on and an angry female voice demanding why the day’s grocery money had been spent on Sam Adams and potato chips.

Mom didn’t take the news quite so easily. She had clearly been thinking Steve and I would get married, and it was very shocking to her when things didn’t turn out according to her plans. “I just can’t believe it,” she said, blinking in confusion. “Steve’s a liar.”

“Yes.”

“And a dirty cheat.”

“Yes.”

“That...that good-for-nothing rascal. I wish I’d never laid eyes on him - I never liked him Jane - never - I can tell you now - I never trusted his looks - he always had a scheming glint in his eye - he was roguish, you might say -”

I could sense a tidal wave of matronly scorn headed my way, but I was powerless to save myself. I had learned to just let my mother talk, and to worry about fixing the damage later.

“I saw how it would be - but oh! Jane! I wouldn’t have said a word against any friend of yours - but why do you always pick the jerks? - if I can count on one thing, I can count on you to bring home a bad man - you’re like a magnet for reprobates - oh! Susan has a nephew, a nice young doctor - an optometrist - or is it an orthodontist? - I can never get them straight - go out with him for *my* sake, Jane; I’m getting old and I want to see you happily married before I die.”

Ah. We’d come back to that again. It was a line carefully crafted to inflict maximum-strength guilt, and a personal favorite of my mother’s. She likes to say it even though she hasn’t had so much as a cold since the Reagan administration.

“I could go at any time, you know - I had numbness in my left arm just yesterday, but Daddy said it was from sitting too close to the AC unit - you know your father, he’s got the AC on when it’s sixty degrees out - oh! - and to think I gave Steve’s mother the recipe for Granny’s crab bisque! This is terrible - I never give out my recipes, Jane - you know that - never! - but I thought it would stay in the *family*! Jane! You’ve got to call Steve and ask him to get it back for me.”

“I’m not calling Steve to ask for a *recipe*,” I hissed.

“And why not?”

“Mother.” I was channeling my best Lady Catherine Debourgh tone of condescension. “He’s just. Dumped me. For a bimbo. I’ll never ask him for anything ever again, whether I need a recipe or an *ambulance*.”

We glared at each other across the table, grim-faced and stony, but after a few moments she threw up her hands.

“Oh, alright already!” she huffed. “But Granny Froude would roll over in her grave if she knew those Joneses were eating her soup.”

It could have been worse, I guess. He might have proposed, and then I’d have been in *real* trouble.

## Chapter 2

The next morning I awoke feeling as dry and brittle as a rye crisp, with a screaming headache and a trail of crusty dried slobber down my chin. Wonderful, I thought. Now I remember what it's like to be single.

Upon arriving home at my empty house the night before I had followed through on my wine threat, and figured that while I was at it I might as well throw back a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a kosher dill pickle, and three Little Debbie snack cakes. The memory of my binge was vague, but it was brought into sharper focus when I sat up and felt my stomach jump and kick like Michael Flattley in *Lord of the Dance*. Good thing it was Saturday, and I was at liberty to stay home and throw up as long as I needed.

I glanced at the digital clock radio on my nightstand. 8:17. Debating whether or not to get up and risk inducing an explosive reverse-digestion display, I decided it was wiser to stay in bed a while longer, and snuggled further down under my cream-colored quilt. Outside it was a bright and breezy autumn day, and the hardwood floor of my bedroom was dappled with rosy sunspots. I heard Mrs. Beatty's Subaru start up next door and drive away, and the muffled conversation of two people walking past, probably on their way to the bakery down the block. Normally I'd leap out of bed and plunge headlong into my day, unwilling to let time go by in idleness. I like to be doing things, especially when other people are doing things. Whenever I try to be normal - to sleep in on a weekend like a civilized person - I wake up with a jolt of guilt and panic and I think, the wheels of commerce have been turning since eight o'clock and I'm still lying here in

yesterday's underwear? I need to get out there and buy a bread machine or an electric toothbrush or a quart of Penzoil or something!

But not today. I was licking my wounds.

Steve may not have been the perfect boyfriend - okay, there were times when he wasn't even a mediocre boyfriend. But at least he had been *my* boyfriend. Yes, he often left his dirty AC/DC t-shirts and balled-up socks on the floor. Yes, he sometimes picked at his teeth with a steak knife after dinner. Yes, his knowledge of literature was limited to John Grisham and the "Everybody Poops" series. But sometimes he was nice to have around, like when I'd be rooting through the fridge looking for anything non-moldy and finding nothing but mustard and a can of tuna, and the doorbell would ring and there would be Steve with a bag of Chinese take-out. Or when I'd be grading papers at the kitchen table and he'd walk by and kiss my shoulder on his way to grab a beer. I certainly wouldn't have stayed with him forever, but I hadn't been planning on giving him up just yet.

But I could deal with all that. I'd been dumped before. I knew that I'd eat a few cartons of Ben and Jerry's, rearrange my furniture, maybe get a new haircut, and I'd be over it soon. I had learned that lesson from fifteen years of disastrous dating: Steve was only one of many, many men that I had tried and failed to have a relationship with. My tales of courtship horror were starting to become infamous in the darkened halls of Portland's singles bars. Sort of like urban legends, but without the metal hook hanging from the car door handle. At least, not yet.

There had been Jon, the sexy (and criminal) accountant who “moved” to Mexico without telling me. Then Eric, an artist, who I had thought was perfect until I found out he was doing more than just *painting* his models. Then Michael, a very mild-mannered chef, who one evening asked if he could put a bit of banana chutney on my womanly parts. And then Brian, and Scott, and Trent...my relationships had all disintegrated in fabulously embarrassing ways, usually involving illegal activity, beautiful women other than myself, and, once, a pair of Peruvian chinchillas. (Don’t ask.) It was as if the male population had long ago hatched a secret plot to rid me of any girlishly romantic notions.

But every time a man had tried to stretch me farther than I could go, I pasted a smile on my face and snapped back into proper form each and every time. Jane Tulliver, the human equivalent to the elastic waistband. I’d get over Steve. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was, I knew I couldn’t face going back out into the singles scene.

As far as I’m concerned, Hell is a trip-hop dance club. There is nothing more painful than stuffing myself into a halter top, catching a cab downtown, and gyrating in a sea of Ecstasy-crazed teenagers while strange men take turns rubbing their zippers against my butt. Call me old-fashioned, but I think it’s terribly rude for anyone to present his erection before he’s even introduced himself.

I had also had my fill of donning black turtleneck sweaters and full make up just to sit at Starbucks sipping lattes grown cold and reading torturous Salman Rushdie novels in the hopes that some hot guy would wander past and think I look mysterious and intelligent. It is possible that, in the hundreds of hours I’ve logged in this practice, I’ve

improved my mind and become a better person. But I doubt it. Mostly I read the same incomprehensible paragraph over and over again and try to hide my irritation that all the comfy chairs have been taken and I'm left perching on the hard wooden one that is treating my spinal column like a balloon animal.

Likewise, I couldn't bear the thought of renewing my gym membership and spending all my extra time pounding away on the treadmill with a calm, faraway look in my eyes as if I were enjoying some sort of Power Bar/endorphin rush transcendentalism, while secretly I'm two steps away from cardiac arrest and trying to figure out how to get off the torture machine without being hurled against the wall. It's no use meeting a good-looking man with a neck like a tree trunk if your Lycra shorts have embarrassing sweat rings in the groin, you've plaster dust in your hair, and you're being loaded onto a gurney.

Basically, I was really tired of trying to meet men at sports bars, art museums, outdoor markets, antique malls, veterinary clinics, grocery stores, bowling alleys, Ace Hardware, Waterfront Park, disco nights, Yahoo! Personals, the ATM line, Otto's Sausage Kitchen, jazz concerts, punk concerts, rock concerts, Portland Opera concerts, Jiffy Lube, PTA meetings, ice skating rinks, karaoke parties, malls, elevators, the Belmont Library, and Ole Ole. Pretty much the only places I hadn't tried were darkened alleyways and gay bars.

I was really sick of it. I needed some time off.

I also needed more sleep. All this thinking was worsening my hangover.

The phone rang, forcing me to roll over and reawaken the beast inside my stomach. I scanned the room for the waste basket - just in case - as I picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“For fuck’s sake,” said Molly. “Why didn’t you call me back last night?”

Oops. When I had returned from my visit to the parental nest the night before, there had been seven messages on my machine: “Hi Jane, it’s Molly, calling to see what was up with you today. Gimme a call me when you get in.” *Beep!* “Jane. I’m getting worried; call me back.” *Beep!* “Jane. I’m imagining that your fridge has toppled over and you’re trapped beneath it, or you’ve burned the popcorn again and passed out from smoke inhalation. If you’re still conscious and physically capable of dialing, call me back.” *Beep!* “Pick up the phone. Pick up the PHOOOOOO-ooooooooone. The phone! Pick it up! Pick it-” *Beep!* Etc, etc.

“Sorry, Mols,” I said. “I had a bad night. I forgot.”

“Never mind that. What’s going on?”

I told her about Steve.

“Oh, Jane. You poor thing. I’m so sorry.”

“You are not,” I said, laughing weakly. “Don’t lie.” I knew that Molly had never really warmed to Steve, despite my best efforts to coax them into friendship.

“You’re right. I thought he was a mawkish plebe.”

“Geez. Tell me how you really feel.”

“He was a shit-head.”



“I was being sarcastic,” I grumbled. “I liked your fake sympathy better. Could I please have some more of the cooing and the fawning?”

“You don’t need cooing and fawning. What you need is to get out of bed, make friends with a bar of soap, and eat some fruit or take a vitamin or something.”

How did she *know*?

“And then,” she continued, “you need to come hang out with us at Nachos tonight.”

“Oh, I don’t think-”

“Nonsense. It’ll make you feel better.”

“But I-”

“Beef fajitas, Jane. Melted cheese.”

“I don’t-”

“Don’t be a mope. Nachos. Seven o’clock. Be there.”

I didn’t have the strength to argue. “Okay.”

I had barely hung up the phone when it rang again. Why was it suddenly okay to call people before 10:00 a.m. on a weekend? Was I the only person who agonized over getting people out of bed, preferring to pace by the phone till mid-morning? Apparently so. I saw on the caller ID that this time it was my brother.

“Hi, Andy.”

“Sugar-boo! I’ve heard the news. Vicky was on the horn before breakfast to spread the gospel of her bitterness. Sergio caught an earful - I was in the shower - he had

to bear the brunt of it, poor little puss. But how are you? Is the flower of your soul crushed beneath the boot of rejection?"

"Er, no. Let's not talk about that. How's the restaurant?" Andy owns a restaurant that makes something called Asian-Italian fusion. I find this hilarious, as my brother knows how to cook only scrambled eggs and chocolate chip cookies. If he were ever called on to actually *make* something Asian-Italian, he'd probably serve bean sprouts in marinara sauce.

"Not talk about it? Not talk about it? Honey-pie, what kind of Neo Feminist do you call yourself? Of course we have to talk about it. Do you think millions of women burned their bras in the sixties so you could sit there and repress your feelings? No! This is a confessional society we're living in, Jane; get with it! You'll be a big fat nobody until you've told the whole world about your teenage drug addiction, your panty-sniffing fetish, your affair with a pair of twin midgets--"

Andy likes to pick on me whenever he thinks I need cheering up. His philosophy is that being mad is better than being sad. Once when we were kids I was crying in the coat closet because, in a fit of ill-judged creativity, I had shorn Cheerleader Barbie's silky nylon hair with a pair of safety scissors. Then Andy found me and threw my doll in the toilet, and I was so angry that I spit a loogie in his eye, which made him forget that he was trying to be nice. After Mom peeled us off the bathroom floor she grounded us from TV for a week, which was *really* bad because it meant missing "The Dukes of Hazard." But at least I didn't care about stupid bald Barbie anymore.

“-a description of your third nipple and your experiences with high colonics. And all *I’m* asking for is a report on your feelings about the departure of Poopy-pants Jones. Come on, Jane. Talk to your loving brother.”

“Hm. Let’s see,” I said. “I sold my body to a Norwegian dairy farmer, I was born with a tail, and I’m totally fine about Steve.”

“Two truths and a lie?”

“No, really. I’m fine. I was a little stunned yesterday, but now I’m moving on.”

“Excellent! Because there’s a new guy at the restaurant, a minx of a waiter, with the tightest little-”

“No! Oh, no. You’re not setting me up again.”

“Why not?”

“Because the last time you said you had a nice man for me, you sent me on a date with a guy who talked about his mother all night.”

“George? He was nervous, that’s all.”

“What about Alex, then?”

“What was wrong with Alex? The man was a dream: successful, handsome, sweet as sugar. I thought he was perfect.”

“That’s exactly my point,” I said. “Wally Cleaver is *your* type of man. Not mine.”

“But you like Sergio.”

“Yes, I *love* Sergio. For *you*.”

Sergio had been Andy’s boyfriend for almost two years. They had met in a yoga class: Andy hates yoga but he went to scope out the fresh meat; Sergio was the new

instructor at the gym. He was about four and a half feet tall but with the proportions of a Calvin Klein model, with coffee-and-cream skin, wavy black hair, and sleepy Latin bedroom eyes. All it took was a few minutes of deep breathing and a Downward Dog, and Andy was smitten. Sergio was a great guy, but I had one small problem with him: he was nice to *everybody*. He held doors open for elderly ladies, talked with strangers at the post office, and tipped waitresses generously even when they forgot to leave the salad dressing on the side. And he referred to my mother as “Mrs. Tulliver” even when she wasn’t around, even though Andy told him it was okay to call her The Old Battle Ax or Icky Vicky, like we do.

Such indiscriminating respect would never fly with *me*.

“Well. Fine,” sniffed Andy. “I won’t do you anymore favors. What’s your next move then?”

What? Was I supposed to do something? “What do you mean?”

“Duh! I mean, what will you do now to fill the empty gaping hole that Steve used to occupy? Pun intended. Ha!”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please.”

“No, I’m serious. It’s been twenty-four hours. Isn’t it time for you to get another boyfriend? I read in the *Willy Week* that there’s a bi-curious fetish ball tonight. You might be able to pick up-”

“Actually, Andy, since you ask, I have decided to take some time off from dating for awhile.”

It didn't become a resolve until the words escaped my mouth. But why shouldn't I? It made perfect sense. I had been on the frontlines for half a lifetime. I was overdue for a little R&R. I could take a vacation from dating. It would be a learning situation, a little preview of my future if I never found Mr. Right: I could take up a hobby and spend more time with my friends. And then if I reached the age of forty and was still alone, I'd simply learn to play bridge and adopt a dozen cats.

"Come again?" said Andy.

"Er, yes. You heard me. I'm going to celebrate my independence and, um, find myself. As of this very moment, I am taking a vow not to date for, um, six months."

Silence. Had we been disconnected? "Hello?"

"I'm here. I'm just...surprised."

"Why?"

"Oh, I - no reason. Listen, I think that's a great idea. You should relax, take up painting or gardening or whatever it is that people do to commune with their inner child. It'll be good for you."

"That's what I think, too."

"Just one word of advice."

"What's that?"

He muffled a laugh. "Don't tell Vicky."

### Chapter 3

Nachos is one of those perplexing kitsch-chic places that looks like it was designed by Davy Crockett but somehow still attracts amazingly stylish customers: beautiful people with mod hairstyles and black leather boots lounging around on spotted cowhide loveseats as if it were all a kinky Vogue photo shoot. There are tables, but very few people deign to sit at them, choosing instead to mingle around amidst the potted cacti or to strike poses against the wood paneling. The menu offers food, but few people deign to eat, not wanting to dribble salsa on their Diesel jeans, and generally preferring to hold a fancy colored drink, suck in their cheeks, and look sophisticated. They come because the bar boasts forty-one varieties of fruit-infused booze.

My friends and I, on the other hand, come because we love spicy beef.

Molly, David, and Meredith were already there when I arrived because I had been battling it out with my hairdryer and had left the house late and frenzied, as usual. It always takes me too long to get ready to go out. There are the freckles to cover with foundation, the boring brown eyes and invisible lashes that require two coats of mascara, and the pale cheeks that beg and plead for blusher. Not to mention the untamable curls. Long ago, tired of being that person that everyone has to wait for, I had tried starting my daily beautification routine fifteen minutes earlier, but somehow that just meant I had more time to get mascara smudges on my eyelids and accidentally dry my hair into the shape of a Christmas tree. I had had to reach a state of Zen acceptance about my tardiness, as had my friends, who were kind enough to overlook it.

As I approached the table they started shushing and hissing at each other like a den of snakes.

“Hi,” I said cautiously, sitting down.

“Geez, we’re starving here, Jane,” said Molly. “If it weren’t your birthday dinner I’d have ordered without you.” She shoved a handful of tortilla chips into her face.

“Hi,” said Merry and David. They were sitting on their hands, looking at me with flying-saucer eyes.

“Oh!” I gasped, my hand flying to my hair. “I know. I ran out of de-frizzer-”

“Jane,” said Merry, her beautiful eyebrows crinkling in concern. “We’ve heard.”

Oh. Was that all? I was about to tell them anyway. But I *was* a little miffed. They *knew* how much I liked to make dramatic announcements. I frowned at Molly.

“Oh, come on. You can’t have expected me not to say anything.” A bit of damp chip flew from her lips onto David’s arm. “Sorry,” she said, retrieving it from amongst the bristly arm hair and popping it back into her mouth. David watched the proceedings with detachment, being used to Molly’s unique standards of etiquette.

“Oh, well,” I said, smiling. “I’ll just have to do something stupid so I have more stories to tell. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“That’s the spirit,” said David. He shot me a little wink. “Let’s get some tequila inside you so you can start working on that.” He made some kind of flirty signal to the waitress, who took our food and drink orders and went away blushing under the spell of David’s brown eyes and wide smile.

David had been my sister's boyfriend for a little while back in high school, but my parents had loved him so much that Dilsy had no choice but to dump him for a gothic kid with a motorcycle. Unbelievably, David had still wanted to be friends with her. And through some inexplicable clique-mutating process never before seen among teenagers, he had become my friend too, even though Dilsy and I went together about as well as dog turds and coffee cake. David was a veterinarian now, and another one of those super-doooper nice guys who likes everybody, whether they're ax murderers or saints. (Or St. Bernards.) He was able to overlook everyone's flaws, which I found endearing when it was *my* flaws being overlooked but annoying when it was other people's. Especially people I wanted to criticize.

"But why didn't you call me?" asked Merry. "I would've come over, if I had known. I could've snuck away for a few hours."

It was very difficult for me to maintain a neutral face at this comment.

Meredith was my best friend, and the only one in my close circle who was already married. We met when we were twelve, when my family moved onto the same street as hers. I had been lonely and shy, with a whole summer to kill by myself before school started, but she had shown up at the door one day, a skinny kid with a shiny brown ponytail and big blue eyes, and invited me to come swim in her backyard. She had brought out juice boxes and chocolate grahams on a fancy silver tray, and I had remained a devoted friend ever since.

Then one day, there we were, just two best friends away at college together, sharing clothes and sex tips, when out of nowhere appeared this handsome, hunky



business student with a square jaw and a buzz-cut, and suddenly I was watching *Friends* by myself on Thursday nights while Merry was out canoodling in Darren's Eclipse. They got married right after graduation. For eight years they had been together, and not once had Darren ever joined our little group for dinners out or bowling nights or dessert parties. Not once.

It was taking me a long time to get adjusted to the idea that my Number One Person (Merry) had a Number One Person who not only A) wasn't me, but B) was an anti-social creep. There should be a self-help book about it: *How to Accept That Your Best Friend is Married to an Asshole (For Dummies.)*

"Oh," I said, summoning my inner poise. "I know, Mer. I just didn't get the chance. Besides, I'm totally fine."

"Are you?"

"Absolutely. It's already ancient history."

"Because if you need someone to talk to, I'm here for you. You can call or come over any time. Darren's on a business trip this weekend anyway."

Inwardly, I imagined Darren being the size of a grape and squashing him under my foot. Outwardly, I smiled. "Thanks, but I'm really okay. It's no big deal."

The drinks came just then, and after flashing another hundred-watt grin at the waitress - who was by that time reduced to a simpering, giggling idiot - David raised his glass.

"Here's to Jane being fine," he said. "You're better off without that leech anyway."

“Amen to that.”

We drank our Technicolor margaritas and settled into the kind of random chit-chat that sounds really profound at the time, but afterwards you can never really understand what made it so. I suppose it’s easy to dismiss causal connections when you’ve made friends with Jose Cuervo. Some choice samples of our discussion:

“But if oxtails come from cows, why do they call them oxtails?”

“Marketing ploy. Who would ever order cow-tail soup? ‘Oxtail’ sounds more exotic.”

“Who would ever order *oxtail* soup? Why wouldn’t they just order a slice of pizza or a turkey sandwich or something?”

“But that’s not exotic.”

“I’ll tell you what’s exotic. Emu burgers.”

“Have you ever had one?”

“Er, no.”

“So I said to the guy, ‘Christ, man, put that thing away, you’ll set the Board of Health on me.’”

“What happened?”

“He bought a mini cheesecake and a honey-glazed pear tart and walked out.”

“Geez, there’s a lot of crazies in this town.”

“Yeah. But the weirdest part was, I think it might have been Clint Eastwood.”

“It couldn’t have been Clint Eastwood.”

“Why not?”

“Because I read he’s on the Atkins diet.”

“They were right in front of the window. I couldn’t help it.”

“Did it occur to you to look away and give them some privacy?”

“No. If they wanted privacy they wouldn’t be doing it in front of the window.”

“Still, you didn’t have to watch.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve seen in real life what every other man in America has to rent on video. It was one of the best days of my life.”

“Ick. You’re such a pig.”

“I even got it on camera.”

“Ooh. Can I see?”

Later, when we were all sipping coffee and sobering up, I told them about my new six-month sabbatical from dating.

“So, what do you mean?” asked Molly. “You’re going to like, climb a mountain and achieve wisdom?”

“Well, I hope it won’t involve that much exercise,” I said. “All I really had in mind is to just lay low for awhile. I’m tired of putting so much energy into dating.”

“You really think you can go for six months?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “What, you think I can’t?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never seen you do it before.”

“But you can still hang out with us, can’t you?” asked David.

“Of course. I’m not giving up all social activity. I’m just not going to date.”

“I think that’s wonderful, Jane,” said Merry. She leaned forward and rested her chin on her delicate hands. “You can take a step back and look at the big picture. Figure out what you want, what’s really important to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Just that you obviously haven’t found what you’re looking for yet.”

“Tattooed men with good jobs and stable mental health are less common than you might think.”

It was a cold night. The sky overhead was clear and cloudless, but the haze from the city lights obscured the stars. The headlights from the passing traffic were blinding as the four of us huddled against the wind.

“I’m parked two blocks that way,” said Molly, flailing her right mitten.

“I’m up that way, too,” said Merry. “I’ll walk with you to your car, and then you can drive me to mine.”

“Where’s your car?” David asked me.

“Down there,” I said, pointing the other way.

“I’ll walk you.”

I thanked them all for the lovely dinner and we quickly hugged our goodbyes. Meredith and Molly hurried off, and David offered his arm and escorted me down the sidewalk. We were silent for a few moments, then from out of nowhere a Journey song popped into my head. I was powerless to fight it. I had to sing. I opened my mouth and belted out a verse about cheating lovers who would end up crying someday too.

David joined me for the grand finale of nah-nah-na-nahs, then we stopped at a crosswalk and waited for the light.

“Jane,” said David. “Are you really okay?”

“Sure,” I said, looking up at him. His nose and ears were turning bright red in the cold and he looked about twelve years old. “I’m starting to look forward to this independence thing. Maybe I’ll learn to sew my own clothes. Or play cricket.” The signal changed and we crossed the street and kept on going down the block.

“Or join a spelunking crew?” asked David.

“Exactly.” We reached my car. I dug my keys out of my purse and turned to David. “Why do *you* do it? I mean, you’ve been single for, I don’t know, ages now, and you could have any girl you wanted.” I cocked my head at him in mock scrutiny. “You’re not secretly gay, are you?”

“No.”

“Are you hiding a grotesque physical deformity?”

“No.” He laughed.

“Are you sure?” I asked, looking him up and down.

“Want to find out?” He leered at me and waggled his eyebrows Groucho Marx-style.

I pushed him lightly. “Come on,” I said. “Be serious.”

“Well, it’s like Merry said.” He took my keys and opened the door for me. “You have to know what you’re looking for. If it’s not there, there’s no point.”

I must have looked confused, because he laughed. “Goodnight, Jane.”

“Want a ride to your car?”

“No thanks. I’d rather walk.”

“Kay. Goodnight then.” I got in my car and started it up. When I pulled away from the curb, I saw David in the rearview mirror, waiting on the sidewalk to make sure I was safe. I gave him a little toot on the horn. He raised a hand and waved, and turned to walk back the way we had come.

## Chapter 4

When I was in the second grade I had a really hard teacher, one who didn't believe that anyone should get 100% on their spelling tests. However, I was an excellent speller, having mastered the principles of phonics at the age of five; I was, therefore, a constant threat to Mrs. Huntsacker's theory. I aced not just my tests, but my pre-tests as well. There was no word Mrs. Huntsacker could throw at me that I couldn't figure out. So Mrs. Huntsacker decided that she would give me a harder test than the rest of the class; while the other kids worked on "pear" and "pair," I got "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." No joke. But I got 100%.

The same day that I brought home my gold-star spelling test, Dilsy played "Fur Elise" in a piano recital. My mother gave her a standing ovation and bought her a new pair of Mary Janes; to me she said, "But that's not even a real *word*! I don't know what they're teaching you in that school."

That's pretty much how it's always been in my family. Growing up, Dilsy excelled in music and ballet, and I excelled in academics and sports. If Dilsy got the lead in the school play, I matched her by making the varsity softball team. If she was voted prom queen, I was voted class president. We were both over-achievers, and it seemed like we were always in some sort of competition to see who was the best. But there was no way I could win in my mother's eyes, not unless I did something revoltingly feminine like sew a satin pillow in Home Economics or sing a solo with the school's Belle Choir. Which I did not.

I suppose it's not fair to hold anything against my sister. It's not her fault that she likes to do that sort of thing and I don't. It's not her fault that my mother's ideals of womanhood are based on Betty Crocker. (How did my mother happen to miss 1969? Was she at home washing her hair?) No, the only thing I hold against Dilsy is that she, like my mother, criticizes me for not being more like her.

After high school Dilsy went to a music conservatory in Boston on a full scholarship for playing the piano. She could have become famous, could have toured the world playing Mozart and Chopin, but instead she married Ronald Dean Thurston III, a Harvard man. He's the type of fellow who wears navy blazers with brass buttons, listens to *Turandot* in the car, and thinks that homeless people are homeless because they're too lazy to get a job. When he graduated they moved back to Portland, and he joined the most prestigious law firm in the city, while Dilsy started keeping house and "doing" lunch with the other "wives."

My mother practically wet herself with joy. Her oldest daughter was not only married, but married to a man who would one day soon become a millionaire. The only thing that could have made her happier was if Dilsy got pregnant and started popping out some kids. Which Dilsy did with remarkable haste. My mom still gets giddy with excitement whenever she runs into some long-lost acquaintance in the frozen foods aisle at the supermarket and she has the chance to reveal her trump card, the one piece of evidence that proves she was a good mother: "Oh, your Jenny's a single mother on welfare, is she? Wonderful! I'm a grandmother now, too! Did you know Dilsy married a lawyer? A-hahaha!"



Colin and Harry, ages six and four, are now the axis around which Dilsy's world spins. They're very cute (favoring my sister instead of her husband, who has a nose like a penis) and very clever, and Dilsy serves them as if she were a chamber maid to their royal highnesses. Both of them have social calendars that would rival Prince William's; there are play dates and oboe lessons and soccer practice and French tutors. I can never talk to Dilsy for more than two minutes without her having to dash off to some child-related event. And she never calls me, not unless her babysitter has cancelled and she's desperate.

Which is why it came as such a surprise to me when, a few weeks after the Steve fiasco, the phone rang and it was my sister.

"Hello, Jane," she said. Where did she learn such elocution? "How are you?"

"Oh! Dils! Um, you know, busy." It was partially true. My list of must-watch TV shows was growing longer by the day. "You?"

"Jane, please try to remember I go by Delia now. I refuse to let you turn my name into baby talk."

"Oops. Sorry."

"Never mind that. I haven't sat down all day. Harry has the stomach flu and I spent the entire morning at the doctor's office, only to have them tell me to give him 7-Up and soda crackers. Then Colin came home and told me his class is having a Pioneer Potluck tomorrow, so I had to figure out what to make. Did pioneers eat apple pie?"

"I think they-"

“Never mind. At least it’s homemade. Last year Cindy Wallace sent her son to school with a can of beans for the Cinco de Mayo festival. A can of beans!”

I was still trying to decide what sort of reaction Dilsy was looking for when she continued. Apparently my participation in this discussion was not required.

“And the restoration is coming along, but the designer is obviously incompetent. I specifically told her I wanted all-white contemporary minimalism, but last week, what did I find? Mauve accents in the bedroom!”

Dilsy and Ron recently purchased a towering Victorian mansion in the West Hills and are now supposedly “restoring” it, which really means they’re having it torn down and rebuilt as a glass and chrome wonder. At the time, I wondered why Dilsy didn’t just buy the glass and chrome wonder that was for sale next door to the Victorian mansion, but I soon came to realize that would have defeated the purpose. She gets off on the demolition.

“I almost fired her on the spot,” Dilsy continued, “but she’s one of the partner’s wives.” She expelled a heavy sigh. “I hate that vintage frou-frou garbage, but Ronald says I’ll just have to put up with her and re-do the colors later. Excuse me. Colin! Put that down! Mommy said put that down! Put that...there’s a good boy. Anyway, listen Jane. I’ve had an idea and I need your help.”

“Oh?” My internal alarm was going off. Danger, danger!

“Well, as I’m sure you are aware, Mom and Dad’s anniversary is coming up this summer. And I think...” She paused for dramatic effect. “...we should throw them a party.”

Huh. "But we always throw them a party."

"No, Jane, I'm not talking about some trailer-trash backyard barbeque. I'm talking about an elegant black-tie reception, in a candlelit hall, with caterers and champagne and two hundred and fifty of my closest friends."

Ugh.

"But Dils - I mean, Delia - isn't that the type of thing you do for a golden anniversary? Mom and Dad have been married for-" Quick calculation. "-thirty-five years. That's sort of a weird number, don't you think?" As soon as it came out of my mouth, I realized it was the wrong thing to say to the woman who made a career out of being our mother's favorite.

"Weird? *Weird*? You say that as if you thought thirty-five years of marriage didn't mean anything."

"I didn't mean-"

"I know what you meant. I don't care if it's *only* their thirty-fifth anniversary; the point is that they've never had a nice party before and they're getting old and I want to do something nice for them. Don't *you*?"

"Sure, but-"

"But what? You know Mom would love it."

It was true. My mother would love it. If it involved buying a new dress and showing off to her friends, Mom could be counted in.

"But what about Dad? He hates to dress up."

“He’ll be relieved that he doesn’t have to plan anything himself. Besides, he’ll do it to make Mom happy.”

Poor Dad. Story of his life. I could just picture him spending his anniversary standing next to the buffet table, eating coconut shrimp and tugging at his necktie. But it was true that he’d do anything for Mom, even dress up like a penguin and dance in public.

I sighed. It sounded like a good idea. So why did I have that unshakeable sense of doom?

“Dils – Delia - whatever. Listen. I don’t know anything about planning a party like that. I’m the one who plans the backyard barbeques, remember? I know which kinds of beer have screw-tops and how long to grill a hamburger so it’s done all the way through. I think the party idea is nice, but I don’t see how I could be of any help.”

“It’ll be easy, Jane. I’ll give you a list of things to do and you can call me if you’re unsure about anything. Now, we’ll have to get started right away because we only have nine months. First you’ll need to find a ballroom somewhere; I have a list of places for you to go look at. Then you have to choose colors and order flowers and the cake-”

“Hold on. That sounds like kind of a lot. What are *you* going to do?”

“Jane,” she sighed. “I have a husband, two kids, and a crumbling house to look after. I don’t have time to be running all over the city looking for the perfect Chantilly cake. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do: I’m going to *pay* for it.”

“Hey,” I snapped. “Do you think I sit around all day eating muffins? I have a career. I have a life. I don’t have time to find a Chantilly cake, either.” I didn’t even know what a Chantilly cake *was*. “Why don’t you just hire someone to plan it?”

“Because I can’t trust a stranger with something like this. It’s too important. It has to be you.”

“But I don’t want to do it,” I pleaded.

“Please, Jane.” She sounded really tired. “I can’t do this without you.”

Now, let’s get one thing straight. I didn’t just fall off the turnip truck. I knew that Dilsy was manipulating me, that her argument was previously rehearsed and finely calculated to strike my innermost core of womanly compassion and familial guilt. I knew that if I agreed to help I would be signing myself up for months of torture and chaos and obligation. But what could I say? My sister never asked me for help. And there might have been a teeny, tiny part of me that still craved my mother’s approval. If I put together the most beautiful party ever seen, my mom would have something to be proud of me for.

“Okay, Dils. I’ll do it.”

I knew that I was saying ‘yes’ to my own doom, just like Dorothea Brooke from *Middlemarch*. Maybe I would have a hysterical fit, too, and impart some elegance to my situation.

## Chapter 5

“Are there any volunteers to read aloud their sonnets?”

There is nothing like asking for volunteers to make the room go instantly quiet. Conversations end mid-sentence, heads bow down, and even spitballs seem to screech to a halt halfway to their target and drop harmlessly to the floor. No kids ever want to read their poem out loud. It's a lose-lose situation: if the poem is good, their classmates make fun of them for being a patchouli-scented wuss. If the poem is bad, their classmates make fun of them for being a moron. Of course I know this. But I like to pretend I don't, because, like the un-hip English teacher that I am, I try to encourage honest creative expression. Sue me.

It is also possible, only in the most subconscious and non-malevolent way, that I was about to punish a certain uncouth young gentleman for blurting out, in the middle of a discussion of Sonnet 116, that Shakespeare was a fag.

“No volunteers?” I called gaily. I paced down the aisle between the second and third rows, surveying my kids. Thirty-two faces studied their notebooks. “Well, then, I'll have to pick somebody.” I looked animatedly around the room, pretending to consider Megan here and Krista there, as if I hadn't already decided twenty minutes ago who was getting called on today. My prey was hunched over his desk, making his blond dreadlocks fall over his eyes. “Jordan Deneveer!” I boomed, sounding like I was announcing the contestants on *The Price is Right*. “Will you please bring your sonnet to the front of the room?”

Jordan didn't move for a moment, then suddenly lurched out of his desk and swaggered to the front podium, full of cocky self-assurance. I watched him with mingled disappointment and admiration: I realized immediately that he was *dying* to read his poem, which probably meant that it was full of swear words and/or drug references, but I couldn't help but be a little envious of his confidence. That was *definitely* a guy thing. Girls can never tell when they've written something good, so they usually fear reading aloud more than they fear, say, falling to their death in a broken elevator. Guys, on the other hand, think that *anything* they've written is a masterpiece, whether it's an ode to their skateboard or a treatise on why *Star Wars Episode I* was way suckier than all the rest.

Jordan tossed his mane like a defiant pony and read, in a voice like the Crypt Keeper, his poem:

*Flesh will rot and fall away  
Bones will crumble and decay  
Life runs out and bodies die  
Among the worms we'll all soon lie  
They'll eat our brains, our lungs, our heart,  
And from our coffins never part  
Until there's nothing left of us  
Except a stinking blob of puss*

Well. It certainly rhymed.

A few giggles erupted around the room, and then everyone began clapping and laughing. Jordan took a bow, but then the bell rang and all minds turned towards after-school plans: basketball, Spanish Club, making out in the Taco Bell parking lot. Poor Jordan. Celebrity is so short-lived.

“Thank you, Jordan,” I called dryly over the noise of people slamming books, packing up, and pushing each other out into the hallway. “That was very descriptive. Not a sonnet, but very descriptive. You should read *The Island of Dr. Moreau*; I think you’d find it really uplifting.” To myself, I thought: I know one person in the room who’s getting a ‘D’ on this assignment.

But, you know, not mean-spiritedly. It’s just that in my classroom, the centuries-old rules of formal poetry get the respect they deserve.

And then they were gone. Off to play grab-ass and eat junk food, lucky devils. But not me: I had to get ready for a date with some geezer named Oscar, who was going to give me a tour of his ballroom.

I wish that were a euphemism. I was still committed to my date-free existence, though so far it wasn’t exactly the enlightening experience I had anticipated. I hadn’t “found myself” yet, even though people kept giving me tips on what I should fill my time with. Especially Merry, who was ringing almost daily to tell me about some new Salsa-robics class at her gym or a great documentary on Chinese game shows. In her own misguided way, she was really determined to enrich my life. And then there was Andy, who was supposedly recording my man-withdrawal symptoms to aid medical research. (“Day Twenty-one, Jane. Tell me how you feel. Any night sweats? Sleeplessness? Uncontrollable diarrhea?”) David, at least, supported me in normal ways, that is, taking me out to emergency ice cream whenever I panicked. (To be fair, that had only been necessary twice so far: once when there had been a spider the size of a Big Mac in my bathtub and I had had to catch it myself, and once when I saw a spot on the nightly news



about some woman in Chicago who had died in her living room in 1997 and had only just been found, not by her family or friends, but by a burglar who was after her TV.) So far, the only thing I'd found that really made me happy was a Friday night makeover show in which two chic Manhattanites attacked some poor slob on the street and forced her to spend \$5,000 on new clothes. I was praying someone would nominate me to be the victim.

When I arrived at Fancy-Pants West Side Ballroom Place (referred to as "Pinecrest Country Club" in the brochure) I was tired and cranky and the only thing I'd eaten since breakfast was a nasty three-day-old scone from the teachers' lounge. But I was impressed. The place was two minutes from downtown Portland, yet it sat high up on a hill amidst ancient, moss-covered trees. When I got out of my car, assisted by a chivalrous valet attendant, I looked around and was stunned by the view: fall foliage in the late-afternoon sun, city skyline framed by endless blue, and a snow-topped Mt. Hood in the distance.

Inside, the lobby was almost as spectacular. The ceiling was very high, and a crystal chandelier the size of a Volvo hung in the center of the room. The walls were covered in royal blue damask, which was offset by the cherry wood floors - which in turn were accented by exotic Persian rugs in deep reds, blues, and greens. Over the intricately carved reception desk hung a fifteen-foot oil painting of an English foxhunt. The place

screamed of old money and Republicans. I knew it was exactly the kind of place Dilsy had in mind.

I casually made my way to the receptionist, as if I and my pilly Gap sweater came there all the time. “Hello,” I said, leaning on the desk. “Jane Tulliver. I have an appointment with Oscar to see the ballroom.”

The receptionist, a lovely woman with amber-colored eyes and a glossy black chignon, glanced up at me and then down to her appointment book. “I’ll let Mr. Carlyle know you’ve arrived, Miss Tulliver. If you’ll please take a seat, he’ll be with you dye-rect-leh.”

Wow, even the receptionist was posh. I sauntered over to a grouping of enormous velvet wing-back chairs and tried to perch elegantly, but I ended up having to launch myself up like a child with a booster seat. The chair was so deep that my legs stuck out and dangled a foot from the floor. I was still struggling to squirm into some semblance of a sophisticated pose when a pair of charcoal-gray pants stepped into my line of vision.

“Miss Tulliver, welcome to Pinecrest.”

Oh my. Oscar was not the dapper elderly gentleman I had been expecting. He was, instead, sex in a suit. He looked about my age, with smooth creamy skin, spiky black hair, and impossibly blue eyes, sort of a wide-shouldered Collin Farrell-type, exuding boyish mischief.

“May I?” He extended his hand and helped me out of the torturous chair.

“Thank you,” I breathed. Who was I kidding? Just because I had sworn off dating didn’t prevent me from being interested. Think, Jane, think: say something witty. “I

thought from your name that you'd be as old as my grandpa." Nooooooooooooo! "Um, I mean-"

He gave me a funny look. "Well. My mission since childhood has been to shatter all those preconceived notions. You might also be surprised to know that I don't live in a garbage can on Sesame Street."

Shit!

Then he smiled. "Mine's on Sixth and Broadway."

I laughed in relief. "Sorry," I said. "Sometimes I'm offensive without even trying."

"It's okay," he said. "Let me show you the ballroom."

We walked down a long hallway lined with gilded mirrors the size of barn doors and antique tables topped with garish arrangements of lilies, which perfumed the air with a strong peppery scent. At the end we came to a pair of arched French doors and Oscar swung them open and gestured for me to enter.

It was perfect. The ballroom was cavernous, easily large enough to hold three circus tents, an Office Depot, and all of my parents' friends from the Neighborhood Association. Two adjacent sides of the room were entirely made of floor to ceiling windows, giving the room an outdoor feel, and several doorways opened out to a large enclosed terrace above the garden. I crossed the room to take it all in. The view was amazing, even better than the one from the front steps: the ballroom was higher up on the hill, so in addition to the trees and the city and the mountain, there was also a glimpse of a silver thread of the Willamette River.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said Oscar from behind me. “The perfect backdrop for your wedding.”

“Oh!” I whirled around. “I’m not getting married. The party is for my parents’ anniversary.”

“Oh,” he said, smiling. “Well, even better.”

Was he flirting with me?

“How long have they been married?” he asked, coming to stand beside me.

“Thirty-five years in July.”

“That’s a long time. They must be very committed to each other.”

I snorted. “More like they should *be* committed. They drive each other crazy.”

He gave me a little wink. “Sounds like true love.”

“If by ‘love’ you mean ‘psychosis,’ then yes, I’m sure it is.”

Oscar laughed, a warm, rich sound that echoed in the empty ballroom. “Come on, I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Ooh, yes *please*.

We walked through the building together, and Oscar pointed out all the noteworthy features for me to simmer about. Then we went outside, where it was just getting dusk and chill, and strolled through the garden admiring the topiaries and water features. It would have been very romantic had it not been for the fact that Oscar was wearing a name tag and trying, albeit very charmingly, to get me to invest several thousand dollars in his country club. This is a business transaction, I kept reminding myself. Not the Pemberley scene from *Pride and Prejudice*.

But that decided me, really. Any place that could make me feel like a Regency-era heroine was definitely a keeper. When I forked over the reservation deposit it had nothing to do with my lusting after a certain foxy tour guide.

“Miss Tulliver,” said Oscar, smiling. “I think you’ll be very pleased with your decision. I’ll personally see to it that all your needs are satisfied.”

I got out of there before I did something stupid. For the sake of my six-month plan, I hoped I wouldn’t be seeing too much of Oscar.

## Chapter 6

“Now, breathe deep...good...and imagine that you’re a butterfly. What do you look like? Are you an orange butterfly? A blue one? How big are you? Keep breathing now. In...and out. Gooooood. In...and out. Remember that your ribcage should be out and your spine straight, as if you had a string attached to the top of your head, pulling you up. Gooooood. Now that you’re a butterfly, let’s give you a home. Maybe you live near a sparkling clear brook. Can you hear it gurgling as it dances downstream?”

*Aaaaaarrrrgggghh.* I was in a big white room surrounded by vegetarians and yoga hippies, being made to “visualize my happiness” by a middle-aged woman with the dubious name of Willow, whose professional uniform consisted of a pair of purple stretch pants and a “Grow Organic” t-shirt. Any minute now I was sure she was going to tell me my aura was yellow or blue or black, or whatever it is that signals repressed anger and deep despair.

“In the distance there is a mountain,” droned Willow. “A beautiful blue mountain topped with snow.”

“Merry,” I whispered. “I’m getting out of here.”

“No,” she whispered back. “Give it a chance.”

“But this is *stupid*.”

“It’s not stupid. You’ll love it, I promise.”

“Quiet, please,” called Willow. “Let’s concentrate on the blue mountain.”

Concentrate on the blue mountain? How could I concentrate on anything but how embarrassed I would be if anybody from school learned that I was in a class called Visualizing Your Path to Spiritual Harmony?

“Your butterfly wings are carrying you closer to the mountain. You’re flying over a grassy plain, a wide field of soft green grass. Can you see the grass? Can you smell it?”

My butt was going numb. I wished I were sitting on a green grassy plain instead of a hardwood floor. The mat that Willow had offered me was about as effective as a sheet of notebook paper.

“Feel the wind on your face as you fly over the plain. You’re free. You’re weightless. You’re flying effortlessly towards the blue mountain, getting closer and closer.”

An image of Oscar with his shirt off popped into my head. No! I corrected myself. Mustn’t think of him. Mustn’t break my vow. I wonder if he has any tattoos?

“You’ve reached the blue mountain now, and you’re flying up its rocky face. Higher and higher, you’re climbing to the top.”

At least in this class, I thought, the exercise is virtual. I don’t have to do any climbing or sweating as long as I can imagine it. Maybe if I imagine myself losing five pounds, I will.

“Higher...higher...you’re racing to the top now, flying as fast as you can. You’re almost there...a little more...and you’ve reached the top! What do you see there? What do you see at the top of the blue mountain?”

At the top of the blue mountain I saw a sign. It read, “You’re paying forty bucks an hour for this, sucker.”

“Good idea, Merry. I’m glad you brought me along today.”

“You’re such a liar.” She rolled her eyes at me. “I know you hated it.”

We were waiting in line at the Starbucks near Merry’s gym. Outside, the trees whipped around in the wind, beginning to shed their autumn leaves, and dark clouds blocked out the sun. It was a gray day, but the inside of a Starbucks is always cheerful: sunshine yellow walls, brick-colored armchairs, Frank Sinatra on the stereo, and the happy gurgling sound of the cappuccino maker as it froths the milk.

“Sorry,” I said. “I tried.”

She waved her hand at me. “It’s not for everyone. We’ll find something else for you.”

I got a caramel latte and a Black Forest muffin; Merry got a double espresso with no sugar. We gathered up our bounty and hunted down a table by the window, which looked out into the passing traffic.

“Are you on a diet?” I asked, making a face at Merry’s puritanical drink.

“No, but you know how I feel about the pastries here.”

“Mmm,” I grunted, biting into my muffin. “Snob.”

Merry is a pastry chef, the fancy kind that makes custom wedding cakes shaped like swans or the Empire State Building. She’s fantastic; she baked as a hobby when we



were kids, but then she got her business degree and opened her own bakery. A few years ago she was even featured on the Food Network: they showed her icing a cake that turned out to look like Cinderella's glass slipper. But being around high-class baked goods all the time has taken a toll on my friend; she no longer has a taste for common sweets like oatmeal raisin cookies or chocolate pudding - or even a Starbucks muffin. Now she only gets her fix from top-of-the-line treats: plum cake with vanilla bean custard or honey-glazed gooseberry tarts. She's a dangerous friend to have; she's always bringing me chocolate éclairs.

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Besides, I can't eat now. I'm too stressed."

"But we just had relaxation class. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. The usual. My mom wants to know when Darren and I are going to give her a grandchild, the dishwasher's on the fritz, and Becky, the new girl, booked us for three custom cakes on the same day. Insanity. I'm praying that somebody's wedding gets called off."

"Mm. What'd you tell your mom?"

"What? Oh. That if I ever saw grandchildren for sale at Neiman Marcus, I'd pick one up for her birthday." She took a sip of her coffee and pulled a face. "Seriously though, Jane, Darren and I couldn't possibly have a baby now. We'd have to be having sex for that, and I hardly see him more than once a week lately."

"That's awful!" I said, thinking that if I were married to Darren, once a week would be too much. "Why?"

“His company is getting ready for some big merger and they’re sending him to L.A. all the time for meetings and hand-holding. He says it should calm down in a few months, but in the mean time, it sucks.” She shrugged her shoulders. “But what can I do, right?”

“Well...but...if he *were* around more, would you want to have a baby?”

She looked at me from under her lashes and gave me a rueful grin. “Come on. I can barely keep the houseplants alive.”

Oh, thank you god thank you thank you.

“So,” Merry chirped, changing the subject. “How’s the Tulliver Anniversary Hoedown shaping up? Find a barn big enough for all the cowboys yet?”

I filled her in on my tour of Pinecrest.

“So what are you saying? You like this guy?”

“No, I said I liked the *ballroom*. The view from the terrace is fantastic.”

“But you described the tour guide more than the terrace view. ‘Magnificent oceanic eyes,’ you said. I’m guessing you like him.”

“I don’t like him,” I sputtered, rolling my eyes. “I don’t even know him. I just found him very attractive, okay?”

“Let me guess. Boyish, slightly scruffy, big muscles, looks like he plays in a punk band in his off hours. Am I close?”

“He wasn’t scruffy,” I argued. “He was wearing a suit.”

“Jane,” sighed Merry. “It’s the same old story.”

“What do you mean?”

She shot me an exasperated look and plopped her hand on her chin. “You always go for the slacker guys who look like they’re going to skateboard off into the sunset, and then they always do and you wonder why. Do you think this Oscar guy is going to be any different?”

“All I said was that he’s cute. I’m not going to see him.”

“Don’t give me that. I see what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?”

“You’re trying to figure out a way to see this guy. You’re thinking that you’ll just bend the rules, or blow the whole thing off, and go out with some guy you don’t even know just because he’s cute.”

I pursed my lips. There might have been a tiny kernel of truth in that statement. Not that I really would have done anything, but Oscar *had* been my top fantasy for the last few days.

“And history will repeat itself,” Merry continued, “and he’ll turn out to be a loser and a jerk. I don’t understand why you do this to yourself.”

“I see,” I mumbled, looking out the window. “You think that my...bad luck with men is my fault.”

She sighed and took my hand. “I think that you have a history of jumping into relationships with men who are totally wrong for you.”

I frowned at her and pulled my hand away. “You don’t understand what it’s like, Merry.”

“Then tell me.”

“I hate being alone. Single women get no respect,” I said, picking at the remains of my muffin. “When I don’t have a boyfriend, everybody treats me like I’m defective. I’m under constant pressure.”

“From your mom, you mean?”

“From everybody.”

“Not from me,” said Merry.

I shrugged. How could I tell her that she was wrong? She never actually said anything, but our friendship had been different since she got married, and I knew it wasn’t just because of my problems with Darren. It was because I was single and she was married. We were two different castes. That’s how things were, not just with us, but with women all over the world. I knew that if I ever got married, I would be more accepted by my married friends...and probably distanced from the single ones.

“But anyway,” I said, changing the subject, “how can I even think about getting married when every single guy out there is either a jerk or a freak?”

“Not every guy,” said Merry, shaking her head. “You just seem to have a particular fascination with jerks and freaks.”

“It’s not like I pick them on purpose,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Sometimes I wonder.” She swallowed the last of her coffee. “Listen. Just promise me you’ll stick to the six-month plan. I think it will be so good for you.”

“Of course. I was never thinking of quitting in the first place.”

Merry beamed. “Good. And you won’t be alone, you know. If you need me, you can call anytime.”

“What, like if I urgently need some more visualization therapy?”

She cocked her head and grinned at me. “You never know, it might grow on you.”

“I kind of doubt it.”

“Well, at least you’ve already discovered one thing you’re sure you don’t like. It’s important to know yourself.” She glanced at her watch. “Oops. Sorry, I gotta go. Darren’s flying in tomorrow morning and the house is a wreck.” She stood to go and ran her hand through her hair. “Wanna try Country Kickboxing on Wednesday night?”

Not on your life. “Um, let’s see, shall we?”

That night I couldn’t stop thinking about what Merry had said. Or rather, what she had implied. I knew that I went out with a lot of losers. That detail of my life was certainly no secret. But Merry seemed to think that I was going out with losers on *purpose*, as if I had some sort of psychic powers. It didn’t make any sense. It wasn’t fair. How could I know who would turn out to be a jerk? It’s not like they carried around little signs: “I’m a big fat liar!” or “I’ll say anything to get laid!” Obviously my friend had been married for so long that she had forgotten how dangerous it was in the dating pool.

I also couldn’t figure out what it was she wanted me to do during my six months, although apparently it involved more fun classes with Willow. How was taking a few classes going to change my love life? If I took up step-aerobics would I meet the man of my dreams? If I learned to snorkel would all life’s secrets be revealed? Merry had made it

sound like six months from now I'd be a different person, a better, happier version of myself.

I didn't know if I believed it, but I hoped so.

I spent the following afternoon hauling furniture up the steepest flight of stairs ever built. I was helping David, the proud first-time homeowner, move into his new place, a stunning three-bedroom house near Laurelhurst Park. It was quite a change from his tiny apartment in the Woodstock area; apparently he had been saving for quite awhile. I couldn't even conceive of buying a shack, let alone a two-story house. When I had asked him about it, he answered simply, "I have a family of four, Jane. I have to think about the boys."

Indeed he did. David was a huge animal lover, which was a great perk for me, because I got to visit his three dogs any time I wished and yet was not required to share in any of the walking, feeding, or poop-scooping responsibilities. It was like having a fling: all of the fun and none of the commitment.

I *loved* David's dogs. Bully was a twelve-pound Scottish terrier with manners like British royalty. When the other dogs begged at the table, Bully looked at them with pitying scorn and put his nose in the air. He had been David's first dog, and was sort of the stuffy granddad of the other two. Oliver had been brought to David's clinic as a stray a few years ago after being hit by a car, and David had nursed him back to health and then adopted him. He looked like some kind of beagle mix, with big brown spots and

floppy ears. He had sad, watery eyes, but he never stopped wagging his tail. And Duke Orsino, whom I had helped name, was a yellow lab puppy that liked to give sloppy kisses and chase tennis balls. Sometimes when I was feeling low, I went over to David's just to play with the dogs, and it always picked me up.

Now, I supposed, I was repaying my debt.

"Don't you have any buff guy friends that can help you with this?" I puffed, trying to maneuver one side of David's beige recliner through the doorway. We had already unloaded the queen-sized bed, the nightstands, the dresser, and all the boxes marked to go upstairs, and my arms and back were killing me.

"Yes," he wheezed from the other side. "But they were all busy. Trust me, you weren't the first person I called. Try turning it this way."

We made it across the threshold and staggered through the foyer and into the living room, where we deposited our burden. The house was like something from an HGTV special, all golden hardwoods, bay windows, and hand-carved staircase railings. I strolled to the back of the house and peeked into the kitchen: marble countertops and state-of-the-art stainless steel appliances. Through the glass French doors in the breakfast nook I could see that the yard was almost a quarter of an acre.

"I just can't get over it," I said. David had trailed in behind me. "It's amazing."

"Do you like it?" he asked hopefully.

"Who wouldn't?" I answered. "It's perfect. I'd kill for a house like this. Can I sleep in the laundry room if I promise to do all the cooking and cleaning?"

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "No can do. I'm afraid I've already sampled your cooking."

"I told you, that casserole was an experiment. Besides, that was months ago, and I've been watching a lot of *Emeril Live* since then."

We went back out to the U-Haul truck and wrangled the dining table down the ramp and up to the front door. As we tried to get through the doorway, Duke and Oliver came racing down the hall and jumped up on our legs, while Bully watched the proceedings from the top of the stairs.

"No, Duke! Down!" I hollered, almost dropping my end of the table.

"Duke, go lie down!" ordered David, and the dog trotted over and jumped up into the chair we had just brought in. Oliver followed and sat on the floor.

"Very obedient," I commented.

"We've been working on the training," said David, walking backwards with his end of the table. "Duke even knows how to make scrambled eggs now."

We centered the table in the dining room and went back out for the chairs.

"So," David said, picking up a chair in each hand. "Meredith told me you met some new guy."

"Not really," I said, frowning. "She's making a big deal out of nothing." I grabbed a chair and we headed toward the house again.

"What about the no-dating thing? Aren't you still doing that?"

"Yes," I snapped. "I told you, it's no big deal."



“Okay, okay. No need to get mad.” We carried the chairs in and put them down by the table. “Want a drink? I have water, milk, or beer.”

“Beer, please.”

David took a couple of Coronas out of the fridge, popped them open, and handed me one. “Sorry, no lime. Haven’t done the major shopping yet.” He sat down next to me on the floor.

“Sit over there,” I said, pointing him across the kitchen. “You don’t smell so fresh.”

He laughed, taking off his baseball cap and wiping his grimy brow. “No offense, sweetheart, but neither do you.”

I lifted the collar of my t-shirt and smelled myself. Ew. “Oh well. To hell with it, then. A toast?”

“To being smelly?”

“To your new house.”

“Ah.” He grinned. “To friends who help me move into my new house.”

“To friends who invite their helpful friends over to the new house for dinner.”

David laughed. “Pizza or Chinese?”

“Pizza,” I sighed. “I deserve pizza today.”

We drank our beers and listened to the strange silence of a half-empty house. Outside, I could hear the neighbor’s kids shrieking and giggling on the other side of the fence, and off in the distance a lawnmower rumbled to life. But in David’s kitchen everything was quiet and still, and suddenly my exhaustion caught up to me and my body

felt like lead. I wanted to lie down and sleep for a week. I rested my weight against David's side.

"Come on, Supergirl," said David, shaking my knee. I must have dosed off for a second. The shadows across the floor were a little bit longer. "Let's get everything in the house before it gets dark."

"Unghhh," I grunted.

"I'll let you pick the pizza toppings," he bargained. "And then you can lie on the couch as much as you want. Me and the guys will even let you rub our tummies."

## Chapter 7

The following Monday, Molly cornered me in the teachers' lounge just as I was retrieving my sack lunch from the community fridge.

"I need to talk to you," she whispered. "In private." She jerked her head to the side, motioning me to a table.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked. "There's nobody here but us."

"Come on," she urged, pulling me over to a chair and sweeping off crumbs with her hand. "It's important."

The teachers' lounge, I feel, is much like a public restroom. It's a little bit smelly, full of crazy people, and riddled with stains you shouldn't sit on. But no matter how repulsed you are, you still have to spend a bit of time in there. Ours was particularly awful. It was an olive green room with gray linoleum flooring and only two windows, which had been painted shut for as long as I could remember. There were a few cheap round tables of the variety you find in schools and a scattering of hard red plastic chairs. To the left was a lemon yellow refrigerator left over from the Nixon administration, some brown cupboards and a ketchup-encrusted countertop, a microwave that always smelled like burnt popcorn, and a sink that no one ever cleaned. On the wall above the sink there were about thirty wooden pegs, from which hung every teacher's favorite mug; most of them had pictures of apples and said something cute like "I Luv Teacher," but some of the more daring ones read "I'd Rather be Fishing" or "Shopaholic."

Against the right wall sat a brown and orange plaid couch with lumpy pillows; nobody had gone near it since a rumor spread among the faculty last year that Dina (Phys. Ed.) and Brian (Social Studies) consummated their relationship (supposedly secret) on those very cushions. In the corner there was a pile of well-worn issues of Good Housekeeping, which we used to A) squash bugs, and B) read in desperation in case Hester Quinn, harpie-at-large, was the only other person in the room. But that doesn't really work anyway. Hester will gripe at you whether she thinks you're listening or not.

I sat down with Mols and took out my ham and cheese sandwich. "You don't mind if I eat while we're talking?"

"Not if you share with me," she said, searching through my lunch bag and coming out with a packet of M&M's. She ripped them open, poured herself a handful, and shoved the whole wad in her mouth.

"Listen, Jane," she said when she had swallowed. She looked over her shoulder, as if she thought she'd find the head secretary lurking behind her, just waiting to eavesdrop. The coast was clear. "I met somebody."

"Oh?" My stars, this *was* news. Molly was picky.

"Yes. At Powell's Books. I was looking for a Yiddish dictionary and he was trying to find a used thesaurus. We met in the reference aisle." She raised her blond brows as if this was significant.

"What did you want with a Yiddish dictionary?" I asked, my mouth full of food.

"Oh, I got invited to a briss."

"I'm pretty sure they speak--"

“Jane. It’s incidental. Focus.”

“Sorry. Go on.” I gestured that the floor was hers and took another bite of my sandwich.

She crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair. “His name is Tyler Morgan and he’s a fireman. He grew up in New York and moved here six years ago for a girl, but she dumped him for a radio DJ. And...he likes to snowboard.”

Molly was a diehard snowboarder, one of those nuts who went up the mountain practically every weekend from December through April. I had gone with her once after she had promised to teach me, but after spending twenty minutes with me on the bunny slopes she had given in to temptation and ditched me for more hazardous terrain. It had ended up being a good learning experience for me; after falling down a few times I realized that my time was better spent in the lodge with a cup of cocoa.

“Well, well, well,” I murmured. “He sounds right up your alley. Is he good-looking?”

“Sooo cute. He looks like a taller, beefier version of Ben Stiller.”

Somehow that didn’t necessarily sound like a good thing to me, but Molly seemed to think it was. Far be it for me to judge; after all, look where my taste in men had gotten me.

“So how did you meet?”

“Well, I thought I was alone in the aisle so I was trying out some of the phrases from the book. Only it turns out he was behind me, and he thought I was talking to him. He said, ‘Excuse me? Did you just call me a fat grandma?’ He’s half Jewish, you see.

Isn't that a coincidence? And then we started talking and we hit it off and he gave me his number."

"That's nice," I said, swallowing the last of my lunch. "When are you going to see him?"

"So you think I should see him?"

"Wait - you're not sure if you want to?"

"I don't know. I really liked him, but-"

"But?"

"What if I go out with him and it turns out he's not what I thought?"

Trust me, I thought. That's a given. "Mols, that's what dating is for. If you don't like him you can throw him back."

"But I really want it to work."

"Then go *out with him*," I said, rolling my eyes. "It's not going to have a hope of working if you never even have a first date."

"I know you're right. I'm just too keyed up." She grabbed my hand. "Jane, he could be the One."

I stared at her like she had just grown two heads. "Don't start saying that, Mols."

"I know; it's crazy. But you know I hardly ever meet a guy I like. And I really like this one. It has to mean something."

"Uh-uh," I cautioned, shaking my head. "Don't do that, Molly. That's crazy talk. It doesn't mean something until it means something, and it doesn't mean anything yet."

"But you said I should go out with him."

“Of course you should, if you like him. But don’t go into it already planning your wedding, for god’s sake. First just go and see if you can stand him for two hours.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. God, I’ve been such a wreck since I met him.”

Now *there* was an auspicious sign. “Just play it cool for a while, Mols.”

“Play it cool. Right.” She nodded grimly, like a woman on a mission.

The door swung open and Ethel, the head secretary, waddled in. She was the kind of woman who cultivated a look I liked to call Schoolroom Chic: her bulbous, potato-like frame was draped in a powder blue cotton knit dress with an embroidered kitten on the chest pocket, her short gray hair was permed and swept into a matronly pompadour, and on her feet she sported navy wool socks with white orthopedic sandals. I prayed every day that my career would not do that to me.

Molly and I stopped talking.

“It’s all right, girls,” tittered Ethel. “You can say what you want. I won’t tell a soul.” She made her way to the counter and picked out a donut from the bakery box someone had left there. “By the way, did you hear about Marie Souza from the district office? Three months pregnant!”

For me, making a list is a stress-relieving activity; I like to make lists the way other people like to do yoga or knit scarves. It’s my way of fantasizing, I guess. I love to make out grocery lists and imagine all the lovely foods I’ll buy; I love to make To Do lists and picture how very productive and efficient I’ll be the next day. I make lists of my

favorite songs and favorite movies, names to consider when I have kids, ideas for costumes or party themes or great date destinations. I have a list of goals for my five-, ten-, and twenty-year plan. I even have a list of words I like to say, including 'frangipani,' 'ensemble,' and 'caribou' (which I actually pronounce 'cariboo-boo.') Other women have diaries; I have a book of lists.

That week I made a list of things I might want to do in the next six months, things that might enrich my life and make me a better person. Anything that wouldn't mean spending any more time imagining myself as a butterfly. So far I had:

1. Read all the books that am supposed to know but don't.
2. Attend plays and/or symphonies written by famous dead people.
3. Learn to make quiche (eggs, spinach, what else?)
4. Take ballet lessons; learn to be naturally graceful.
5. Study Italian via cassette tapes (the kind one listens to while sleeping, if possible.)
6. Visit art museum regularly, become expert on Cubism (what is it?)
7. Write letters to long-distance friends.
8. Take relaxing weekend trip to beach; work on tan.
9. Watch five-hour-long BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*.
10. Go running.

That last one made me stop. Did I really want to try that again? I knew I hated running on the treadmill at the gym, but I had always been sort of envious of those people you see running around the neighborhoods, the ones who have coordinated short-short



outfits and sweatbands, and devices strapped around their chests and upper arms. They look so determined, so professional.

I imagined myself in sleek black running tights and a navy windbreaker, my toned legs pumping away as they propelled me down the street. Hurtling past house after house, my long hair streaming behind me, I resembled a female version of the Terminator, my mouth set grimly as I chased after invisible quarry. *That* would enrich my life.

Of course, it had been many moons since I had exercised those muscles. But I could pick it up again, right? It was just like walking, only faster.

Dilsy called me on my cell phone while I was trying on sports bras in the fitting room at Target.

“Hello, Jane,” she purred. “Just calling to check up on how the party planning is coming along.”

“Fine,” I said, struggling out of a fuchsia jogging top the size of a dime. The sports industry expected me to wear *that* in public? “I reserved the ballroom at Pinecrest.”

“Ah, yes. Pinecrest. It came so highly recommended. I had a feeling it would be just the thing.”

“Yeah. It’s perfect.”

“Excellent. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about the cake. Just a sec. Harry, dear, go find Nanny. That’s right. Mommy’s busy. Pardon me, Jane. Anyway, I’ve been talking to some colleagues and I have a list of names.”

My left arm was trapped in a Lycra straightjacket, but I stopped thrashing when I heard Dilsy’s business-like tone. “I was going to ask Merry to do the cake.”

There was a blank silence.

“You know, my best friend, Meredith Green? She’s a professional baker.”

Dilsy cleared her throat. “Jane, I’m sure she’s very talented, but I think for a gala of this sophistication-”

“I’m telling you,” I interrupted. “She *is* talented. Her designs are very sophisticated.”

“Of course, but I doubt-”

“She’s been featured in *Food & Wine*, Dilsy.”

There was a lovely silence, the delicious sound of my sister backpedaling. “Oh. Well then. What a charming idea.”

Ha! “Is there anything else?” I asked sweetly.

“Yes. Don’t forget to talk to the Pinecrest people about the linens. I want lilac tablecloths, Jane. Lilac. Not lavender, not orchid. Lilac. If you have any problems, call me.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes. “Bye.”

I hung up the phone and stared at my reflection in the mirror. The reality of my legs in running tights was not at all what I had pictured in my Terminator fantasy. For

one thing, it wasn't my muscles that were bulging. My legs looked like two spandex-encased chicken drumsticks. How was it that every molecule of fat I ate took a bullet train to my inner thighs? Why couldn't some of them take the scenic route to my breasts?

I opted for the less-fashionable-yet-more-concealing gray tracksuit, and vowed that when summer arrived, I would not only look stunning in leggings, but in coordinated short-short ensembles as well.

## Chapter 8

Suddenly it was Thanksgiving. I had hardly noticed it was getting close, what with all the errands I had been doing for the anniversary party, the outings I had been going on with my friends, and of course, my full time job as a shaper of young minds. (Which, in addition to the actual teaching and grading of papers bit, also required that I show my school spirit by attending football games, advising the yearbook staff, and participating in the seniors' Homecoming skit by dressing up as a cougar and shaking my fanny in front of the entire student body to the tune of "Twist and Shout." Go Cougars!) So I hadn't really paid much attention to the impending holiday, other than to observe, every now and then, the dazzling array of pies available at the Safeway bakery department. Perhaps I was blocking the holiday from my mind as a safety mechanism.

My mother, on the other hand, had not forgotten about Thanksgiving. Indeed, it had been in her thoughts since Labor Day, when she had called me from her vacation in Vancouver to ask if my new boyfriend – Steve - would like her sage dressing, or should she make a fancier one like sausage peppercorn?

"Gosh, Mom, I don't know," I had answered.

"Well, does he like sausage?"

"I think so." I knew Steve liked hotdogs, anyway. "But don't make a lot of work for yourself. Why don't we go out to eat?"

"Out! Out to eat on Thanksgiving? You can't go *out* on *Thanksgiving*."

“Sure you can,” I said. We had been having this discussion every year of my adult life, and every year she pretended she had never heard of such a thing. “Lots of people do. Molly says her family goes out to Chinese food, then has a frozen cheesecake from Trader Joe’s. Her mom doesn’t have to do any cooking or cleaning.”

“Well, if they want to behave like heathens that’s okay with me. To each his own, I always say. But none of my children will be eating *frozen foods* on a holiday, thank you very much.” She sniffed. I’m sure she was convinced that Molly’s mom was a slatternly cow. “Does Steve prefer pumpkin pie or cherry?”

To argue was futile. Thanksgiving would be spent in my childhood home, where all my dear family would be gathered to celebrate. Except that when I say ‘celebrate,’ what I really mean is ‘torture each other.’ It was a holiday tradition. And since I was going to be there alone, I would be bearing the brunt of the torture.

The day before T-Day I called Andy in a panic. “You guys are going to be there, right?”

“Absolutely, Sugar-pop. But first we’re going to a little party with some friends. I told Vicky we’d be just a teensy bit late.”

“How late?” I almost screamed.

“A teensy bit. A half-hour, max. Just calm down, Bunnykins. Have a glass of sherry or something.”

“Dilsy and Ronald will be there this year.”

“Crap. A two-snob dinner.” He sounded depressed.

“Yeah.” So was I.

“Two snobs, two brats, two queers, two crazies, and a TV addict.”

“I’m not a TV addict.”

“I meant Dad, silly. You’re one of the crazies.”

I was still feeling pretty miserable when I hung up the phone. Everybody was going to have somebody to lean on except me. Andy and Sergio had their own mutual admiration club; whenever they were together I always felt a little left out. And Dilsy certainly wouldn’t be any help - if anything, she’d make it worse. I knew that Dad would be off in his own little world, as usual, which meant that I would have to deal with Mom all on my own.

I couldn’t face it. I just couldn’t. Still, if I didn’t go at all, my mother would never speak to me again. (Would that be a good thing? Hmmm.) I couldn’t ditch out. Maybe I could get someone to go with me? I didn’t even think of asking Merry; I knew that she and Darren would be down in Salem at his parents’ house. I could have asked Molly, but why would she give up General Tso’s chicken to hang out with my dysfunctional family? I wouldn’t if I were her.

I called David. He *had* to come. My mother *adored* him. But the sickest part was, I think David adored *her*.

“Hey Jane!” he said, all perky and boyish. “What’s up?”

“Dave,” I implored. “You know how you said that if I was ever in trouble, if I ever needed anything, I could come to you?”

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I need you to come with me to Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. Andy’s going to be late and Dilsy’s brood will be there and if Vicky finds out I’m not dating for six months she’s going to massacre me. Please, please, *please* help me.”

“Oh, Jane, I’d really like to, but I’m supposed to go to my folks’ house.”

“I know, I know,” I cried. “But I’m so desperate. What time is your parents’ dinner?”

“Two o’clock.”

“But that’s perfect! My mom’s isn’t until five! Can you go to both? Please, David? Please?”

“Well,” he said. “I don’t know. You say you’re desperate, huh?”

“Yes! Please come with me. I’ll do anything.”

“Better watch what you say,” he teased.

“I’ll do anything that doesn’t involve barnyard animals or wrestling in oil.”

“You drive a hard bargain, but we might be able to work something out.”

“Oh, thank you thank you thank you! I owe you big time. You’re the best, the absolute best.”

“No problem,” he said. “It’ll be nice to see your family again.”

Oh my god, he really was insane.

Picture this: it was 6:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day, and the formal dining room, the one that only gets used three times a year, was full of the delights of the holiday. My

mother's best lace tablecloth was on display, showcasing her good china and her cornucopia napkin rings. The centerpiece, roughly the size of a Goodyear tire, abounded in the colors of fall; there were orange mums, yellow daisies, and a few rust-colored sunflowers nestled amongst sprigs of dried maple leaves. My dad sat at the head of the table in a shirt and tie, the tie I gave him three Christmases ago as a joke, the red one with the Grateful Dead teddy bears on it. The glistening, golden turkey was laid in front of him, and he waited, carving knife in hand, ready to slice away.

At the foot of the table sat my mother, like a queen on her throne, presiding over the table with goodwill and generosity. She was wearing a burgundy velvet two-piece, and had shellacked her hair into a perfect sphere in honor of the occasion. To her left sat Dilsy and Ronald and their boys, who were dressed in ridiculous matching sailor suits, throwing handfuls of corn at each other, and shrieking. David and I were seated across from the happy family, he in khaki cargo pants and a navy sweater, and I in a knee-length black skirt, red top, and fifties-style cardigan. My mother was nattering on about holiday traffic and Dilsy kept shouting, "Do you need a Time Out? Mommy will put naughty boys in Time Out!" The rest of us were trying to ignore the two empty seats where Andy and Sergio were supposed to have filled half an hour ago. I, for one, was wishing the floorboards would give out and send me tumbling through to the basement, putting me out of my holiday misery.

My mother's crimson red lips were fixed in a pleasant smile, but I could tell she was about two seconds away from nuclear meltdown because the vein on the side of her forehead was bulging out and throbbing indecently. "Has anyone heard the weather



report?” she asked. “Maybe there’s a storm - or a downed power pole - or a car crash blocking the road. I don’t know what could have become of them! Oh! Jane-darling, do you remember Gary and Moira’s son Edward? The one with the cowlick and the Mexican wife? Two years ago on Easter he was bringing six-dozen eggs to the church and he was rear-ended by a dump truck! A dump truck on Easter morning!” She wrung her hands and blinked rapidly in the manner of a claymation cartoon.

“Andy did mention he might be late, Mom.”

“Oh, Darling, I’m not worried at all!” she lied, patting her hair. “He’ll get here as soon as he can. Can I get anybody more stuffed celery?”

I was really starting to feel glad that I had snuck two shots of vodka while helping out with the cranberries.

“Dad,” I pleaded. “Can’t we all go into the living room and watch football until they get here?”

“No!” he huffed, hovering over the turkey. “Stay where you are. I’m going to carve this bird the second he and his friend walk through the door!”

I looked over at Ronald, sitting there so prim and proper with his super-straight side part. He was fiddling with his silverware, looking offended by the gaucheness of it all. Dilsy was picking corn from his lapel; Colin and Harry were sword fighting with their butter knives.

“Ro-nald,” sang my mother. “Did Delia tell you about the party she’s putting together for Bill and I?”

“Yes,” he replied, looking grateful to have something to say. “I-”

“I told her it was much too grand, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer. I’m just so excited! Dancing and flowers and new clothes! Oh! I’m so lucky to have such a generous daughter. A-hahaha!”

My muscles were seizing. I could feel my face twitching as I tried to maintain some semblance of neutrality. David noticed, and squeezed my hand beneath the table.

“Yes,” said Ronald. “She’s-”

“I do hope you’ll indulge your mother-in-law with a dance, Ronald. I’ll need you to rescue me from Bill! A-hahaha! He’s got two left feet - always stepping on my toes - even at our wedding.”

“But I’ve got a few new moves to show you, my dear,” said my dad, waggling his eyebrows and licking his lips.

“Bill! Don’t speak like that in front of the children.” She was trying not to smile, the corners of her mouth twitching dangerously.

I thought I might be sick. Did my sixty-year-old parents still have *sex*?

She turned back to Ron. “Oh! I love to dance. Delia tells me that the ballroom is just superb, like something out of ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous!’”

I started and turned to look at Dilsy, who seemed perfectly composed. “Yes,” she said, “it’s very glamorous, and the view from the terrace is incomparable. You’ll love it.”

I was going to kill her! *Kill her!* I was going to snap her like a-

“Thanks again, Vicky, for having me over tonight,” David interrupted. “When Jane told me you were making your famous cornbread muffins, I just knew I had to weasel an invitation.”

“Oh. Oh! You sweet thing!” she gushed. “I’m just so happy to have you here! And with my little Jane. She’s had a rough time lately - you know, what with another birthday - you know how she gets - and then that good-for-nothing S-T-E-V-E.”

“Mom,” I whined. “I know how to spell.” I was still seething at Dilsy.

“And she’s been a little lonely. She needs to be taken care of - she’s always been a bit fragile - and I’m glad she’s got a nice young man like you.”

“Mom, we’re not-”

“You two look so good together, it’s a shame you didn’t go out in high school! Well, but there was Dilsy, of course. A-hahaha! But you could have gone to the prom together - wouldn’t that have been sweet?”

“But Mom, we’re not-”

“Who did you go to the prom with, Jane? Michael Turkin, wasn’t it? That gangly boy with the pimples? I can’t believe you and David haven’t gotten together sooner!”

“But we’re not actually-”

“Fine, dear, fine. It’s none of my business.”

“No! I’m trying to tell you there’s nothing going on.”

“Darling.” She looked at me like I was a naughty child caught in a lie. “A mother knows.”

“No, you don’t know!” I rocketed out of my chair. “I’m not dating David. I’m not dating *anyone*. I’ve given up dating entirely, so there! And by the way, Mother, Michael Turkin is now a fund manager at Harris and Whitehall, so perhaps if I had indeed consented to oral sex in the backseat of his VW bug I might now not only be *married* but

have a summer house in the Hamptons as well.” I was becoming hysterical. “And another thing. Dilsy’s never even *been* to the fucking ballroom! She only knows it’s fabulous because I fucking *told her so!*”

All of a sudden the house exploded in noise and action: my mother burst into tears and the children began cackling, “You said the F-word! Aunt Jane said the F-word!” Meanwhile, Ron excused himself and practically sprinted to the bathroom.

“Look what you’ve done, Jane!” Dilsy barked, putting her arms around our mother’s shoulders. “Why do you always have to be so selfish?”

“Selfish?” I snapped incredulously. “You think *I’m* selfish? You’re the one stealing all the credit.”

“You’re acting like a child,” snapped Dilsy.

“You should talk!” I snarled. “You think the entire world revolves around you.”

“Ladies, ladies, let’s everybody calm down,” soothed David. “We’re all a little tense; let’s not say anything we’ll regret.” He had taken on the stance of a lion tamer; any second now he’d be warding us off with his chair.

“Did you know that Jennifer Lopez has a house in the Hamptons?” asked my dad.

“Oh, shut *up*, Bill!” screeched my mom, then plopped her head back down on the table, sobbing. Then, in the awkward silence that followed, there came a lot of stomping from the hallway and Andy and Sergio clomped into the room.

“Hello in there,” sang Andy from the doorway. “Where’s my gorgeous mother?” Then he froze and took in the scene: Vicky was sitting there with tear-streaked mascara running down her cheeks, Dilsy and I were standing on opposite sides of the table as if

we were about to leap over and wrestle amongst the mashed potatoes, Dad's lip was quivering, and Colin and Harry had butter in their hair.

“Whoa,” said Andy. “Did we miss anything important?”

Mom jumped up and rushed into his arms. “Oh, Andrew! My darling boy! I'm so glad you're here,” she wailed into his shoulder. “I thought you were dead! The turkey is cold - I've had too much to drink - and Jane says she'll never date again! Oh! What if I she never gets married? What am I going to doooo?” She sniveled into his jacket.

Andy looked at me and sighed. “You and your grand announcements, Jane.”

## Chapter 9

David and I were pretty quiet in the car on the way home. The only sound was the monotonous swishing of the windshield wipers and the intermittent *shhhhhh* of cars going by on the rain-slicked pavement. I was thinking about what I'd have to do to get back into my mother's good graces. It would probably be something along the lines of agreeing to a blind date with her accountant or taking her on an all-day trip to the mall to help her look for sturdy shoes and The Raincoat That Got Away. (She saw one there about ten years ago - in her description, it was the loveliest raincoat that ever existed, the Platonic ideal of raincoats - that for some reason she didn't buy, and she's been searching for it ever since. She asks people on the street where they got theirs, hoping for clues, as if her life were an episode of *Monk* and one day she'll discover her long-lost coat in an outlet store in Troutdale, where it's been waiting for her for a decade and is now reduced to 50% off.) Both options seemed pretty dismal. I was screwed.

I glanced over at David in the driver's seat. It was dark, but his face was illuminated by headlights every time a car passed in the other direction. He looked sort of...pissed, actually, with furrowed brows and a hard-set mouth. I realized that in all the years I'd known him, I'd never really seen him upset before. I mean, I'd seen him looking grumpy after a bad day at work, or scowling when the Seattle Mariners lost a game. But David was really the most even-tempered guy I'd ever met, doing everything with a wink and a smile. I felt bad for ruining his Thanksgiving dinner, even if it was his second one.

“Sorry about all that,” I said. “I didn’t know it would get so out of hand. My family’s so...well, you know.”

He gave me a hard glance. “You don’t have to apologize to *me*. I’d think you’d probably want to apologize to *them*.”

I cringed. He was mad at me. “I’ll make it up to them,” I said.

“Oh, really? How will you do that?”

“Come on, Dave, it’s not like I burned down the house or ran over someone’s dog. It was just a fight, that’s all. It happens all the time.”

“But it shouldn’t,” he argued. “You ought to respect them more.”

“Excuse me?”

“You ought to just accept that they are who they are.”

“I’m sorry, did I just hear you take my mother’s side?” I asked. Now I was getting pissed.

“I’m not taking sides, Jane.” He shot me a disbelieving look. “What are we, fourteen? I’m trying to help you.”

“How is yelling at me going to help me? You’re acting like I have no right to be mad at them. You heard what Dilsy said.”

“I heard what you said, too.”

“She started it,” I huffed.

“Give me a break. *You* started it by yelling at your mom.”

“But she was driving me crazy. And Dilsy was getting all the credit for the party, when I’m the one working my ass off.”

“Why does it matter who gets the credit?”

“Because Dilsy always gets the credit!” I shouted, a little louder than I meant to.

David didn’t respond for a minute, then he said, “Your mom does love you, you know.”

“Yeah, loves to talk about what a failure I am.”

“She doesn’t think you’re a failure. She just wants you to be happy.”

“She wants me to get married and have babies. She wants me to be just like Dilsy.”

“She thinks that would make you happy, because that’s what made her happy.”

He sighed. “You’re never going to change her, Jane. It would be for your own good if you could learn to see that when she fusses over you it’s because she loves you so much.”

I craned my neck and stared at him. Who the hell did he think he was? “I can’t believe you’re making it sound like everything is my fault. I would have thought that you of all people would be able to understand the way things are in my family.”

We had come to my house, and David pulled over by the curb and shut off the car. The rain poured down the windows and made it look like we were trapped underneath a waterfall.

“I *do* understand,” he said, turning to me. “That’s why I’m trying to help. If you could just take a step back and see your family from the outside, you’d see things so differently. I just wish you could see them as they really are - so that you wouldn’t let yourself get so upset.”



“Don’t try to tell me I don’t know my own family,” I spat out. “Don’t sit there and tell me the problem is my *perception*. I thought you were my friend.”

“Damn it, Jane, I am your friend!” he bellowed.

I was stunned by his sudden rage, and a little frightened. Instinctively I pressed backward against the car door.

“Sorry,” he said, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Sorry.”

I didn’t say anything. I sat for a minute, letting the silence sink in, then I opened the door and hopped out into the rain. All I wanted was to get inside and crawl into bed, so I wouldn’t have to think about anything anymore.

Once I got upstairs, though, the argument with David played over and over in my head. How dare he criticize me like that? He didn’t know anything about my family. He was sticking his nose where it didn’t belong. I decided I needed a hot shower to wash all the bad thoughts away. I turned on the tap and stripped off my stupid holiday outfit. But under the steaming spray a niggling voice in the back of my head whispered, What if David was right? Was I too hard on my family? Was I holding on to an old grudge?

When I turned the water off, the phone was ringing. I knew it was David, but I ignored it; I wasn’t ready to talk to him yet. I dried off and piled into bed, not even bothering with pajamas, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When I got up the following morning I had just enough residual anger to fuel my first attempt at running. I pulled on my gear and hit the pavement, starting out with a

five-minute walk to warm up. It was still pretty early, and the sky was overcast, so the morning light was gray and the air was damp and smelled of rain. It was cold, and breathing deeply hurt my lungs, but it was rather pleasant, too. It made me feel brave.

I lived in the Hawthorne area, a funky neighborhood that's a mix of Victorians and Craftsman bungalows in various stages of disrepair; mine was one of the older Victorians, in need of some minor maintenance but charming nonetheless. It had a huge front porch with a rocking chair and a stained-glass windowpane in the front door, and although it was just a rental, I loved it like it was my own. The area was full of trendy shops and restaurants, so a lot of my neighbors were college students or artists or just generally cool people, people who had blue hair and cared about their community. I loved my neighborhood, and I never wanted to move anywhere else.

Nobody else was out and about so early in the morning, so I had the whole street to myself. The leaves were down from the trees and soaked from last night's storm; my footsteps made pleasing squishing noises as I moved past all the quaint houses with their gingerbread trimmings. A few blocks up, I broke into a slow jog. I had to think about my breathing: breathe in for two steps, out for two steps. It was hard at first to establish a rhythm; I felt clunky and uncoordinated and I couldn't get enough air. But I forced myself to continue on, pounding my feet and swinging my arms. If you don't know what you're doing, I thought, fake it until you do. Maybe that should be the motto of my life.

I crossed to the other side of the street, dodging an orange cat, and kept going. It felt like I had been jogging forever. I glanced at my watch. Only six minutes. I was gasping for air; I needed a break. I slowed to a walk and tried to regulate my breathing.

At least my legs felt fine so far, I thought. I wasn't even tired. I was just suffocating - a minor detail, really.

I was nearing a small neighborhood park and I decided to cut through and commune with nature. The birds were waking up and talking to each other, and pushing around in the long grass for bugs. There were some monkey bars and a lonely swing set off on one side, and a cluster of benches on the other. In one corner of the park was a clump of tall Douglas firs; I walked up to them and ran my fingers along the mossy bark, inhaling deeply the nose-tickling scent of the needles and the sweet smell of the damp bark chips below. Ooh. I also picked up a distinctly dog-poopy smell, and decided I had better push on.

I continued onward, alternating jogging for five minutes and then walking for five, making a big loop around my neighborhood and winding up back at my house. My quads were burning, I had a stitch in my side, and my windpipe felt permanently burned, but I felt great. My blood was buzzing with endorphins; I felt like I could do anything. I checked my watch. Twenty-five minutes. It was a good start.

I was feeling so good when I got inside that I figured I'd call my parents and try to make amends. The phone rang four times and then my dad answered, which meant my mom was still really ticked off. My dad has been banned from answering the phone since 1986, when the PTA president called for my mom but was told she was "in the can."

“Hi Janey!” shouted my dad into the phone. “You’re mother’s not here! She’s gone out to the supermarket!”

“I know she’s there, Dad. Please let me talk to her.”

His voice dropped to a whisper. “You know I would, dear; I don’t know what all the fuss is about. But I don’t want to get in trouble with you-know-who.”

I wouldn’t be deterred from my goal. “Would you tell her I’m really, really sorry and I feel awful and I want to make it up to her?”

“Sure, sweetheart. Don’t worry. It will all blow over soon; you know your mother.”

“I know. I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, Kiddo. Keep your chin up.”

We said our goodbyes and then I called David and made up with him. He apologized for yelling at me and I apologized for being a bitch and we agreed to meet on Sunday to have coffee and play with his dogs. I hung up the phone and sprawled on the living room floor, letting the wood cool my flushed skin. Things were going to be okay. I could already feel them starting to get better.

Monday mornings, for most people, are usually a period of dignified grief. The weekend is over and gone forever, carried away by the sands of time. Gone are the Friday Night Happy Hours and \$2 margaritas, gone are the Saturday afternoon trips to the grocery store and the library, gone are the lazy Sunday mornings in bed with the paper

and a hot cup of coffee. They are already fading memories, and in their place come the unpleasant forebodings of what Monday through Friday will bring.

That's how I usually see them, anyway. But that Monday morning I felt particularly chirpy; my endorphin rush had lasted all weekend. Or maybe it was just that I felt better having gotten a few things off my chest. I knew I should have spent the weekend feeling guilty and mean-spirited, but for some reason I was filled with budding optimism. I went in to school early to see if I could catch Molly before classes began.

"Good morning, Mols!" I called, walking into her classroom.

"Good morning, Jane!" she sang, bouncing up and down over a bunch of test tubes and chemical bottles.

How odd. What were the chances of *two* people being cheerful on a Monday?

"Hold on," I said. "You do realize it's Monday, don't you?"

"Yes!" she squealed. "Isn't it grand?"

"Why are you so happy?" I asked, awe-struck. Mols does not do 'giddy.'

"Because it's great to be alive!" She threw her arms in the air and thrust one leg backward, in some sort of grandiose ballerina pose.

I squinted at her face. "Are you high?"

"Yes, high on life!" She giggled. "Guess what!"

"What?"

"I'm in love!"

Whaaat? "With who?" I sputtered.

“Tyler Morgan, silly!” She put on a pair of safety goggles and began dancing spastically around the lab tables, humming what sounded like “too-rah-loo-rah.”

“Tyler Morgan, the fireman?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes! We went on a clubbing date. It was eighties night, and I dressed up like Madonna in her *Who’s That Girl* phase.” She stopped dancing and grinned at me. “Tyler came in overalls and spiky hair, just like in the “Come on, Eileen” video. Isn’t that cute? I love that song.” And she started singing again.

Well. This was an interesting turn of events, I thought. In the years that I had known Molly, she hadn’t had many boyfriends, and she had never confessed to being in love. I had always believed she was sort of cynical about love. I had certainly never seen her twirling around a table of hydrochloric acid.

“So,” I said. “Don’t make me beg. Tell me what happened.”

She put on a face like she was having an orgasm and pretended to faint into one of the desks. “I knew it was love when I first saw him standing at my door,” she giggled. “He was like, ‘Hey, nice tutu,’ and I was like, ‘Thanks, nice biceps,’ and then we left. And we danced all night. He knows how to do the Robot.” She giggled, lost in thought.

“And?” I prodded. So far I wasn’t seeing where the love came in.

“And we went to his place and had *sex*!” She hid her face in her hands, but I could tell she wasn’t embarrassed. I think she was laughing.

“Molly! I can’t believe-”

“I can’t either!” she giggled, coming out of hiding. “It’s all happening so fast. We stayed at his place all weekend.”

“But you barely even know him.” Surely this couldn’t be healthy.

“I know! It’s crazy. But it’s like I have this connection with him. I’m telling you, this is the real thing.” She looked at me, serious for the first time. “It was something magical, Jane. If this isn’t love, I don’t know what is.”

Could it be? Was it really possible? I wanted to believe that my friend was right, but I just wasn’t sure. I knew fires that blazed up quickly often flickered out just as fast. I didn’t want to see Mols get burned.

“Just be careful, Molly,” I said, feeling like a killjoy. “You know what wise men say.”

“‘Carpe diem?’”

“No. ‘Only fools rush in.’”

She rolled her eyes. “*You* should talk. Besides, that wasn’t wise men. That was Elvis Presley.”

Even so. He must have been very clever to come up with that song.

## Chapter 10

Most teachers will tell you they hate marking papers, but I don't really mind it. Sometimes I feel more in touch with my kids when I read their essays than I do when I see them at school. When they write, it's just them and not their school personas. Plus it gives me a good excuse to put on sweat pants and get cozy on the couch with a mug of sweet tea. Also, sometimes they make me laugh:

*My car is cool because it has really cool rims and it's black. It's a Honda Civic. My dad helped me buy it when I turned sixteen. He said that if I washed the dishes every night until I graduate and picked up my little brother Kyle from T-ball practice, then he would pay for half of it. So I said okay. I put in a CD player and an XR3000 subwoofer and now it really rocks.*

*Karen Nguyen thinks it's cool, too. She lives on my street so sometimes I drive her to school if I see her walking. She's a sophomore so she doesn't have a license yet. Yesterday I gave her a ride and we listened to "Justified" and she was like, "Your sound system rocks," and I was like, "I installed it myself," and she was like "Really?"*

*I asked her to go to the winter formal with me and she said yes. And that is why it's good to have a cool car.*

Actually, on that one I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. I love my job, and I love my kids, but sometimes I really wonder whether I'm doing them any good. Years from now, when they're surveying the teenage wasteland they sprang from and recalling the people in their lives who really meant something, will they remember Miss Tulliver?



Will they say to themselves, “Now *she* was a great teacher; I really loved the way she taught revision strategies.” I want them to remember me. But will they only remember that once, in class, a dryer sheet fell out of my pant leg?

This thought had me rummaging through the cupboards looking for cookies, but luckily my brother called.

“Hey kitty cat,” he said. “I bring you tidings of joy.”

“Oh?”

Now that we were adults, Andy usually assumed the role of mediator in our family disputes. He was a momma’s boy, and our momma told him everything, even though she knew he’d tell me. Probably *because* she knew he’d tell me. She liked to imagine that her life was a soap opera, full of drama and intrigue, and life was so much more exciting to her when she could give me the silent treatment yet still communicate via secret messenger.

“Are you sitting down?” Andy asked. “You’d better be sitting down.”

“I am sitting down.”

“Are you holding any knives or boiling liquids? Put them away.”

“I thought you said this was good news.”

“It is. Kind of. It’s mostly good.”

“Just tell me already.”

“Okay. Our mother has decided to forgive you-”

“Great!”

“-if you go to Jackie Beaman’s wedding.”

I put down the paper I was holding. "Who's Jackie Beaman?"

"You know, Jackie *Beaman*!" Andy trilled in a dead-on impersonation of our mother. "She was in your Bluebird troop, silly. Red hair? The one with the wiener dog?"

Laughing, I said, "I was never friends with any-" Oh wait. Yes, it was all coming back to me. Red hair. Extensive Barbie collection. Cat food breath. "Jackie *Beaman* is getting *married*?" I asked.

"December twenty-eighth."

"To *who*?"

"I dunno, a vice-president of something or other. Sports fiend. Will you go?"

"But I haven't spoken to Jackie Beaman in more than twenty years," I said. This wasn't making sense.

"But Vicky talks to Mrs. Beaman once a year at the St. Peter's Christmas bazaar," said Andy helpfully. "Therefore they are best friends. But who cares? Just say you'll go to the stupid wedding so that I don't have to be the stupid go-between anymore, okay? I want to go watch 'Trading Spaces.'"

Ugh. I knew my mother had some kind of ulterior motive; there was no way she simply wanted me to witness Jackie Beaman's finest hour. I was sure she was going to try to introduce me to Jackie's second cousin or her brother's dentist or the caterer's bookie or someone equally horrible. The men my mother tried to fix me up with usually fit the profile of old, odd, and ugly. If I went to this wedding it would be four hours of pure, unadulterated hell.

But I wanted to put an end to the family feud. Every time I thought of my mother being mad at me my stomach clenched into a tight little ball. As much as I liked to pretend otherwise, I wasn't cut out to be a rebel. And besides, there was a good chance there would be an open bar at Jackie's wedding. If things got really bad I could always take a few drinks into the ladies' room and wait out the storm. It was a small price to pay for peace.

"Okay," I chirped. "I'm game."

"Great!" said Andy. "Drama over. I have to go. Hildi glued Astroturf to the walls and the homeowners are about to see it. I love it when they cry!"

The next evening, as if nothing had ever happened, my mother stopped by my house "to say hello." (I know it's not healthy to not discuss our problems, but actually I rather like our system. It's so clean. So simple. It must be because we come from a long line of Irish Catholics; all I have to do is repent my sins and be forgiven. It makes things so much easier.) I had just come back from a short run, and answered the door in my track pants and sweaty T-shirt, my hair sticking to my neck in itchy clumps.

"Hello, Jane-darling! Oh! Have I come at a bad time?" She breezed in and seated herself at my kitchen table, obviously with no intention of leaving, even if I had said something like, "Yes, Mom, actually I was just exploring bondage techniques with Mr. Huang from next door. Can you come back in half an hour?"

"No, of course not," I replied. "Shall I put the kettle on?"

“No, Dear, I can’t stay. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d bip in.  
What would you like for Christmas?”

“Oh,” I said, caught off guard. It was a trick question, I knew it. What to say?  
What to say? “I hadn’t really thought-”

“How about a subscription to *Modern Bride*, Darling?”

Oh, Christ. Try to stay calm. “I already get several magazines.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice to look at all the lovely pictures? You could start a  
scrapbook of all your favorite dresses.”

“I really don’t think so, Mom. But thanks.” I whirled to the fridge, desperate for a  
subject change. “Are you sure I can’t get you a drink? I’m having a soda.”

“You know,” continued my mother, “Myrna Bradbury’s daughter moved back  
home for a couple of years to save for her wedding.”

I nearly choked on my Diet Coke and sputtered for air. Finally, instead of saying  
what I really wanted to say, which was, “Is she MAD?” I managed to gasp out, “Who is  
she getting married to?” (It was inconsequential that I had no idea who Myrna Bradbury’s  
daughter was. The point was, she was clearly troubled.)

“Oh, Annie’s not engaged yet. In fact, she doesn’t really even have a proper  
boyfriend at the moment. But she wants to be prepared when the time comes.”

I stopped and stared. “Wants to be...?”

My mother gathered up her things and moved towards the front door. “I just  
wanted you to know, Darling, that your room is always open to you if you want it. Kiss-  
kiss.” She was halfway out, then she turned back. “Oh, and Jane. Do wear something nice

to Jackie Beaman's wedding, hmmm? Not your pink dress; you need something more structured."

My mother left and I brought a glass of wine upstairs and ran a hot bath. Now that is what's wrong with society, I thought. This poor Annie character has given up her fun single independent lifestyle to live in her parents' basement, where she will never have a moment's peace ever again. She'll never get to talk on the phone without someone picking up the extension and saying, "Darling, I'm expecting a call from Caroline Schultz about the egg drop soup." She'll never get to take a shower without someone banging on the door, calling out, "Save some hot water!" And obviously she will never get a nice boyfriend, as nice men do not date fully-grown women who live with their parents. But this poor young woman's brain had been warped by our single-hating society into thinking it was better to live with her parents and save money for some hypothetical Big Day rather than be out there on her own in the world.

God. For once I felt so deliciously normal.

December was flying by in a haze of holiday festivities and manic consumerism. Every day at school the kids got more and more unruly, impatient to be released for two entire weeks of blessed freedom. (So were us teachers, to be honest, but we did a better job of hiding it, only cackling with glee behind closed doors.) Whenever I wasn't frantically grading papers in an effort to get semester grades in on time, I was out on the frontlines at the suburban malls, braving hordes of angry people who acted like they had

forgotten their schizophrenia medication, waving their arms and snarling. I think there were several occasions when I joined their ranks; I have a hazy memory of being trapped behind an old woman shuffling along at 2.3 miles per hour and fantasizing about sticking my arms out in front of me like a football player and mowing her down. (But I didn't. I was very restrained.) Anyway, the time clipped by and eventually the shopping was done, the cards were mailed, and school was over. That last day, students and teachers alike ran joyously out into the cold air, whooping into the semi-darkness.

That night I had invited Merry, Molly, and David to come to dinner at my house to celebrate the end of school. Shortly afterward, in a great flash of awareness, I had realized that I hate to cook, so I ordered a feast from Papaya Thai, which I briefly contemplated putting into my own serving bowls and passing off as my own. But no. Nobody would believe that I made Tangy Eggplant and Tempeh from scratch, anyway.

My friends were due at 7:00. At 6:00 I changed into black pants and my prized burgundy cashmere sweater; this was a celebration, after all. I ducked into the bathroom and applied makeup and extra styling potion to my hair. At 6:30, just as I was setting the table, Molly called.

"Listen, Jane," she said. "I can't make it tonight after all. There was a mix-up with the scheduling at the fire station and now Tyler has the night off."

Hmmm. "Well, bring him along. I'd love to meet him."

"That would be great, Jane, it really would, but it's just that...I haven't seen him in two days. I really want to, you know, have some alone time. You understand."

Oh yes, I certainly did. As much as single girls like to say their friends come first, what they really mean is, their friends come first as long as their boyfriend is busy. I knew how it was. But understanding the situation didn't mean it hurt any less. "Sure, Mols, I understand. Go have fun. We'll see you some other time."

David showed up at 6:55 with a bottle of wine and a chocolate torte from Papa Hayden's. I chastised him for plotting to ruin my diet (ha!) but secretly I was very pleased. You can tell a lot about a person by what sort of offerings they bring to a party. If they show up and say, "Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to bring anything," then you might as well get rid of them there and then. If they bring a case of Bud Light, they're clueless but obviously trying. You might be able to salvage them. If they bring quality booze or quality sugar, then they are a quality person who will make a quality friend. Now David, for example, always brings both booze *and* sugar. I'm not really sure what that means, but I know it's a good thing.

"Mols just cancelled on us," I said, relieving David of his burdens. "She's going out with Tyler Morgan." I said the name the same way one might say Adolf Hitler or Rush Limbaugh.

"Have you met him?" asked David, taking wine glasses down from the cupboard.

"No. She's got him ferreted away like a shiny new toy that she doesn't want to share."

"Maybe she really is in love."

I grimaced at his back. "God, wouldn't that be awful?"

He laughed and passed me my wine. "Sooner or later, the bell tolls for us all, Jane. One day you'll fall in love and then you'll see what it's like."

"I've been in love before," I said defensively.

He cocked his head and gave me a patronizing look. "What, with Steve?" he asked incredulously.

"No, before that."

"Who was before that? Jason somebody?"

"No, I mean way before, back in college." I turned away and started fussing with the food cartons.

"Were you really? I never heard anything about it."

"Well, it was kind of a disaster. I didn't tell anyone. Only Merry knows, and that's because we were at school together."

"So what happened?" asked David, hoisting himself up to sit on the countertop.

"Who was he?"

"Um, I don't really want to get into it," I mumbled.

"Come on. You can't tease a guy like that and then not follow through."

"It's too embarrassing."

"But you don't get embarrassed," he pressed. "You told everyone about that crazy sex fiend who tried to smear your stomach with peanut butter."

"This is different."

"Please? I won't tell anyone."



It must have been my gratitude for the torte, because I told him. The story went something like this: my freshman year at college I had joined the Student Filmmaking Association as a bit of a lark, thinking I'd get to be in some low-budget slasher movie and become the next Jamie Lee Curtis. Well, I didn't, but I *did* meet Jamie Phillips, a hot British import and the president of the club. He was older, a senior, and he seemed so very mature, with the way he swaggered around in front of the camera and drawled out his oh-so-English vowels and clipped consonants. I was young and inexperienced, and Jamie was so unlike any of the geeky high school boys I had known. He was so charismatic - all the girls wanted him, but *I* was the one he chose. It was like having my fairy godmother show up and turn me into a princess. It felt like finally my life was beginning: I was full of hope and optimism, picturing how happy my life would be now that I had somebody to love.

Anyway, to make a long story short, he told me he loved me, I went to bed with him, and when it was over he shoved my panties at me and said, "Look, you'd better go. I don't want my girlfriend to find you here." I slunk off in shame and never spoke to him again, and it took me almost a whole year before I could even think about going out with anybody else. Because even though he had been a lying sack of shit, he had been the lying sack of shit that I loved.

In telling the story - the abbreviated version - to David, I knew it sounded pathetic. Other peoples' heartbreak stories were about meeting the love of their life while studying abroad in Paris, or being on the verge of marriage and then discovering their true love only had three months to live. My love story was about being stupid and

gullible. What was even more pathetic was that I sometimes still thought of Jamie and fantasized about running into him somewhere. Not that I wanted to get back together with him, but just to see him, to talk to him, to find out if he had ever really loved me at all or if my entire experience of being in love was a lie. The thought of that possibility was so shaming. I knew that I was supposed to hate Jamie, or even better, to forget him completely, but I couldn't do either. It was like Merry had told me back then, when I'd come home crying in the middle of the night: you can never really heal a heartbreak, you just try to find a way to live with the pain.

David was appalled. "So what are you saying? You still love this guy?"

"No, of course not. I'm not *that* pathetic. I just sometimes think about him, you know, when people talk about love."

"But he was a complete asshole."

"I know that," I said, frustrated. "But that's my experience of falling in love."

David's face twitched, and I couldn't tell if he was angry or disgusted. I blushed. This was exactly the reason why I didn't like to talk about it.

"Gosh, look at the time," I said. It was almost 7:30. "Merry's awfully late."

I called her house. No answer. I called her cell. No answer. Where could she be? I began to visualize, in rich Technicolor detail, what could have happened to detain her. Problems at work? Flat tire? Oh my god, car accident? Images of charred steel and severed limbs flashed across my brain with horrific realism.

"Get a grip," said David. "You've seen too many Schwarzenegger movies. She's probably just running late."

“But she’s never late,” I argued. “And why wouldn’t she answer her phone? I just know something’s wrong. If we can’t reach her by 8:00 I think we should call all the hospitals in the area.”

David and I sat around picking at satay sticks and dialing Merry every few minutes. Finally, at 7:58, a gravelly voice picked up her house phone. “Hello?”

“Thank god you’re alive!” I said. “I was worried about you.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “I didn’t feel well this afternoon. I fell asleep.”

She sounded so pitiful that my heart went out to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she mewled. “It’s just a migraine.”

“Is Darren there? Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“Mm. Sorry, I don’t really feel like talking now, Jane. I’ll call you back.” She put down the phone without saying goodbye.

Nonplussed, I hung up and looked at David. “She said she had a migraine.”

“I didn’t know she got migraines.”

“Neither did I.”

After the uncomfortable stroll down Memory Lane and the panic over our missing friend, we had to do something drastic to recapture the celebratory mood. We decided to watch *A Fish Called Wanda* and get drunk.

## Chapter 11

Christmas went off without a hitch. Mom seemed really pleased with her gold sequined sun-visor, and Dad was glad to get the Outkast CD he had asked for - so much so that he put it into the stereo straight away and was quickly banned from playing “that noise” in the house. My parents didn’t give me anything at all, but Santa brought me some Bathina Enchanting Beauty Bubbles, a new straightening iron, and a white leather handbag that was going straight to the back of my closet.

Andy and Sergio managed to convince Ron to try his hand at playing Grand Theft Auto, to which he promptly became addicted. The three of them stayed in Andy’s room all morning, and every now and then the rest of us would hear a collective shout of joy or dismay from upstairs. Dilsy and Mom stayed in the kitchen discussing ham glazes and pineapple rings, and Dad, my nephews, and I watched *A Christmas Story*, which was being broadcast continuously for 24 hours on TNT.

Just as Ralphie was unwrapping his Red Rider BB gun and preparing to shoot his eye out, I noticed that Colin and Harry were asleep on the couch. They were probably coming down from their sugar-high: while their mom had been peeling potatoes they had eaten an entire box of maple sugar Santas for breakfast. I glanced over at my dad, next to me on the sofa, and was startled to find him watching me.

My dad looks like a gnome, with a round belly and round red cheeks and a half-circle of fluffy white hair around the middle of his head. He wears gray trousers and diamond-pattern sweaters, and smells of Old Spice. You’d never suspect he was the type

of guy who went crowd-surfing at Lollapalooza or had front-row seats at the Tony Hawk “Boom Boom Huck Jam” skateboarding show. I’d chalk it up to a mid-life crisis except that he’s always been this way.

“What?” I asked.

“You look a little different,” he said, squinting. “Have you done something with your hair?”

“No,” I answered. “Nothing.”

“Is that a new sweater you’ve got on?”

“I’ve had it for ages.”

“Well.” He smiled. “You look very pretty.”

I smiled and rested my head on his shoulder, and he put his arm around me. He turned off the TV and we sat in the silence for a bit, sleepily observing the blinking lights on the tree and the vast mountains of wrapping paper scattered over the floor.

When he nudged me awake, it was time for dinner.

“Your brother wanted to draw a moustache on your face,” he said, “but I wouldn’t let him.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, kissing his cheek. “You’re the best.”

The final strains of Pachelbel’s Canon faded away into silence; the bridesmaids were lined up like a row of pink meringues. Then the organist struck up the Wedding March and Jackie Beaman appeared in the doorway. She was covered head to toe in

frothy white lace, seed pearls, and satin bows - it looked as if a bridal shop had barfed on her. But she was lovely: shining auburn hair, glowing skin, misty blue eyes. I could see happiness radiating off her body like white light. She floated to her groom at the front of the church and they began to say the words that would bind them together for the rest of their lives.

Crazy bastards.

In the same way that people can't help gawking at car wrecks and burning buildings, I love to see a wedding. I can't help but wonder at what powerful forces have brought these two people together. I mean, sure, there's love. But as a great poet once said, what's love got to do with it? What I want to know is, how do you get to that place where you trust someone enough to say, "Sure, let's open a joint checking account" or "You know, let's create a human life together and raise it in our home for eighteen years"? How do you know that person will never leave you, will stick with you through minivan payments and menopausal crying jags and dentures? It all seems quite risky to me, even with love thrown in the mix. *Especially* with love.

Coincidentally, it turned out the reception was being held at Pinecrest, which I thought was actually quite lucky. I'd have the chance to look around at Jackie Beaman's decorations and stuff, and it would help me decide what to do for Mom and Dad's party. I was just handing my keys to the valet when my mother dashed towards me across the pavement, dragging behind her a gawky creature with a patchy red beard and invisible eyebrows. His eyes were like two black olives staring out of blob of white dough. Obviously, this fine specimen was to be my escort for the evening.

“Jane-darling, this is Tim. Tim is an optometrist.”

“An orthodontist, actually,” said Tim in a helium-balloon voice. “I like teeth.”

Tim turned to my mother and grinned, displaying a row of faultless pearly whites. I continued my inventory and noticed that the insides of his ears were shiny with oil. Yuck. It seemed I was about to pay a heavy price for my Thanksgiving foibles. But I promised myself to be on my best behavior. “Tim, it’s lovely to meet you,” I cooed, taking his arm. “Shall we go in?”

Tim and I lined up to go through the receiving line at the door. I had all the usual compliments prepared.

“Jackie! Robert! It was a beautiful ceremony. I loved your poem. So touching.”

We exchanged manically cheerful hugs and handshakes - the kind you give when you’re overcompensating for not knowing who in the hell you’re talking to - then Tim tried to guide me from the frenzied mob of well-wishers. A great felt hat-brim knocked me in the eye, a fat woman wearing a purple tent crushed my toes, and at last we entered the darkened sanctuary of the ballroom.

“I liked the poetry reading, too,” squeaked Tim, fluttering his pale eyelashes.

I raised my eyebrows at him, wondering what sort of pervert he must be to have enjoyed such an aural assault. During the poetry reading I had been fantasizing about strangling myself with a loop of pink taffeta ribbon, or bashing my skull with one of the bridesmaid’s stacked heels. (There is never any call for rhyming “love” and “dove,” even for a wedding.) I smiled tightly, and said nothing.

The ballroom was strewn with purple hydrangeas and lit up with fairy lights and candles, and a vast ocean of round tables with white linen tablecloths stretched before us. Very swanky. I was glad I wore my sexy black dress, despite my mother's advice. ("It's a church wedding, Jane! You've got to wear a suit! Here - take my pearls - you have a suit, don't you? No suit? How on earth can you go around without a nice suit...?")

Tim and I investigated the seating chart and discovered that the tables, rather than having numbers, had been assigned the names of professional athletes. (Somehow this did not compliment the elegant lighting scheme and place settings. I mentally filed it away under the heading of "effing ridiculous," and made a note to report it later to Andy, who was a connoisseur of ill-chosen party themes.) We were to be at the Shaquille O'Neill table. I was no golf expert, but I deduced that was fairly prestigious. Or if not, at least it was close to the bar.

We sat down and the room began to fill with guests and the rising buzz of conversation. Then I noticed Tim staring at me in the manner of Charles Manson.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" I began pawing around my nose and mouth.

"No." He laughed. "I was just thinking how beautiful you are. You're like a Greek goddess. Like Aphrodite! I can't believe you wanted to meet me!"

I felt my eyes go wide and the blood rushing to my cheeks and throat. "Thanks," I squeaked. My mother had a lot of explaining to do.

Our dining partners began to show up, rescuing me from my mortification. A middle-aged couple introduced themselves as Sylvia and Ed and sat down on Tim's right



and immediately drew him into a discussion centering on the considerate merits of organic farming. Two young women, hooched up within an inch of their lives, sat down to my left and began eyeing the groomsmen at the head table. (Or rather, the Barry Bonds table.) I was beginning to hypothesize that the seating chart had been made up in flagrant violation of Miss Manners' standards of etiquette, in fact, made up according to no standards whatsoever, possibly by such piss-in-the-wind means as drawing names from a hat, when suddenly I realized I was much too sober. Two people had just committed themselves to each other until death, for god's sake. I got up and headed for the asylum of the open bar.

I was morbidly contemplating nuptial bliss, watching people Wang Chung on the dance floor, and guzzling Merlot when I felt something cold and slimy land on my foot. I looked down and saw a pink blob oozing over the toe straps of my sandals, whereupon I squealed like a rabid guinea pig and shook my leg around to get the crud off.

"Sorry," said the guy to my right. He was talking around a mouthful of food, mindless of launching wet gobs into my personal space. "Crab salad. My bad."

I growled at the man and he slunk off towards the buffet.

"Napkin?" said a voice from my left.

"Thanks." I took the offering and bent over to clean off my foot. When I came back up I was about six inches away from a gorgeous pair of blue eyes.

"Oscar!" I said, taking a step backwards towards safety. He looked sexy and dangerous, just the way I remembered him. Damn!

“That guy’s just dubbed you Duchess of Crab,” he said. “That’s quite a title to live up to.”

What? What on earth was he talking about?

“Is it?” I asked timidly. I hardly knew Oscar. Maybe he was a bit crazy. In that case, I thought, I should humor him and be very polite.

“Oh yes,” he continued. “You’re an emissary of the crustacean nation now. There’ll be high stakes diplomatic missions, charity work in third world countries, peace talks at all the seaports. Not to mention that you’ll have to live under a microscope.”

“Will I?” He was very attractive for a crazy man.

“You’ll never have a moment’s peace!” He gestured wildly with his hands. “You’ve become public property now. You’ll have paparazzi trailing you everywhere you go, vans with high-tech surveillance equipment parked across the street, men hiding in bushes and disguising themselves as telephone repairmen just so they can take a picture of you on the toilet and go through your trash for chocolate wrappers and used condoms. It’s tough being a celebrity, but it’s even harder being royalty. Just ask Prince Charles. Everybody thinks they’ve got a right to know.”

I was torn between laughing and sputtering, and it came out as sort of a convulsive gurgling noise. I sounded like a baby about to spit up.

“Have I frightened you, then?” He smiled ruefully. “I’ve got to work on my pick-up lines. Is it too late to ask if you’re a Pisces?”

That time I really did laugh.

“It’s good to see you again, Jane.”

Awww. He remembered my name. “What are you doing here?”

“Just stopped by for the garter toss, actually.” He winked. “Kidding. I’m working. I have to come to all the big events. You know, make sure everything runs smoothly, nobody gets pelted with crab salad, that sort of thing. What about you?”

“I was mean to my mother over the holidays and this is my punishment.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad. You know there are shrimp wontons at the buffet, right?”

I smiled. “That certainly helps. But it’s the guy she’s set me up with that’s the problem.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Not your type, is he?”

“Not really.” I gestured towards Tim, who at that moment was stuffing a giant California roll into his mouth and smacking his lips wetly.

“I see,” said Oscar, rubbing his chin. “Shall I sneak you into the kitchen?”

I looked up at him, my heart beating wildly. I was envisioning the two of us making out in the walk-in refrigerator and rolling around passionately on top of an industrial steel table. Yes, *please*. But I was on a peace-keeping mission. If I didn’t at least pretend to make an effort with Tim, my mother would be mad at me again. And then I’d just have to keep going to more hideous weddings with more hideous men. It was a vicious cycle - better to nip it in the bud.

I shook my head regretfully at Oscar. “Maybe some other time.”

“All right then.” He grinned. “I’ll look forward to that.” And he disappeared into a sea of tuxedoed men.

“Hey gorgeous,” breathed Tim in my ear, causing my to jump and wheel around.

“Want to dance?”

“Oh,” I mumbled, reeling from his sushi breath. “That would be a treat.”

And he led me onto the dance floor for an hour of spastic flailing and covert attempts to grope my ass.

My god, I thought. I really am a martyr.

## Chapter 12

When the tree has been taken down and abandoned to rot on the curb, when you've eaten nothing but leftover ham and cherry cordials for a week straight, when you've already broken your New Year's resolutions to floss daily and give up carbohydrates--in short, just when you've gotten really accustomed to pretending you're in early retirement and watching three or more hours of daytime TV, that's when those bastards at the DOE viciously yank you from your happy fantasy life and force you back to a grueling existence of lunch duty, insolent teenagers, and multiple choice exams. The first day back is like hell. Everybody's grouchy and bloated and wishing they were at home watching "A Dating Story" with a mug of tea and a Whitman's Sampler. The kids are pissed off, too. They'd rather be anywhere but school, even if it means staying home and playing Scrabble with their grandmothers.

Still, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "Don't talk to me until I've had my coffee" and 10 being "I will staple my notebook to your forehead if you wish me Happy New Year," I was only about a 3. I had been practicing my running whenever it wasn't raining outside, and I was up to twenty minutes without stopping. I hadn't lost any weight yet, but neither had I gained any over the holidays. Certainly an epic triumph. Not only was I pleased about that, but I had been able to watch *Pride and Prejudice* twice. So that was *two* things on my list. (I hadn't read any classics yet - unless you counted *Bridget Jones's Diary* - or been to any mind-enriching concertos, but I still had time for that stuff later.) So to be honest, I really wasn't that upset when I discovered only two-thirds of my

second period freshmen had done their homework assignments. When I lectured them about it, I really had to work hard to seem angry. I'm not sure they bought it.

After school I drove over to Merry's bakery to talk about the cake for my parents' anniversary. I was really looking forward to seeing her. Ever since that weird evening when she stood me up, she had been acting strangely. Every time I called her, she always sounded sick or sleepy, and she had a million excuses why she couldn't get together. Running errands. Waiting for the plumber. Feeling another migraine coming on. (I couldn't believe my own best friend was using the "I've got a headache" story! Come on.) Obviously she didn't want to talk to me, but I couldn't think of anything I had done to offend her. Well, I mean, besides the usual stuff--but she had been used to that for years.

The bell on the door tinkled as I walked in, and immediately a wave of sugar-scented air enveloped me. In front of me and to the left was an L-shaped glass display case filled with exotic goodies, and to the right were a few groupings of wooden tables and chairs, one of which was occupied by an elderly couple sharing a piece of cake. The light yellow walls were covered in old-fashioned black and white photos: some of them, I knew, were Merry's relatives, while most of the rest were purchased from antique stores. When Merry first opened her shop she had asked me to contribute a picture; I gave her a copy of my grandparents' wedding photo, which she hung above one of the tables. My grandmother wore a straight white dress with long lacey sleeves and a high neck, and my grandfather wore a tuxedo with tails and a top hat. They were both about twenty-one

when the picture was taken, and although they were holding hands, their faces looked sort of dazed and frightened.

The infamous assistant, Becky, was behind the counter, decorating a sheet cake with real flowers.

“Can I help you?” she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Could you tell Merry that her friend Jane is here?” I said. “We’re supposed to talk about a custom cake.”

“Oh, right. Here, have a look at the idea book and I’ll go get her.”

She passed me a thick book the size of a phone directory and went back into the kitchen. I opened it up and leafed through; there were cakes done up like medieval castles and the leaning Tower of Pisa, cakes covered in real red roses or icing bows, cakes with bubbling chocolate fountains in the center. I was trying to work out how she built that last one when she came out from the back in her white chef’s coat.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

She looked like hell. There were dark circles under her dull eyes and deep creases at the corners of her mouth.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Oh, fine,” she said. “I’ve been a little under the weather.”

I didn’t think that “under the weather” quite described it. She looked more like she had been on a tequila bender or in recovery from a car crash. But I didn’t think it wise to say so.

“So,” she said, donning a mask of gaiety, “let’s talk about cake! I’ve got some flavors for you to try.”

She brought a tray of bite-sized cake wedges over to one of the corner tables and we sat down. It didn’t take me long to decide on the white cake with raspberry filling. If it had been entirely up to me I would have gone with something chocolate, but I knew Dilsy would kill me if I bought a brown cake. And of course I already knew that it should be very traditional and classy, so I got the square-shaped three-tier variety, to be decorated with purple orchids. Still, I had to try all the flavors, just to be sure.

“And I’ll give you a discount, of course,” said Merry.

I made a face at her. “Are you kidding? Dilsy’s paying for it. You can give yourself a bonus, as far as I’m concerned.”

She smiled weakly.

“Mer, what’s wrong?” I said. “Please tell me.”

For a moment she didn’t say a word, and I thought she was angry, but then, to my horror, she started crying. Big, fat, silent tears rolled down her pale cheeks and left shimmering wet trails to her chin.

“Mer!” I cried, grabbing her hand. “What’s going on?”

“It’s...it’s Darren,” she whispered. “I think he’s having an affair.”

“Whaaat?” I gasped, outraged. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” she sobbed. “He’s been acting so strangely lately.”

“Did you see him with someone?”

“No.”



“Did she call the house?”

“No.”

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing, really.” She dabbed at her eyes with a paper napkin. “It’s just that he’s gone so often and I start to wonder what he’s doing and who he’s with. And I know it’s part of his job and it never used to bother me but lately he’s just been acting kind of...weird,” she finished lamely.

“Weird how?”

“Like, when I try to talk to him his eyes glaze over. And when we, um, you know...” She blushed and lowered her eyes.

“Have sex?” I supplied.

“Yeah. It’s like...it’s like...he’s on automatic pilot.” Fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

“Oh, Mer,” I said. “You’re probably just overreacting. You told me yourself he’s working on some kind of merger. He’s probably got business on the brain.”

She shook her head. “It’s more than that. I can tell.”

“How?”

“I just can.”

She met my eyes and I could see her despair. Immediately I felt my gut clench and start to burn with hatred toward Darren. I mean, I knew he was bad news from the very beginning, but I had never imagined he would have an affair. To be honest, I still wasn’t convinced that that was what was going on. But the very fact that Merry was so

upset about it made me hate Darren no matter what. He was making my best friend unhappy. Whether he was having an affair or not, he didn't deserve her.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just wish I had something to confront him with. If all I have to go on is my instincts, he'll just laugh in my face."

"So you need some proof." An idea blossomed in my mind. Surveillance equipment. Telephoto lenses. Hidden microphones...

She nodded. "But what can I do? It's not like he's coming home with lipstick on his collar."

"You could do a stakeout," I said.

"What?"

"A stakeout. Like a detective. When he says he's working late, follow him around and see if he does anything suspicious."

Merry looked at me like I was insane. "How am I going to follow him? He'll see me."

"You can wear a disguise."

"But what about the car?"

"You can use mine; he won't recognize it."

She shook her head. "This is nuts, Jane. I can't do a stakeout on my husband."

"Why not? Merry, you've got to find out for sure what's going on. You can't just ignore it; it's tearing you apart. You look like you've spent the last two weeks in a Mexican prison. If you don't find out about it now, you're going to worry forever."

“Uh-uh. I can’t do it.”

“You’ve *got* to.”

The tears spilled over her eyelids and dripped down her nose. “I can’t,” she cried.

Suddenly I had a vision of myself in tight, camouflage military gear and high leather boots. I was speaking into a walkie-talkie, saying something cool in code like, “Roger that, Papa Bear. The cuckoo bird flies at midnight,” and peering around dark corners.

“Do you want me to do it?” I asked.

She sniffed pathetically. “Would you?”

“Of course, Mer.” I squeezed her hand. “Anything.”

The elderly couple got up from the next table and shuffled past, and Merry turned away so they wouldn’t see she had been crying. They called out a cheery thanks to Becky, who was bent over her cake and humming a Metallica tune behind the glass display cases, and she waved at them. The bell on the door tinkled again, and they were gone.

Merry leaned in and whispered, “When would you do it?”

“Soon. This week. I’ll follow him from work.”

“And you’ll...you’ll let me know what you discover?”

“*If* I discover anything. It’ll probably turn out he really is at work.” I wasn’t sure if I believed that, but I thought Merry needed some hope.

“Okay,” she said, wiping her eyes and sitting up straighter. “Okay. Thanks, Jane.”

“Of course. Um...would it be okay with you if I got someone to help?”

She gripped the edge of the table in panic. "I don't want Molly to know. She'll tell *everyone*."

"No, I was thinking of David. He has a camera with a long-distance lens."

"Oh. Yes," she breathed. "Get David. I know I can trust him."

So it was settled. The stakeout was arranged for Thursday, when Darren was supposedly staying late for a business meeting. David and I would wait outside his building downtown. If he came out, we'd tail him to whatever sleazy hideaway he met his paramour in, take some pictures, and then maybe kick his ass and take his wallet.

Unless it turned out that he was just going home, in which case the beating would probably be frowned upon.

Meanwhile, Dilsy had more big news for me. Apparently she was taking very seriously this business about "go forth and multiply."

"Jane," she said over the phone. "Guess what? I'm pregnant again!"

Good god! Wasn't she aware of the escalating world population, the constant decrease in food supplies and natural resources, the hole in the ozone layer, the disappearing rain forests, the cost of a college education, drugs in schools, childhood obesity rates, the U.S. political crisis, the global deflation of the dollar, and the death of rock and roll? How could she be incubating a third child in desperate times like these?

"Congratulations," I said. "That's wonderful."

"It's due in July. We're hoping for a girl this time."

My call-waiting beeped, and I knew it would be my mother. I gave Dilsy my best wishes again, said goodbye, and switched over to the other line.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Jane-darling! Have you heard the news?”

“Yes, I-”

“Oh! Another grandchild! I’m so happy I could cry. A-hahaha! Dilsy said they were thinking of calling her Rhonda after her father - Rhonda! Can you believe it? - I wouldn’t say a bad word against my own daughter but *please*, Darling! With a name like Rhonda you might as well slap some frosted eyeshadow on her and stick her behind the register at Wal-Mart. Oh! Jane! Did you know the baby’s due in July? The same time as our big anniversary party! Isn’t that lovely?”

“Yes, that’ll be-”

“Is it too late to change the color scheme to pastel pink? Because if it *is* a girl, wouldn’t it be just precious to have pink and white?”

I did *not* want to change the colors. “But what if it turns out to be a boy?”

“Oh! Well! Then we’ll just say that pink is my favorite color. Anyway, that Jackie Beaman had purple flowers and I thought they looked absolutely putrid. Have you spoken to Tim lately?”

I had to sit down; the less-than-subtle transitions were getting to be too much.

“No, actually, I haven’t heard from him.”

“You did give him your number, didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” Technically this was an eensy-beensy lie. I had given Tim a number, it just hadn’t been mine. But there was really no need for my mother to know this.

“Oh, well, you know men - always trying to play it cool - he’ll call, Darling, don’t you worry. Oh! Jane! I just realized - it’s so lucky that you’ve agreed to lend a hand with the party planning! Dilsy will be *much* too busy getting ready for the baby to do it on her own now. She really takes too much on herself, the little dear.”

“Yes,” I said, clenching my teeth. “Well. I’m happy to *lend a hand*.”

“Anyway, Darling, I’d better go. I have so many calls to make. Bye-eee!”

## Chapter 13

“What on earth are you wearing?” I asked David. He had just climbed into the passenger seat of my car.

“What’s wrong with it?” He looked down at his button-up shirt and khaki pants.

“What’s wrong with it?” I repeated. “What’s wrong with it? We’re going on a stakeout. You’re supposed to be in camouflage.” I gestured towards my own ensemble: black pants, black sweater, black baseball cap. I was prepared to blend into the shadows whenever the need arose.

“But we’re going to a business district,” said David.

“So?”

“So,” he said, eyeballing my combat boots, “I think you look far more conspicuous than I do.”

Whatever. Obviously my partner knew nothing about the intricacies of a stakeout. I could tell he was going to require some convincing when I pulled out the black greasepaint.

I turned the car around and headed for the route I had mapped out in my tactics notebook. It was 4:25 and it had already been dark for half an hour. The night was cold and the wet pavement shimmered from the recent showers.

David unzipped his backpack and started pulling stuff out. “I brought supplies,” he said.

I glanced over. Along with his camera and a handheld tape recorder, there was a Dunkin' Donuts box, a large steel thermos, and a CD case.

"Now you're talking," I said. "Donuts and coffee are crucial to the success of a stakeout."

"That's what I thought," replied David. "They always had them on *Dragnet*."

He opened up the CD case and flipped through it, then pulled one out and stuck it into the car stereo.

"That better be stakeout music," I warned. The CD player whirred, then the theme from *Mission Impossible* came on. I nodded approvingly, beginning to reassess my partner's value.

As we went over the Hawthorne Bridge, David said, "So, do you think we'll actually catch Darren with another woman?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

"I thought you hated him."

I glanced over. I had never talked about that with anyone. "What makes you think that?" I asked casually.

David snorted. "Come on. Every time his name comes up you practically shoot red laser beams from your eyes."

Ooh. I hoped Merry had never noticed. "I don't like him much," I admitted. "But if we *do* catch him cheating...well. I just don't want Merry to get hurt."



We drove up Fourth Avenue, turned left on Taylor, and when we reached Darren's building, circled the block until a parking space opened up facing the front doors. "Perfect!" I said, shutting off the engine.

"Now what?" asked David.

"Now we watch and wait. Hand me the tape recorder, will you?" Men and women in staid gray suits began pouring out of the revolving doors like a great office building exodus. David handed over the gadget and I looked at my watch. Pressing the button, I said, "5:02. The unit is in place. No sign of the suspect."

David looked at me like I was nuts. "You've got to be kidding me."

"That's what they do in detective novels."

"But do you really think-" He stopped when he saw my face. "Fine. Never mind."

We sat there and watched the people file out, off to have dinner with their families or buy a round of beer for their colleagues or meet up with their coke dealers or whatever. I was wound up like a clock, my jaw clenched and my hands curled into fists around the steering wheel. I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen if we really did find Darren doing something he shouldn't.

After a few minutes David broke the silence. "So this guy walks into a bar-"

"Shhh," I interrupted. "You have to pay attention. If he comes out and we miss him we're in big trouble."

"But in the stakeouts on TV they always tell jokes while they wait for the bad guy."

I thought about that. "You're right. Sorry, go on."

He shook his head. "Too late. You ruined it."

At twenty past the hour, there was still no sign of Darren. "Maybe he really is working late," said David.

"We might as well settle in," I said. "Looks like we'll be here for awhile. I mean, we might even be here all night."

"All night?"

"Yup." I saw the pained look on his face. "Don't worry. I've got sleeping bags in the back seat."

"Oh, what a relief." He rolled his eyes and began searching around in his backpack again. "Want a donut?"

"I thought you'd never ask." I took a toasted coconut one - my favorite - and David and I passed the thermos between us.

Keeping his eyes on the doors, he asked, "How was that wedding your mom made you go to?"

"Oh, same as usual. A lot of chit-chat with strangers. Salmon and prime rib. Hangover in the morning."

"What about the guy?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Tim? He was pretty typical too."

"Define 'typical.'"

"He had a 401K and a bald spot."

"So you didn't hit it off?"

“Not really.” An image of a pair of gorgeous blue eyes floated through my brain.

“But you know who was there? Oscar.”

“Oscar?” David turned to me. “Who’s that?”

“Keep your eyes on the doors,” I said. “Oscar’s the guy from the country club, remember? The one Merry thought I had a crush on.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. We just talked for a minute.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.” Then into the recorder I said, “5:46. Still no sign of the suspect...wait a minute.” I grabbed David’s sleeve. “Is that him? That’s him!”

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a black overcoat strode out through the revolving doors. He carried a leather briefcase in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

“Are you sure that’s him?” asked David, squinting in the dark.

“That’s him,” I said. “I’m positive.” I would recognize Darren anywhere. It wasn’t just his chiseled face or his slicked-back hair; it was the way he moved, the way he stalked down the sidewalk as if he owned the world. He was such an arrogant little prick.

“It’s pretty early,” said David. “If he’s supposed to be working late, I doubt he got much done.”

“Maybe he’s just going to get a sandwich before the meeting,” I said. “Or maybe the business meeting is a business *dinner*.”

“Or maybe he has to put more money in his parking meter,” suggested David.

Darren turned and started walking towards the river.

"I guess we'll see. Are you ready?" I asked.

"Ready."

We grabbed the camera, jumped out of the car, and started following Darren, careful to stay back far enough that he wouldn't notice us. I darted down the sidewalk, pausing intermittently to hide behind a lamp pole or a bus stop shelter. This had to be done right. If Darren caught us, Merry would never find out the truth.

"What are you doing?" I hissed, pulling David down behind a mailbox.

"What do you mean?" asked David.

"Why are you stomping like that?"

"I'm not stomping," he insisted. "I'm walking normally."

"You're attracting attention." I peered around the mailbox. Darren was at the end of the block.

"You're the one attracting attention," he said. "Do you think it's not weird to hide behind mailboxes at night?"

"Come on, he's getting away." I grabbed David's hand and pulled him down the sidewalk, almost running in an effort to catch up to our prey.

Darren crossed the street and kept walking. I let him get to the other side of the street before I dragged David into the intersection with me - almost getting us killed by a yellow cab in the process - and then paused behind a building on the other side.

"Listen, Jane," said David, wiping his brow. That had been a close one with the cab. "I've got an idea. Why don't we pose as a couple? Then it would be totally normal

for us to be walking on the sidewalk. Normally. Like normal people. Like the kind who don't dodge behind poles or in front of moving vehicles."

"Pose as a couple?" Peeking around the corner, I saw Darren half a block away.

"Yeah. You know, a couple out on a date, going for a walk."

I grimaced at David. "Like pretending to hold hands and stuff?"

"Yeah."

The thought was tempting. Finding places to hide wasn't as easy as I had thought it would be. I should have worn a black ski mask, but it was too late for that. If Darren saw my face he would recognize me. At least I thought he would. I mean, I *was* the maid of honor in his wedding.

"It's too dangerous," I said, shaking my head. "He knows my face. We have to stay out of sight."

We emerged from hiding and scuttled down the street to the nearest lamppost. Darren was all the way down at the next corner already.

"Damn it, he's fast!" said David. "What's he in such a hurry for?"

"Maybe his meeting was cancelled," I said hopefully. "And he's anxious to get home to Merry. Come on."

So we continued on, darting in and out of hiding and attracting strange looks from passersby, trailing Darren as he made his way through the city. Finally, after an exhausting six or seven blocks, he slowed down and ducked into a cozy-looking restaurant.

“Thank god,” I huffed, leaning against a brick building. “I thought he was going to walk all the way back to the suburbs!”

David scratched his head and looked around. “So, ah, do you think we should we go inside?”

Okay. Decision time. The problem was, what if I barged in on a company dinner? Or what if he was just having dinner by himself? Or what if he *was* with someone? What would I say? I envisioned myself marching up to the table and hurling red wine in Darren’s face. God, that would be cool.

But then what if it turned out the person he was with was a business associate? Or his boss? That would *not* be cool. For me or for Merry.

I looked uncertainly at David. “Maybe I should just go peek in the window first, shall I? A bit of a reconnoiter.”

“If you think that’s what’s best.” He gestured gallantly for me to go ahead.

Suddenly I felt scared. It was the moment of truth. I sent up a little prayer: *please god, let him be sitting with a fat old man and a thick ream of business documents. Please please please. Or by himself. Or even...with his mother. Yes, his mother would do.* I squared my shoulders. I could do this. It would be fine. He’d just be sitting there with a table full of suits, charging up the company Visa.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going.”

“Okay,” said David. He gave me a salute. “Good luck, Wingleader.”

I smiled weakly and stumbled forward. It was as if my feet were suddenly made of lead; I could barely get them to move, and every time they touched the ground my

thudding footsteps seemed to echo in my brain. My blood was buzzing in my ears and my lungs felt tight, as if someone were sitting on my chest. But I moved forward and stopped in front of the window. I had to do this. For Merry.

Inside, the restaurant looked very pleasant. The walls were a lovely dark pumpkin color, there were fresh flowers at every table, and the entire place glowed with candlelight. Huh, I thought confusedly. It didn't really seem like the kind of place you'd go for a business meeting.

And then I saw them. Right there in the front window, not ten feet away from me, as proud as you please. Darren and some thin blond woman in a designer suit, holding hands and making googly eyes at each other.

"Do you see them?" asked David.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. All I could think about was Merry, sitting at home night after night, thinking that everything was okay, that her life was good, that her marriage was strong. Sitting there trusting her husband of eight years, whom she had vowed to love and trust for the rest of her life. And all that time, he was sitting here in a window table at Gino's Italian Bistro, buying seafood linguine for another woman.

"Jane?" asked David, coming out from around the corner and walking over. "Can you see anything?"

He stopped beside me and followed my gaze. "Oh, shit."

I held out my hand. "Give me the camera," I whispered.

That fucker was going down in flames.

## Chapter 14

Merry didn't take the news very well. She cried for twenty minutes at her kitchen table then hurled a dinner plate into Darren's plasma TV.

"Fucking bastard!" she shrieked, charging up the stairs.

"Mer?" I called nervously, following her. "What are you doing?"

She was in the closet, yanking Darren's suits off their hangers and tossing them on the floor, muttering something about kerosene in the garage.

"Okay, Mer," I soothed. "I know you're upset. But burning your husband's wardrobe is not a healthy way of expressing your feelings." I took a Brooks Brothers' suit from her trembling hands and hung it back up. "It would be better if you called a 24-hour locksmith and had the doors re-keyed."

But after some more tears and a bit of talking, we decided that Merry would pack up a few things and come stay with me for a while. David and I gathered some of her clothes while Merry composed a little note. This is what she left on the hallway table:

*"You adulterous bastard! I give you the best years of my life and you turn out to be some faithless, sex-addicted, two-timing, rat-faced pig who can't keep his dick in his pants! If you were here right now I'd beat you with the fire poker. I'm leaving you!"*

Back at my place, we gave Merry a Xanax and an Excedrin PM and tucked her into bed in my extra room. She mumbled something that sounded like "can't find the matches" and fell asleep with tears still sparkling on her eyelashes.



David and I turned out the light and walked downstairs to the kitchen.

Wordlessly, I put on the teakettle and sat down at the table, staring into space.

“Are you hungry?” asked David. “Can I make you anything?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

He took out two mugs and put teabags in them, then lowered himself into a chair across from me. We didn’t say anything, but it wasn’t awkward. It felt like we had just both witnessed a horrible car crash or something, and now we were bonded by tragedy. After a few minutes, David got up and poured the tea.

“What do you think will happen now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They might get a divorce, I suppose.” I lowered my eyes to my lap. “I feel awful. I wish I had never gotten involved. I feel like it’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault,” said David, sitting down next to me and putting his hand on my arm. “You did what Merry wanted you to do. You did her a favor. Darren’s the one to blame for all this. What an asshole.”

“I just can’t believe it,” I said. “I mean, I know this stuff happens all the time, but I never pictured it happening to Merry.” I got up and began doctoring the tea with sugar. “It’s true that I never liked Darren, but I figured that deep down he must be okay because Merry loved him. But now...well, it just goes to show you, you can’t trust men.”

“That’s not true,” said David. “Not all men are like Darren.”

“All the ones I know are.”

“What about your parents? They’ve been together for over half their lives.”

“That’s different,” I said. “They’re an older generation. They take commitment seriously.”

“How about Andy and Sergio, then? Don’t you think they have a committed relationship?”

“Yes, but they’re gay,” I argued. “They’re operating on a whole different set of rules.”

He waved his hand in the air, dismissing me. “Whatever. What about me? Don’t you trust me?”

I rolled my eyes. What a stupid question. “Of course I trust *you*. You’re my *friend*.”

“Okay, but I’m a man and you trust *me*.”

This was getting ridiculous. Obviously David did not understand what I was trying to say. “Okay, okay. Apparently you can trust men as long as you’re not romantically involved with them.”

“That’s garbage, Jane, and you know it. There are some men that you can trust no matter what.”

Wow. That was the kind of thing guys said in movies, right before they kissed the heroine and swept her off her feet. It was the kind of thing I had always fantasized about. It was too bad that the guy saying it was just my friend. Otherwise, I might have thought it was damn sexy.

The next few days were awful. Darren kept calling and calling for Merry, and he came by twice and pounded on the door but I threatened to call the cops. He even stood in the yard yelling her name, just like in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But Merry wasn't ready to talk to him yet, so I threw eggs at him from the upstairs window and he eventually went away.

Merry was a wreck. She stayed in bed in her borrowed nightgown all day long, never bothering to get up and shower or come downstairs to eat. I brought her tea and toast, chicken noodle soup, even chocolate ice cream, but she wouldn't do more than eat a few bites and go back to sleep. And the worst of it was, she wouldn't talk to me. I kept trying to reassure her that I was there for her, that I'd help her anyway I could, but she just looked at me blankly and started crying again.

But on Sunday morning she came downstairs with wet hair, in a clean outfit, and sat down across from me at the table where I was trying to grade papers.

"I'm going to call him now," she said.

I gulped. "Okay." I handed her the phone and started to get up.

"No," she said. "Stay."

So I sat back down and she called him. And when he answered, she very calmly said, "I'm very angry with you." Then she did a whole lot of listening, every now and then saying something like, "Why should I believe you?" or "Is that supposed to make me feel better?" And then, near the end, she asked him what he wanted and whatever he said made her cry, and she said, "I'll have to think about it." And she hung up.

After she had composed herself and I had fed her some Nutter Butters and a mug of cocoa, she filled me in. Darren's story was this: he had met this woman, Josephine, at work; they had been assigned to work on the merger together. So they had been working very closely, going on business trips together and staying late at work, and basically getting to know each other quite well, but in a completely innocent, professional capacity. But then a few weeks ago, they had gone on a business dinner together, had a little too much wine, and they ended up kissing. Darren had been very confused about the whole thing, and they had started going out on dates. Real dates. But they had never slept together, and they had only gone out a few times, and Darren was really sorry and he knew he was an idiot and he would do anything for Merry to come back.

I was outraged. "Does he think that just because he never slept with her it's okay? What the hell is wrong with him?"

"I know!" huffed Merry, then added, "But at least they *didn't* sleep together."

"How can we even be sure he's telling the truth about that?" I was getting horrible mental pictures of Darren naked in a cheap hotel, trying to seduce Josephine on a heart-shaped bed. Yuck. Oh, yuck.

"Mm," mumbled Merry.

"What?" I gasped. "Do you believe him?"

She looked away guiltily. "I think so."

"Merry," I said, gripping the edge of the table. "He could be lying. He could be trying to cover his ass."

“But...he didn’t sound like he was lying. He sounded like he really wanted me back.” Merry looked hopefully at me.

“But Mer,” I said. “Surely it doesn’t matter if he wants you back.” I looked at her confused face. “Does it?”

“No, no. Of course not.” She shrugged. “Maybe.”

I was horrified, but I let it go. I didn’t want to get into it with her when she was so very fragile. But I knew that we’d be coming back to it. There was no way I was letting my friend go back to her cheating husband. At least not without a fight.

My mother likes to say that when it rains, it pours. Well, that week it sure was pouring: Tyler Morgan dumped Molly. Apparently she started discussing what their children would look like and he kicked her out of his apartment. She told me about it over the phone, since she had been pretending to have the flu and calling in sick to work.

“I don’t understand!” she wailed. “He said he loved me!”

“Did he really?” I asked. I was honestly surprised. They had only been going out for two months. “When?”

“On our first date,” she sniffed.

“Your first date!” I almost dropped the phone. “You mean the first night that you...”

“Yeah.” She paused. “Wait a minute. Are you suggesting that he only said it to get me into bed?”

“No!” Well, yes. That’s exactly what I was suggesting. “I just think that’s awfully early for a guy to be whipping out the L-word. Did you say it back?”

“Of course,” she said. “And I really meant it.” She started crying again.

Christ. For the first time in my life I was starting to feel really grateful that I didn’t have a boyfriend.

“Oh, Mols,” I said. “You’ll bounce back. You’ll find a better guy.”

“But he was the best!” she squealed.

I really wanted to point out that a so-called ‘best guy’ wouldn’t throw you out on the street at three in the morning for asking if dimples ran in his family. But what I said (quite tactfully, I thought) was, “It only seems that way now, Mols. I promise, once you develop a little distance, you’ll wonder what you ever saw in him.”

“No I won’t!” she sobbed. “I’ll never get over him!”

Obviously this was going to require an intervention. “Mols, why don’t you come over to my house over the weekend for a girls’ night?” I asked. I mean, what the hell, right? Merry was already there, eating everything that wasn’t nailed down. Mols could come over and weep on the sofa. All we needed was to paint each other’s nails and it would be a sixth-grade slumber party.

“Okay,” she sniffed. “That sounds like a good idea. Ooh...should I bring *Sleepless in Seattle*?”

\* \* \* \* \*

If this were a movie, this would be the part where three single women dance drunkenly around the living room to “I Will Survive” in some sort of weird pseudo-feminist ritual. But no. That’s not what happened at our girls’ night.

We got tanked and drunk-dialed people. I like to think it’s what Gloria Steinem would have done, too.

It started out so innocently. We had just put the movie into the VCR when I got up to make a run to the fridge. Except Merry suggested that instead of Diet Coke we do tequila shots. Which was fine, but I couldn’t find my shot glasses, so we decided we’d just pass the bottle around between us. So there we were, taking pulls like a bunch of bona fide winos, and suddenly it occurred to me that I had seen *Sleepless in Seattle* about eight gazillion times. We weren’t even to the disgustingly cute “Dad and son brushing their teeth together” scene before I was totally bored.

“Hey,” I called out to the living room at large. “Izzanyone tired a this?”

They looked at me; they looked at each other. “S’making me nauseous,” confessed Merry.

“Thass the booze,” said Mols. She looked at me. “Whatcha wanna do?”

“I dunno. Make cookies?”

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So Betty Crocker.”

“Does anyone know any drinkin’ games?” asked Merry.

We ended up playing Ring of Fire and were totally plowed by nine o'clock. All I wanted to do was lie on the cool wooden floor and try to make the room stop spinning, but it was Molly's idea to get out the phone.

"I'm gonna call Tyler," she announced. "An' tellimwhatta fuckhead he is." She picked up the phone and dialed. "S'his machine," she whispered. "I'll jus' leave him a little message..." Then suddenly she put on voice that sounded like Bitch Queen from Hell and roared, "Tyler, you complete bastard! I woulda dumped you anyway. You've got the tiniest nubbin I've ever seen!" She shrieked with laughter, but then it turned into sobs. "I miss you. Please call me."

I grabbed the phone away from her and banged it down into the cradle. "That wasn't good," I said.

"No," whimpered Molly.

"But the firs' part rocked," said Meredith. "You shoulda stuck to that."

"Should I call 'im back?"

"No!" I yelled. But then it seemed really funny and we all started giggling uncontrollably and falling out of our chairs. Molly almost wet her pants, and that made us laugh even more because she was rolling around on the floor making noises like a hyena and grabbing her crotch.

Eventually we came up for air and Merry said, "I'm inspired. I'm gonna call Darren."

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that wasn't a wise move. The thought gathered slowly like a rain cloud, coming in wisps and fragments: I should say



something...I should do something...but by the time a coherent thought had traveled slowly down the synapses from my brain to my lips, Merry had already dialed the number and the phone was ringing. And Darren picked up on the other end.

Merry's eyes went round. Like a deer caught in the headlights, she gaped at me, frozen. "Wha' should I say?" she whispered.

"I dunno!" I hissed. "It was your idea to call 'im!" I could hear Darren's voice, small and tinny, calling out, "Hello? Hello? Mer, is that you?"

"Hang up! Hang *up*, you ninny!" whispered Molly.

Merry scowled and turned away. "Hi, Darren...no, I'm fine...well, yes, actually...what the hell do you care if I've been drinkin'? Don't I have a right to drink when my husband is out boffing other women?!...You're damn right it's all a mistake! The past eight years have been a mistake, you miserable twat!...Aw, go fuck yourself!" And she slammed down the phone.

She turned back around to face us. "I need another drink. Quick."

"The proplem here," I slurred, passing her the empty bottle, "is that ovviously neither of you have studied the art of the drunk-dial. You're not suppose' to call exes."

"You're not?"

"No. You're not suppose' to call exes even when you're sober." I reached for the phone, which seemed to be spinning in a circle. Or maybe that was my vision. "You're suppose' to call someone you can flirt with. That way you can say loads a raunchy things, and nobody takes you seriously 'cause you're drunk." I hiccupped and punched in a number. "Lemme show you how it's done."

“Who are you calling?” asked Merry.

I smiled smugly and shook my head. This is going to be hilarious, I thought.

“Hello?” answered a voice on the other end of the line.

“David!” I called. “It’s me! I’m drunk!”

“Yes, I can tell,” he said. “You’re deafening my right ear. Everything okay?”

“Lovely! We’re havin’ a girls’ night. We’re drinkin’ tequila in our jammies.

Guess what I’m wearin’!”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, guess what I’m wearin’. I’ll give you a hint: it’s black and lacy and about the size of Kleenex.” That wasn’t actually the truth; I was wearing gray droopy-butt sweatpants. But he didn’t need to know that.

There was a pause. “Um...am I still supposed to guess?”

“You know what, David?” I was going to have to try another tactic here. “I’ve always thought you had really nice hands. Big, strong, manly hands. I bet you’re good with them.” I glanced up and snickered at Merry, who was waving her arms and mouthing *Nooo!* Honestly, the woman had no guts. I waved her away and purred into the phone, “You know what I’d like you to do with those hands a yours?”

“Uh...I don’t know,” said David. “Help you clean your rain gutters?”

“No, silly.” I hiccupped. “I wan’ you to slowly take off my clothes, piece by piece...slide those big hands of yours down my naked, glistening body...and *oof!--*”

Merry tackled me to the floor, knocking the wind out of me.

She scrambled over my sprawled form, lunging at the phone, and yelled into it, "Sorry, Dave, she passed out...No, no, I'm gonna put her into a cold shower right now. Okay, bye." She hung up and glared at me. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"I think I have a concussion."

"How could you tease him like that?" she raged.

"He knew I was joking," I sputtered, struggling to sit up.

"Have you ever thought about a part-time job as a phone sex operator?" asked Molly, who was lying upside down on the sofa, her head hanging over the floor. "I hear they make boatloads of cash."

"Don't encourage her," snapped Merry. "That was very insensitive, what you just did, Jane."

"It was a prank!" I yelled. "He knew I was drunk. What's the big deal?"

She rolled her eyes and snorted. "Grow up, Jane. Just *grow up*!"

I rolled my eyes back at her. "You're blowing the whole thing out of proportion, Mer. Don't worry about it." I got to my feet and leaned against the wall for support. I was actually starting to feel like I really might pass out. "Can someone please bring me a glass of water? I don't...feel...oh my god."

I made it to the bathroom just in time. Reminder to self, I noted: Jose Cuervo and Fig Newtons might seem like a good idea at the time, but they are really, *really* not worth it.

## Chapter 15

When I first brought Merry to stay with me I hadn't thought about how long it would be for or what it might be like. If anything, I imagined it would be like it was back when we were college roommates: borrowing each other's clothes, consuming inordinate amounts of junk food and booze, and giving each other bad advice about men. I had thought it would be a restorative experience for her, something that would help her get over her shock and anger over Darren.

Two months later, I was finally beginning to realize that what Merry needed was not Girl Time, but rather something along the lines of prescription drugs and expensive therapy. She still went to work, still did all the things she normally would have done, but it was like she was a robot. Nothing made her happy, not even beef fajitas or the White Sale at Nordstrom. Not even the reconciliation efforts of her husband, who brought flowers and hand-written letters practically every other day.

She read them to me sometimes: he wanted her to come back, he was sorry, he couldn't live without her, and if she gave him another chance he'd never stray again. Blah blah blah. Not much creativity on his part, let me tell you. I mean, had the man never heard of Shakespeare? What on earth was The Bard *for* if not to be copied in love letters? If Darren had been a student in my class he would have been better prepared for occasions such as this.

But whatever he lacked in creativity he made up for with sincerity. I thought so, and hell, I hated the man's guts. His persistence alone was proof enough for me; less

honest men would have given up weeks ago and started hunting down more blonds. It galled me, but I believed him when he said he was sorry. And I was pretty sure Merry did too.

But the question was, could she forgive and forget? That was trickier. If it was me in her shoes, the answer would have been no, no, a thousand times no. But Merry wasn't me.

"I still love him," she said to me one night. She had just read aloud a particularly good letter, and we were trying to sort everything out for the millionth time.

"I know you do," I said. "But let me give you a hypothetical situation. Let's say you do get back together, and everything's fine and good, you love each other and all that. Except every time your husband goes on a business trip or mentions a female colleague, you wonder if he's having an affair. What sort of life is that?"

"But he wouldn't have another affair, I know it."

"Yes, but the point is that you'd always be thinking about it. It would always be out there. You could never escape from the fact that he *once did*."

"Even if I forgave him?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mer. Can you imagine yourself ever thinking about what's happened and not getting unhappy?"

She stared out the window at the bare trees and rain-soaked street. "I don't know. I can't imagine being happy with him, nor can I imagine being happy without him." She smiled ruefully. "Basically, he's ruined my life."

“Come on,” I said, moving to stand beside her. I bumped her playfully with my hip. “It’s not ruined. At least you’ve still got hope.”

“Yes.” She frowned, and turned back to watch the rain.

It was during that time that I decided that if anyone asked me to plan another party, I would immediately move to Switzerland and live under an assumed name. The whole thing was turning into a catastrophe. I was fielding calls from Dilsy and my mother left and right. At that point, my mom wanted to change the color scheme to yellow and have the entire ballroom blooming with daffodils, while Dilsy remained firm that purple orchids were the only way to go. With the two of them nattering away at me all the time, not to mention the fact that there was no florist in the entire state of Oregon who could get daffodils in the middle of July, I was expecting my head to start spinning around like in that scene from *The Exorcist*. Why couldn’t we just have a backyard barbeque? Then I’d only have to pick out decorative paper plates. I was sure I could get *those* in yellow.

Plus I was becoming the most hated woman on the catering circuit. I had already changed the menu three times, after Dilsy had read something about Moroccan food being the next big thing. Dutifully I had arranged for lamb and couscous, but then my dad said he’d be “in the john all night,” so we quickly changed to roast duck cannelloni. Except Mom said none of her friends would eat duck. So then it was back to salmon and prime rib, which is what we planned in the first place.

I called Andy to complain. “Why can’t you help with the menu?” I whined. “You own a restaurant, for Christ’s sake. You know more about all this than I do.”

“Of course I do, Duchess,” he cooed. “But I’m much too clever to get involved with this three-ring circus.”

“Clever, ha! You’re the one who thought chartreuse was the name of a sports car!” I took a few deep breaths. “They’re driving me nuts, Andy. They’ve got me going to Bridal Barn to look at silver fluted cups this weekend.”

“Wow. Sounds fun. As for me, I’m taking Sergio up to the mountain. We rented the cutest little log cabin; it’s got a fireplace and a faux bearskin rug!”

“Well, if you can go off and have a good time knowing that your favorite sister is slaving away on this stupid party, then that’s just fine. I hope you get frostbite.”

“Oh, you’re just jealous because I’m getting nookie and you’re not. Hey. That reminds me. When are the six months over?”

“The first of May.” That was a little over five weeks. Thirty-seven days. Eight hundred and eighty-eight hours. Not that I was counting.

“How exciting!” trilled Andy. “What will you do to celebrate?”

“Well, actually...” I had been toying with an idea, but I wasn’t sure yet. “I was thinking about running in the May Day Race.”

“What?” he gasped. “Isn’t that, like, ten miles?”

“Yeah. But I’ve been training, you know.”

“Training how? Wrestling open a bag of chips?”

“I’ve been running!” I argued. “I ran four miles yesterday.”

He paused. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm getting pretty damn good, as a matter of fact."

It was true. My legs were stronger, my lungs were stronger, and even my mind was stronger. I had only planned on running three miles, but then I hadn't wanted to stop. Every time I went out running now - which was almost every other day - I tried to top the distance I had done the last time. I felt like I was becoming a real runner.

"Well," said Andy. "If you run the race I'll come cheer you on to the finish line."

"Oh, would you?"

"Definitely. You're going to need someone to carry you home."

The call-waiting beeped. "Andy, it's Mom on the other line. Gotta go."

"Tell her I said her skin tone is too pink to have daffodils."

Right. I switched over to the other call. "Hi, Mom."

"Oh! Jane-darling!" she sang. "Guess what? I've had a brilliant idea."

Oh god. Not again. Stay calm; think about sunny meadows. "Really?"

"I was over at Fabric Depot this morning, just bumping around looking at upholstery fabrics - you know I've been wanting to redo the dining room chairs for ages now - and I happened to breeze through the satin aisle, and guess what I found?"

An orphaned kitten? I wanted to ask. A twenty-dollar bill? An umbrella? But I knew it was all wishful thinking. "What did you find, Mom?"

"The most gorgeous roll of satin I've ever seen, Darling, at fifty percent off! And I thought to myself, you know, Susan knows how to sew. She makes her own clothes!



She could make a dress for me for the party! A custom-made dress, just like the movie stars have! It will be one of a kind. Isn't it brilliant?"

"Er, yes." The last time I saw Susan she looked like she was wearing a purple gunnysack. 'Brilliant' was not the word that had come to mind.

"And the best part is," continued Mom, "we can change the color scheme to match my dress!"

No! No! This couldn't be happening to me. I absolutely refused to go along with this plan. Shouldn't you be able to count on something? I mean, in this mad, whirlwind existence, shouldn't something as simple as a color scheme for a party have just a tiny shred of constancy?

I tried not to sound angry. "Mother," I said. "You're going to have to make a decision and stick with it. I can't change all the plans every two weeks."

"Oh, phooey, Darling. I was just experimenting with my creativity before. How was I supposed to know what I'd like if I didn't try it out?"

"Experimenting is fine, Mom, but when you place an order that usually means that you've made your choice. The florists are starting to hate me."

"But this is it," she insisted. "This is the color I really want."

"You're sure?"

"Oh, yes, Darling! I won't change my mind again, I promise."

I thought about it. If this was the last time...

"Okay," I said. "But if you change your mind again, it's too late. No more last-minute changes. This is it. This is permanent. Okay?"

“Of course! Darling, you make it sound as if I were flaky!”

Probably because you are, I thought. “So, what color will your dress be?”

“Orchid!”

What? “Orchid? You mean, like, orchid as in the color we started out with?”

“No, Darling!” She clucked at me. “That was a boring, dull purple color. This one is absolutely *gorgeous*!”

Meanwhile, the ache of rejection had driven Molly to baldness. Well, not total baldness, but close enough: in an ill-advised post-breakup moment, she had paid someone \$70 to cut off all her hair. She called it a pixie cut, but personally I thought she looked like a cancer survivor. Thin clumps of pale, maimed hair stuck up at odd angles from her scalp, making her look small and vulnerable and rather like a ten-year-old boy.

“Isn’t it funky?” she asked, messing it with her fingers. We were sharing a peanut butter sandwich during our lunch period. “I don’t even have to comb it. I just fluff it and go.”

“Um, right.” Of course she didn’t have to comb it. It was half an inch long.

“Listen, is this a cry for help?”

“What?”

“Is this new haircut some kind of statement about Tyler Morgan?” I demanded.

“Jane,” she barked. “What did we talk about?”

Oh yeah. Shortly after the breakup, she had brought me into the teachers' lounge to witness her "closure ceremony," which involved burning a candle, chanting the lyrics to "Come On, Eileen," and swearing never to mention his name again. It had seemed like a swell idea at the time, but honestly I don't think it really helped much. Molly hadn't been her usual self since Tyler dumped her.

"Sorry," I said. "Listen, I just want to make sure you're okay. You've seemed kind of...depressed lately."

"Don't be silly." She laughed. "I'm fine."

"So, that explosion in the chemistry lab was nothing to worry about?"

She rolled her eyes. "I told you, that was an accident. Besides, it wasn't really an *explosion*. It was more like a...a spark. I don't know why they even bothered to call the fire department."

"And what about that day when you forgot where you lived?"

"Everything turned out fine," she said, shrugging. "Those cops were really nice."

"And I shouldn't have been concerned when you suddenly decided you wanted to donate a kidney to your next door neighbor?"

"Jane, I told you, I thought she needed one. She looked sickly."

I put my hand over hers. "Yes, dear, but stomach flu is a lot different from diabetes. Listen Mols, I know you're recovering from a heartbreak. I know that sometimes it can feel unbearable. But you're going to get through it."

"Please, Jane," she said, pulling away. "Honestly, I'm completely over him. It was fun while it lasted, I learned from the experience, and now I'm moving on."

I wished I could believe that.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I’m just saying, if you want to talk, I’m here for you.”

“Don’t worry.” She got up and started clearing away her lunch things. “I’m fine. I’m great. I’ve never been better.” And she left.

When I got home from an exhausting afternoon at Bridal Barn that Saturday, the house seemed different somehow. I couldn’t figure out what had changed until I realized that Merry wasn’t sprawled on the couch in her sweatpants watching “Oprah.” Nor was she in the kitchen nursing a few chocolate éclairs. And the house was downright *tidy*. This was very strange indeed.

“Merry?” I called.

“Up here,” she called. “In my room.”

I took the stairs two at a time and swung around the banister. “Have you been cleaning?” I asked, nudging open her door.

She was sitting on her bed with a blue suitcase beside her, her legs dangling over the sides. The blinds on the window were drawn up, and the room was flooded with weak winter sunshine.

“I’m going back to him,” she said.

“So I see.”

I stepped into the room and sank down into the old velour armchair in the corner. It had been my dad’s when I was younger, and still held an impression of his round

frame. Sitting in it made me feel like a little kid again, almost like I was sitting in my father's lap.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

She nodded, refusing to meet my eyes. "I know you don't think I should, Jane. But I've been arguing with myself for months now, and I finally feel like I've made up my mind."

I drew my legs up underneath me. "What decided you?"

"It was today's letter." She pulled a white envelope from her purse. "Want to read it?" She leaned forward and passed it to my outstretched fingers.

*Dear Meredith, I read. I realize now that I've always taken you for granted. From the moment we met, you've been unfailingly generous to me, giving more of yourself than I deserve. When we were together, I guess it was easy for me not to notice all the little things you do that make my life happier. But now that you're gone, I can see all the empty spaces in my life that you used to fill. I miss waking up beside you and listening to you breathe. I miss the way your hair smells like sugar. I even miss the way you nagged at me to spend less time at work and more time with you. I can see that I was a fool not to listen.*

*I know I've hurt you very badly, and that it's asking too much for you to forgive me. But I still have to ask, because my life means nothing without you in it. Please come back. I swear that if you do, I'll spend the rest of my life making you glad you did. You are the sun in my universe. You make all the good things possible.*

*Darren*

“That’s a pretty good letter,” I said, sighing.

“Yeah,” she said. “And the thing is, I feel the same way. I love him more than anything. I *could* live without him, but I don’t want to.”

“But...” I couldn’t stop myself from asking. “How can you ever trust him again?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it’s something we’ll have to work on together.” She took the letter back and turned it over in her hands. “But I believe him when he says he’ll work at it.”

I nodded and watched the floating dust motes sparkling in the sun. So this was it. This was the moment when I watched my best friend go back to her cheating husband and didn’t try to stop her. This was the moment when I accepted the life she had chosen for herself. The decisions she had made weren’t the ones that I would have, but it didn’t matter anymore. I had to let it all go: all the things I held against Darren, and all the things I secretly held against Merry for loving him. I was giving up all the resentment, because I wanted my best friend to be happy.

“Okay,” I said. I got up, sat next to her on the bed, and threw my arms around her. “Good luck to you both. I know you’ll work it out.”

“Thanks, Jane.” She hugged me tight. “Thanks for putting up with me for so long.”

“Aw,” I mumbled. “It was nothing. I’d put up with you forever...even though you always hog the TV clicker.”

“I love you, you know.”

“I know,” I said. “I love you, too.”

We sat together for a little while in silence. The sun sank low on the horizon,  
casting long shadows across the room.

## Chapter 16

“What about that guy?”

“Which one?”

“The one in the black shirt. With the spiky hair.” Trying to be discrete, I pointed with my fork towards the man standing at the bar.

“What, the one with the lip ring?” asked Molly. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

David craned his neck to see who we were talking about. “I’m with you, Mols. He looks a little hardcore to me.”

“What are you talking about?” I sputtered. “Just because he’s got a two-foot chain dangling from his belt and a tattoo on his neck doesn’t necessarily mean he’s an angry person. I think you’re both being very judgmental.” I picked up my margarita and licked the salt from the rim.

“We’re not being judgmental, we’re being smart,” said David. “That guy looks like someone who steals purses from little old ladies.”

“Whatever.”

We were sitting at our favorite table at Nachos, listening to salsa music and picking our way through an appetizer plate of chicken quesadillas and Southwestern egg rolls. Our mission had two goals: 1) to pig out, and 2) to find a guy to cheer up Molly. It had been almost three months since the Tyler Morgan episode and she was *still* moping around as if her life were over. I mean, I thought the rule was you got two weeks of mourning for every month you were in a relationship. Mols and Tyler had only been



together for two months, so that meant she got four weeks of mourning. Clearly she was over her limit.

It was time for another intervention.

“Okay,” I said, spying a new male specimen just walking in. “Okay. How about this guy? He looks squeaky clean.”

Molly turned around, then looked back at me and scowled. “He’s a redhead.”

“So?”

“So, I hate redheaded men.” She violently stabbed a chip into the guacamole.

“They remind me of those white lab rats with the pink eyes.”

I shot a quizzical look at David and he shrugged.

“Okaaay,” I said. “That makes no sense whatsoever.”

“So, what kind of man *would* you be interested in?” asked David.

She sighed. “Guys, I appreciate your concern and all, but this isn’t going to work. Nobody in this room interests me.”

“How can you say that?” I asked. “This place is a sausage fest. You couldn’t walk two feet in here without bumping into a hot guy.”

“I’m just not interested,” she huffed. “Can’t you understand? I’m not ready for this.”

“But why not?” I pressed.

“*Because*, Jane,” she hissed. “I know that someone like you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to actually be in love, but I do. I *loved* him. My heart is *broken*.”

I drew myself up in my chair. “What do you mean, *someone like me*?”

“Come on, girls,” said David. “Let’s play nice.”

Molly waved her drink in the air. “All I meant was that you go for the type of relationship where you don’t get too involved.”

What was she talking about? I got involved all the time, for god’s sake. And I had a long list of ex-boyfriends to prove it.

I dismissed it. Obviously Molly was upset and not making much sense. “Look, I’m not trying to force you into seeing someone,” I said. “I just thought it would cheer you up if you had a new prospect. I was only trying to help.”

“Me too,” said David. “Sorry if we’ve been acting like jerks.”

“Aw, you guys,” mumbled Molly. “You’re not jerks. *I’m* the jerk. I always seem to be killing the mood lately.”

“Well,” said David, flagging down the waitress. “We can easily fix that. Let’s get another round of drinks.”

Molly pleaded a headache and went home early, but David and I decided to stay on. It wasn’t even nine o’clock yet, and besides, I had been so busy taking care of my two lovelorn girlfriends that I had hardly seen David at all. I had kind of missed him.

“So what’s new with you?” I asked, chewing on a lime wedge.

“Same old stuff,” he answered. “I’ve been going nuts trying to find someone to adopt a fox terrier that was brought into the clinic last week. Hit by a car. But he’s going to be fine.”

“Why don’t you take him?”

“I would if I could. But I’ve already got the three, you know. That’s a whole lot of poop-scooping, Jane.” He popped a chip in his mouth. “Any chance you might take him?”

“Me?” I asked. “No way. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because. I’d have to remember to feed him, and walk him, and carry little plastic bags around with me all the time. I’m not ready for that kind of commitment.”

“But you love dogs.”

“Sure, but what if I want to fly off to Maui on a moment’s notice? What if I want to stay overnight at someone’s house? I’d always have to plan my life around taking care of my dog.”

He frowned at me. “Who are you staying overnight with?”

“No one,” I giggled. “I’ve got a couple weeks left before I can have that kind of fun. I was speaking hypothetically.”

“Has it been six months already?”

“On May first.” I lifted my chin proudly.

“Good for you, Jane. So, do you feel different? Have you achieved inner peace?”

“Almost,” I said. “I lost ten pounds from all the running. I’m at peace with my inner thighs.”

“Ah, well.” He winked at me. “I thought your thighs were nice before.”

I shot him a disbelieving look. “Don’t patronize me, please. They were like two tubs of cottage cheese.”

“No they weren’t,” he protested. “You’ve always had a nice figure.”

I shook my head. “Uh-uh. I’m a skinny fat person. I look skinny when I’m dressed but as soon as the clothes come off you can see all the sketchy spots.”

He leaned forward and whispered, “If somebody was lucky enough to get your clothes off, Jane, I promise you they wouldn’t be looking at your ‘sketchy spots.’”

I laughed and threw a tortilla chip at him. “You big flirt. Look at you, you’re such a womanizer that you can’t even stop when it’s just me.”

He gaped. “A *womanizer*? What on earth makes you think I’m a womanizer?”

“Oh, please! It’s so obvious. Everywhere we go, you’ve got women drooling all over you.”

“Really?” He turned to look over his shoulder and glanced around the room. “I don’t see anyone.”

“You are *such* a bad liar.”

“Jane, there’s not a single woman in this room looking at me. And I’m not a womanizer,” he argued. “You know I hardly ever date anyone.”

“That’s because you’re also a tease,” I said. “You get them all whipped up into a frenzy with your sexy grin and your suggestive winks, and then you ignore them.”

“You think my grin is sexy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

“I’m sorry, what was the subject again?”

“Your evil womanizing ways.”

“Oh, right. But your argument doesn’t make sense, Jane. If I were a womanizer, I’d be sleeping with loads of girls and then chucking them. But you yourself have pointed out that I’m practically a monk.”

“So?”

“So, if I was trying to get all these girls, why would I just flirt with them and go home by myself?”

I shrugged and tossed back the last of my drink. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe you have a terrible commitment problem.”

By the look on his face, he didn’t quite agree.

The club was dim and smoky and pulsing with a ground-shaking bass beat. All around me, lithe young bodies in skin-tight plastic leotards thrashed to the music, sweating and gyrating and whipping their dreadlocks around. I was standing in the middle of the room, all by myself...but wait. Who was that coming towards me? Out of the sea of unknown faces emerged the one person that I had never dared hope to see: Justin Timberlake! He grabbed my hips and starting grinding against me, and I put my arms around his neck and shoved my tongue in his mouth, and we kissed hungrily while the music got louder and shriller and more piercing until suddenly I realized...the phone was ringing.

Lurching awake, I thought, Oh my god. These boy-band fantasies have got to stop. It's completely immoral. It's totally perverted. It's just plain wrong.

But I made out with Justin Timberlake!

The shrieking phone, however, was a damper on my elation. I looked at the clock. 4:13 in the morning. This could only be bad news; immediately my heart began pounding in hyper-drive.

"Hello?" I yelped.

"Jane," whispered Dilsy. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is it Mom and Dad?"

"Yes..." she said.

Oh god, no! I couldn't deal with this. This couldn't be happening.

"...Mom told me last night that she wanted a brass band."

This couldn't be - wait a minute. "What?"

"She said something about a brass band playing golden oldies, and I know you've already auditioned a few bands, but-"

"Hold on," I said. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Are you calling me in the middle of the night to tell me I've got to find a brass band for the anniversary party?"

"Yes, Jane! This is an emergency. If we don't get a band booked this week, they'll all be snapped up for summer weddings. The party is less than three months away, for god's sake! The whole thing should have been taken care of by now."

"It is taken care of," I growled. "I booked a band last week."

"Well, cancel it!"

I took a deep breath to bolster myself. “I’m not canceling it. I refuse to cancel it. I have already canceled three orders with the florist, three cake designs with Merry, three menus with the caterers, and one very pissed off harpist! There will be *no more cancellations!*”

“Jane, you had better fucking cancel that band. This is the most important-”

“Dilsy.”

“-part of the whole party. If we don’t get the right-”

“Dilsy.”

“-band then they won’t dance and it won’t be any fun and-”

“DILSY!”

“What?”

“I have to get up for school in two hours. I’m going back to sleep. And I’m not canceling the goddamn band. If our mother wants to hear a fucking brass band, she can get on a fucking time machine and go back to the fifties!”

“But we need to-”

“No!” I snapped. “No more!” I slammed down the phone and burrowed under the covers. I should have been really angry, but actually I was quite pleased with myself.

Apparently the new me didn’t take any shit. I really admired that in a woman.

## Chapter 17

May Day. I had done it. I had endured six months without a man in my life. Six months with no kisses, no flirting, no candlelight dinners, no hand-holding, and no sex. There had been no boyfriend to ease the pain of family dinners. No boyfriend to send me a card on Valentine's Day. No boyfriend to distract me from my own neuroses. I had proved to everyone that I could spend some time on my own. I was an independent woman. I had climbed my proverbial mountain.

I really deserved a rest. Instead, I was going to run ten miles.

The sun was just rising as I retied my shoelaces for the sixteenth time, and the sky was tinged with pink and gold, reflecting its colors on the rippling surface of the Willamette River. Even the glass windowpanes of the downtown skyscrapers mirrored the fiery dawn; it seemed like the entire world was bathed in tangerine-colored light. Enjoying the beauty of the early morning, I stood along the pathway at Waterfront Park, where hundreds of people had gathered to await the starting signal for the May Day Race.

Surreptitiously I checked out the woman to my left. She had calf muscles like a pair of shiny apples and running shorts with all the coverage of a string bikini. I looked to my right. The guy next to me was slathering Vaseline on his inner thighs.

"Want some?" he asked.

"Er, no thanks. I've already moisturized."

He gave me a funny look and turned away. Oh well, I thought. Screw these marathon-types. They'll probably be finished and showered by the time I get to Mile



Three, but it doesn't matter. As long as they don't trample me to the ground, I don't care. I'm going to finish this damn race.

Although whether or not I really *could* do it was still up in the air, making my stomach twinge with nerves. I hadn't actually ever run ten miles all at once. In the training magazines they had said not to practice the full distance I'd be doing in the race. According to them, if I could run eight miles I could certainly run ten. (I guessed that my feet would be so numb by that point that I wouldn't feel the difference.) Well, I'd just have to keep my fingers crossed. My brother was going to be waiting for me at the finish line, so if I didn't turn up it would be just a tad embarrassing.

Suddenly the crowd tensed, and I knew it was time. I took one last, calming breath, cracked my ankles, and the gun went off. A great cheer went up from the spectators and we all lurched forward, trying to find space to move within the crowd, searching for gaps to slip through and get ahead of the pack. I didn't mind; I started out with a slow jog, paying attention to the rhythm of my breathing and my steps. I had to get this right. This was the culmination of six months of hard work; it wouldn't do to lurch my way through ten miles.

After a few minutes the crowd broke up and I was able to pick up my pace. It was quite peaceful, actually, running along the river at sunrise. The air was so fresh and clean and calming. I listened to the *clomp-clomp* of hundreds of running feet and the sound of my own pulse thudding in my ears; it almost seemed like the city had a heartbeat.

Around Mile Four I started to feel tired, and every step sent shock waves up my legs. It would have been so easy to stop running and throw myself down on a bench, but I

knew from experience that I had to push through. Once I got past the pain barrier, my body would be so used to the repetitive motion that it would move on automatic pilot. So I plunged onward, allowing the rhythm of my body to lull my thoughts away from the pain.

At last I made it into what athletes call the Zone. I had never understood what they were talking about before I started training. People described it as an altered state of mind, a phase of effortless performance, so somehow I always believed it must feel like being stoned: your brain is foggy and you think you're awesome. But that's not at all what it was like. It was like being hyper-conscious and unconscious at the same time - all the minute details of my job, my struggles with planning the party, and my concern over my friends and family faded into the background, and I became aware of my body in a way that's impossible in day-to-day life. My entire focus was on breathing, running, swinging my arms; I was aware of performing the motions but I didn't really feel any of them. It was almost like becoming a machine.

The rest of the race went by in a blur. I was running along, then I rounded a curve and suddenly, the finish line was before me. Hundreds of people stood along the sidelines cheering me on, waving flags and homemade posters. A wave of fresh energy rushed through me and I sprinted across the finish line as the crowd tossed flower petals over me and a flashbulb went off. I did it. I had done it. I had finished a ten mile race.

"Jane!" called a male voice. "Jane, over here!"

I followed the voice, thinking it must be Andy. But it wasn't. It was Oscar.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, running my hand over my sweat-soaked hair. Oh my god, I thought. I must look like a drowned rat.

Oscar, on the other hand, was looking damn foxy. His eyes were just impossibly blue.

“Jane, I thought that was you!” he said. God, what a killer smile he had. “I didn’t know you ran.”

“It’s my first race,” I said sheepishly. “Er, you didn’t run it, did you?”

He laughed. “No way. I only run when someone’s chasing me. I’m here working. Pinecrest is one of the sponsors, so I have to help hand out T-shirts and Gatorade and stuff.” He passed me a T-shirt that had the race logo and ‘Finisher’ emblazoned across the back. “I was saving that one especially for you.”

“Thanks,” I said, blushing. If I got any redder in the face someone was going to mistake me for a heart-attack victim. I had to get out of there before he realized that sweat-smell was coming from me. “Well, it was great to see you again...”

“Would you like to go out sometime?”

Yes! Yesss!

“I mean, I know you don’t know me that well,” he stammered. “But I promise I’m not a serial killer or anything. If you’re worried, we could meet in a public place. There’s a place called-”

“Okay,” I interrupted.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. I’d love to.”

We exchanged numbers and I wandered off in a daze, trying to find Andy. What a stroke of luck, I thought. Oscar the Hottie, who I'd been drooling over for months, asks me out on the exact day that my six months are up. It *had* to mean something.

I was grinning like a madwoman and pondering the meaning of fate and destiny and soul mates when I saw Andy...and his entourage: David, Merry, Mols, Sergio, and...my parents? Screw the meaning of fate; what was the meaning of *this*?

A chorus of congratulations hailed my arrival. "What are you guys doing here?" I sputtered.

"Surprise!" tittered my mom. "Andy told us you were running today. Why didn't you say anything, you naughty girl? Oh! You're so flushed, Darling; have a lemonade. You look piqued."

Andy winked at me. "You smell like rotting garbage. But you looked pretty good out there. I got a picture of you crossing the finish line."

"Have you been working out?" asked my dad. "Madonna runs ten miles a day, you know."

Merry pulled me into a hug. "Congratulations!"

"Oh, no, I'm sweaty!" I squeaked.

"I don't care," she said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Me too," said David, putting his arm around my shoulders and squeezing me.

"That was incredible. I couldn't run ten miles to save my life. I can't believe you did it."

"I can't really believe it either," I said. "I have no memory of the last five miles."

“Want to go celebrate?” asked Molly. “Let’s all get breakfast together! You deserve a strawberry waffle.”

“With whipped cream,” added David.

“And a side of bacon,” I said, laughing.

Dad’s eyes lit up. “Can I get bacon, too?” he asked hopefully.

“Don’t be silly,” clucked my mother. “You can’t have bacon. With your cholesterol? You’ll get a nice low-fat fruit plate.”

“Don’t worry,” I whispered in Dad’s ear. “I’ll slip you some under the table.”

He patted my shoulder. “You’re a good girl, Jane.”

“A toast to Jane,” called Andy, and everyone raised their orange juice glasses.

“Not only is she a brilliant athlete, but she’s accomplished something else today as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, prepare to be amazed: as of today, Jane has gone not four, not

five, but *six* months without a boyfriend!” A great cheer went up around our table. I

blushed and glanced around the restaurant, but not too many of the patrons at the 24-Hour Hotcake House seemed to care about the noise.

“Oh! Jane-darling, this is fabulous news!” twittered my mother. “Now you can start dating again - what about Tim, dear, he was a nice young man, wasn’t he? So successful, too. Oh! How silly of me! David, I’d love it if you came to dinner again with Jane - didn’t we have fun on Thanksgiving?”

I glared at her but didn't dare say anything. If she wanted to persist in her delusion that David and I were a couple, that was her prerogative.

"Thanks, Vicky. Anytime you're making that famous cornbread of yours, you just give me a call," said David. I could have sworn he was laughing.

"So what's the plan now?" asked Molly, shoveling a forkful of hash browns into her mouth. "Got any hot dates planned?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but for some reason I hesitated. I realized I didn't want to tell anyone about my run-in with Oscar. It *did* seem a little silly to be making dates on the exact day I was allowed to again. Almost as if I were desperate or boy-crazy or something. I wasn't boy-crazy. Oscar was special, I could tell. There had to be a reason that I kept meeting him; it must be fate. But I didn't want to give the wrong impression to my friends, not when everyone thought I'd done so well.

"Nope," I answered. "I'm waiting for something special to happen."

"Wonderful." Merry beamed. "The past few months have been so good for you, Jane."

See what I mean?

I reached for the syrup, and my eyes met David's. He was wearing an unreadable expression. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but I was hoping to high heaven that he hadn't seen through my white lie.

Oscar and I had agreed to meet for a drink the following weekend, and then we were going on from there to see a show. The problem was, I had been so excited just to be making the date that I hadn't clarified what show we were going to. I had no idea what to wear, and went into a full-blown shopping panic. But the three new outfits I had purchased at Forever 21 only confused the matter. Should I go casual and sporty with the vintage-look jeans and green sweater? Should I try for fun and flirty with my adorable pink A-line skirt and off-the-shoulder top? Or should I dress formally and wear the knee-length wispy black dress? Were we going to a movie, a play, or an opera? I had no idea, but I didn't want to call Oscar and tip him off to the fact that I was stressing out. Men are like animals: they can smell your fear.

I decided that the skirt ensemble was the most adaptable. Plus it showed off my newly-toned legs, which I was anxious for Oscar to notice. He might have been my destiny, but just to be on the safe side, flaunting my gams couldn't hurt.

As I was waiting around at the entrance of the bar that night, however, I couldn't help but notice that the place looked a little...rough. Perhaps it was an up-and-coming nightspot, I thought, one of those places that all the cool kids know about. (The kind I never hear about until they're sooo last week.) Still, it didn't *seem* trendy. The people going in looked more like members of a motorcycle gang than hipsters. When a pair of them whistled at me, I began to grow increasingly nervous about Oscar being late. I mean, that was *my* thing, right? I was the one who was always late. My destined soul mate should always be *early*; that way we'd balance each other out.

Then I spied him swaggering up the street. He was wearing faded jeans, a crumpled Sex Pistols t-shirt, and a navy wind breaker. So much for dressing up. Still, he was a sex beast: his dark hair flopped messily over his forehead and his eyes sparkled with mischief. I could have lapped him up like an ice cream cone.

He whistled low when he saw me. "You look good enough to eat. What did I do to deserve this?" he asked.

I blushed daintily and my brain turned into yogurt. Then, from out of nowhere, I came up with, "Nothing, yet." Good one, I thought. Play it cool.

Oscar laughed. "Well, I'll do my best then. Let's get you a drink."

The moment I walked through the door I was assailed with the stench of stale cigarette smoke and hot grease. The place was almost completely dark, illuminated only by a few bare light bulbs hanging over the pool tables and the red glow of an electric Budweiser sign behind the bar. I glanced sideways at Oscar. Was this some kind of joke?

He made his way to the bar and I followed him, trying to climb onto a high stool without flashing the Harley Davidson guys. "Two Bud Lites, please," he said. I wondered if I should mention that I the only beer I liked was Corona, but then it occurred to me: of course! He must be on a tight budget. Giving tours and checking up on the catering at Pinecrest couldn't be all that lucrative.

"So, Oscar, you never really told me what your job at the country club is," I said.

"I'm their Event Coordinator," he answered. "I manage the organization of all the weddings, parties, and conferences."



Well, that blew my theory right out of the water. Maybe he actually *liked* Bud Lite - was that possible? It must be; when the bartender slammed the mugs down in front of us, Oscar grabbed his and drained it halfway in one go.

“That must be a fun job,” I said, recovering from my shock. “How’d you get into that?”

“Well, I just sort of fell into it.” He shrugged. “It’s only to pay the bills, really. My real passion is my band.”

Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner! “You’re in a band?” I breathed, trying to repress the urge to flutter my eyelashes and swoon.

“We’re called the Vulgarians. You might have heard of us; we opened for Naughty Bits at the Crab Shack last month.” He beamed proudly, as if this were the equivalent of the Beatles going on the Ed Sullivan Show.

“Oh,” I mumbled. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with the name.” Or Naughty Bits. Or the Crab Shack, for that matter. Was I completely out of the loop? God, I felt like such a geezer. “What kind of music do you play?”

His eyes lit up. “We call it punkadelic. It’s like, grunge meets punk meets speed metal. On an acid trip.” He swallowed more of his beer. “Don’t you want yours?”

“What? Oh, yes.” I sipped at my beer, trying not to cringe. It tasted like a cupful of piss, to be honest. (Not that I’ve ever actually tasted piss, but I imagine that Bud Lite comes close. And not that I spend a lot of time *imagining* what piss tastes like. But anyway.) And I was still trying to work out what punkadelic might actually sound like. Having never been on an acid trip, it didn’t really work for me as a descriptor.

“So, what do you do?” he asked.

“I’m a high school English teacher.” Don’t say it, I thought. Don’t say it.

“I guess I’d better watch my grammar around you.”

He said it.

I smiled weakly. “Oh. Ha-ha. No, I’m not like that, don’t worry.” Inwardly, I was reeling. Oscar had just failed one of my time-honored tests. If any potential boyfriend joked about watching his grammar, that was it. He was cut from the varsity team. But Oscar...Oscar was supposed to be my destiny. How could he fail the test? He was supposed to say something sensitive and endearing about children being our future.

“So you work with teenagers all day? Man, I don’t know how you do it. I’d want to shoot them all.”

Oh dear. I guess that meant he wouldn’t want children of his own someday.

“Well, they encourage us to leave our weapons at home,” I joked. “But sometimes if I’m really pissed I make them sit in the hall.”

He laughed. “You’re such a bad-ass,” he teased.

Oh, he was so cute when he smiled.

We drove to the mysterious and much-anticipated show in Oscar’s car, winding down some unfamiliar inner east-side roads, getting closer and closer to the river. I couldn’t stop my foot from tapping with anticipation. This was going to be so cool!

“So, what are we seeing?” I chirped.

“It’s a surprise.” He grinned. “You’ll love it.”

See? *That* was destiny at work. Oscar already had a sense of me, of my inner soul, enough to feel confident that I'd love whatever it was he was taking me to. It wasn't just me being stupid, believing in fate and soul mates and all that. Oscar must have felt it too.

"Where are we?" I asked, peering out at the dark buildings. "I don't recognize this area."

"We're close to the industrial district," he said. "All the underground stuff happens down here." Eventually he parked the car and we piled out and started down the dark, deserted street.

"It's just around the corner," said Oscar. I nodded warily. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice was telling me that it wasn't really the thing to bring a girl to the industrial district on a first date. It was too much like what serial killers do. I knew Oscar wasn't going to chop me up and put me in his freezer, but it wouldn't hurt for him to follow the protocol. Besides, I was pretty sure there were no Regal Cinemas down this way. Where the hell were we going? A meat-packing plant? A cannery?

Then we rounded the corner, and I saw it: the Crab Shack. Oh my god. It really was a shack. The walls were covered in graffiti, the roof was collapsing, and the windows were blacked out. From inside came an intermittent screeching noise, reminiscent of a cat in heat, accompanied by random banging and guttural shouting.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "This is where your band plays?"

"Yup. Come on." He took my hand and led me to the door. The closer we got, the louder the noise became, until finally Oscar flung open the entrance and I had to cover my ears with my hands to prevent them from bleeding.

“What is this?” I yelled over the noise. “A bar fight?”

“It’s Naughty Bits!”

Oh, fuck.

He went in ahead of me, pausing to give one of those cool-guy handshake/hugs to the doorman, then scampered to the bar. I nodded in acknowledgment to the bouncer and tried to follow Oscar.

“Hold on, lady,” said the doorman, grabbing my elbow. He held out his beefy hand. “It’s ten bucks.”

“Whaaat?” How could a dump like this be charging admission? They should have been paying people to attend in compensation for hearing loss and psychological trauma.

“There’s a ten dollar cover,” he said. “Usually it’s free, but when we have A-list bands like Naughty Bits, we gotta charge.”

“But...but I’m with Oscar.” Where the hell *was* Oscar?

The doorman frowned at me until I gave up and thrust a ten-dollar bill into his hand. A-list my ass, I thought. It sounds like they’re torturing animals in here.

The inside was worse than the outside. The floor was sticky with beer, the place was lit with red demonic light, and the smoke was so thick my eyes stung. Across the room, atop a makeshift stage, three men with mohawks and tattooed necks played their instruments like five-year-olds and growled a string of obscenities into their microphones. Below them, a crowd of young people in combat boots thrashed around in the mosh pit, trying to blacken one another’s eyes.

I peered dubiously through the smoke and located Oscar, who was ordering – naturally - two more Bud Lites at the bar. “Isn’t this great?” he yelled in my ear.

“Yeah,” I yelled back, clutching my purse to my chest. “This place is so...raw.”

“I knew you’d love it. This is the best place in the city for live music.”

Right. Best place to get killed by a meth addict, more like. “How often do you come here?” I hollered. A guy with a safety pin through his nose stumbled past me and I felt beer slosh onto my new Nine West sandals and down between my toes.

“As often as I can,” shouted Oscar. “This place is my home away from home. These guys are like my family.” And with that, he drained his beer, ran across the room, and dove head-first into the mosh pit.

Apparently destiny was a real comedian.

## Chapter 18

An empty school, to me, is unnatural and creepy. A school is supposed to be full of bustle and noise. So when the kids go home in the afternoon and I stay behind to work out my lesson plans, it feels like I'm in a ghost town. The desks are empty and turned at odd angles, almost like skeletons of the students who occupied them. The hallways are deserted, with only a few lonesome papers and Frito bags littering the floor to remind me that the place was a circus a few hours before. Sometimes the custodian whistles, and it echoes through the whole building. And the ladies' room across from my classroom is haunted, I'm sure of it. Every time I go in there, the toilet on the far wall flushes by itself.

I was sitting at my desk flipping through a stack of vocabulary quizzes when my cell phone rang, startling me so badly I nearly swallowed my tongue.

"David, you scared me!" I said.

"Should I have warned you I was going to call?" he joked. "Maybe by telegram?"

"Yes," I huffed. "Or by couriered letter, at least an hour in advance. What's up?" I heard a cockatiel shrieking in the background. "Are you at work?"

"Um, yeah. I was just thinking...I had an idea, and I didn't want to put it off. I wanted to...er, I wondered if you'd like to have dinner with me on Thursday night."

Mentally I scanned my calendar. I wasn't seeing Oscar until Friday, so it seemed like a safe plan. "Sure," I said. "Want me to bring over a pizza?"

"Um, no, thanks. Actually I thought I'd take you out."

"Ooh. What for?"

“Er...to celebrate that your six months are over.”

“Oh,” I said. I thought we had already done that at the Hotcake House, but far be it for me to turn down a nice dinner out. “Great. Where shall we go?”

He paused. “How about Fratelli’s?”

“Fratelli’s!” Wow. That place was a far cry from our usual fajita joint. I had seen it listed in *Willamette Week*...it was recommended for something, but I couldn’t remember what. “That would be lovely.”

“Yeah?” He chirped.

“Yeah, fantastic. See you Thursday.” We said our goodbyes and I hung up. This was perfect. Now I wouldn’t have to return my new killer black dress to the store.

Six months of celibacy will drive a person to all kinds of madness. When David came to my front door to pick me up wearing a suit and tie, my first impulse was to leap on him and shove my tongue down his throat. I took one look at his broad shoulders in pinstripes and my pulse started doing a samba. David looked hot, capital H-O-T!

Two seconds later, my next impulse was to jump into a scalding hot shower and scrub the nastiness away - this was *David* I was imagining mauling, after all. A guy I had been friends with for half my life. It was *impossible* that he should be setting off my sexometer. Impossible and unnatural. It was two steps away from *Flowers in the Attic*. I pushed the thoughts away and marveled at my momentary lapse of sanity.

“Going to a funeral?” I teased.

He took in my gauzy, spaghetti-strapped dress. "I might be," he said. "The sight of you in that dress is giving me heart palpitations."

The wicked flirt.

Then the phone rang, and I grabbed David's arm and dragged him out onto the porch. "Let the machine get it," I said. "It'll just be my mother, calling to ask if it's too late to hire a mariachi band and do a fiesta theme, and if it might not be better in that case to go with gerbera daisies and marigolds and have Mexican wedding cookies instead of cake."

"Why not?" teased David. "You still have plenty of time. And I'm sure Dilsy would feel that piñatas are the height of sophistication."

"Yes, of course," I agreed. "It's just that I don't want to be responsible for what will happen when a room full of sixty-year-olds eats refried beans for supper. We might have to call in the HASMAT squad."

Fratelli's was cozy and unassuming, with warm glowing candlelight and dark corner tables. There was a quiet, friendly murmur on the air, and smiling couples with round, rosy cheeks were holding hands over their plates of veal piccata. The scene looked like it had been painted by Norman Rockwell on his Mediterranean holiday.

David and I were seated in the far corner, and the waitress lit a candle and brought us a bottle of wine. Meanwhile, we drooled over the menu like teenagers with a porn mag.

"Look at this!" cried David. "Prosciutto-wrapped prawns and asparagus! Salmon Alla Siciliana!"



“And pancetta affumicata!” I sighed.

“What’s that?”

“I haven’t a clue, but doesn’t it sound scrumptious?”

Finally, when my seared scallops and mushroom risotto arrived, I almost fainted with delight. “Oh, god,” I moaned. “You have to try this.” I held out a forkful of risotto for David, and he gobbled it right from the fork.

“Mmm.” His head bobbed up and down in approval. “Here, try mine.” He speared a bite of ravioli and lifted it to my mouth.

“Heavenly,” I said, my eyes watering. “We *are* going to get dessert, right?”

“Of course.” He rolled his eyes. “You think I have a will of iron? I *saw* the tiramisu.”

After two glasses of wine, though, we had moved on to more serious topics: Prince Charles’ fashion sense, the Britney/Christina debate, and the true meaning of my X-rated Justin Timberlake dream. David had taken a psychology course in college, and therefore thought he was qualified to psychoanalyze me.

“See, in your subconscious, Justin doesn’t really represent Justin.”

“He doesn’t?”

“Of course not. Everything in the dream world is just a symbol for something in real life. A house doesn’t necessarily represent a house; it might represent a person’s sense of security and stability. And dreams about going swimming supposedly have something to do with going back to the womb. Nothing is what it seems in a dream.”

“So you’re saying that I don’t really want to make out with Justin Timberlake?”

David nodded. "Exactly."

Don't quit your day job, I wanted to say. "What about you? What about some of your dreams?"

David looked nervously over his shoulder. "Honestly, Jane, this is a family restaurant. You'll get us thrown out."

I laughed, then the chocolate terrine came and we dedicated ourselves to honoring it. When we were finished, I was so sated that I felt like lighting up a cigarette. And I don't even smoke.

We were dallying over coffee when David brought up the topic of my six-month victory. "So, what was it like?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was it the challenge of your life?"

I snorted. "You make it sound like I battled a life-threatening disease or something. All I did was stop dating for a while. I never meant it to become a personal mission; I was just tired of doofy men."

"But it did become a personal mission, Jane. You've changed. You seem more...self-assured, I guess. More grounded."

"Do I?" I asked, feeling myself blush with pleasure. I had never thought of myself as self-assured before.

"Are you kidding?" asked David. "You've been pouring your soul into this anniversary party-"

"Selling my soul, more like," I interrupted.

“-and handling the pressure like a pro,” he continued. “Plus you supported your two hysterical girlfriends without a single complaint, and you stuck by your commitment to take care of yourself, too. I think you’ve been amazing, Jane. I really admire you.”

“Awww. Thanks.” I smiled sheepishly. “You wouldn’t, though, if you knew what I had been thinking and feeling during some of those times. The anger. The loneliness. I’m not really as strong as you seem to think.”

David frowned. “But you weren’t lonely, were you?”

“Of course I was,” I said, sipping my coffee. “It’s not easy for me to be by myself. I mean, I have you and Mer and everybody to keep me company. But friends aren’t the same as lovers.”

His started and stared at me. “No.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I think the time’s been good for me,” I continued. “I’m glad I did it. I *do* feel more confident. I think that’s what makes me feel ready to move on now and start risking my heart again.” I thought of Oscar and the steamy goodnight kiss we had shared when he dropped me off at home. “I feel like I’m ready to have a relationship.”

“So do I, Jane,” whispered David. “I didn’t think it was right to say anything before, but-”

“What’s this?” I gasped. “Have you met someone?”

A second ticked by. “What?”

“Who is she?” I teased. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me before! This is fantastic, Dave; now you can go on double dates with me and Oscar.”

David stared at me as if I had just suggested a double date with his mother. “What do you...hold on, who the fuck is Oscar?”

“You remember, the guy I met months ago. The country club guy?”

“But I thought you said you weren’t interested in him.” His forehead was slowly crinkling into an origami figure.

I snorted. “Yeah, but that was when I couldn’t have him. Now I can.”

David’s face was changing from pink to red to purple. “So you’ve been waiting to go out with this loser for six months?” he growled.

I paused, taken aback. “Yes. No. He’s not a loser, Dave. And no, I wasn’t exactly waiting for him...I didn’t really think about him, but then we kept running into each other. And then I saw him again at the race-”

“The May Day Race?”

“-and he asked me out. And, well, you know.” I shrugged. “He’s my type.”

David’s eyes were as round as dinner plates. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Why?”

He threw down his napkin and stared at me. Silence.

“I don’t understand, Dave. What’s the problem?”

He shook his head and stood up. “Come on. It’s time to go.”

“But we’re not even...aren’t you even going to tell me about your new girlfriend?”

He laughed dryly and threw a wad of cash down onto the table. "Let's go, Jane. I've had enough of this." Wordlessly, he put me into my coat and propelled me across the room and out the door.

I had never seen him like this before. "Why are you acting so mean?" I said, stumbling across the parking lot. "I thought you'd be happy for me."

"I don't want to talk about it, Jane." He opened the car door. "Just get in. I'm taking you home."

The ride home was tense and interminable. When we got to my house, David pulled up to the curb and left the engine running. His anger was palpable, and it was too much for me. I was confused about what had just happened, but one thing was certain: tidal waves of fury were rolling off of my friend. He was battering me with his silent rage. "David," I whimpered tearfully. "If you'd just tell me why you're mad...I don't understand, but I'm sorry!"

He gripped the wheel in a vise-like hold and ignored me.

I felt gutted and hollow. "Okay," I mumbled. "Okay, I'm going. Thanks for...dinner."

He didn't answer. I got out of the car and stood dumbly on the sidewalk, watching him speed away.

I didn't sleep at all that night, and went through the next day feeling like I had cotton padding where my brain should be. I couldn't stop thinking about David. I kept

replaying the previous night's conversation in my head, trying to figure out how I had offended him, but I couldn't pin it down. The torture of not knowing was driving me batty. It wasn't fair. I should have been dancing on air, thinking about my second date with Oscar that night. Instead, I wanted to dash my head against the blackboard and put myself out of my misery.

At the end of the school day I called Merry. She would know what to do.

"Hey," she said. "I've been meaning to call you. Things have been so hectic lately."

"Yeah?" I croaked. "How is...everything?"

"With Darren, you mean? It's been okay. Things are progressing. We've been having a lot of long talks lately and we're starting to work things out. He's been trying very hard."

"So do you think it will be okay?"

She paused. "I think so. I've already told him that if I catch him with another woman again I'll use his dick for a punching bag."

"Ah. Well." I cleared my throat. "It's good that you're communicating."

"Yeah. So, anyway, enough about my soap opera life. What's new with you?"

"Actually, I need some advice." I sketched out for her what had happened with David.

"That's weird," she said. "He's usually so easy-going. What were you talking about?"

I thought back to our conversation. “Well, mostly we were just joking around. We talked a little bit about my family...and a little bit about you and Mols...and then he started to tell me about some new girl he’s seeing.”

“David’s seeing someone?” gasped Merry.

“I think so. He had just brought it up but I got so excited that I interrupted him with questions...and then I mentioned that I had met someone, too.”

“Wait a minute - *you’re* seeing someone? When did this happen?”

“Last weekend,” I said. “I would’ve told you sooner, but I didn’t want to pester you when you’ve got your own stuff to deal with.”

“But this is important news! Who is he?”

“Er...Oscar,” I mumbled. I had just remembered our conversation about Oscar all those months ago, and was pretty sure Merry wouldn’t be pleased with me.

“Pardon?”

“Oscar,” I said. “The guy from Pinecrest.”

Silence. Then, “Your new boyfriend is Oscar from Pinecrest? The scruffy tour guide?”

“He’s not my *boyfriend*,” I sputtered. “We’ve only been out-”

“Jaaaaaaaaaaaaane!” Merry stretched my name out like it had four syllables. “I can’t believe you! Haven’t we talked about this? Haven’t you learned *anything*?”

“Listen, you’re being judgmental,” I snapped. “You’ve never even met him.”

"I don't have to meet him!" she yelled. "All your boyfriends are alike. Every single one of them is a loser, a moron, and a jerk! This creep Oscar is going to be exactly the same, Jane."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do!" she shrieked. "I do know it! You want to know how I know it, Jane? You want to know why you have bad luck with men?"

I didn't say anything.

"It's because you purposely choose men that you already know won't stick around. You go out of your way to find guys who are losers or criminals or otherwise completely wrong for you, so that you never risk falling in love!"

My blood was boiling, but I tried to control my temper. I couldn't risk having *two* friends mad at me at once. "That's the craziest thing I ever heard, Meredith. Of course I want to fall in love."

"No you don't," she said. "You haven't let yourself get even remotely *close* to falling in love since Jamie."

"Merry," I warned.

"It was ten years ago, Jane. He was a jerk, and he hurt you. And ever since then you've been afraid of getting hurt again."

"That's ridiculous; I've had loads of boyfriends since then. I risk getting hurt all the time."

"No, Jane, you don't!" she snapped. "You're never at risk of getting hurt when you already *know* your boyfriend is an asshole. You can't get hurt by someone you could



never love. *That's* why you go out with losers like Oscar, and Steve, and all the weirdos before him. You're playing it safe so that you never have to put your heart on the line. You don't want to fall in love because it makes you vulnerable. And you're more afraid of being vulnerable than of anything else in the world."

If I was a cat, my claws would have come out. "You're a fine one to be judging my love life," I spat. "Look at what happened to you. Your husband was out with another woman!"

"Yes, and it hurt like hell; it still does! But I can heal from it because I love him, and he loves me, and we're committed to making it work out. If you want a real relationship, Jane, you have to make a commitment to it."

"God, you sound so smug!" I raged. "You don't know what you're talking about. You think you're so much better than me because you're married, because your life's been all sewn up and planned out since college. 'Ooh, poor Jane, can't find herself a steady guy; something must be wrong with her.' Well, nothing's wrong with me! So you can get off your fucking soapbox--I don't need your patronizing psycho-babble."

"Jane, I never said--"

"Whatever. I don't have time for this; I have to go get ready for a date. With *Oscar*. So if you'll excuse me..."

I slammed down the phone. She was wrong. She was so wrong. And I would prove it to her.

## Chapter 19

Normally I wouldn't bring a date to my brother's restaurant. The first (and last) time I did, Andy hid behind a Japanese screen and spied on me the entire evening. Then when my date had been so bold as to try to hold my hand, Andy appeared with a pitcher of ice water and 'accidentally' spilled it on Mark's lap. It wasn't the kind of performance I wanted to see repeated.

Still, after hearing Oscar dissed by everybody but the mailman, I was anxious to get a second opinion. And Andy was a great connoisseur of men. If anyone could get an accurate and impartial reading of Oscar, it would be Andy.

There was also a tiny niggling voice in the back of my head that said, after the minor shortcomings of our first date, Oscar could not be trusted to pick a dinner venue. He might take us to Taco Bell, for all I knew.

When Oscar and I walked into the restaurant, Andy was waiting for us.

"Sugar-boo!" he boomed. "What a treat this is! You're looking divine - are those Via Spiga sandals? And who is this luscious boy?"

I performed the introductions and watched in horror as my brother kissed Oscar on both cheeks.

"*Mwa! Mwa!*" he smacked noisily. "I could just eat you up, Oscar! I'm going to start putting you on the menu, you're so yummy."

Oscar shoved his hands in his pockets and edged closer to my side. As we were led to our table, he whispered, "You didn't tell me your brother was gay."

I blinked. "It didn't occur to me."

"You could have warned me."

"Don't worry about it," I whispered. "He's not making a pass at you, he's just trying to annoy me."

The restaurant was decorated in a theme that might be called Tart's Boudoir meets the Vatican. The walls were a deep crimson red, as was the velvet upholstery on the chairs, and the tables were fashioned out of thick rustic planks of dark wood. Overhead, the ceiling was painted with a stunning tribute to Michaelangelo: fluffy clouds, pink-cheeked cherubs with their loins wrapped in gauze, and Adam stretching out his finger to touch God.

Oscar and I were shown to a large semi-circular booth in the back corner. "So what will you have to drink, Princess?" asked Andy. "A bottle of Pinot Grigio?"

"That would be love-"

"What kinds of beer do you have?" interrupted Oscar.

Andy flickered an eyebrow at him. "Tell you what, Pumpkin. I just got in a new shipment of Stella Artois; you'll be the first to have it. It's divine, absolutely divine."

Oscar wrinkled his nose. "What is it? I've never heard of it."

"It's Belgian," said Andy. "You'll love it." He smirked at me and scampered away.

I smiled at Oscar. "So, what do you think? It's pretty cool, huh?"

“It’s okay,” he said, shrugging. “I don’t usually go to fancy places like this, but I guess tonight’s kind of special.” He winked at me, then turned to his menu. And did a double-take.

“Holy shit!” he whispered. “Fifteen dollars for a plate of spaghetti?”

“Er...” I felt a blush creeping to my cheeks. That wasn’t really the romantic sentiment I had been hoping for.

“And twenty-three for something called Mongolian Sizzle! You’ve got to be kidding me. I could buy a large pizza for what they’re charging for a green salad.”

Chewing my lip, I said, “Er, sorry. Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“No, no,” he sighed. “It’s fine.” He continued to grimace over his menu, and I hid behind mine, waiting for my embarrassment to fade.

Luckily the drinks arrived. “Have fun, kids,” said Andy. “I’ll check up on you in a bit.” He winked at me and headed off towards the kitchen. At least *he* seemed to like Oscar.

“So,” I began, desperate to get things back on track. “Now you know all about my obnoxious brother. What about you? Do you have any siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child.”

Awww, I thought. How sad. “What about your parents? What are they like?”

For a moment he didn’t say anything, then his lip started to tremble and he sniffed. “My parents died in a car accident last month.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” I gasped. “I shouldn’t have asked - I didn’t realize - I feel terrible-”

“Ha!” he laughed. “Gotcha. You should have seen the look on your face!”

I froze, my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open. “What?”

“God, you’re gullible.” He snickered. “My parents live in Florida. They like to golf.”

I was speechless. What kind of person jokes about their parents being dead? I mean, next thing I knew he’d be cracking jokes about infanticide and female circumcision. It just wasn’t *done*.

So maybe Oscar’s sense of humor needed a little fine-tuning. We could work on that. Besides, a good sense of humor was a highly overrated quality, right? I gulped my wine and laughed weakly. “Right. That was a good one.”

A waiter approached and took our order, and I did my best to change the subject. “So, do you like to travel?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Oscar, grinning. “I’ve been all over: Tokyo, London, Paris, Sydney. I lived in New Zealand for a year after college, tending bar and learning how to wind surf. After that I flew to Mexico and hitch-hiked up the coast. I stayed in California for a few years, then I wandered up here. I like to keep moving.”

“That sounds so glamorous!” I squealed. “Do you think you’ll stay in Portland for a while, though?”

“You never know.” He winked.

My blood was rushing happily at the subtext of that wink when Andy returned.

“Hey kids, how is everything?”

“Fine, Andy, fine,” I murmured, surreptitiously trying to gesture that he should leave.

Instead, he slid in next to Oscar until they were hip to hip. “I’m not interrupting, am I, Peaches?”

Oscar froze.

“Good, I didn’t think so,” purred Andy. “So what are we talking about?”

“Er, Andy,” I said, glancing pointedly toward the kitchen.

“Oh! Don’t worry, Dumpling,” he roared. “Dinner’s coming on the double.”

Casually, he stretched his arm behind Oscar and rested it against the top of the booth.

“You know, I could slice a tomato on your cheekbones. Have you ever considered doing any modeling?”

Oscar hunched his shoulders, trying to escape Andy’s touch. “No.”

“Oh, you *should*. You could be in one of those Calvin Klein billboards in your skivvies. I’m picturing it now. Oh! Heavenly.”

“Andy,” I growled. “You’re embarrassing him.”

“He’s not embarrassed, are you, Sugar? I didn’t think so.”

The waiter arrived with three steaming plates and laid one in front of each of us.

“What are you doing?” I hissed at Andy.

“Joining you for dinner, silly. I want to get to know your friend here.” And for the next hour, he nattered on about his favorite musicals (“*Pirates of Penzance* was decades ahead of its time!”), the art of feng shui (“does your bed face the door, Princess?”), and

whether or not the guys on “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” were really gay (“Jai: yes; Kyan: God, do I wish”). It was as if someone had set his dial to uber-fag.

I knew he was putting on a show for Oscar, trying to scare him away. And it looked like it was working: Oscar was sweating and shaking like a junkie in withdrawal. At first I was pissed. How dare Andy ruin my date? Who did he think he was, barging in on us like that? But as I was listening to him explain why he would be a better gay talk show host than Isaac Mizrahi, I started to melt. I mean, my brother is completely obnoxious, but he’s also damn funny. By the time he introduced a debate about why gay men are more fashion savvy than lesbians, I was laughing out loud.

“You’re so right!” I exclaimed. (Mind you, I’d had a little wine.) “Look at Rosie O’Donnell. I mean, I love that woman, but what’s with the weird Duran Duran hairdo?”

“Exactly,” said Andy. “Just because you come out of the closet doesn’t mean you have to wear boxy jackets and get an asymmetrical haircut. You don’t see gay men running around with butch hair. We just use more mousse.” He turned to Oscar, who had remained sulky and silent all through dinner. “How about you, stud? What do you use to get it to stay up? Your hair, that is. Ha!”

Oscar mumbled something unintelligible and downed his beer.

And suddenly I was furious. Not at Andy, but at Oscar. He was such a homophobic stick in the mud he couldn’t even laugh at my brother’s stupid jokes. He couldn’t even join in the conversation and have fun. He had done nothing but complain and offend since we walked through the doors. What a loser.

Then it dawned on me. Yes. Of course he was a loser. He was just like all the others, just like Merry had said. He wasn't my soul mate or my destiny. He was just a narrow-minded slob with no sense of humor, bad taste in music, and a petulant, teenage mindset. There was no point in wasting my time on him. He wouldn't last a month. In fact, I realized, I was already tired of him.

I stood up and grabbed my coat. "I think it's time we were off," I said. "Thanks, Andy, dinner was fabulous." I charged towards the door, not bothering to see if Oscar followed.

Outside, he almost spontaneously combusted. "What the fuck is wrong with that guy?"

"He was just playing with you," I snapped.

"He was not. He practically dry-humped my leg."

"Shut up," I hissed.

"What?"

"You heard me." I stopped walking and faced him. "That's my brother you're talking about. Have some respect."

"Well, your brother just-"

"SHUT UP!" I roared. "I'm not finished. Let me tell you something, Oscar. I don't like Bud Light. I don't like the Crab Shack. And I *really* don't like Naughty Bits. I had a headache for two days after listening to that crap." I shoved my finger in his face like a weapon. "But as bad as our *first* date was, I'd have to say that tonight was the worst



date I've ever been on in my life. You are the rudest, most inconsiderate, selfish, boring jerk I've ever been out with. And that's saying a lot."

He stared at me as if I had just said the Pope was gay. "Wait a second. What happened tonight wasn't my fault."

"You're right," I said, turning on my heel. "It was mine. See you around." I left him on the sidewalk and flagged down a cab.

Consciously realizing that you've had a subconscious commitment problem for ten years is not all fun and games. No. Harsh reality takes away your rose-colored glasses and forces you to reexamine the past with new eyes. For example, I now had to admit to myself that my long history of catastrophic relationships was entirely my fault. For years and years I had been blaming my crappy love life on the deficiencies of men, when all along it was my own neurosis that was responsible. I was very angry with myself when I figured out I had been sabotaging my own happiness. Who needs enemies with friends like these, right?

There was also the shaming knowledge that everyone but me seemed to have known about my problem. How embarrassing. I felt like someone had just told me I had a booger in my nose...and it had been there for a decade.

My first step was to call Merry and apologize for being such a twat.

"Hello," she answered.

"You were right," I said. "I feel like an idiot."

There was a pause. “You are an idiot.”

“Good, we agree. Listen, Mer, I’m sorry I yelled at you. I was completely out of line.”

“No you weren’t,” she sighed. “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have said anything; I shouldn’t have gotten involved. And I *was* being a patronizing cow. I think your reaction was very mild, actually, compared to what it could have been. I feel awful.”

“Please don’t feel bad. I’m *glad* you said something. It needed to be said. Guess what.”

“What?”

“I told Oscar to get lost.”

“Really?” she gasped. “That fantastic.”

“It was pretty fantastic, actually. I’ve never dumped a guy in my entire life. What a great sense of power! I wish I’d tried it sooner.”

“So do I.” She paused. “So, um, you’ve thought about that...issue?”

“Yes, and I can see your point. I do have a habit of going out with guys who are sort of...sub-par. But I thought I just had a thing for wild, rock and roll-type men.”

“Well, they can be very attractive. But they’re not really known for a willingness to commit.”

I thought about it. “Does this mean I have to start going out with men my mother would approve of?” I thought of Tim from the wedding, with his top job and greasy ears.

Merry made a gurgling noise in her throat. “Jane, maybe you’re not ready to be dating right now. I mean, let’s keep in mind the core issue here.”

“Ah. You mean my...fear.”

“Can you talk about it?”

I gulped. “Probably not very well. I’ve just been diagnosed. But I admit that there’s some truth in what you said. I’ve been...” What was the right word? “...*cautious* about love.”

“I think it’s okay to be cautious, Jane, but not so much that you don’t give yourself a chance. You know what I mean? Go out with guys with potential, but move slowly. Build up your level of trust. Don’t give anyone your heart until they’ve earned it. That’s the best way to protect against getting hurt.”

“But I still might.”

She sighed. “Of course you might. As you said the other day, look at what happened to me. But finding real love is worth the risk, Jane, it really is. You’ve got to take a little chance if you want to reap the rewards.”

“Mm, I sense a proverb coming on.”

She laughed. “No! I’m only saying, when you’re ready, when you feel brave enough, take a risk. But start with a little one.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “Start with a little one. I can do that.”

“Good. Now, have you patched things up with David?”

I winced. I had left David fourteen messages in the last three days. Obviously he was screening his calls. Obviously he didn’t want to talk to me. “No,” I said. “I’m still working on it.” A new idea, like a tiny bud, blossomed in my mind. “Do you think he’s mad because I told him I was going out with Oscar?”

Silence.

“Meredith, have you talked with David about what you and I just talked about?”

More silence.

“I see.”

“Jane, talk to David about it. He cares for you very deeply, and it pains him to see you get hurt.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up, and I pulled on my Nikes and went for a run. I had a lot to think about.

## Chapter 20

I feel that whoever came up with the phrase “giddy as a schoolgirl” must have had a narrow range of experience, or else he would have said “giddy as a schoolteacher on the last day of school.” I’ve seen a lot of schoolgirls, and I’ve seen a lot of teachers, and quite frankly, a fourteen-year-old with an N\*SYNC obsession has got nothing on a middle-aged schoolmarm with a summer rental on the coast.

It was the last day of school, the last school bus had just pulled away from the curb, and the mood in the teachers’ lounge was beyond giddy. The place hadn’t been so full of energy and excitement since...well, since the same time last year. Ethel, the head secretary, had brought eight-dozen chocolate-frosted cupcakes to celebrate our release, and everyone from the principal to the choir teacher to the custodian was hopped up on sugar and adrenaline. You would’ve thought that peace had just been declared in the Middle East: people were hugging, laughing, crying with joy...even Hester Quinn, uber-bitch of education and terror of the teachers’ lounge, was dancing a little jig with Coach Riley.

“Look.” I pointed them out to Molly. “It looks like a sumo wrestling match.”

Molly glanced at them, then down at her half-eaten cupcake. “Just Say No,” she quipped, tossing it in the trash. She surveyed the room. “Can you believe we made it?”

“Not really,” I said. “It was a close call. What are your plans?”

“Actually...I just bought my ticket yesterday. I’m going to Africa.”

“What?!”

“I have a friend who’s a travel agent, and she got me a special deal. I’m off on a two-month safari!”

“What, by yourself?” I sputtered.

“No, I’m going with a singles adventure group. There are going to be sixteen available men aged twenty-five to thirty-five. And we’ll sleep out in the wilderness, in co-ed tents!” She grinned wickedly. “Maybe a giant anaconda will find its way into my sleeping bag.”

“You dirty girl!” I whispered. “Damn it, I’m so jealous.”

“You can come, too.”

I started to laugh, then saw she was serious. “No, I-”

“Yes, you can. Come on, it would be so much fun. We’ll wake up early and watch the sun rise over the plains, we’ll see elephants and zebras and giraffes, we’ll visit ancient tribal villages...I know you would love it.”

“Maybe. Unless I got mauled by a tiger or bitten by a tsetse fly. But I can’t go,” I wailed. “I’ve got my parents’ anniversary.”

She picked at a hangnail and pouted. “You could always blow it off.”

I snorted. “Are you kidding? After all this, they’d put my head on a spike.”

She shrugged. “Just think about it. You’ve got two weeks to decide.”

It sounded great, but in my heart I knew I wouldn’t go. I didn’t want adventure; I wanted rest. The last few months had left me with too much unfinished business: I still had party details to work out, especially now that my sister was as big as a house, but

more importantly I had to make up with David, who still wasn't speaking to me after more than four weeks.

David. I wondered how he had been, what he had been doing. Merry had told me that I had been mistaken about him seeing someone, that he was throwing himself into work and spending long hours at the clinic. I had stopped leaving messages for him; it was getting too embarrassing since he never called back. He would talk to me when he was ready, I guessed, and there was nothing I could do to hurry him along. Still, though, I didn't think I could be happy gallivanting around another continent while my life at home was so unsettled.

I smiled at Molly. "Well," I said, "I'm happy for you, anyway. An African safari. Look at you go."

She giggled. "I'll send you a postcard, shall I?"

"You'd better," I said. "And a shrunken head, if you can find any. I'll use it to scare the new freshmen."

It was my first day of summer vacation, and I chose to celebrate by getting up at dawn and running around the neighborhood. What a strange creature I had become. Until recently I would have regarded such a morning as severe punishment.

When I stepped out the door and skipped down the front steps, the sun was just rising in the east and bouncing glimmering rays off of leaves and grass. The world was alive with color: flowers were bursting into bloom in great blotches of purple and pink,

the oaks lining my street formed a heavy canopy of green, and the sky overhead was an endless river of blue. As I glided past my neighbors' houses, I noted a yellow cat sunning itself on a front porch and a robin pecking for worms in the lawn. A soft breeze smelling of pine and mulch caressed my face. My feet thumped out a steady rhythm on the ground, the soundtrack of my life, and it erased all the worries from my mind and replaced them with beautiful calm.

When I returned home I dashed upstairs and jumped in the shower, making a mental list. I would call Merry and reconfirm the plan for the cake, check with the florist about my dad's boutonniere, and then...bliss! I'd plop myself down in a lawn chair with a diet Coke and my new issue of Cosmo. I threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, wrapped my wet hair in a towel, and wandered to the kitchen for some coffee.

The phone rang, startling me into spilling on the counter. It was 8:47, for god's sake. If it was Dilsy calling to tell me the napkins didn't match the tablecloths, I was going to be pissed.

"Hello?"

"Jane, is that you?"

"Dad," I said. "What a surprise! What's up?"

"It's your mother," he rasped. "Can you meet me at the hospital?"

Oh my god. "What's wrong? What happened?"

There was a pause, then he said, "I don't know. She...she couldn't get out of bed. The doctors are with her now. Can you come, Jane, please?"

Oh god oh god oh god. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."



There are some things I wish I'd never seen: Bryce Jacobs changing into his bathing suit at my sixth grade pool party, Dilsy's home video of Colin's birth, my neighbor's cat getting hit by a car. But most especially, I wish I'd never seen my dad crumpled like an empty paper sack, sobbing uncontrollably in the dingy gray waiting room at the hospital.

My dad may seem dotty, but he's a strong man. He has to be; he's married to my mother. But beyond his jolly façade of celebrity trivia guru and bowling club president, my dad is a rock. When Andy came out of the closet, my mother had a hysterical fit and locked herself in her room, but Dad just said, "You're not going to start listening to Barbara Streisand, are you?" When our family dog, Lulu, got cancer and had to be put to sleep, Dad never broke down, he just drove the car home from the animal hospital while the rest of us wailed. He's the kind of guy you'd want to have around if you were ever stuck in an elevator: he wouldn't panic; he'd just call the repairman, offer you a stick of gum, and ask if you'd seen any good movies lately.

So when I stepped out of the elevator and saw my dad bawling, I knew it was bad. My stomach, already tied in knots, gave a great shudder like an engine dying, and I thought I would be sick.

"Oh, you're here," he mumbled, wiping his eyes and holding his arms open for a hug.

After some frantic questioning on my part, the gist of the story came out: when Dad had gotten out of bed, he thought Mom was still asleep, but when he came out of the

shower she was moaning and thrashing around on the bed. She was conscious, but she couldn't speak or sit up. Dad had called an ambulance right away, the doctors had been with her for about half an hour, and someone had just come to say that they believed Mom had had a stroke. They didn't know yet how bad it was. They were running some tests.

As Dad told me the story, an eerie detached feeling stole over my body. It didn't feel real. It didn't feel like a real hospital. Those people in scrubs and white coats didn't seem like real nurses and doctors. It didn't feel like me or my life. I felt like somebody *watching* my life, a passive observer to the unfolding drama. My insides were made of sawdust.

Then the elevator doors opened and my enormously pregnant sister waddled out with Ron, and my Dad repeated the story for them. Dilsy started crying and we all huddled together on the little couch, stiff with worry, waiting for news.

Ten minutes later Andy and Sergio arrived, and we went through the explanations again. Andy threw himself onto a chair and buried his head in his hands, and Sergio put his arm around my brother's shoulders, soothing him.

And then we waited. And waited. And waited some more. Every thirty minutes or so a doctor would come by and tell us what was going on: CAT scans and MRIs and brainwaves and heart rate monitors and Mom was asleep and no we couldn't see her and no they didn't know yet what was wrong with her and no they didn't know yet if she'd make a full recovery and no they didn't know when they would know. We had to wait.

I felt so alone. I was surrounded by my family but I felt like I was stranded on a desert island, alone with my fear. I glanced over at Dilsy, Ron, and my dad, sitting on the couch across from me, silent but united. There seemed to be miles separating them from me. Andy and Sergio, holding hands, were just returning from a run to the coffee kiosk, whispering softly to one another, their own private unit of two. I was going out of my mind, bubbling over with what if-what-if-what if, replaying all the nasty things I had ever said to my mother, all the times I had rolled my eyes when I thought she wasn't looking, the times I had turned her into the punch line of a joke. The last time she and I had talked, I remembered, had been a few days before - a conversation about the seating chart. The stupid seating chart! I couldn't remember the last time I had told her I loved her.

There was no one to comfort me, no one to hold my hand and tell me it would all turn out okay. That was usually David's job. He was the one who had been there for me through thick and thin, who knew me as well as I knew myself. He was the one who cheered me up when I was sad, who made me feel better just by being in the room. He was the one who always rescued me when I was in trouble. I had always taken his friendship for granted, thinking that David would always be there when I needed him. Would he be there now, when I needed him most?

I tiptoed down the hall and dialed my cell phone, praying David would pick up. It rang four times on his end, and I almost shouted in frustration. Just as I was about to hang up, I heard David's voice, solid and warm.

"Hello?"

I managed to squeak out, “David!” before my throat constricted. But the tears wouldn’t come.

“Jane?” said David. “Is that you? Are you alright?”

“It’s my mom,” I choked out. “She’s had a stroke.”

There was a brief pause, then, “I’m coming, Jane. Just tell me where you are.”

I’ve often heard people use the expression “time stood still” and thought that it was a load of crap. I mean, *how* does time stand still? If time stood still, wouldn’t everybody stop moving? And if everybody stopped moving, wouldn’t they have to stop thinking as well? If you stopped thinking you couldn’t be aware of time standing still...it was too confusing.

But when David stepped out of the elevator, I knew then what it meant for time to stand still. It wasn’t that people stopped moving, it was just that suddenly their movement - okay, their entire existence - seemed relegated to a separate dimension. I knew they were there, but I didn’t hear them, I didn’t see them. I only saw David - saw him searching the room looking for me, saw the softening in his face when he recognized mine, saw him striding toward me and opening his arms. I think my heart might have stopped for a second, too.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

I shook my head, which was buried against his neck. “No. But I’m better now that you’re here.”

“Then I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

He sat with me all day. We didn’t really talk; he seemed to understand that nothing could be said. It was his presence that comforted me, the simple fact that I had someone to help me brave the day. That gray couch that I shared with him became a shelter in the storm, while the crazy outside world - a whirlwind of scurrying nurses, beeping machines, and worried relatives of the sick - raged on around us.

I had just dozed off on David’s shoulder when he shook me awake.

“The doctor’s coming,” he whispered.

I lifted my head and glanced at my watch. It was almost seven o’clock. It hadn’t even been a whole day, but it felt like I had been in that hospital a year.

“Tulliver family?” asked the doctor, looking around at our ragtag group. We probably looked like a tribe of gypsies. “Good news. Mrs. Tulliver is awake.”

We all started speaking at once: “Is she okay? Can she talk? Can she move?”

The doctor held up his hands. “One at a time, now. I’ll put it simply: we’re optimistic. We believe she had what’s known as a transient ischemic attack.”

“Oh my god!” wailed Dilsy.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a temporary stroke, one that doesn’t last long enough to cause permanent brain damage. It’s still caused by a blockage in the blood vessel, but it passes through before the brain cells are starved of oxygen. So Mrs. Tulliver should be okay for now, although I must tell you that this increases the likelihood that she’ll have another stroke in the future.”

We stood there morosely, digesting this news.

“Try to cheer up, though,” said the doctor. “She’s in great spirits. When I left her room she was asking the nurse to find her some lipstick.”

I let out my breath in a *whoosh*, and realized I’d been holding it.

“Can we see her?” asked my dad.

“Yes, but only for ten minutes, and only the immediate family, please. She’ll tire out very quickly, and we want her to get her rest. She’ll have to stay here overnight, at least, for observation.”

Me, my dad, and my two siblings followed the doctor down an acrid-smelling corridor and through a maze of hallways, and finally came to my mother’s door.

“Remember,” said the doctor, “she’s been through a serious trauma today. She’ll probably seem a little disoriented.” He pushed open the door and we walked in.

My mother was sitting up in a powder blue hospital nightgown, applying face powder from a silver compact. “Oh! Bill!” she gasped. “There you all are; I’ve been waiting for you! This young man,” she said, pointing at the doctor, who was about fifty-five, “has forbidden me to get out of bed - I told him I’d just bip down the hall and find you, but he thinks I might fall down. Honestly! But anyway, the back of this gown is tied with a piece of string, so it’s just as well - what did you have for dinner, my dears?”

I cried for real then, for the first time all day, on the foot of my mother’s bed. And before I left, I made sure to tell her that I loved her.

## Chapter 21

“Don’t you have any food in here?” asked David.

We were back at my house, poking through the kitchen cupboards in search of sustenance. Everything I’d eaten since the morning had come from a vending machine and consisted of a Mars Bar, a bag of Doritos, and a steady stream of diet soda.

David opened the fridge. “Okay, we’ve got eggs, mustard, a jar of sauerkraut, and a couple of non-fat yogurts. What would the Iron Chef do?”

“Order a pizza?”

“That’s what I thought.” He got on the phone with Papa John’s and I went upstairs to change into my pajama pants. Glancing into the bathroom mirror, I grimaced. My hair was a mess and my face was a big white blotch. I paused to add a little blusher to my cheeks, just so David wouldn’t mistake me for a cadaver. I didn’t want him to return me to the hospital, after all.

Back in the kitchen, David was ripping up a head of lettuce. “I found some vegetables hiding in the bottom bin,” he said. “I figured it wouldn’t hurt if we ate something fresh today. Not too much, of course.” He winked. “Maybe just a salad garnish.”

Smiling, I opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. When the pizza arrived, we dove in head first, munching in silence. But the longer we didn’t speak, the more uncomfortable I felt. At the hospital, surrounded by people and dealing with a crisis, it hadn’t mattered that David had been mad at me for a month. Now, when it was

just the two of us side by side on the living room sofa, all my anxieties about our friendship bubbled to the surface. Eventually, I knew, I'd have to bring it up.

"I'm sorry about what happened last month," I said. "I never meant to upset you."

Slowly, David put his plate down on the coffee table and wiped his hands with a paper napkin. "I know," he said.

"That whole thing with Oscar...well, it was a mistake," I continued. "Merry helped me realize that I was, um, perpetuating a bad habit, and I ended it with Oscar pretty quickly."

"She told me."

Hmph. He wasn't making it very easy for me.

"So," I went on in a rush, "I'm trying to tell you that I realize I've done a lot of stupid things in the past, and I know I've made you worry about me, and I'm really sorry. I know I disappointed you, but please don't give up on me. I'm trying to do better."

He sighed. "I know, Jane. You're the kind of person who always tries to do better; that's one of the things I admire about you. I'm sorry I've been giving you the silent treatment. I *was* really disappointed, and I needed some time to just back off and cool down."

"But why didn't you just tell me I was being an idiot? Why didn't you just say, 'Hey, Jane-o, you're always dating losers'?"

"I've told you that a million times, and you never paid attention before."

"You have not!" I protested. "You've never said anything about it!"



He shot me a look of disbelief. "When you started dating Steve, I mentioned that I thought he was a little immature for you, and you told me that he was in touch with his inner child."

"I never said that! I would never use a hippie phrase like *inner child*."

"Then what about the guy before him? I pointed out that he always made you pick up the check, and you said it was because he had had a rough childhood and needed to feel nurtured."

Dimly, the memory of that conversation came back to me. God, did I feel stupid about it now.

"Still, you didn't have to ignore me for a month," I protested. "You could have told me how you felt. We could have talked about it."

He shook his head, and his eyes flashed darkly. "No, Jane, we *couldn't* have talked about it."

"Why not?"

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Because *this* is how I feel." And he kissed me, hard and hungrily, his lips devouring mine, demanding that I respond.

And to my surprise, I did.

Feeling a swirl of heat rise in the pit of my stomach, I cupped the sides of his face with my hands and kissed him back. When I opened my mouth and welcomed him in, I felt a shudder go through his body, and he pulled me to his chest. Mindless of anything but a craving to get closer, I moved on top of him, straddling his waist and gripping him with

my thighs, never breaking the kiss. He groaned and buried his hands in my hair, and my fingers crept down and started pulling frantically at the buttons on his shirt.

Suddenly, he pulled back. "Wait, Jane."

"What?" I was still fumbling, hands shaking, with his third button.

He caught my hands. "Stop, Jane, please. We can't do this."

"Why not?" My mind, sluggish with lust, was slowly returning to reality. "I thought...I thought you wanted to."

"God, I do," he breathed. His liquid brown eyes were dilated, resembling two inky pools. "But not like this. It's not the right time."

I glanced at my watch. "How about now?"

"Come on, Jane. You're upset about your mom; you're not thinking clearly. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"You're not," I said, feeling my cheeks go pink with embarrassment. "I want this." I put my arms around his neck and pulled him towards me again.

"Stop it!" he said, pushing me away and leaping up. He paced the length of the room, hands on his hips. Finally, he came and sat down next to me on the couch, where I was thinking that I'd rather combust with shame than suffer one more second of humiliated rejection.

"I don't think you understand," he said, his voice breaking. "In fact, I think you've been misunderstanding me for fifteen years. I don't want to be your friend."

Shocked out of my embarrassment, I stared at him. "Why not?" I whispered.

"Because I'm in love with you," he said.

Horried, I whispered, "But that's impossible."

"It's not impossible, Jane." He pushed his hands through his hair. "I've been in love with you since you were fourteen and you roller-skated through the school cafeteria on a double-dare. You're the kindest, funniest, smartest woman I know. I love that you're not afraid to look stupid, that you'll do anything to make people laugh. I love that you carry cans of soup in the trunk of your car in case you see any homeless people. I love that you can quote Shakespeare but you can't program your VCR, and I love that you're not afraid to tell me when I smell like a garbage truck. I love you so much, Jane, that it hurts to be just your friend."

I sat there, my mouth hanging open, completely stupefied.

"I don't want to be your back-up guy anymore," he continued. "I don't want to be your *pal*. But I also don't want to be a one-night stand, something you jumped into without thinking about because you were upset. I don't want to be another one of those guys that you add to your list of mistakes."

He stood up and walked to the window, looking outside even though it was dark. "So I want you to think about it for a while, Jane. If you want to have something real with me, then give me a call. But if you don't...then don't."

The gaping silence that was left when he finished was such that I could hear the blood whirring through my body. I blinked in confusion. "You're in love with me?"

He nodded. "So much in love with you."

I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. It was too much to compute; my circuits were overloaded and my brain was shutting down. David had always been like a brother to

me...well, okay, like a really good-looking brother. But I had never imagined what it would be like to have him as a boyfriend...he had once been my *sister's* boyfriend, for god's sake. That made him off-limits. And...and my mother liked him, which was another strike against him. And besides, the whole idea of us being *involved* was just crazy, just completely untested and untried and experimental, and what if it didn't work out and he ended up hating me or I hated him and everything fell apart? Our friendship was on the brink of disaster and now he was throwing love into the mix? Love was dangerous--love was trouble. Love could get somebody hurt. It would never work.

I shook my head. "David, I don't know--"

"Just think about it," he said. "You don't have to decide anything tonight." He picked up his jacket and headed toward the door. "Just let me know, okay?"

"Okay."

I heard him fiddling with the door, locking it from the inside and pulling it shut. That was considerate of him, whispered a little voice in the back of my brain. Then I laid down on the couch and fell fast asleep.

It's amazing how many distractions you can find for yourself when you're really looking out for them. The next few weeks, I had plenty. Mom was discharged from the hospital, so instead of spending all my time in her hospital room, I spent all my time at my parents' house. Cooking, cleaning, whatever; it didn't matter as long as I was doing something. (It also didn't matter that my mother assured me she was perfectly fine and

quite able to make her own breakfast cereal.) After a few days of that, however, I began to suspect that my cooking and cleaning abilities were going unappreciated - particularly when I walked into the kitchen and found my dad tipping a plate of my famous Turkey-Tofu meatloaf into the garbage bin. ("Oh! Jane! I...I wasn't hungry." Right.) Luckily for me, Dilsy went into labor and the whole family rushed back to the hospital to welcome Romola Anne Thurston into the world. (Poor, poor child. A name like that is not much of a welcome, is it?) So there was a great fuss to be made over that: diapers to change, bottles to warm, lullabies to sing. And Colin and Harry were practically apoplectic that their baby sister was now the star of the stage, so I made myself useful and spent some time with them. (I'd like to apologize, once again, to the people at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry; I really should have warned you we were on our way.)

And of course, even with so many urgent, important tasks to complete, there were still so many little things, too, that prevented me from thinking about David: the car needed an oil change, the roses needed pruning, the washing machine was on the fritz, I needed a haircut and a manicure, I hadn't bought a dress yet for the anniversary party, the President was bashing gays again, bombs were going off in Palestine, Krispy Kreme was coming to town, Britney had a new boyfriend, Dashboard Confessional sold out before I could get tickets, my hay fever was acting up, Molly left for Africa, the hole in the ozone layer was getting bigger, and they discontinued my favorite brand of de-frizzer. It was a lot to wrap my mind around, let me tell you.

It was no wonder, then, that it took me a little while to get around to discussing the situation with Merry. But eventually, on a bright sunny afternoon, while we were

sipping iced tea and flipping through magazines in my backyard, I felt it was finally time to get it out in the open.

I approached the subject with all the delicacy it required. “So, uh, David’s in love with me.”

She licked her thumb and flipped another page. “Yes, I know.”

“Whaaat? How do you know?”

Lowering her sunglasses, she raised a delicate eyebrow at me. “How could I *not* know? I live on this planet.”

“Well, I didn’t know,” I grumbled.

“You’re learning a lot lately, aren’t you?” she teased. “So, go on and tell me how it came out.”

I filled her in on the story and she whistled low. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

She paused for a moment. “Was he a good kisser?”

“Merry!”

“What? Like that’s not important? It’s a crucial detail.”

“But it’s *David*,” I hissed.

“So? He’s not your brother; he’s not a priest; he’s not married. Was he a good kisser?”

“Yes,” I answered sulkily. “So, what do you think I should do?”

“What do you want to do?”

See, this was the problem with Merry being into all that therapeutic self-actualization, self-analysis voodoo. Every time I ask her a question she asks one back. It's like talking to Freud's parrot.

"I don't know," I wailed. "I don't want to have to do anything."

"Well, it sounds to me like you have to do *something*."

"I know; I know. But how can I make that decision? He's asking for too much."

She sipped her drink and smacked her lips, scanning the sunny lawn. "Oh, I don't know. He's only asking for you to give him a chance."

Chewing my lip, I bit out, "You say that like it's nothing, like he asked to borrow a fiver or something. This is a relationship we're talking about."

"I'm not saying it's nothing; I'm just saying it's not everything, Jane. He's not asking you to marry him. He's not even asking you to decide if you love him. He's only asking you to clear some space in your heart and give him an honest chance at winning it."

I snorted. What was I, a furniture showcase on *The Price is Right*? "But what if I did, and it didn't work out?"

Merry shrugged. "At least you'd both know that you gave it a shot. It wouldn't be the end of the world."

"But I'd lose his friendship!"

She pushed her sunglasses atop her head. "It sounds like you're about to lose it anyway. Jane, can't you see how it must hurt him to be overlooked by you? To always be the consolation prize? I can understand why he'd walk away from that."

I glared at her. Whose side was she on, anyway? “If he really loved me he’d want to be a part of my life in any capacity, whether it’s as my friend or...something more.”

“But if you can’t love him, he has to try to move on, Jane. I mean, surely you can see that.”

I didn’t say anything. The conversation was making me ill. God, I wanted to run away and not have to deal with any of it. I wondered what Molly was doing in Africa just then? I imagined myself sitting on the back of a camel - did they have camels in Africa? Oh well, it was my fantasy - running over the grassy plains, the wind whipping at my hair, not a care in the world...

“Hey, come back,” said Merry, pulling me from my safari daydream. “Listen, this is actually quite a simple decision. Do you like David?”

“Of course.” What a stupid question.

“And do you find him attractive?”

I sucked in my cheeks. After the way I had mauled him, there was no use denying it any longer. “Yes,” I snapped.

“And,” she purred, “is it possible that you could love him?”

Oh, this was too much. “Come on, Mer-”

“Answer the question. Think about all the time you’ve spent with David, all the experiences you’ve shared, good and bad, and tell me: is it possible?”

I remembered one of our best times: David and I playing in his new backyard with his dogs, tossing a ball back and forth between us, laughing as Oliver and Bully tumbled over each other in a scramble of legs and tails. David stuffed the ball in my pants



pocket and Duke tackled me, shrieking and laughing, to the ground. David, cackling like a maniac, had jumped into the pile of bodies and planted a raspberry on my belly. And then on Duke's.

I thought of the fight we had gotten into on Thanksgiving: how angry I had been at him then. But I also thought of the way David always expected the best from me and believed that I could give it. In my family, I had gotten pretty used to coming in at second place, to believing I was second best, but David always saw me as the champ. Even when he was screaming at me.

I thought of the way he had been at the hospital, when he had come to my rescue even though he was angry and disappointed with me - the way he always stood by my side when I needed him. He didn't coddle me, but when I asked for help, he gave it freely. He was the most generous, caring person I had ever known.

The realization that I loved him hit me like a thunderbolt. Awestruck and panicked, I turned to Merry. "Yes. It's possible."

"Okay then." She beamed. "Decision made. What's the problem?"

I felt my face crumple. "The problem is, I'm scared."

She nodded. "Jane, you're one of the most fearless people I've ever known. You do things every day that would scare the shit out of me. I don't know how you walk into a classroom of thirty teenagers - that's a firing squad, as far as I'm concerned. That's an angry mob. But with you, if there's something you want to do, you just do it. You don't stop and question whether or not you'll succeed. You want to put together a thirty-thousand dollar party? You go out and do it. You want to run a race? You put on your

shoes and go.” She leaned forward and put her hand on top of mine. “You’re a brave person, Jane, the kind who doesn’t hesitate. The kind who doesn’t consider failure an option. Which is why I’m telling you: the greatest failure is when you never even try. Please...if David is what you want, go after him.”

“So, uh, you think David and I would be good together?”

“I think you’d be one of the great love stories,” she teased. “Like Romeo and Juliet.”

I gaped at her. “But Mer, they died at the end.”

Her smile slipped a notch but she waved her hand dismissively. “Well,” she said, “that was the messenger’s fault. If you send Dave a letter, use Fed Ex.”

## Chapter 22

If my life were a movie, realizing that I was in love with David would be represented by an extreme close-up of my radiant, happy face, a sweeping orchestral soundtrack, and a montage of our future life together: walking hand in hand on the beach at sunset, clinking champagne glasses in front of a crackling fireplace, and frolicking through a field of wildflowers in what appear to be the Swiss Alps.

But alas, my life is not a movie. In reality, I expressed my love for David somewhat less joyously, by pacing around the kitchen muttering to myself and continuing to steadfastly ignore him. It's not that I wasn't joyous. I was. It's just that I was also neurotic, and I knew how to do neurosis much more confidently than I knew how to do joy. I should have just called him, right? I loved him; he loved me - it should have been easy to pick up the phone and get things rolling. But I couldn't. Because once I called him, that was it. Telling David I loved him was like inviting him to lace up his soccer spikes and dropkick my heart.

So I didn't. Instead, I focused on the anniversary party, which was quickly approaching. There had been some whispered discussion about canceling the whole thing due to my mother's stroke (which she quickly downsized to a "spell," a term that she accompanied with a wave of her hand, as if it was something that could be cured with smelling salts or chicken soup), but she wouldn't hear of it. She was absolutely fine, she protested, as fit as a fiddle. In fact, she thought it would do her a world of good to have a few dances, seeing as it was such beneficial exercise. The doctors had recommended it.

I made a few concerned noises, but arguing was futile. Truthfully, it did seem like she was doing fine. She had jumped right back into her normal routine of shopping obsessively for overpriced yet useless items, leading the Neighborhood Association in its fight against chain link fencing, and harassing her second daughter - oh, that's me - into a constant state of hysteria over orchid centerpieces and silver napkin rings. If anyone were bound to keel over and do a face-plant into the punchbowl, it would most likely be me.

I promised myself I'd talk to David at the party. By then, surely, I'd have come to grips with this whole commitment thing, and would be able to let myself love him without fear. By then, surely, I'd be ready to give myself a chance.

"I'm not coming out!" shouted my mother from behind the bedroom door. It was the evening of the party and I was at my parents' house helping Mom get ready. Dad had already finished his toilette and was parked in front of the TV, watching "Real World" reruns and wrinkling his tuxedo pants.

"I look like a purple heffalump!"

"It can't be that bad," I said to the door. "Let me have a look."

"No! It's awful! I don't know why I ever thought that Susan could sew - she's turned my beautiful fabric into a Teletubbie costume!"

"Come on, Mom," I coaxed. Inwardly, my entire being was screaming *I told you so*, but I pride myself on diplomacy. "Just let me see it. Maybe we can fix it; I'll get some pins."

The door swung open and hit the wall with a *bang*, revealing my red-faced mother, hands on her hips, who appeared to be wearing an inverted ice cream cone. The top of the dress was fitted in a simple tank style that was meant to be Jackie Kennedy-esque, but the bodice was too tight, the straps were too thin, the neckline was off kilter. The bottom half of the dress was an explosive nightmare of a skirt, a giant purple puffball, as if my mother's waist was where all faux satin went to die.

"Wow, Mom, that's...wow."

Her lip quivered, her cheek gave a twitch, then her entire face crumpled and she bawled, "It's hideous, Jane! What am I going to do-ooo-ooo?"

Luckily I was prepared for this. Susan had volunteered to make my reindeer costume when I played Rudolph in the fourth grade Christmas play, and I knew she was no Vera Wang. The woman couldn't even handle a brown felt jumper, for god's sake.

"Hand on just one second, Mom. I'll be right back." I dashed outside to my car and pulled a garment bag from the trunk. Racing back to my mother's makeshift crisis control center, I shyly presented her with my gift.

"What's this?" she asked.

"I saw it when I was out shopping for my own dress, and I thought it would suit you."

"What?" She gaped, her mouth hanging open. It might have been the first time I ever saw her at a loss for words.

"Go on," I said. "Open it up."

With slow, careful movements, she unzipped the garment bag and pulled out the dress. It was a dusky lavender concoction with a beaded lace bodice, cap sleeves, and a flowing chiffon skirt. It looked like something Blanche from “Golden Girls” would wear: something elegant and glamorous and just right for a woman celebrating her 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

“Oh, Jane! This is...this is...”

“Well, don’t just stand there, try it on.” I strong-armed my way into the bedroom and shut the door behind me. “Let’s get you out of that hideous meringue.” I helped her into the new dress and zipped up the back. It fit perfectly.

She stood, gazing at herself in the full-length mirror. “It’s beautiful.”

“Good,” I said. “Now let’s get going, we’re going to be-”

“Oh, Jane,” she whispered, catching my arm and pulling me into a tight hug.

“Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, hugging her back.

“Jane, I - I know how much you’ve put into this,” she whispered. “I know this party has been your creation. Dilsy needs to feel special, so I pretend for her...but don’t think I don’t know how much you’ve done for your dad and I.”

At that point my mascara was in grave danger of being washed away. “Oh, Mom,” I bleated. “It was nothing. Happy Anniversary.”

“Oh, Jane. My darling, darling girl. You’ve always been such a sweet daughter. I love you so.” She patted my cheek. “Now! Let’s get to the party and see if we can find you an eligible bachelor! Nancy Shoemaker - you remember Nancy, dear, her husband

ran off with a grocery store clerk - it's all very gauche, if you ask me - he might have diddled his secretary, at least, like a normal man, and left poor Nancy some dignity. Well then. Nancy has a son about your age - works in advertising, I think, and has his own boat! His mother told me he likes fishing for tuna! He's quite a catch. A-hahaha! Be sure to say something about tuna, Darling."

Nine months of party planning had not adequately prepared me for the sight that awaited me at the Pinecrest Country Club. True, I myself had placed the order for one thousand hothouse orchids. I was the one who oversaw the arrangement of ninety yards of pale purple tulle, seventy-five strands of twinkling fairy lights, and sixteen ornate candelabras. I was the one who had conceived of a magical kingdom backdrop against the rear wall and hired a string quartet to play before dinner. But walking into that ballroom was one of the greatest shocks of my life.

It was like stepping into a fairy tale. The sun was setting behind the trees; the terrace doors were thrown open to allow the cool evening air inside. The candles flickered hypnotically, casting a warm glow around the room, and a hundred cascading arrangements of orchids trembled delicately in the breeze. The strains of a sonata echoed gracefully around the room, and a champagne fountain gurgled peacefully in the corner.

My mother gasped. "Oh! Jane!" She covered her mouth with her fingertips and grabbed my dad's arm. "Bill," she squeaked. "Isn't it lovely?"

“Yes, but not as lovely as you, my dear.” He kissed her hand and led her towards the terrace to admire the garden in full bloom below.

I congratulated myself on a job well done and scooted over to the bar to pick up a glass of champagne. The guests were piling in already, and the buzz of chatter was rising as people realized their good fortune: the drinks were free and the caviar was imported. It was going to be a great party.

I circled the room, greeting my parents’ friends and keeping an eye on the entryway for David’s arrival. My stomach fluttered with nervousness - I hadn’t seen him or spoken to him in nearly a month, and the last time we met my tongue was in his mouth and I was trying to rip his shirt off. I had tried to compose a little speech for him - truth be told, I stayed up late the night before, debating whether it would be better to go with powerhouse cheese like, “I’ve loved you forever but I never knew,” or something simple and pragmatic, such as, “Shag now or shag later?” In the end I decided that perhaps spontaneity was my best bet, that it was very likely inspiration would strike when I saw my beloved and that pure mellifluous poetry would pour from my lips and woo his heart.

I saw Merry and Darren stride in together, hand in hand, and went to greet them.

“You look fabulous!” I said, hugging Merry. “Thanks for coming. And Darren, uh, you look nice, too.” Awkwardly I stuck out my hand.

He took it, clasping it in both of his, and to my surprise, leaned in to kiss my cheek. “It’s nice to see you, Jane,” he said. “I’ve been wanting to thank you for all the things you’ve done for me and Mer.”



I managed not to faint dead away, but it was beyond my capabilities to formulate a response. Luckily, Merry saved me from standing there stupidly with my mouth dangling open like a dead fish.

“This place looks great,” she said. “It looks like something from ‘Celebrity Weddings,’ but even better, because there’s no boring ceremony to sit through.”

We chatted for a bit, and eventually Darren obligingly wandered off to fetch drinks for us. “So,” whispered Merry. “Are you nervous about David?”

“Nervous? I feel like Cirque de Soleil is performing in my stomach.” I glanced toward the door. “I just wish he’d get here already. He’s late.”

“He’ll be here. Don’t worry.”

Darren returned with the champagne and I urged the two of them out onto the terrace. Somebody should be enjoying the romantic view, even if I couldn’t. Surveying the room I spied Andy and Sergio heading my way.

“Muffin!” cried Andy. “The caterer is looking for you; he said something about the fish being burned.”

“What?” I screeched, almost dropping my glass.

“Jesus, calm down. I’m kidding! Sergio made me do it.”

“Sorry, Jane,” said Sergio, laughing. “But you looked so stressed, I had to. Have some fun, huh? It’s a party.”

“You!” I pinched his arm. “You two are a couple of real comedians.”

Just then a trumpet blared and I jumped, turning around to look at the stage. My sister, tottering dangerously in a pair of rhinestone-encrusted stiletto heels, was climbing

the steps and taking command of the microphone. A spotlight beamed down on her from some unseen location, and her black satin gown shimmered in the light.

“What’s this?” asked Andy.

“I have no idea,” I whispered. “I didn’t request any heralding trumpets.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” boomed Dilsy. “I’d like to welcome you all this evening, and thank you for joining me in celebrating the thirty-fifth wedding anniversary of my parents, William and Victoria.” She paused expectantly, and a wave of applause rose up from the crowd. “Thank you,” she continued, beaming angelically. “This event has been a long time in planning, and a lot of hard work, but I’m sure you will agree that no couple deserves it more than my parents. It has been my very great pleasure to put tonight’s affair together for them...”

I gasped and went rigid with shock, and Andy silently laid his hand on my shoulder.

“...so I hope you will join me in toasting the marriage of my parents. To Bill and Vicky.” Dilsy raised her glass to a chorus of cheers, and everyone drank. My sister smiled beatifically and began to descend from the stage, while I watched in silent outrage. I couldn’t believe it. She had done it again.

“Don’t worry,” whispered Andy. “She’ll get her dues someday.”

And even as I watched, she did. Four steps from the bottom, Dilsy stepped on her dress, lost her balance, and spent three glorious seconds flapping her arms like a chicken before falling backwards and sliding down the steps on her butt with a *thump-thump-thump-thump*. She landed with a squawk on the ballroom floor, with her skirt bunched up

around her thighs and her legs splayed open, revealing her yellow floral-print cotton briefs to two hundred elderly guests.

For a moment, there was stunned silence. Then Andy started laughing, low and deep, and the sound echoed around the cavernous room. And suddenly everybody was laughing: my parents, Ronald, the Neighborhood Association, even the busboys. Even me. I couldn't stop. My shoulders shook, my eyes watered, I sounded like an asthmatic donkey...and it was great.

Dilsy, blushing three shades of crimson, picked herself up off the floor and motioned violently towards the kitchen staff, who immediately swarmed like bees and began serving dinner. The laughter died away as everyone's thoughts turned toward prime rib and salmon, and I made my way to the head table. My own thoughts were turning towards David: where *was* he?

All through dinner I kept careening my head around to watch the doorway. He's not coming, I thought. He changed his mind. He doesn't love me. The thought made my stomach seize and my lungs tighten, and I desperately guzzled a glass of water.

"Are you alright, Jane?" asked my dad. "Does the fish disagree with you?"

"No, I...I'm fine. I'll just...get some fresh air. Back in a moment."

Darting out of my seat I made a dash for the door. As I passed by the champagne fountain a figure stepped out in front of me.

"Oscar," I said, startled.

"Hi, Jane."

He looked different than I remembered: not quite so tall, his eyes not quite so sparkly. I noticed that his hair looked uncombed, and not in a sexy way. Actually he looked like he could use a shower. Had he always been like this?

“You look gorgeous,” he said. “I was hoping I’d run into you tonight.”

“Oh. Well, here I am,” I gabbled. “Actually I was just-”

And then I saw David.

It was as if I was seeing him from one end of a tunnel: everything else - all the people, the noise, the lights - faded out of my awareness, and I saw only him. Nothing else existed in the world except the two of us. The butterflies in my stomach dissipated, and all my fears about love and commitment went with them. This is *David*, I thought. How on earth could I have ever believed he’d hurt me?

His eyes met mine and I saw the flash of recognition, the heart-stopping beginnings of a smile...until his gaze flickered over to Oscar and his face clouded. The eyes flicked back to mine and this time they were no longer warm; they were flinty and shuttered. He spun on his heel and walked out.

“David!” I called. He didn’t stop. I lurched forward, leaving Oscar in mid-sentence, and ran across the room, maneuvering around an obstacle course of ill-placed tables and waiters and inebriated senior citizens. I got to the doorway and saw David halfway down the long hallway.

“David, wait!”

He stopped and turned around, shoving his hands in his pockets, and I dashed over. Behind me I could hear the band beginning to strike up the first strains of “It Had to Be You.”

“David,” I panted. “Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving.”

I screwed up my face and peered at him. “But you can’t go yet. You just got here.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I shouldn’t have come.” He refused to meet my eyes. “You looked like you were busy in there.”

Suddenly it dawned on me: the stupid man thought I was with *Oscar*! A warm flood of love coursed through my body for this sweet, sensitive fool. “No!” I yelped. “I wasn’t *busy* with him. You thought I chose that wacko over you? I was only talking to him because he practically tackled me on my way to come looking for *you*.”

David blinked, looking confused. “He’s not your date?”

“Of *course* not,” I said. “Why would I bring a date when I knew you were coming?”

“I didn’t know that you knew I was coming.”

Gaping at him, I said, “Why wouldn’t you come?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he scoffed. “Just a little matter of you leaving me hanging for an entire month, after spilling my guts to you, when-”

“David.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We seem to be suffering from a gross miscommunication.”

He raised an eyebrow. "Are we?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe you'd better explain things to me."

Yes, I thought, I'd better clear things up.

I pushed him up against the wall and kissed the hell out of him. My hands were in his hair, on his face, around his neck - I did everything but climb him like a ladder and wrap my legs around his waist. Which I probably would have attempted if I hadn't been wearing a floor-length ball gown.

Reluctantly coming up for air, I said, "That's about the gist of it."

He smiled, and I noted with pride his puffy, lipstick-smeared lips. "Interesting point," he murmured. "So what you're saying is..." He wrapped his arms my waist and lowered his mouth to mine, and again, we were off.

"Yes, exactly," I whispered. "Except I also wanted to add..."

"Yes?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really." I looked up at him and grinned. "Just that I love you."

"What - is that all?" he teased.

"That, and I've decided to promote you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, congratulations." I winked. "You're now a boyfriend-in-training."

"Boyfriend-in-training?" he complained. "How come I don't get to be a full-fledged boyfriend?"

I shook my head and clucked at him. “Honey-pie, you’ve got to put in the time like everybody else. Just because you’ve known me for fifteen years doesn’t mean you can get out of taking me out for dinner and a movie.”

“Oh, well,” he sighed, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I guess I have to pay my dues.”

“Buck up. Being a boyfriend-in-training comes with its perks.”

“What kind of perks?”

Nodding towards the ballroom, I said, “If you go back in there and dance the foxtrot with me, I’ll let you take me home tonight.”

He kissed me again, light and sweet, then put his hand on the small of my back and steered me towards the party. “Foxtrot it is.”