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They shoot single people, don't they?

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They Shoot Single People, Don't They?

by

Dianne J. Smith

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?
Dianne J. Smith

ABSTRACT

They Shoot Single People, Don’t They? is a romantic comedy of errors set in Boston about Lexie, a twenty-five year old pediatric nurse with still perky breasts and lightly dimpled thighs who can figure out pediatric drug dosages, but is so severely relationship-challenged that she can’t make any choice at all when it comes to men. Her life becomes a convoluted mess that includes two guys and a tangled web of lies.

After Marcus dumps her with a post-it note taped to her refrigerator door, Lexie thinks that her five-year plan to get married and have a baby are back in the crapper. She’d do anything to have ex-boyfriend’s tongue back in her ear; that is, until the chain breaks in her toilet tank and handyman Duncan comes into her life. When alpha-dog Marcus reappears to reclaim Lexie, she’s thrown into a tailspin and doesn’t know which guy to choose. She finds herself up a tree and in a dumpster, and on one memorable night, she’s standing on a toilet seat to discover whether Marcus is boinking her father’s hot new babe in a stall at the Charles Hotel. Lexie lets herself get caught in a tangled web of lies. She leads Duncan to believe that Marcus is her brother and lets Marcus think that Duncan’s just the guy who fixed her plumbing.

They Shoot Single People, Don’t They? is a novel that uncovers the insecurities of Lexie, a successful single woman, who equates personal satisfaction with being in a
meaningful relationship. The book focuses on the lighter side of Lexie’s pursuit, her frustrations of waiting for her real life to begin, and her awareness by novel’s end that Marcus does not define her. She discovers that Duncan is the guy she wants. She’s no longer worried about her five-year plan or worried that someone will shoot her just because she’s single. Lexie doesn’t know if Duncan is forever and ever, but she’s pretty sure that he’s the right guy for now.
Introduction

Only recently have I begun to consider myself a writer. Perhaps this is because much of my life was spent being practical instead of passionate. And even while I was being practical, there were stops and pauses along the way, markers that suggest I was this (writer), not that (nurse, teacher). These “markers” did not come as a result of the childhood plays I wrote or the plethora of entries that filled my journals, or the angst-ridden poems of my teenage years that told of unrequited love, or lost love, or the half-a-dozen times I thought I had found love. I see these earlier writings more as part of my development as a person than as a writer.

Still, as a young adult, I recall that my inclination toward humor was what set me apart from what others were writing in my circle of family and friends. My poems, in particular, became expected at birthdays and later at weddings and occasionally at impromptu roasts that required snappy satires. “The Top Ten Things You Would Never Hear My Brother Say,” for example, might be performed on his birthday to an audience of family and friends. He would never say that the Chippendales asked him to join their troupe so he could perform his belly roll, and because he is a computer nerd, he would never say that “modem” was what he did to his front and back lawns. There were other poems of this sort, written about relationships or the discord between two people in a relationship. My earliest experimentation with similes can be found in stanzas that had *him* hugging like an over-starched collar, relaxing like a piano wire, talking like an
instruction manual, loving her like a piece of gum stuck to his shoe, while she obeys like a pigeon perched on a No Parking sign, trusts like an “open house,” parties like the chicken pox, and loves him like a stripped and empty house.

Later, my focus would be writing fiction that concerns itself with what it means to be a human being. In this more serious form, most of my writing as a nurse was expressed in careful documentation with an attention to detail and description. I wrote elaborate case studies that others said read like a good book because the patients had something at stake, because the conflict was evident, because the pacing created an edge in the study that caused readers to want to turn the page. One of these cases won an award, and I remember thinking it odd to write about somebody’s misfortunes, in this instance a young woman with multiple knee surgeries that left her overweight, handicapped, and with intractable pain. To be honored for telling her story so well was both rewarding and unsettling.

There were long gaps in my writing when I was a young mother. Mostly I wrote stories for my daughter—about her imaginary friend, about her favorite doll and companion “Big Baby,” about Wanda, a scary witch with the flu, to whom the strangest things would happen with every sneeze—k-a-C-H-O-O! The book, complete with illustrations, won first place in the Hudson Regional Library contest and is still read in elementary schools today.

I evolved mostly then, as a writer, in these last five years, paying attention to the craft of fiction, measuring my writing against the good and the great, revising at dizzying speeds for further clarity and depth, learning from my mistakes, taking risks with voice and style, and writing feverishly, not so much to make up for lost time, but because my
characters insisted that a story be told, because I fell in love with words over and over again, and because I remained passionate about keeping my writing fresh and alive.

Prior to taking my first fiction workshop in the fall of 2000, I read whatever was on the bestseller fiction list as long as it kept my interest. I would learn later to recognize the craft in good writing, to appreciate, as Annie Dillard notes, that the writer “is careful of what she reads, for that is what she will write. She is careful of what she learns, because that is what she will know . . . Only after the writer lets literature shape her can she perhaps shape literature.” And so the short story became all that I read, and mostly all that I wrote. I learned to unpack short fiction, focusing on what the craft could tell me about my own writing. I learned about characterization by reading “Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story” by Russell Banks and others, and then I analyzed my first short story, “The Lesson,” about a young overprotective mother who watches as her five-year old daughter struggles during a swimming lesson. The story is told in third-person limited, focusing on the perspective of the young mother. In this story, I created a harrowing plot, as the young child nearly drowns. The mother sees her daughter in the water but is too far away to provide immediate help; the swimming instructor is seemingly unaware of the child’s danger because he is preoccupied with the demands of the class. My earlier drafts subordinated the characters to action without attention to motivation. I let the action drive the story, become the story, instead of the characters’ motivations underscoring what was at stake. I created motivations against no real oppositions, not allowing characters to find solutions to their problems.

I evolved from this writing experience aware that I had a proclivity for writing fast-paced, action-packed scenes and, perhaps, aware that I was too in love with my own
words instead of focusing on the effect my words would have on the readers. With new confidence, I deleted the inconsequentialities that had no greater purpose than to beautify the page. In my later versions, I learned not to resort to such extremes—the child did not need to drown at the end of the story; the “drowning” might have been misinterpreted by a too-protective mother; the child may have been making her first strides away from the dependency of her mother. In subsequent renderings, the depiction of place became more a function of the plot and less a description for description’s sake.

My second short story continued along a familiar melodramatic path. This time, four high school seniors took one too many risks and one of the boys died. I guess I had to get the dying character out of my system since I had felt the need, at first, to kill the young swimmer in my first story. And in “Reckless Boys,” I increased the stakes, characterizing the dying boy with Down’s Syndrome. One of the problems in this piece of fiction was the similarity I created between the boys. Their personalities were indistinguishable; they meshed together, acting as a collective unit rather than as independent individuals with unique motivations. To some degree, the “meshing” was a function of peer conformity, but, on the other hand, there was little distinction between characters, even their names lacked originality—Billy, Joey, Wally, Kevin—all articulated with two syllables. I had also created a concrete line between good and evil for the reader. I was listening to my first year creative writing teacher who said give it all away. I gave away the boys’ history of reckless behavior in the story’s opening, and thus the story became too linear, the story’s end anticipated. The youth with Down’s Syndrome, who just wanted to be one of the gang, became too obvious a target for the boys’ reckless behavior.
I remember being referred to “Hunters in the Snow” by Tobias Wolfe and “So Much Water So Close to Home” by Raymond Carver to determine how these authors handled relationships, to see how the writer crafted the motivation of his characters to act or not act, to explore ways in which the authors distinguished one character from another. I evolved from this writing experience aware of the importance of making characters memorable but not all to the same degree. I learned the importance of placing characters in a hierarchy, of differentiating one from the other. In my later revisions, I made significant distinctions between the characters. They all wanted something different; they all had personal agendas. I also tried my hand at first person narration, a perspective that I would later adopt as my favorite because of the personal voice, because of the intimate relationship between narrator and reader. At the time I wrote this story, I was reading fiction that was open-ended, and, as a result, I revised a previous ending to incorporate this new influence. Instead of ending with the funeral as I had in my earlier version, I closed with two of the boys carrying the body of the dead boy back to town. The ending might have cost me publication, since one editor found the closing incomplete; she stated that she was left hanging. I have re-read the story since then, and I disagree. The open-ending in this story shows the boys making a decision; it ends with action—the finality of the story is in this action.

The turning point in my writing came with a story called “Jacksonville.” It was also written in first person, incorporating the adult perspective, a reflection on childhood, with the more dramatic and current perspective of the adult as a young boy in an abused family. The father in the story was particularly abusive, and I was influenced by writers like Junot Diaz in his story “Fiesta 1980,” where monsters were tempered with some
human element. In my story, the father dabs at his son’s bleeding mouth and nose with a clumsiness that hurts more than it helps, he tells jokes to his family when he is sober, and he wraps his arms around his wife so that both parents are linked in some complicated puzzle, complete with two interlocking pieces. I evolved from this writing experience with a better understanding of how to create sympathetic characters. I became more aware of voice, of the importance of telling a story through first-person narration, of layering a plot with complications, of creating a beginning and an ending that spoke to each other, of developing strong characterization so that the motivation behind the dramatic end is clear to the reader as the only possible end. The young boy in this story was the first character who really spoke to me, who was not forced onto the page to live and lie, the first character who told his compelling story to me so that I could write it on the page. At times, the story frightened me, but I remembered hearing that if a story scares you, you should go with that, and so I did, not averting my eyes from the serious story at hand. “Jacksonville” was published in The Allegheny Review in 2001.

I wrote a couple of more stories in the year 2001. One was about a young girl who delivers a baby in a high risk Labor & Delivery Unit in Trenton, New Jersey. I had a particular fondness for the character, but the story eluded me then and now. It has not been told satisfactorily despite point of view changes and alternate endings. Perhaps I will revisit it again in the future, but for now, it remains tucked away in one of the files of my computer. I evolved from this writing experience with a better understanding of knowing when to let a story lie unfinished, to understand that the craft of fiction can be appreciated even though the story is not a success.
Another story that has been revised many times since its original version is called “Scrabble.” At the time I wrote this story, I was reading and enjoying the minimalist approach of writers like Ann Beattie, Ernest Hemingway, and Raymond Carver. I appreciated the sparseness of their stories, the scarcity in place, in descriptive detail, and in characterization, all of this sparseness balanced by an emphasis on dialogue. I evolved as a writer in “Scrabble” by learning when to submerge three-fourths of the story so that readers would infer larger meanings from the piece through my use of dialogue and subtle gesture. I wanted readers to hear what my characters said between the lines. I believe that these nuances, the ability to withhold information, and the subtleness in the writing were my greatest success.

“Scrabble,” written in a first-person male voice, depicts a gathering between two neighboring couples. Through a game of Scrabble, it becomes clear that both marriages are in trouble. The narrator tries unsuccessfully to revive the life of his marriage. His wife still blames him for the unfortunate death of their three-year-old child. The narrator learns, when the story closes, that his wife will never change, that he is not unlike the woodpecker that beats his head against the bark of the tree some three hundred times a minute. By story end, the narrator shows emotional growth. His wife does not, and yet there is an empathetic understanding of her inability to move on, of her need to keep the death of her son on the surface gaping like a dehiscing wound. The faulty relationship of the other couple is a story that evolves within the primary story. The husband continues to drink; his wife remains unaware of life’s repeating lessons (her first husband was also an alcoholic), and there is an edginess that seeps into their dialogue. The reader suspects that this marriage is doomed. In my earlier version, the ending had an element of surprise.
The narrator and the neighbor’s wife confirm tomorrow’s meeting place in a whispered exchange. Subtle hints are dropped throughout the story about their affair: the way the narrator comments on how the neighbor’s skin is translucent, how pretty she is even without make up, how her green eyes remind him of still water, how he finds himself lost in them.

I was reading Guy De Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” Frank O’Connor’s “Guest of the Nation,” and O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” at the time of my writing and was influenced by the crafted surprise ending in all. My original version was considered “an artful rendering” by novelist Kathleen Cambor, Director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston in 2001. The story received the esteemed Sylvan Karchmer Fiction Award later that year. Yet “Scrabble” remains unpublished today, one editor claiming that the story was seriously considered for publication, but perhaps it attempted too much—infidelity, adoption, marital discord—and then another editor contemplating publication if only the ending had not felt less than deserved.

A newer shorter version of the story received the Anspaugh Fiction Award at the University of South Florida in 2004. This acknowledgment suggests that the story has merit. I evolved from this writing experience with a different perspective on readers. I think in this story I let readers’ response shape my rendering of the plot. I do not doubt that the original story needed revision, but, when I read the story today, it is not the same one I set out to write. There is a part of me that feels I have betrayed the characters, that I have not been true in the retelling, and yet there is another part that knows that this story needed to be reshaped. Even today, I find that it is difficult to alter the motives of these characters, to make them responsible when before they were not, to make them respond
in opposition to previous behavior. It is peculiar to feel as a writer that I have betrayed some of my characters who if they could speak to me from this new perspective they would perhaps express their disappointment at the changes I have made. There are some stories that I know as a writer I will not revisit. I have, in a sense, outgrown them, but “Scrabble” is one story that I will continue to champion until everything is there for a reason and once these reasons are secure, I know that they will bring the story to its conclusion more believably.

One of my favorite stories is “Crazy Lucy,” written in 2001 and published in the fifth edition of *Hampton Shorts*, a writing journal created by novelist Daniel Stern, a distinguished professor at the University of Houston. In keeping with my desire to experiment with voice and character, I wrote this story with a flair for the comedic. I seemed to be most comfortable in this genre, having learned so many important and critical aspects of the craft from the more serious literary renderings of my previous stories. The impetuous and demanding natures of such characters as Lucy fortunately found a place on my written page. I was reading Pam Houston’s collection of short stories in *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Waltzing the Cat* when I wrote “Crazy Lucy.” I found a blend of humor and poignancy in Houston’s stories. Characters that said, “I’m gonna find a man in this town who’ll have sex with me if it’s the last thing I do,” offered a rawness that I wanted to replicate. I read Melissa Bank’s *The Girls Guide to Hunting and Fishing* and found the same honesty couched in sarcasm—the driest form of humor. Bank had one character suggesting that “when he calls and tells you he misses you, you invite him over. He spends the night. In the morning, he asks where his razor is. You tell him that you threw it away when you broke up. He says ‘I framed your deodorant.’” The
dialogue and characters in this story were fresh and inviting. And so, I found a way to blend my natural inclination toward humor with the elements of craft that I learned through the study of fiction.

“Crazy Lucy” is a story about two sisters, one who is single and spontaneous, one who is married and conscious of a prescribed set of societal standards. It is the unmarried crazy Lucy that thrives in this story. The narrator, the married sister, tells the story, and so the reader must consider her reliability as a narrator, must consider her motivations along the course of the narration. Just who is dependent on the other is the question that ultimately arises. Just who is the crazier of the two?

I found in writing this story that the comedy was more difficult to write than some of my earlier works that were devoid of humor primarily because the comedic story required the same dramatic progression as the more serious works and more. The comedic element required snappy dialogue, an attention to timing, and an understanding of characterization. Readers were sympathetic to the careless, yet spunky, Lucy. My challenge in this story was to create an equally interesting and sympathetic narrator and to create an understanding of what was at stake for the narrator in keeping her sister unsettled and unmarried. I evolved as a writer in this piece with significant confidence in my ability to write comedic renderings that had value in the literary world.

I graduated summa cum laude in the creative writing program at the University of Houston and submitted the above collection of short stories as my thesis entitled *Jacksonville and other stories*. I received the Outstanding Achievement Award for *Jacksonville* amidst eighty-one theses presented in 2001. Because I was still trying to discover my voice and style at this point in my writing career, this award affirmed my
range of stories and, more importantly to me, demonstrated my ability to take successful risks in the craft of fiction. This recognition acknowledged my position as a promising writer.

I applied and was among one of fifteen candidates accepted in the Creative Writing Masters of Fine Arts Program at the University of Houston, a program that ranked second in the country in this field. I completed one semester at this university before a family illness called me to Florida. I am close to my family, so leaving the esteemed program was not a difficult decision to make. My writing was on hold for about a year then I applied to the University of South Florida with a renewed interest in becoming a part of its writing environment. Here I discovered the importance of submitting my work to a group of respected writers. I was familiar with the workshop experience, but, in addition to that venue, I discovered a group of writers who I knew would deliberate an honest response to my writing, who would respond to my craft as if it were their own, always with a reader’s eye on detail, always with a critic’s eye on believability. I wrote with them in mind, anticipating their acceptance in places, expecting some diversion in others. I learned much from their own stylistic renditions and was anxious to revise my work to make it clearer, fresher, to write with a keener urgency, to write at a deeper level.

I wrote two short stories between 2002 and 2004 and a two-hundred and sixty-eight page novel during my masters program at the University of South Florida. The first of the two stories I wrote was entitled “Trappings,” a story about a young woman who works through her recent and sudden break up with her fiancé. She is forced to deal with a family of squirrels in her fireplace, a cat with a history of seizures, and a loss of identity...
when the house she owns is contracted for sale. To complicate matters, her local job is no longer available, her new job in another state is pressing, and now her life is upended. The protagonist works through her loss and indecisiveness as she deals with the one remaining squirrel in her kitchen. It is not until she sets him free and watches him come to a bifurcation of limbs, as if he, too, wonders which way to go, that the reader knows that the young woman is going to be okay. This story is my first attempt at symbolism. The lost squirrel represents the main character’s loss and insecurity. The momentum of her life comes to a halt when her fiancé backs out of their marriage plans, and now the character is at a bifurcation similar to the squirrel’s predicament—a decision is required. The character’s motivations and the symbolism present in the story became the critical factors for the story’s success. This story was a finalist in the Glimmer Train Open Fiction Contest in 2003 and in the Chicago Quarterly Fiction Contest in 2004.

The second piece of short fiction I wrote during my master’s program was a story that turned out to be the basis of my novel. It was more of a vignette than a story: an episodic slice of life that looked at the dating perils of a twenty-five-year-old woman. The vignette became the framework for my novel, They Shoot Single People, Don’t They? For the vignette and for my novel, I continued to read Lorrie Moore’s stories. One piece, called “Two Boys,” gave me the impetus to write about a character who attempted the precarious balance of two boyfriends. The main character spoke honestly of the complexity of the situation: “For the first time in her life, Mary was seeing two boys at once. It involved extra laundry, an answering machine, and dark solo trips in taxicabs.” Once again, it was the rawness that attracted me to this style.
For the past year, I have been writing my first novel, *They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?*, a romantic comedy of errors set in Boston about Lexie, a twenty-five year old pediatric nurse with still perky breasts and lightly dimpled thighs, who would do anything to have her old boyfriend’s tongue back in her ear again; that is, until the chain breaks in her toilet tank and handyman Duncan comes into her life. When alpha-dog Marcus reappears to reclaim Lexie, she is thrown into a tailspin and doesn’t know which guy to choose. She finds herself up a tree, literally, and in a dumpster, and, on one memorable night, she is standing on a toilet seat to discover whether Marcus is boinking her father’s hot new babe in a stall at the Charles Hotel. Lexie lets herself get caught in a tangled web of lies. She leads Duncan to believe that Marcus is her brother and lets Marcus think that Duncan’s just the guy who fixed her plumbing. Although Lexie can figure out pediatric drug dosages, she is so severely relationship-challenged that she cannot make any choice at all when it comes to men.

This novel challenged my writing because all of my characters needed to earn their keep on the page, because each character had to demonstrate unique personalities and oddities that defined who they were, that kept them fresh and alive throughout the book. And I needed to be reminded that Lexie must show personal growth, that it was not enough to have circumstances propel her through the novel. It was Lexie’s motivations that drove her actions. What she wanted at the beginning of the novel was not what she wanted at the end. My goal in writing this novel was to deliver a fast-paced satisfying story written in the immediate first-person present tense that made the reader laugh out loud.
I received the faculty-nominated Ann and Edgar Hirshberg Award for Creative Writing for the first three chapters of this novel. More importantly, I evolved from this writing experience with a clearer understanding of what kind of writer I am and what genre best suits my writing expression.

My immediate plans include finding an agent and publisher for They Shoot Single People, Don’t They? Currently, there is good response to the queries I have sent agents who represents writers of women’s fiction and romantic comedy. Soon I plan to write my second novel which will also be a comedy of errors. In the near future, I plan to secure my MFA and/or PhD so that I can continue to surround myself with critical attention and literary examples that will move my work forward. With a larger publication history to my credit, my plan is to continue writing and to teach the craft of fiction at the university level.

I appreciate the opportunity I have been afforded to study in the creative writing program at the University of South Florida and would like to thank my director for her insightful guidance and unwavering support. I will miss her watchful eyes and thoughtful response, and soon I will feel a little like a trapeze artist performing without a net. I also would like to thank my professors who have made my university experience so worthwhile to me. Thank you.
They Shoot Single People, Don’t They?

Prologue

I go to Marcus’ new studio apartment with Chinese take-out in one hand and the Argyle socks I bought for him in the other. I’m trying not to focus on the fact that these are the socks I was buying two weeks ago when Marcus broke up with me by sticking a post-it note to my fridge.

He opens the door and says, “Lexie, I’m glad to see you.”

I believe him because he’s hungry for Moo Goo Gai Pan, and I’m hungry for him.

We make love on an inflatable mattress because there’s no real furniture. I spend the night with a quarter of the flimsy blanket, my butt exposed to the chill of the night. I can’t seem to warm my feet, so I rip open his package of new socks.

In the morning, wearing only his briefs, he stands barefoot on the lime-green linoleum of his vestibule waiting for me to leave. His toenails need clipping, I think, as I step over the door riser and onto the hallway carpet that is battleship gray. When I turn to kiss him I see that he has closed the apartment door so that the space between us has narrowed. He gives me a peck on the tip of my nose.

“You’ll call me then, right?” I ask.

He says he’ll call me later, and as I walk away and hear the door click shut and the dead bolt catch and feel the semen dampen my underwear, I wonder if he meant later
today or later in a few days or later this week or later in a vague sort of when-I-get-around-to-it way.

It’s *days* later when I see him as I come out from the cleaners. He’s leaning against his solar yellow jeep outside the delicatessen two doors down.

My fingers fly to the angry pimple that’s on my chin.

He’s wearing a navy pea coat and jeans. His hiking boots are unlaced and his face unshaven. Black hair falls carelessly into his eyes, and he doesn’t see me hovering under the awning of the cleaners. He’s watching a woman with spiky macaroni-and-cheese colored hair move towards him, carried by her daddy long legs. There’s some definite tongue action between them when they connect. I bite my lip so the pain will keep me from crying and look at my reflection in the storefront window. I look like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* with tufts of broom-blonde hair poking out from under my wool hat.

I’m aware that the pimple on my chin has its own pulse.

Carolers sing “‘Tis the Season to be Jolly” on the corner, and as I pass them on my way home, I give the mirthful spirits the finger inside my benign mitten.

Back at home, I consider filling out one of those dating service applications: twenty-five-year-old dumpee with still perky breasts and lightly dimpled thighs desires . . desires—oh let’s face it—desires her old boyfriend’s tongue in her ear.
Chapter One

Okay, so here’s the thing. Getting dumped is like having your heart wrenched from your chest and shoved through a meat grinder while it’s still beating. What’s left is a gloppy, muddled mess. I guess I feel like if anyone was going to break it off, it should’ve been me. It wasn’t going to be me because I was too ga-ga over Marcus for that to happen. But I was the one changing my plans to suit him, sacrificing the last bit of cream for his coffee, letting him smoke in my apartment even though it made my eyes sting and my clothes stink. As a girlfriend, I was borderline Stepford.

And part of me thought Marcus could really make me happy. And I got to thinking, why was that? It’s not as if he had all the best boyfriend qualities. Yes, he drove me crazy in bed, and he’s got his mother’s Bolivian genes with his olive-colored skin and jet-black hair, beautiful hooded eyes, and perfect teeth, and he’s got an adorable butt. I even got used to other girls gaping at his sexy good looks. Okay, maybe that’s not entirely true, but it was me that he wanted, and for as long as he did, I felt special. It was like he defined me by his love and attention. That without him, I was anonymous, which I know is ridiculous, but still, as long as he had a hold on me, I felt validated and privileged as if I always had a back stage pass to the Dave Mathews Band in my pocket or something. Then poof. He let me go, and now I’m just hanging out, going nowhere, kind of like the pile of laundry in my closet.
I look at myself in the mirror and wonder what pushed him over the edge? Was it that little hair that I tweeze from my right nipple? Was it because I didn’t want to have sex during my period? Or perhaps because I surprised him with a chicken dance birthday gram at the garage where he works on muscle cars? Or maybe, just maybe, I might have mentioned that this is the year I turn twenty-six, and according to my five-year plan, I should be getting engaged. My plan to get married and have a child by the time I’m thirty is reasonable, I think: a year to meet a guy (check), a year to get engaged (obviously the deal breaker), a year of engagement, two years of marriage and a year to get pregnant. Didn’t Marcus know that I was fast approaching Advanced Maternal Age? Yep. I was losing thirty eggs a day, rain or shine, sex or no sex. Wasn’t this something to worry about?

Oh God! Maybe it’s time to get a grip, to leave my shriveling ovaries alone and to grab life by the cajones and yank. After all, thanks to medical advances and Snack Well's fat-free devil's food cookies, I could live until I’m eighty. That leaves plenty of time to get married. What’s the hurry? Tick-tock.

Tonight is New Year’s Eve, and I’m considering my prospects: I can go to a party with my best friends, Cooper and Olivia, dressed as a third wheel; or I can meet some of the girls from work at Club Elixir over at Faneuil Hall, or I can stay home and pumice the dead skin off the bottoms of my feet.

Normally, I wouldn’t mind hanging out with Cooper or Olivia. Apart, they’re both awesome. But since they’ve become a duo and since Marcus dumped me, I cringe at their public displays of affection. Like the other night, when we were at the Fleet Center, in the middle of the action: the puck in our possession, the Bruins with their first chance
to score against the Devils, the crowd going nuts, and I’m banging on the glass trying to harass the Devil’s goalie. I look over at the two of them sharing a pistachio ice cream cone, their two milky tongues coming together. I mean, come on. Where’s the sensitivity in this friendship? Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy they found each other. They’re my best friends and that’s why I love them, but they’re also a couple. I can’t help but loathe them at times. So lately, when they’re doing their couple thing, I think of them as I would a scratchy sweater: too close to have next to my skin.

I decide to take my chances with the New Year’s Eve party at Club Elixir. I agree to meet a group of girls who work with me at Charlestown Pediatrics at the bar, which is a big mistake, because I hate going to places alone, and I can’t find any of them at the bar or in the ladies’ room or on the dance floor. I try calling Candice, one of the other nurses, on my cell phone, but all I get is her voice mail. It’s only ten, and I figure maybe I’m just early. I’m relieved to find a seat at the bar on the far side of the dance floor; my size-eight feet throb inside Olivia’s size-seven-and-a-half strappy platform sandals. I order a Mai Tai from a bartender who looks strangely like my mother’s second husband. As I look around, I see that I’m over the top in my black sequin tube dress and in glaring competition only with the transvestite humping a column on the dance floor in his/her wet-look cat suit. The place is swamped with mostly jean-clad couples that look as if they just walked off the BU campus.

It doesn’t take long for the bartender to make my drink, and he goes to put it on the bar in front of me but draws the glass back when an Allman Brothers’ cover band, called Wee Went Wong, starts playing. The bartender sings, “Feel like a straaanger,” and I’m wanting my drink so I lean forward to reach for it, but instead of giving it to me, he
takes my hand in his, my drink held dangerously close to his shirt pocket in his other hand, and swings my arm to the music like we’re dancing, only there’s a slab of mahogany between us. He sings, “Gonna be a long long crazy crazy night.” And I’m thinking, God, not if I can help it.

I get a pity look from the girl sitting next to me who appears barely old enough to baby-sit. She nuzzles her nose into her boyfriend’s neck. When the bartender does give me my glass and drops my hand, I gulp down my Mai Tai, slide off the bar stool, and cross the dance floor feeling like a pinball bouncing off the hips of swaying couples. I’m one hip-check away from the exit sign, sickly excited about an evening with my neglected feet, when a guy wearing gray pleated slacks and a black ribbed sweater wraps his arm around my waist and twirls me back to the middle of the floor. He, too, knows the words of the song, and his goatee tickles my ear as he sings, “Silky silky craaazy crazy night.”

He tells me his name is Simon, he’s twenty-seven, and he teaches high school biology. He talks fast as if he’s running out of time, and likes to play with my hair, twirling the curls around his finger. He asks me if I keep my toothbrush near the toilet, and I’m thinking what kind of a stupid question is that? Then he enlightens me to the fact that fecal gases explode in the air every time we defecate (his word), depositing molecules all over the bathroom including the bristles of the toothbrush we put in our mouth every morning and every night. This is a really gross thought, and I need another Mai Tai to squash the visual of turd gases exploding in my bathroom. I don’t know whether I believe him or not, or why he thinks this is stimulating getting-to-know-you banter. Maybe he’s got some sick sense of humor or he’s trying to impress me with his
biology world. In any event, it bugs me enough to make a mental note to buy another toothbrush and keep it away from microscopic airborne poop.

If nothing else, Simon is entertaining on the dance floor. He’s got this strange shimmy bit going on, arms above his head, his whole body shaking in a sort of Ricky Martin hula-like fashion. He’s tall and thin, so he doesn’t look totally dorky. Occasionally, he dances with his thumbs out, crossing his legs to suggest that he may have to pee, or swinging his arm out in front of him as if he’s smacking someone’s huge behind. Other times he pulls me into him, then unfurls me like a yo-yo. I get caught up in his enthusiasm. He doesn’t care what people think and after two more Mai Tais, neither do I. At one point he gives me a tentative pelvic thrust, then cocks his index finger at me and asks, “Who’s your Daddy?”

“Pardon me?” I ask.

“I’m your Daddy,” he answers his own question and gives me a more earnest shove of his hips.

I laugh at his rawness yet know, too, that in the broad daylight of reality, I’d be too ashamed to introduce him to my friends. But here, under the cover of the thickness of New Year’s Eve, we flourish, clumping together like mushrooms on neglected neighborhood lawns. We become a couple of dancing fools. I even try a few hip-hop moves I learned from my exercise video. Simon moon-dances over to the bar to get me another drink.

When midnight rolls around, I’m thrilled to have someone to kiss.

We blow paper horns at each other; the uncurling of his party favor pokes me in the eye. Teary-eyed, I get sprinkled by a shower of confetti and look around at the
faceless couples huddled on the dance floor around me; the brimming of festive energy floats my heart so that I’m as buoyant as balloons tapped in the air. I push away an image of Marcus with a swat of a balloon that flies in my face. I try to pop another balloon under my bare foot and succeed only in squishing the round shape so that the balloon now looks like a banana. Maybe Marcus is alone this New Year’s Eve wishing he made plans with me, I think. Someone rattles a noisemaker in my ear. Simon pops the balloon under my foot with the heel of his loafer. Then he plants a cardboard top hat, with Happy New Year inscribed on the brim, onto my head. Silver glitter flakes from the brim onto my cheek, and Simon says I’m adorable.

He wants to take me home with him. Wee Went Wong is playing *I Need a Miracle*, and I take it as a sign.

I’m a little tipsy and giggle all the way to his car, barely bothered by the cold asphalt that numbs the soles of my bare feet. The rose Simon bought from the flower girl is clutched to my chest; my pantyhose lie in a wad in the ladies’ room trashcan. Olivia’s rock-my-world sandals are up for grabs under someone’s chair back at the Club. Fortunately, I’ve got on my raspberry wool coat only because I had the sober sense to give it to the coat check girl when I arrived at the Club. I jiggle the keys in my pocket.

For some reason I jabber about getting on the marriage highway as we head to his house in his SUV. The velvety petals I pluck from the rose fall around my feet.

We get to Simon’s house, which is someplace in Charlestown, and right away we’re kissing. Simon has cigar breath, and I figure I do too since my lips were puckered around his stogie on the way home. I start to feel a little woozy, and when the walls begin to dance better than I did all night, I ask Simon to show me the bed. No sooner are we
bare-assed between the sheets with his cigar-tasting tongue in my ear, then I think I hear
the rip of foil, so I’m hoping there’s a condom in bed with us. The ceiling is dipping into
the air space a few feet above me, and I close my eyes so I won’t see it come crashing
down. I know Simon’s talking to me but he sounds like a trombone riff, something like

The rest gets very blurry, but I think Simon forgets about foreplay.

In the morning, I wake up on my side in a sweat, his back tightly pressed against
mine. I scoot away from him, but he follows and closes the gap. I fan the covers back, but
I’m still hot. My hand goes to the small of his back to try and push him away, and I feel
his back, densely covered with coarse, thick hair. I jump from the bed and startle the
German Shepherd that lies in Simon’s space with drool in the corners of his mouth. The
long, pink tongue comes out at least a foot when he raises his head off the pillow and
yawns at me. The tail wags, and the dog rolls over, exposing the little pink thing between
his legs. Oh God! I don’t want to be seeing this. “Go,” I say, and he gets more excited
and slurps his little pink thing with his long pink tongue. Cripes! A masturbating doggie
show! I back up a few steps and clap my hands. “Shoo,” I tell him. He stands on the bed
and woofs. I run to the bedroom door. He follows. I open the door and say, “Go on!” He
goes through it, and I shut the door behind him. I don’t know where Simon is, but I’m
feeling so bad that I’m glad he’s not around. The whole scene gets me missing Marcus
even though I know he’s a shit for swapping saliva with that mangy macaroni-and-cheese
pup a couple of weeks ago. I figure, she’s probably really good at fetching his beer—and
obeying his commands to “roll over” and “beg” and do God only knows what other kinds
of tricks. Christ—I’m losing it. I push back mental porno clips of doggie-style sex scenes
between the two of them, and the effort is exhausting. The morning activity coupled with my hangover leaves me so dizzy I climb back to bed, close my eyes, and drift back to sleep.

I wake to the smell of burnt bacon and Simon standing over me asking how I want my eggs. I think about our brief but completed encounter last night, and I’m not at all sure now if our sex was protected.

“How about unfertilized,” I say and it’s not a question.

He smirks and tells me there’s an extra toothbrush in the bathroom drawer.

My eggs are scrambled, and I throw up on his carpet mostly because I hesitate when the first wave of nausea hits. Instead of running to the toilet, I’m thinking about getting vomit molecules on the bristles of his toothbrush. I’m really embarrassed, grab at some paper towels on the counter and offer to clean up my puke, but his dog gets to the mess before me, and licks it up with that long pink tongue. This just starts me heaving again.

I go out to get some fresh air with Simon’s boat-size slippers on my feet and don’t come back. I escape in a cab hailed two blocks from his house, leaving my black lace underwear lost among the tangle of his sheets.

The cab takes me to the Club to get my car. It’s a ten minute drive home to Harvard Square, which is not long enough for any warm air to crank out from the heater of my ‘93 Outback. Opening my apartment door, all I can think about is soaking in a hot tub. I see Olivia sprawled on my couch reading one of those self-help guru books. She has a set of my keys, so seeing her there is not surprising. She’s wearing a vintage frock and angora toe socks; her feet peek over the arm of the couch like a couple of puppets.
Her attention is focused on the bottom of an ice-cream container—she tips the pint up towards her face and for a second all I can see are eyebrows, wisps of chestnut brown hair, and a Ben & Jerry snout. I know it’s chocolate chip cookie dough because it was the last pint in my freezer. When she lifts her face from the container to look at me, I see an ice-cream band across her forehead.

“God, Lexie, where have you been?” she asks and removes her paisley-patch newsboy hat. Her new hairstyle has me distracted with its very short choppy layers and barely-there bangs that hang like carpet fringe on her forehead.

“Don’t ask,” I say. “It’s not a pretty picture.”

“And where are my shoes?” she asks, looking down at my newly acquired slippers. Her fuzzy toes are now planted on the carpet.

“Well, they might be in the lost and found at Club Elixir,” I tell her. “If they have a lost and found, but probably they’re part of that ‘not a pretty picture.’”

“You’re so irresponsible,” she says and shovels a heaping spoonful of Ben & Jerry into her mouth.

“Okay, this isn’t going anywhere good,” I say, dropping my jacket on the recliner as I head for the bathroom. I pass the answering machine, but the message light’s not flashing. So much for Marcus missing me.

“You should’ve come to the party,” she shouts after me. “There was an ice sculpture there, and we had lobster.”

“I’m allergic to shellfish,” I mumble and slip my dress over my head.

“Oh my God, Lexie! Where the hell’s your underwear?”
Simon’s dog is probably sporting my bikinis on one of his floppy ears. The thought makes me want to drown under a layer of chamomile bubble bath.

“Remember that ‘not a pretty picture?’” I say and close the bathroom door.
Chapter Two

I only have to swab the back of three-year old Victor’s throat and then I can leave to meet Cooper during my lunch break at the deli near Post Office Square.

I work at Charlestown Pediatrics. It’s a bustling medical clinic. Dr. Gregory, the lead pediatrician, commandeered me from the hospital where I worked as a charge nurse on the children’s unit. All the call-ins, weekend shifts, and twelve-hour rotations were burning holes in my mental health, so I took him up on his offer. That was a year-and-a-half ago. I love the kids (most of the time). The parents can be a bit unnerving, but then again, who knows what I’d be like if my own kid were sick? If I ever have a kid, that is.

When I enter the exam room, Victor is sitting on his mom’s lap in his underwear, looking like a little Buddha. Yellow snot is bubbling from his nose.

“Okay, Victor,” I say and approach with the swab in my hand. “I’m looking for Barney. Have you seen him?”

He torques his upper half so that he’s facing his mom; his face burrows into her chest. There’s a trail of mucus across her shirt. I lean over to pretend to look in his ear.

“Who’s down there? Is that you, Cookie Monster?”

Victor swings his head back around so that he’s looking at me; our eyeballs are inches apart. This sweet round-faced cherub with his flushed cheeks and glazed muddy eyes, red curls kinking all over his head, tugs at my shriveling ovulating ovaries.
“Where’s that Barney?” I sing to him; and he answers by walloping me right in the nose with a left hook I didn’t see coming.

My eyes tear, but my nose isn’t bleeding, and I’m thankful for that.

“Oh, Victor, that wasn’t nice,” his mother says. “He didn’t mean it.” I’m watching Victor peek at me from under his mother’s arm, and I’m thinking Gerber Baby Turns Ugly.

I put the swab down on the counter and remove the stethoscope from around my neck, rub the bell of the scope against my scrubs to warm it up, stick the ear pieces in my ears, and place the bell between his chubby little pecs.

“Big Bird, is that you I hear?” I ask. Victor shakes his head and coughs. I hear the expiratory wheeze in his lungs.

I grab the swab from the counter and take a tongue depressor from one of the apothecary jars. “Victor, can you open your mouth for me?” I ask. “Can you stick out your tongue and go ahhhh?” I hold his chin to steady him, and I’m ready to swab and split, but Victor’s having none of it; his teeth are clenched and he’s moving about on his mother’s lap like a bowl of Jell-O.

“How about you put Victor on the exam table so I can swab his throat,” I say to Mom, who looks at me and my swab in horror as if I’m going to perform a tonsillectomy on her son.

“Okay, I will,” she says and lays Victor on the table. “But I can’t watch this. I have to leave.” Victor screams bloody hell as she leaves the room, and I catch him just in time by his meaty thigh as he tries to leap from the table.
“Victor,” I say and take him in my arms. I sing in his ear, rock, and shush him around the room. “I’ve got a lunch date so be a good boy,” I sing some more, only this time to the tune of “Happy Birthday to You.” I pace back and forth in the small room, jiggling Victor in my arms, singing, “Hush, Victor.” He lays his head on my shoulder; his skin is warm and moist. His whole body shudders with his sobs. I rock him some more until he quiets down. With my palm against his back I can feel the resonant movement of air in his lungs. Victor falls asleep. I walk over to the table, gently lie him down, and watch him sleep for a few moments, then brush some of the wet curls off his forehead. I still have the swab in my hand. Victor’s mouth is relaxed, his lips parted. I pull the lower part of his jaw forward, which causes his mouth to open wide enough for me to hold down his tongue with the depressor and slip the applicator to the back of his mouth to swab at the patchy red tonsils.

Victor gags and coughs in his sleep.

My cell phone rings, and I grab it from my pocket after the first ring. Victor stirs, but doesn’t wake.

“We’re still having lunch, right?” Cooper asks.

It’s thirty-two degrees outside with a wind-chill factor that makes it seem like twenty-two. The thought of putting on layers of clothing and hauling my butt for a two-block walk from the clinic to the deli is only manageable because of the Reuben sandwich I’ve been romancing in my head for the past half-hour and the fact that Cooper always has some keen perspective on my love life (or reasons for the lack thereof).

“Definitely. Are you at the deli already?” I ask him.

“Are you going to make me wait?” he asks.
“Only until you’re thirty,” I say. It’s an adolescent joke between us, a pledge we made to marry each other if neither of us met “the one” by the time we hit thirty. We don’t take this seriously, but it makes me feel psychologically better knowing I have a pseudo back-up to my five-year plan.

Cooper, or Coop as I sometimes call him, has been a constant in my life since I was seven when he and his overweight whiskey-guzzling maniac of a father moved in next door. On summer nights, when the windows were open, I could hear his dad’s voice above our TV show howling at some stupid sitcom or sometimes cursing the day Cooper was born to his two-bit floozy mother who left with the butcher and a freezer full of sirloin steaks. My parents used to let Cooper stay over some nights, and he’d sleep in the twin bed in my room until he was eleven. That was the year Coop stomped Sammy Caruthers for snapping my training bra and the year Cooper and I did a bit of groping to critically distinguish what was between my legs and what was between his. It was also the year his dad, the county dogcatcher, chased a Dachshund down the street and dropped dead of a heart attack. Cooper moved in with an aunt on the other side of town after that, but we stayed friends all these years, even when I went away to nursing school and when he got a job as a zookeeper at the Franklin Park Zoo. He and Olivia hooked up at a costume party last Halloween. Cooper dressed as a Padre and Olivia as an elf in green satin and gold-covered balls. Marcus went as a Roman gladiator, and I was this hippie Go-Go girl thinking I looked pretty good in my vinyl fringe halter and bell bottom pants until I caught my Roman warrior making a pass at Chiquita Banana.

“Hey, I’m on my way,” I tell him. “Order me a Reuben, will you?”

“Yeah, I know. And go easy on the sauerkraut,” he says and hangs up.
Victor’s mom comes back in as I’m wiping Victor’s profusely running nose with a tissue.

“Did you do it?” she asks.

I nod, swab my stethoscope with an alcohol pad, and fling it around my neck.

She goes over to Victor. “Let’s get you dressed, my little sweetheart,” she says to him and carries him off to the chair where his clothes are. Victor’s still groggy, so there’s no fussing, but I see him watching my every move.

Tossing the tissue in the trashcan, I let Victor know that Barney’s nowhere to be found. I wash my hands, place the swab in the plastic tube, write Victor Kettle on the outside of the sleeve, and date the specimen. “Dr. Gregory said I could find Barney in here with you, Victor. Guess he was wrong.”

His mom begins to dress Victor on her lap. She puts on his T-shirt and turtleneck sweater. She puts on his socks, then his corduroy pants. She slides Victor off her lap so that his feet are on the floor and tells him to pull his pants up and over his underwear like a big boy. Victor grabs the elastic waist snug around his knees and tugs at his pants.

“Bye-bye, Victor.” I wave at him. “Feel better,” I say as I go to leave the room.

“Barney!” Victor points to his crotch, then looks up at me. “Barney’s here.” His chubby little finger points to the purple dinosaur pattern on his underpants.

“Well, there he is,” I say and close the door.

On the way to the deli, my stomach growls like Chewbacca of Star Wars. When I get there, I see that Cooper’s sitting at one of the back tables wearing his signature Bruins’ cap backwards on his head, which is the only thing that helps to manage his shaggy dirty blonde hair. Because he’s not working today, he’s wearing khaki cargo
pants and one of his funky endangered species shirts; this one has a loggerhead sea turtle on it. He takes a bite of the loaded half of a sandwich he has in his hand. There’s mustard in the corner of his mouth and sauerkraut juice drips down his wrist and forearm.

“Good thing you got here when you did,” he says with his mouth full. “Your Reuben was calling me.”

“Yeah? What was it calling you?” I toss him the napkin that lies on top of my sandwich. “El Slobo?” I take off my coat and lay it on the seat next to me, then plop on the chair across from Cooper. “God! What a morning. I’m starved.”

I let Cooper tell me about the zoo while I eat my lunch. He tells me about Little Joe, his adolescent gorilla, that escaped from the tropical forest exhibit, crossed the twelve-foot wide, twelve-foot deep moat, roamed through the other exhibits drinking cans of orange soda he found in the trash. Cooper says he had to lure Little three-hundred-pound Joe into the men’s room with some kid’s French fries to get him isolated before the docs put him down him with a tranquilizer gun.

“Do you know what it’s like to lift three-hundred pounds of hairy beast?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Speaking of primates, what’s new with your love life?” he asks me.

“Zip. Zero. Nada,” I say forming a big goose egg with my thumb and index finger. “There are no available men my age in Boston—the mayor swept them all away with his ‘Neighborhood Clean Up’ campaign.”

“Oh come on,” he says. “I hear you were minus one piece of intimate apparel when you came home New Year’s Day. What’s up with that?”
“Let’s just say that I woke up next to my own hairy beast,” I say. “My underwear being the least of my problems.”

Cooper gestures for me to continue.

“It’s not the kind of story I want to relive in the telling,” I say and am thankful when the gum-smacking forty-something waitress, sporting a name tag that says “Dot,” comes over to the table.

Cooper orders coffee from her and she says, “Sure thing, Hon.”

We come here a lot, and everything she says to Coop is followed by “Hon.” *What can I get for you today, Hon? You want some ice cream with that apple pie, Hon? Can I scratch your balls for you, Hon?* I wouldn’t make a big deal about it if it weren’t for the fact that she doesn’t call me “Hon.” No, I’m “Girlie.” *You sure you want whipped cream on your sundae, Girlie?*

“Hey, listen,” I say to Cooper, changing the subject. “The chain-thingy-that-connects-the-flusher-to-the-floppy-round-whatchama-call-it broke in my toilet tank this morning. What do I do about that?”

“Call your whoozawhatzit,” he says, winking.

“You mean my landlord? Oh God. He’s such a slime ball. Last time my AC broke down, he came over to fix it while I was at work, and I swear he was in my underwear drawer. He gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“Then go over to Home Depot and replace the chain. If you can wait until the weekend, I’ll fix it for you. Oh wait. I forgot. I’m helping Olivia’s brother move.”

“Pee Wee’s moving in with you guys this weekend?” I ask.

Cooper nods. “Guess I’ll be doing my laundry by hand for a while.”

“Anyway, Olivia’s got a bunch of job applications for him to fill out,” he says.

“As soon as he’s employed, he’s outta there.”

Olivia’s brother is such a dweeb. The first time I met him was on a blind date. Well, a quasi blind date. I’d seen a photo of him in Olivia’s wallet, but it was a distance shot of him waving from a ski lift, his skis dangling in the air, a wool hat covering his hair, goggles on his eyes. He’s a year older than Olivia and when she asked if I’d go out with him this one night he was in town, I figured why the hell not? But when I opened my apartment door and saw him standing there in his light gray suit, pants zipped and buckled two inches above his navel, hair plastered into a sharp peak, I thought his looking like Pee Wee Herman was the punch line to a very bad joke. He even had that same loony laugh too. There was one point when he started jerking his head as if he was going to have a seizure, but instead, he exploded with a sneeze that showered me, and I thought the floor beneath my feet had trembled a bit. Allergies, he had said, and rubbed his palms together smiling at me like we were both in the same universe. I didn’t care to see any more body fluids that night, and best friend or not, I wasn’t going out with Olivia’s brother, so I struck a pose in the kitchen (back of my hand across my forehead, head down, eyes closed). I knew it was a stagy and dramatic gesture, but I said I thought I had a cerebral aneurysm about to blow.

“You’ve got an aneurysm?” he said, backing away a few steps.

“Or maybe a brain tumor,” I said for extra measure because, as lonely as I was, I knew I couldn’t do this Pee Wee Big Adventure bit.
Thinking about Pee Wee has left me without an appetite. I push away my lunch plate, and Cooper dips one of my cold French fries in ketchup, then pops it in his mouth.

“The guys at Home Depot will help you with your toilet problem,” he says. “Or just leave it, and I’ll send Pee Wee over to help you out.”

“Never mind. I’m not totally helpless without a man.”

“Nope. You’re not totally happy without one either.”

“And your point is?”

The waitress cracks her gum as she puts our coffee cups on the table and raises a penciled eyebrow at me. Her torch-red lipstick feathers into the fine lines around her lips.

“Got enough cream, Hon?” she asks.

Cooper tells Dot everything’s cool, and I sit there, apparently invisible, until Dot goes away.

“Lexie,” Cooper says as he blows on his coffee. “For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been filling in the voids of your life with guys. You’re so mixed up when it comes to men that you don’t even know what you want.”

“I want a man who knows how to treat a woman right,” I say.

“You want a rich man,” he answers.

“I want a man who is sensitive,” I respond.

“You want a Boy Scout,” he says.

“No, I don’t. I want a man who has a good sense of humor and is emotionally stable,” I say. “And is intelligent, but not so smart that I have to walk around with a pocket dictionary, and I want . . .”
“You’re so full of crap, Lexie,” he says, and sips his coffee. “Take Marcus, for example. The guy’s into hockey some, so I’ll give him a point for that. And maybe I’d hang out with him if I were interested in quantum mechanics or shoving tips in stripper’s G-strings. Wait a minute. Scratch that. Let’s say if I were interested in quantum mechanics and bench pressing two seventy-five. But here’s a guy who’s more interested in destroying your self-esteem and fucking other girls than he is in you.”

“Come on, Coop,” I say.

“No. It’s true, Lexie, and you know it,” Cooper says. “Marcus believes in wine, women, and so-long Lexie.” Cooper waves his hand for emphasis. “The only difference between him and a bottom-sucking catfish is that one of them is a fish.”

The waitress is back and refills Cooper’s cup with hot coffee. Anything else, Hon? she wants to know. I’m still stuck on the “bottom-sucking catfish” remark, and how come Dot’s left me with an empty cup?

“The guy’s a creep,” Cooper says.

“But he’s such a sexy creep.”

Cooper gives me a condescending look. I pour some of his coffee into my cup.

“Look,” I say, drops of coffee puddling on the table. “Marcus is gone from my life, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Dot’s back to clear dishes from our table. She gives me a Girlie-you’re-a-mess look as she wipes my spills with a rag that’s seen better days. I want to tell her, as she walks away, that I’m bringing a swab with me next time to culture these tabletops. Instead, I tell Cooper that he’s not being very nice.
“Nice?” he says and pushes away his cup. “For the past year, I’ve sat here and listened while you’ve complained to me about how your boyfriend’s really not a prick even though he’s cheated on you. And I’ve heard all the excuses, you know, like he’s really nice when it’s just the two of you. But when Marcus is not emotionally available—” Cooper uses air quotes “—then, you want to talk to me about your miserable life until the guy’s looking for a good fuck, then bam!” Cooper skims one palm against his other.

“It’s adios, amigo.”

I fan my face because the tears are welling up, and I don’t want to cry. It’s just that Cooper’s not usually . . . I don’t know . . . so punch-me-in-the-gut personal.

“And don’t forget how he left you,” he says, obviously going for a KO in the first round. “What was it? Five words or less on a post-it-note?”

“Wow,” I say, sniveling like an idiot. “Are you done?”

Cooper gets up and sits in the chair next to me; his arm drapes over my shoulder. He covers my nose with the handkerchief he pulls from his back pocket.

“Blow,” he says, and I do sounding like one of those horns kids toot on their tricycles.

“Lexie,” he says. “Someone has to take care of your heart.”

“And you’re the Boy Scout for the job?” I ask.

“No. Not a Boy Scout. I quit when they wouldn’t let me eat a Brownie,” he says. I think about what Cooper said and wonder if he’s right about me.

“Come on,” he says. “I’ll give you a ride back to work.”

Am I attracted to the wrong kind of guy? I ask myself. I mean, why wouldn’t I want a man who treats me with respect?
“What’s Wal-Mart and a Boy Scout troop leader have in common?” he asks as we get in his ’68 navy Beetle convertible.

“God only knows,” I say.

“Boy’s underwear half-off,” he says as we drive out of the lot.

Coop’s so crazy. How come I’m not attracted to guys like him? I wonder and paddle the rolling water bottles on his floor mat with the bottom of my feet. Olivia’s my best friend. How come she’s nuts about him? Not that I’d be interested in Cooper. He’s like the brother I never had. It’s just the principle. And how come Cooper’s wild about Olivia? What’s she got that I don’t have? Except bigger boobs maybe, and oh yeah, bigger hips.

Later, after work, I drive on over to Home Depot. I’m determined to fix this broken toilet chain thingy without a man, but when the guy wearing an orange apron with kangaroo pockets, and a badge that says “Duncan” keeps smiling at me, flashing the dimples in his cheeks, telling me that I also need to buy a new flush lever which attaches to the flapper seal and a float valve which attaches to a shutoff valve, I am willing to concede that he’s the handyman for the job. He gives me a package that includes the whole toilet tank works and offers to install it for me. The path of least resistance is to say yes, install it; I haven’t a clue what to do with “the works,” but then I remember that there’s a deposit floating in my toilet bowl at home that won’t flush down because of the broken flapper seal thingamajig. I’m too embarrassed for Duncan to see evidence that I poop like the rest of the human race so I say no thanks and take the works home with me instead of the dimpled Home-Depot Duncan.

“Hey, come back and see me,” Duncan says.
And is he winking at me? Yes. I think so. No wait. He’s rubbing his eye. Probably just some saw dust in the air. Okay. I’m going to walk away now. I wonder if he’s watching me. Don’t turn around. Well, maybe just one peek. When I get to the end of the aisle, I’ll turn my head just a tad in his direction, like this. Shit. Where’d he go? I back up to the previous aisle and there he is. I’ll just hide behind this Black and Decker display so I can watch him helping a guy with something. What is that? Drill bits maybe. Oh God! He sees me. Now he knows I’m looking for him. Wait. He’s waving. I wave back. Already I’m thinking that I could use some treatment for my plant fungus and, let’s see, a ceiling fan would be nice. Hmmm. I wonder if he knows how to mount it? The fan, that is.
Chapter Three

Nothing can spoil my good mood, not even Olivia categorizing clothes in my
closet while I lounge on my bed, daydreaming about Home-Depot Duncan—his dimples,
his brilliant smile, his potential as a candidate in my five-year plan.

Olivia mumbles from my closet. She’s on a mission to find the right outfit for me
to wear on my next trip to Home Depot. Personally, I think the girl’s been watching too
many episodes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

“What’s with the wire hanger?” Olivia says. She holds my tangerine pullover in
her hand, the wire hanger still tucked inside the neck.

“Who are you, Mommy Dearest?”

“What?”

“You know, Joan Crawford? Wire hangers? *Mommy Dearest*?”

She takes the shirt from the hanger.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but look at this.”

I’m looking at my shirt, but I’m thinking, *No more wire hangers!!!!*

“You’ve got little puckered tents on the shoulders of your shirt from the wire
hanger,” she says.

Yep. There they are. Little pup tents, perky as can be on my polyester/spandex
top. I want to tell Olivia not to panic, that I’ve lived this long with teepees on my clothes,
but she’s disappeared again into the depths of my closet, and it doesn’t seem worth the
effort.

“I watched it as a kid,” I call out from my bed. “Joan Crawford flips out when she goes through her little girl’s closet at three in the morning and finds all these pretty little party dresses hanging from wire hangers.”

“Frumpy,” she says, reappearing from the closet. She tosses my cardigan on the bed. “I mean, this sweater’s okay if you’re a librarian.”

“Joan whips her daughter with the wire hanger,” I say.

Olivia grabs a pair of black pumps from the floor. “Did you inherit these sensible shoes from your mother?”

I look over at her blue paisley knee-length skirt, her tight emerald green T-shirt that says *Kiss Me I’m Irish* (she’s Italian) across the chest, her black leather up-the-calf “fuck-me” boots, her large silver onyx ring, and those dangling turquoise earrings she got from a Navajo medicine man in Arizona.

“And who made *you* the fashion police?” I ask.

Olivia rolls her eyes, then continues rummaging through my closet.


“Hey,” I say. “I happen to know that denim will never die!”

Her index finger hooks the loop of my jean overalls. “Tell me you got these free with the zucchini you bought at a farm stand.”

In the spectrum of apparel, Olivia and I are runways apart. No, scratch that. Neither of us are runway material. Olivia’s hippie/bohemian style is found on the racks of Salvation Army stores and thrift shops. My wardrobe is mostly knock-around stuff. You
know, oversized T-shirts, sweat suits, jeans. Baggy, comfy clothes that don’t cut off your circulation or make you suck in your gut or expose those speed bumps on your body. And you don’t have to wear a bra with baggy clothes! Bra straps dig into my shoulders—and don’t get me started on the underwire. Just how is a curved piece of metal digging into my ribs supposed to provide support to my breasts? I mean, isn’t the whole engineering of breast restraints barbaric? It reminds me of something they used to subdue Jack Nicholson in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. And the last time I was in Victoria Secret, I asked one of the saleswomen if she could help me find a 32B without an underwire. That got her laughing. All our bras that size have underwire, she said while checking out my chest. Imagine. Someone should’ve fired her ass.

When I first started complaining about the whole bra-wearing thing, Cooper had said if I wanted to go braless, he’d agree to scamper behind me free of charge, giving me what little support my boobs needed, and as a bonus, he’d press them together to simulate a Wonder Bra effect for maximum perkiness. Later, after he copped a handful of Olivia’s ampleness, he said to me: I don’t know why you wear a bra; you’ve got nothing to put in it. To which I replied, well, you wear pants, don’t you?

And what’s up with pantyhose? They’re either too small and I can’t get them up past my knees, in which case, they end up snapping my legs together like a rubber band, or they’re so big that they bag around my ankles and knees and make me look like a rhino! Yep, if I could wear the scrubs that I wear at work every day of the calendar year, I’d be a happy camper. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not totally without style. Occasionally, I’ll shop for something for a special night or occasion, but lately, the void in my special events’ calendar keeps me bedecked in my comfy clothes.
“You need a major overhaul,” Olivia says. She’s biting the red nail polish off her pinky. A chip of the polish is stuck on her upper lip. “Don’t despair, Lexie. I can help.”

Olivia’s not the first person I’d go to for fashion help. She thinks quirky is sexy like an overbite. But she’s my most reliable female friend—a guardian angel with tie-dyed wings.

We met for the first time in traffic class two years ago. She wore crystal chandelier earrings that caught the light when she turned just so. She kept blinding the instructor who finally told her to nix the shoulder dusters so he could finish the class without having to squint from the glare. When she showed up at the hospital a month later as the unit clerk temp for the children’s unit, I just about gagged on my 7-11 Big Gulp. She got hired on full time, and we started lingering in the lobby or parking lot after work, talking about movies and books and guys and occasionally some interesting bit of current events like the cloning of baby Eve and Dolly the Sheep, and Bush going to town about the immorality of it all. Then we joined the same kickboxing class at the gym, grabbed some venti nonfat latte at Starbucks, started meeting for a couple of beers at Grendel’s Den. Olivia left the hospital when I did and got a job as a receptionist at a mortuary. And the rest, as they say, is history. Cooper jokes that we compliment one another: self-destructive Ally McBeal type minus the celery-thin figure meets punky Cyndi Lauper type minus the orange hair and fake eyelashes. Of course, I disagree. I’m hardly self-destructive, but I might add that Olivia’s highlights are kind of traffic-cone orange.

“We’ve got a week to get it together,” she says. The speck of polish, now on her cheek, looks like a zit.
“A week?” I ask.

“Yes. You do know that you should wait a week before you go back to Home Depot?”

“Because?”

“Lexie,” she says like my third grade teacher. “So that a sense of mystery surrounds you.” The bracelets on her wrist chime when she draws a huge circle in the air and says, “mystery.”

I just stare at her.

“This way,” she explains. “In your absence, Duncan—and by the way, who names their kid after donuts?—will be driven crazy waiting for you to return to the store. He’ll be so pent up with anticipation that when he does see you, in something other than your hillbilly costume, he’ll jump at the chance of asking you out on a date.”

I have to admit, I like the idea of Duncan getting all pent up. I imagine him hot and sweaty, yanking on the starter of a chainsaw, chest hair coiling out from the top of his shirt. When he sees me, he puts down the power tool and takes me between the hanging oriental rugs. I bury my hands in the kangaroo pockets of his apron, his lips touch mine, his breath is hot against my cheek, and the thunderous vibration of a space launch shudders in my you-know-where.

Come to think of it, maybe a week is pushing it. I mean, what if he forgets me all together? God. How embarrassing is that? I walk back into the store a week from now, and he . . . what? Thinks I’m just another Home-Depot shopper looking for a flashlight and some WD-40? Worse, what if he does remember me and all he wants to know is how’s my toilet flushing? Maybe I’ve read way too much into this. But he did ask me to
come back and see him. Did he mean come back and see him? Or is that something Home-Depot employees say to all their customers? You know, like at Blockbuster, they have to say hello when you walk in the door. It’s a customer relation thing. Well, maybe that’s what they’ve got going on at Home Depot. Ask your customers to come back and see you. It’s helpful. It’s friendly. It’s driving me nuts. Still, he did seem interested. Maybe I shouldn’t wait a whole week. Three days seems more reasonable. Unless my ficus plant drops ten more leaves. Then I’ll need to get some herbicide or something. Okay. Maybe five leaves. So my ficus has a fighting chance. It’s settled then. Three days or five leaves. Whichever comes first.

“I have to say,” Olivia flops on the bed next to me. “It’s nice not having you mope about Marcus.”

My stomach drops like a guillotine.

“Damn, Olivia,” I say. “I haven’t thought of him all day.”

“Well, don’t start now,” she says.

“Oh sure. That’s like saying don’t think about an elephant. The more I try not to think about an elephant, the more Dumbo prances around in my head.”

“So better to think of Dumbo than *Dumbo* if you get my drift,” she says. “Or better yet, think about this Duncan guy.”

I see an orange apron, nice teeth, and dimples when I think about Duncan. Oh and big hands. I remember them when he was holding the toilet flushing kit. And a hairy chest. Wait. I didn’t see his hairy chest. Now Marcus has a hairy chest. And a sexy hairy chest it is. I used to lay my head against it and comb my fingers through his chest hair. And he’d put his arm around me, and his muscles would start to twitch like he was
getting little electric shocks as he was drifting off to sleep. First his shoulder, then his
hand, his thigh and foot, and then his shoulder again. My head would bob a little on his
chest with all this twitching going on, but I wouldn’t move for the longest while because
I liked listening to his heartbeat and having his arm around me thinking that he and I
were the perfect couple nestled together in bed; he sleeping soundly and me snuggling
away. And . . .

Olivia smacks me out of my daydream. “Are you thinking of Marcus? You are.
Aren’t you? I could tell from that stupid smirk on your face. Quite frankly, Lexie, I worry
about your ability to move on. Cosmo says women who get dumped have a high rate of
return.”

Oops. Too late. I’ve already done the return. Now I’m a Cosmo statistic. My
going to see Marcus at his duplex after he dumped me is a little secret I’ve managed to
keep from Olivia. She wouldn’t understand. Thinks Marcus is . . . how’d she put it? A
monkey swinging from vine to vine.

“How,” she says. “Do I have to remind you how you-know-who cheated on you
three times in a year? Not once, not twice, but . . .”

“You’re not helping me!” I say and prop pillows against my headboard so I can
sit up. A heap of clothes lies at the foot of my bed. Clothes I was perfectly content to
wear when Marcus was around, I might add. The same frumpy, K-mart-looking stuff I
wore when we went to the movies or to Emack and Bolios for cheesecake and Espresso
or to the zoo to watch Cooper feed the giraffes. Marcus never complained. Then again,
I’m not with Marcus anymore.

Olivia puts her hand on my knee.
“You’re just stressed,” she says. “And stress is not a body’s best friend, you know. It causes wrinkles, rashes, and hair loss. And I didn’t want to call this to your attention, but your eyes are getting puffy.”

I’m about to ask her if she’s looked in the mirror lately—because she could hula-hoop with Saturn’s rings with those hips.


I’m not really into this. So I offer a half-hearted, “How about kill ‘em all, let God sort ‘em out?”

“No. I’ve got it. ‘Out with the old and in with the new.’ Come on. Get in the spirit. Stand up. We’re going to breathe.”

I groan when she yanks on my hand and drags me to my feet. She stands across from me, closes her eyes, her feet slightly apart, toes pointed out, arms out at her sides. If she does a plié, I’m going to laugh.

“Squeeze your butt,” she says. “Engage your inner thighs. Stretch your torso and back, open the diaphragm, and inhale through your nose.”

Her size C boobs inflate to triple D’s. She opens one eye and looks at me.

“You’re not breathing,” she says, without breathing. She speaks like someone who doesn’t want to waste a good toke of pot.

I breathe. My size B minus boobies remain B minus boobies.
“Now release all those trapped toxins,” she says. Her words rush on the trail of her expired breath. “How do you feel?” she asks.

“Hungry,” I say. “Let’s order a pizza.”

After three slices of Papa Gino’s Super Supreme and two cheesesticks with Ranch dipping sauce, I’m ready for a nap. I didn’t need to go to nursing school to know that there’s way too many carbs in pizza, and carbs make me sleepy. Olivia didn’t stay for pizza. Cooper stopped by earlier to invite us for some sushi at Kotobukiya’s. Olivia couldn’t understand why I still wanted pizza over sushi. Let’s see: sea urchin, octopus, sweet shrimp served with sticky rice and anaphylactic shock versus pepperoni, extra cheese, pools of olive oil, chewy mozzarella-stuffed crust and dancing taste buds. Hmmm. And the winner is?

But now I regret eating like a porker. And I think I’m getting my period. My self-pity feasting and my menstrual bloat have me feeling so fat that I’m thankful for the elastic band on my sweat pants. It’s only nine o’clock. If I go to bed now, I’ll be up at two in the morning, and then I’ll be dragging my ass around all day at work.

I sit on the couch and flip though the channels on TV. West Wing—rerun, Jerry Springer—slime of the earth. A nature show with a snake swallowing a frog—no, thank you, The 700 Club—God help me. Nothing’s on. I turn the TV off.

Ice cream.

Oh my God. Where did that come from? It just popped in my head. What am I crazy? I don’t need ice cream. I just ate enough to keep my blood sugar from crashing for the rest of January. I think my body’s feeling deprived. No love. No extracurricular
activities. No sex. It just craves something sweet. Call it replacement therapy. What I should have is an apple, but ugh, who wants an apple? A little taste of ice cream would be nice. One small spoonful or maybe a teeny-weeny scoop. I feel the need for some oral gratification. Some love substitution. Some comfort food. I’m just trying to stay in touch with my body. Nobody else will.

I don’t even have ice cream in my freezer. I look in my pantry and find peanut butter, Instant Breakfast, tomato soup. Popcorn! With melted butter and extra salt! Nah. I don’t want crunch. I want ice cream. Damn. I’ll do something to take my mind off it. I’ll call someone. Olivia. Voice mail. Double damn. I’ll try Cooper. The wireless customer you are calling is not answering his phone. Maybe Mom? Five rings, six rings, seven rings. Where is everybody? Ice Cream is playing in my head to the tune of the Halleluiah Chorus: Ice Cream Ice Cream. IceCreamIceCream. Forget it! I won’t give in. I’ll do this crossword puzzle. Let’s see. Catch phrase for Red Skelton’s Mean Widdle Kid character. Who’s Red Skelton? Okay. Move on. 3-across. Five letters. For the birds. SEED. No, that’s four. For the birds. For the birds. What’s for the birds? Cages for the birds. This puzzle’s for the birds. Wait. CAGES! There we go. Now I’m on a roll. 15-across. Nine letters. Counting exercise in la Scuola. That’s Italian, I think, and Italian makes me think of Spumanti, which makes me think of—Ice Cream. Oh hell. So what if I indulge myself once in a while? I deserve it. Isn’t chocolate what you crave when you need love? I’m just being kind to my body. That’s it. I’m lacking love so I need chocolate. Goo Goo Cluster chocolate and marshmallow melt with chocolate almonds and hot caramel. Oh God, I think I feel an orgasm coming on. I’ll just drive on over to Toscanini’s, run in, and
get my Goo Goo Cluster to go. Then I’ll eat it when I get back home. Sounds like a plan. See. I like not fighting with myself.

There’s still some snow on the sidewalks so I put on another pair of wool socks, yank on my rubber galoshes (I can’t afford Timberlands), and I’m out the door with my hooded parka, thinking I’m certified to be going for ice cream when there’s snow on the ground.

Actually, it’s a pretty nice night. Sure it’s cold, but there’s no wind and it’s clear. I can see the Big Dipper in the sky right above me. Or is that it over there on my left? I can never figure out these constellations. They keep moving around in the sky. Marcus used to point them out to me last summer when we sat in his Jeep with the top down looking up at all the stars. I think he said the dipper of the Little Dipper faces the tail of the Big Dipper. Or maybe it was the other way around? Oh well, so much for trying to figure out the stars, the constellations, and Marcus for that matter.

No one’s at Toscanini’s, except an old man at the counter drinking coffee. I order my Goo Goo to go and use the restroom while the kid with a hairnet over his ponytail reaches into a big cardboard tub for a mongo scoop of ice cream. When I catch a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror, I shudder. My hair is going every which way, my skin is ghostly pale and my lips are cyanotic, and yes, Olivia’s right. My eyelids are puffy! I have to start taking better care of myself. Tomorrow.

I head on home with my ice cream beside me and pass Marcus’ duplex. I decide to swing by his building to see if his Jeep is there. I don’t know why. It’s like there’s still some magnetic force that pulls me to him. I don’t see his Jeep, so I circle around the building one more time and park in the space closest to his second-floor window. The
heater is working tonight, so I’m toasty enough to take off my mittens and eat my ice
cream listening to my Dido CD, wondering if any kids play in the tree house in the old
oak tree that looms in the yard twenty feet or so from the building of Marcus’ duplex.

A light goes on in his apartment. I’m in the slot near the dumpster, which faces
the duplex yard and the side of the building, so I have to get out of my car to see if his
Jeep is in the lot out in front. I still don’t see it, so now I wonder if the light I’m seeing
was on all this time and it didn’t register when I first looked up at his window. I’ve got to
pee, and I feel a little ooze of what’s likely my period wet my underwear. I really should
get back in the car and drive home. I can’t help but wonder, since I’m here and all, if he’s
home. And if he is, what he’s doing? Is he up there with someone? Not that it’s any of my
business anymore.

I walk over to the tree; the frozen snow crunches beneath my rubber boots. There
are several planks of wood nailed against the tree and a piece of plywood anchored to two
of the tree’s limbs. I see a platform in the tree a few feet lower than Marcus’ balcony. The
window facing the yard is in his bedroom, and the living room’s sliding glass door that
leads to the balcony is void of any drapes or blinds. It should be fairly easy to take a
peek. I mean, what’s the harm?

My mittens are still in the car where I should be, so I blow my breath into both
palms of my cold hands. I make a deal with myself to go ahead and climb up the ladder
and onto the plywood, and if I don’t see anything in Marcus’ window, to leave, drive
home, take a shower, and go to bed.

The width of the tree’s makeshift ladder is meant for little kids’ feet, so I have to
turn my boots sideways to grab the edge. I get up the ladder okay, but have to flat foot
across one of the branches to get to the platform several feet from the trunk. Fortunately, the limb is thick in diameter, so I know it’ll hold my weight. I slide my hands along a branch right above my head so I don’t lose my balance, fall from the tree, break my neck and read the headlines tomorrow in the *Boston Globe*: WOMAN FALLS FROM CHILDREN’S TREE HOUSE WHILE SPYING ON EX-BOYFRIEND.

The sheet of plywood is a bit warped and wobbles some when I step onto it. The fort’s smaller than it looked from the ground. I sit on the wood because I feel safer with my butt connecting with something hard. Something of my choosing, that is. My ass is cold, and my underwear’s sticking to my crotch. All I can see is Marcus’ balcony and the lower third of his window. I need to get higher. And closer. The limb I held onto on my way to the platform extends beyond the other branches. I stand, throw my left leg over the branch, and hike myself up and over so that now I’m kissing the bark of the tree and hugging the branch between my legs for dear life. Once I get used to this new space, I raise my head and shimmy out a few feet. I’m about to take another look when *Für Elise* rings from my phone in the pocket of my parka, scaring the hell out of me. I can feel my heart racing, and it makes me a bit dizzy, but I focus enough to reach into my pocket for my phone.

“Hello,” I whisper as if I’m sitting in a movie theater, not in a tree, on a limb, thirty feet from the ground, outside of Marcus’ duplex.

“Hi Lexie.”

“Oh, Mom. Hi. Um. Can’t really talk right now. I’ll call you back, okay?”


She talks slowly and sing-songs the Ernie and I bit.
“We were out walking. It’s seventy degrees here. A perfectly lovely evening in January.”

She laughs, and I know that Ernie is there, listening.

“Your number came up on our caller ID.”

Ernie’s my mother’s third husband. They live in Tampa. She met number three on a Club Med cruise to the Bahamas. He has a moustache and a son who’s in jail for trying to import Ecstasy pills into the United States. I don’t like Ernie very much. He hovers like a helicopter. But who am I to judge? I didn’t like husband number two either.

“I’m kind of busy right now, Mom,” I say, and duck when I hear a noise above me. There’s a squirrel climbing the trunk of the treetop. Two squirrels. They scurry across the limbs and leap from branch to branch. Show off, I think. The upper branches, not as thick in diameter as mine, quiver. Something falls on my head, and I let out a little shriek. Both hands go to my head to brush whatever it is out of my hair. My phone falls to the ground. I find nothing alive in my hair and figure some twigs must’ve broken off and fallen with the sway of the branches above. When I get my wits about me again, I realize that my only point of contact with the tree is my crotch and inner thighs. My hands grab at the sides of the limb again. I look around. All is quiet. Apparently, no one knows I’m still alive.

I have no time to worry about what my mother must be thinking. Right now, the squirrels can have their tree. It’s time to go home. I only have to inch my way back until I’m over the platform again. Wait. Someone’s on the balcony. It’s Marcus. I see a cloud of blue smoke rise from his cigarette. I hunker low so that my head and torso are flat against the limb. I hear the grating of squirrel nails against the bark of the tree as the
squirrels scamper across the branches above. Marcus coughs. He seems to be looking right at me. I hold my breath. He flicks the cigarette over the railing, and I follow the ember as it drops into the dark. The butt hisses when it hits the snow. I raise my head to look again at the balcony. Marcus is gone, but the sliding glass door is still open.

I start scooting backwards on the limb; each bounce on the branch vibrates like a Latino nightclub, up to my full bladder. There’s no feeling left in my dangling feet. I scoot back a fraction of an inch thinking this is scary. I don’t know what’s behind me. It’s so dark up here. The only light comes from the streetlamps in the parking lot and two spotlights on either side of the roof. There’s a tear in the knee of my sweatpants. Something just crawled across my hand.

At this point, I consider shouting out to Marcus to call the fire department and get me the hell out of this stupid tree. There’s wild life up here. And creepy crawlies. I can’t see the stars anymore, and a snowflake just melted in the corner of my mouth.

I can’t move.

The squirrels, who I swear are heckling me with their chatter, jump onto my limb. They scurry to the end away from me, then leap to the dumpster below. I doubt they’d be going backwards on this stupid branch. Going forward is definitely less scary. I drag forward some more and then some more again. The branch is not as thick as it is closer to the trunk of the tree. Carefully, I scoot forward. The limb begins to bend. Whoa. I’m rocking in the air. Me, who’s afraid of roller coasters, whirly whigs, and seesaws. I look over at the balcony, but Marcus is nowhere in sight. I swear to God that if He gets me out of this mess, I’ll never look at Marcus again. An owl hoots into the air. Is he hooting from my tree? Okay, then. God, I promise not to think of Marcus again!
I manage to get myself further out on the limb without too much difficulty. My plan is to get close enough to the dumpster so I can hang from this godforsaken limb and drop into the dumpster, which seems to be full of someone’s empty cardboard boxes and plastic trash bags. I shimmy another few inches, but then there’s a crack. Oh God! Remember, I made you a promise! If this branch is going to break, then I take it all back.

“Marcus!” I yell. “Help! I’m out here in the tree!”

There’s some more cracking, and the branch drops a few feet. Now, I’m afraid to make a sound. But if I don’t make a move now, who knows what direction this branch is going to throw me?

I throw my left leg over the branch so that both legs are now on the same side. Now my grip strains with the weight of my body. The dumpster is below me, and I only have to drop ten feet or so. I close my eyes and let go.

“Ahhhhh!”

I know it’s more than ten feet because I feel as if I’m free-falling from a plane. When I do hit the dumpster, my fall is broken by the boxes and bags. Some of the bags split open, and the contents spit in the air. Some of the crap falls on my face. God. What’s that smell? When I yank my hand from the debris, it’s covered with a dirty Pamper. I shake it away. There are noodles on my face, and some gooky stuff, and I get to thinking that there might be rats chomping away at the goodies in here, so I sit up, and try to find some level footing so I can stand without pitching deeper into the trash. When I hear the sirens in the near distance, I pray. Please don’t let them be after me. Let it be a car chase or something. But the sirens get louder, and I know that they’re close. Then there’s silence, and I think I’m okay until I see the red and blue lights bounce off the duplex.
wall. I know that God is pissed at me. I’m pissed right along with him. Someone’s called the cops. Maybe if I duck back down into this heap of garbage, they won’t find me.

An officer taps his nightstick against the side of the dumpster, and it makes a tinny sound that rings in my ears. I peek out at him, and he says, “Let’s go.” He helps me out, and let me just say that there’s no graceful way to crawl out of a dumpster. I tell the cop I was trying to get my cat out of the tree and fell. I know he doesn’t believe me. He asks me my name, and I’m shaking all over. He asks me for my name again, and I’m about to tell him when I hear . . .

“Lexie? Is that you?”

It’s Marcus. *He* probably called the cops. And now he’s putting two and two together figuring out that I was sitting in that friggin’ tree across from his duplex peeping in on him like some pervert. I turn my back to him and pull up my hood.

“Oh God,” I say to the cop. “That’s my old boyfriend. Please. I don’t care if you throw me in jail with a bunch of axe murderers. Please don’t make me face him.”

The officer looks at me. He looks over at Marcus.

“Really, does he have to know for sure that it’s me?” I whisper.

“Hold on up there, sir,” the cop says to Marcus.

The cop hands me off to another officer who was taking notes the whole time. The note-taker walks me in the direction of the patrol car.

“Officer?” I hear Marcus say. “I think I know that person.”

I turn just enough so that I see under my hooded parka that the first cop leads Marcus back toward the duplex.

“What could he be telling him?” I ask the cop who’s with me.
“That you’re just some homeless kid looking for a warm place to hold up for the night,” he says with a smirk.

“In a dumpster?” I ask.

“It’s been known to happen.” He opens the back door of the patrol car, and I get in. He gives the door a swing.

“Wait!” I brace the sole of my boot against the door to keep it from closing. “My cell phone is under that tree.” I point. “I don’t suppose you’d go and get it for me?”

He smiles. “‘Sorry,” he says. “Watch your foot.”

There’s a small group of people collecting in the lot. I yank my foot in and slink way down in the seat so that the gapers can’t see me anymore.

When I get to the precinct, one of the cops gives me a cup of hot coffee so strong it would kink the hair on my right nipple. No one can corroborate my story about my missing cat, but the cops don’t arrest me. I have no identification with me, no money for a cab, and my car’s back at Marcus’ building. The two cops who rescued me from the dumpster say they’re going to look the other way. They give me a lecture and remind me that there are better ways to die than falling from a tree into a dumpster. I tell them that my boyfriend, I mean, ex-boyfriend left me, and the note-taker says, “You know what you should do when your boyfriend walks out on you? Shut the door. Just shut it.”

Easier said than done.

I feel a little better even though I smell like yesterday’s trash. Maybe I can get back to my car before Marcus spots it in his parking lot.

I need a ride, so I call Cooper. While I wait for him, I use the restroom to wash my hands.
I pull a grapefruit section out of my pocket, towel off some gelatinous crap in my hair, and stick rolled-up toilet paper in the crotch of my underwear.

“Did they strip-search you?” Is all that Cooper asks on the way to get my car. I know he’s trying to keep the mood light for now. I give him the basics: in a tree, in a dumpster, in a patrol car, at the station. It sounds like Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham*.

When we get there, I want to look for my cell phone, but I’m afraid Marcus will see me traipsing around in the snow. I see that there are no lights on in his apartment, and the sliding glass door is closed. I ask Cooper to come with me so we can find my cell and then get the hell out of here.

“So where were you when you dropped it?” Cooper asks, looking up in the tree.

“There,” I say and point up to the second branch.

“So how did you get from there,” he says, pointing to the branch, “to there?” His finger arcs over to the dumpster.

“Look for my phone!” I say, stomping around in the snow. I check the few bare spots, brushing brown grass and twigs with the toe of my boot.

Cooper walks in a circle around the tree. Headlights go on in the parking lot. I run behind the tree trunk. Coop pokes at the snow with a stick. The headlights disappear.

“ Forget it,” I say to Cooper. “I’m going to have a nervous breakdown. Let’s just go.”

We get in our cars. I turn my key in the ignition, and then I see it. There’s a piece of paper under my windshield wiper. I get out. Cooper gives me a *what’s up* gesture from behind his steering wheel. I grab the paper and get back in the car. It’s a note—from Marcus. It says, *Lexie, What the hell? Call me.* I won’t call him. I won’t. I can feel my
eyes sting, and I know Cooper’s waiting for me to pull out of the slot, so I sniffle until I get to the traffic light, and then I let it all out, blubbering and wailing like a lost child, embarrassed by my savage sobs, heaves and hiccups. Dido, as my accompaniment, plays in the background. I’ve got at least ten more minutes of primal relief before me and Cooper’s headlights behind me on the ride home.

When we arrive, Cooper walks me to my door and kisses me on top of my smelly head.

“Chin up, Lexie,” he says, and pulls a chicken bone out of my hair. “You’ll be an urban legend to my grandchildren.”
Chapter Four

Typically, I’m not a morning person. The hours before noon are augmented by stimulants: my alarm clock, my mega-bowl of Frosted Flakes, my first, my second, my umpteenth cup of coffee, my mid-morning Kit Kat. The babies crying in the waiting room get my synapses firing, and the kids, shrieking at deafening decibels, make my alarm clock sound like a lullaby. Then there’s my boss who wears running sneakers and a urinary leg bag. Okay, so the drainage bag is a theory—but the man never makes a pit stop. It’s always go, go, go. These are the kinds of things that push me through the first half of my workday with the same momentum as the Drano that pushes sludge through the pipes of my bathroom sink.

Now take my typical caterpillar crawl through the hours of seven to noon and slow that down to a glacial speed. That’s how I’m moving this morning.

I’m only operating on four hours’ sleep, and my heart is dashing and slowing and sprinting and skipping. You’d think I’d be fixated on last night’s tree fiasco, but I’m working on reserves and raw instinct today. Most of my energy has been invested in staying alert so I don’t give the strep throat in Exam Room One a booster shot and the two-month-old in Room Three a penicillin injection. I triple-check on everything I dispense, but my overcompensation is throwing the morning behind schedule. When Dr. Gregory whizzes by me, I feel like the turtle in the rabbit-and-tortoise race.

We’re in room five, and Dr. Gregory catches me in a yawn, one of those
uninhibited catching-flies kind that wags your tonsils like the clapper in the Liberty Bell.

“Where’s the second set of vitals?” he asks, flipping through the chart. The pages snap between his fingers.

The little boy in the room is lying on the exam table, his towhead on the pillow; the muscles of his belly pull below his barreled chest.

His mother looks at me as if my omission is some measure of malpractice.

Candice, the other nurse on today, pops her head in the door to remind me she’s going to lunch, and the girl in Room Six is still waiting for her allergy shot. Dr. Gregory taps the chart with his pen. It’s obvious that I’m getting on people’s nerves.

Fifteen minutes earlier, I’d given this five-year-old a breathing treatment, which did a good job breaking up the tightness in his chest. The little boy started coughing, which is okay, that’s how he gets rid of the mucus in his lungs. But his spasmodic hacking triggered his gag reflex, so he vomited all over his clothes and onto the paper sheet that covered the exam table. By the time I got him all cleaned up and calmed down, Dr. Gregory was in the room flipping through the chart, looking for a second set of vital signs.

I don’t have the energy to defend myself.

“I’ll get them now,” I say, and smile at the child. I count the beats of his fast little heart and the retractions of his small chest while Dr. Gregory’s heavy sigh parts the hair on the back of my head, and my own heart races again as if it’s trying to catch up.

Somehow I make it through the rest of the day without incident. Who cares if my performance rating has dropped a notch in Dr. Gregory’s eyes? Let him find someone else who will work through her lunch hour so the poor teenager who needs blood drawn
for a mono test can go back home and climb into bed. Oh yes, and who else would empty the trash at the end of the day, and clean out the refrigerator, and vacuum the waiting-room floor because the boss is too cheap to hire a cleaning service? Or when I do go out for lunch, who brings him back a foot-long from Subway since I’m passing the place anyway but didn’t intend to stop there for my own lunch? I should tell him that his Red Wine Vinaigrette Club with turkey-roast beef—substitute-the-Teriyaki-glazed-chicken-strips-for-the-ham-hold-the-vinaigrette-and-add-the-sweet-onion-sauce-on-honey-oat-bread—but-scrape-off-the-oats holds up the line at Subway, not to mention that fifteen minutes of my lunch hour is shot getting his buffet-on-a-foot-long. And getting him to give me seven bucks is like asking the Pope to go down on me. So let the buggy-eyed Pipsqueak with the bald spot that he tries to cover up by spraying black hair paint over it be pissed at me.

I don’t care.

Okay, so maybe I care a little.

When I get home, my answering machine light is blinking. I push the play button, and my mother’s message reminds me that I screamed in her ear last night, so could I please let her know that I’m still alive? I call her, not because I’m in the mood to chat, but because I don’t want her calling the National Guard, and besides, a little TLC might keep my damaged frame of mind from going further in the dump——ster. Oh, when I think of last night, I want to disappear and blow away like some dandelion in a windstorm.

Mom’s phone rings four times before she answers.

“Hi there,” she says.
“Mom, it’s me,” I say.

“If you wait just a second . . .”

“I’m okay, Mom.”

“For the beep, then leave your name…”

I wonder when my mother changed her opinion that answering machines are rude devices. Ernie comes to mind. “I’m alive,” I say after the beep beeps, and hang up the phone. It rings right after I place it on the cradle, and this makes me jump.

“Hello,” I say, grabbing it before it goes off a second time.

It’s Olivia. “I thought you might like to know that some jerk called me on my cell phone right when I was showing a customer the Gibson casket with the solid birch swing bar handles and the hemp bedding. His wife just died from elephantiasis.”

“You mean encephalitis?” I ask.

“Whatever,” she says. “The twit that called me said my momma’s so dumb, she thought Tiger Woods was a forest.”

“Who said that?” I ask.

“At first I thought it was some random crank call. You know, kids picking names from the phone book, calling and saying stupid stuff. But then five minutes later, I’m talking to Cooper in the lobby and his phone rings, and this little brat tells him that Cooper’s so short he could sit on the curb and dangle his feet.”

“That’s kind of funny,” I say. Except Cooper is six-foot one, so the kid obviously doesn’t know him.

“That’s not the point,” she says.
I’m hoping Olivia will get to the point because my brain is too tired for mental gymnastics.

“The little turd has your phone,” she says.

“He does?”

“I didn’t look at the incoming call when I answered, but when Cooper’s phone rang, he said, it’s Lexie’s number. And when he answered it, the kid called him Coop. He knew his name for God’s sake!”

“So he’s calling . . .”

“Yes, yes. He’s calling everyone logged on your cell phone.”

“Shit,” I say and start ticking off people listed in the directory of my phone. Mom, Dad, Candice from work, Dr. Gregory—I hope the kid doesn’t use the short joke on him. Who else? My cousin, Faber—Marcus. I stop right there. When Marcus gets a call from this kid, my number will come up, and he’ll figure I’m harassing him some more, so he’ll probably call the cops and tell them to lock me up this time because I’m nutso, or what if he gets a restraining order against me because he’s afraid I’m like what’s her name in Fatal Attraction? Oh my God! How can this get any worse?

“Call and cancel your service,” Olivia says.

“I will,” I say. “As soon as we hang up.”

There’s a knock on the door.

“I gotta go, Olivia.”

I look through the peephole, and oh my god, it’s Speak-of-the-devil. I back away from the door and tiptoe into the kitchen. Wait a minute. Isn’t it a good thing that Marcus is here? I mean, didn’t he make a special trip just to see me? I creep back to the door and
take another peek. Hey, what if he’s here to tell me off? I back away from the door and start to pace. I bet he wants me to see the anger in his eyes when he tells me to go fuck-off. That’s it. The kid probably phoned him—not like it would’ve been too hard to reach Marcus: speed dial 5 for his cell, 6 for his home, 7 for the phone at the garage. Hold a key down long enough and Marcus is called. I decide not to answer the door. Who needs a tongue-lashing from Marcus? Well, I guess it depends on where the tongue is lashing. He knocks again. It doesn’t sound like an angry knock.

“Lexie. I know you’re in there,” he calls. “I can hear the squeak of your shoes on the floor.”

I open the door, and Marcus is standing there with a grin on his face. He holds out my cell phone. I try to link him as the possessor of my phone with the jokester who obviously had my phone. The dots don’t connect in this picture.

“Drop this from the tree last night?” he asks.

I stand there with my mouth open. Speechless. Frozen. That game I used to play as a child pops in my head. Kids run around, then freeze in some awkward position and the one who’s “it” wants me to wiggle something so he can call me “out,” and then I’ll be “it,” and stop! Why is Marcus standing here at my door with my phone in his hand, and what can I say that will allow me an ounce of dignity in my pitiful state?

“Your momma has one hand and a Clapper,” I say and take my phone.

“Well, your momma’s so fat she walked in front of the TV and I missed three commercials,” he says.

I have to laugh, but I can’t bring myself to look into his Caribbean green eyes. I’m still standing at the door, one hand on the doorknob, the other holding my cell phone.
“Are you going to invite me in?” he asks. “I only know that one momma joke because that’s the line the little homeboy who had your phone used on me today.”

I don’t say a word, but I move away from the door so he has room to enter my foyer. He walks in. His eyes are like searchlights. I feel them on me, over me, checking the perimeters, scanning the room like he’s looking for smoke.

“The kid lives in my duplex,” he says. “I passed him and his buddies on the stairs this afternoon, and I could tell they were making some silly calls.” Marcus unzips his jacket. “I don’t think much of it until my phone rings a few minutes later. I hear their voices, so I take a look out on the staircase, and the little munchkins are giggling like girls with a Ken doll. They tell me my momma’s fat, and I walk down the stairs talking into my phone. They see me coming and hear me say no one messes with my momma and gets away with it loud enough so that they know the guy who’s walking down the stairs toward them is the same guy their sorry asses called.”

Marcus laughs at this, but I just stand there trying to get a sense of what’s coming next.

“I get them to fork over the phone,” he says. “And that’s when I see that it’s yours. Small world, huh?”

“Smaller than a pinhead, Colombo,” I say.

“You were up in the tree last night, right?”

I don’t answer him, “Well,” he says removing the scarf from around his neck. “Unless we’re playing some me Tarzan, you Jane fantasy that you forgot to clue me in on, then the next time you want to see me, knock on the door to my apartment. No peeping in my window from the tree house, okay?”
I nod my head, because what can I say? He kicks the door shut with his hiking boot and takes a step toward me. I look down at his boots so my chili-lunch breath doesn’t knock him over. He lassos his scarf around my neck and pulls me into him. Through my cotton scrubs, I feel the cold buckle of his belt against my belly. He brushes his lips against my cheek; his long lashes tickle my skin as he finds his way over to my ear.

“So how about it?” he whispers. “Do you want to play Tarzan and Jane?”

I can’t figure this whole thing out, but Marcus is here in my apartment apparently turned on by the image of me in a tree. But here’s the problem. He’s pressed up against me, and now he’s kissing my neck and, oh God, that feels good. Still, I’ve got my “friend” and cornrows would weave nicely through the hair on my legs. Now he’s kissing the other side of my neck, and one hand is on my butt, and the other grabs a handful of hair that makes me tilt my head back. He moves to my mouth and parts my lips, and his tongue is warm as it moves over mine, and I don’t want to tell him that I can’t do this, but I can’t do this. Marcus starts walking me backwards toward my bedroom; all the while his mouth is on mine. I’m holding on to his unzipped jacket thinking this is really crazy.

“Stop,” I say when I can grab a breath, but he waltzes me around the bend of my hallway.

“Here?” he asks, and now I’m up against the wall, and he’s working at the drawstring of my pants.

“This isn’t . . .” I say, my hand scrambling to hold up my pants. “How I . . .” He kisses me harder, and our fingers fight for control. I put the palm of my other hand against his chest and push. “Not the best . . .” He’s much stronger than me, and he
doesn’t budge. His hands leave the ties on my pants and head north under my shirt. His fingers stop at the underwire briefly, then detour around my ribs to my back where I know he plans to unhook my bra. “Marcus . . .” I grab his upper arms and push. The clasp is undone. He kisses me again. One hand caresses my right breast. I try to come up for air. The other hand wraps around my lower back. “We shouldn’t…” He shuts me up by putting his mouth on mine again. He lifts me off the floor, and kissing me all the while, he whirls me to my room, and thankfully, my pants don’t fall off. My bed’s not made, but I don’t think he’ll hold it against me. We fall awkwardly onto the sheets. He takes my hand and puts it over the bulge in his pants. He’s rock hard. I don’t dare move a digit on my hand, because I know if I do, the bologna pony’s coming out of the barn. Every second or two, I feel the bulge buck below my hand.

Marcus kisses my neck, and his hand moves on top of mine so he can show me what I should be doing. I give him a few half-hearted strokes, and as soon as his hand goes back to squeezing my boob, I take my hand away—so much for hand-job 101. He flips over, so now he’s on top of me, and he tries to take his jacket off, but his arm’s stuck in the sleeve. He rolls off me, then stands up at the side of the bed, cursing his “fucking jacket.” While he’s wrestling with it, I roll off the other side. Now we’re standing on opposite sides looking at each other.

“What the hell are you doing over there?” he asks me.

“I can’t do this today,” I say.

“Sure you can,” he says, and begins to walk around the bed in my direction.

“We’re good at this, remember?”

“Not today,” I say.
“Lexie, look at what you do to me,” he says, and I know he’s talking about his huge erection.

I don’t say anything, but as he walks the rest of the way over to me, I tie a double bow in my drawstring. I think he watches me do this, and then our eyes meet. A curl of black hair hangs over his eye, and I want to brush it away. But I don’t.

“Okay, Lexie,” he says. “So now it’s cat and mouse you want to play?”

I shake my head, and bite my lip thinking he’s going to be really mad at me now, but the corner of his mouth curls up, and his eyes soften.

“You know, I like this spunk,” he says and taps my nose with his finger.

What does he mean by “spunk?” Does he mean “nervy?” “Moxie?” “Intestinal fortitude?”

“Big Jim doesn’t like it,” he says, and I know he’s talking about his you-know-what. He yanks on the inseams of his jeans as if he’s trying to make some more room. He walks to the door. “Call me,” he says, “when you want to play again.”

I follow behind him wondering what the hell just happened here. I still have his scarf around my neck, well, actually, it’s kind of draped on my shoulders because my neck was, you know, exposed when Marcus was kissing and then groping, and so are we back together? I take the scarf off and hand it to him, but he shakes his head.

“Hold onto it,” he says. “Maybe we’ll play cops and robbers next time.” His fingers lock around my wrists. “Then I’ll get to tie you up.”

Gulp.
I take a shower, but skip dinner, and sleep for ten hours from sheer exhaustion. When I awake it’s five in the morning. I lie in bed and think and think and think. What I figure out about this convoluted mess is that Marcus is getting off on something I’m not. I mean, he seems to think I’m being coy with him when, in fact, I’ve been pathetically desperate to have contact with him, any form of contact obviously, since hanging from a tree limb is the most remote form of contact you can get, and yet, it seemed at the time the most discernable way to be close to him. And now. What about now? He’s lusting after me because of some kinky notion that I’m playing a role. Next thing I know, I’ll be dressed as a school girl, sucking on a lollipop. My pigtails will dangle in the air while Marcus spanks me on my bottom.

How far will this go? I wonder. This play-acting, I mean. I want our first time back together as boyfriend and girlfriend to be perfect. But what if Marcus wants me to wear a braided wig next time and calls me Heidi? I’m certainly no actress. When I was in third grade, I couldn’t even be a good Tinker Bell. I hated prancing around the stage flapping my tin-foiled fairy wings. I wanted to be Peter Pan flying from the rafters, never growing up, dueling the one-armed, rotten-toothed Captain Hook. I failed miserably at fluttering and flouncing. I tripped Peter before his big fight scene, he fell on the floor and chipped his tooth, his mother called me a wretched Tinker Bell, and the show went on without a Peter Pan. The Wonder Boys jumped Hook, and the teacher and principal had to pull them off the Captain, whose hook came off in the struggle, and I was there to grab it and didn’t mind a bit that I was stomping around the stage yelling, *Blimey! Cut ‘em up in tiny pieces and feed ‘em to the sharks, me Buckos.*
Well, I can tell you right now, I’m not dressing like a hooker or a French maid either. And I’m not cavorting with a cat o’nine tails. Nor will I be a schoolteacher. That’s sick. Or a nurse. I mean, yes, I am a nurse, but I’m not wearing a uniform or a cap, and I haven’t put a thermometer in anyone’s tush since I was seven when Coop pretended to have the measles. Nowadays, we’ve got electronic thermometers with a probe for the ear. That works fine for both the kids and me.

I decide to play it cool until I can figure out what to do next. My plan is to run this whole deal past Cooper. I’ll get his “manly” perspective. I wonder if Coop and Olivia share their fantasies? I imagine them both in their Halloween costumes—Olivia, dancing around in her green elf costume, doing nasty things to Padre Cooper. Ew. Let’s get rid of that visual.

At work the next morning, I’m my peppy, pleasing self. I’m back in Dr. Gregory’s good graces, having stopped off at Starbucks to bring him a danish and a double espresso (as if he needs the extra kick). I’m such a kiss ass. Actually, there’s a motive behind my brown-nosing. First, I don’t want any lingering hostility left over from yesterday, and second, Cooper asked me to meet him at the zoo by four-thirty if I want to talk because he’s going to San Diego on an eight-fifteen flight to check out its zoo-across-the-country breeding program. Candice agrees to make this afternoon’s drop of stat lab work over at the hospital, which is something I usually do. And Dr. Gregory, his paunchy belly full of pastry, says it’s okay with him as long as we don’t fall behind. The way to this man’s heart is definitely through his stomach—as long as he’s not putting out any of the dough.
The day goes by without a hitch. Thursdays are generally slow, but the action will pick up again tomorrow because parents typically stress over the upcoming weekend when the office is closed. There’ll be an influx of kids in tomorrow with suspected this and beginning that because parents worry that whatever is ailing their children will reach DEFCON One before Monday rolls around. Today, though, there’s been minor coughs, runny noses, ear infections, and an occasional diarrhea. I like it when it’s not so crazy. I don’t feel like a piece of machinery, and it gives me a chance to play with the kids.

I meet Cooper at the Giraffe Savannah exhibit. He’s shoveling some hay around but stops when he sees me.

“Want to put some giraffe poop in the lion’s area?” he asks.

“That sounds confrontational,” I say.

“Not really,” he says. “It’s part of our enrichment program. Poop swaps, pizza boxes, soccer balls. Newspapers get a lot of mileage. The camels rip them to shreds. This morning, I hid Cracklin’ Oat Bran under some hay for these guys.”

He points to the giraffes that, I have to admit, look pretty weary trudging across the dusty yard.

“We’re trying to challenge their instincts by changing around their habitat and by introducing new objects,” he says.

“Well, listen to you, Mr. Zookeeper,” I say.

“Come on,” he says. “The sun’s setting. I’ll sneak you behind the scenes so we can walk the giraffes to the pen where they sleep. Then you can tell me about the young
and the restless, the bold and the beautiful, and the never-ending saga of Lexie’s troubles and woes.”

I smack him.

“Hey, it could be worse,” he says. “You could’ve been one of the free-roaming peacocks that got into the African wild dogs’ area by mistake.”

“Don’t tell me,” I say.

“It’s a dog-eat-peacock world out there,” he says.

Cooper lifts the hatch of one of the doors to the exhibit. Amazingly, the giraffes stop snacking on what’s left of the browse leaves and shift their attention to Cooper, standing in the open doorway.

“Come on, guys,” he says.

There’s got to be ten or twelve giraffes stepping lively across the yard. I’m a little taken back by their height up close, but Coop is so cool with them, calling their names, moving about them like Tarzan. And that reminds me, of course, why I’m here at the zoo. Cooper grabs my hand, and we take the lead.

“Talk to Poppa,” he says.

I look over my shoulder at the parade of giraffes following behind.

“You’re amazing,” I tell him.

“A regular Doolittle,” he says.

I tell Cooper about my visit from Marcus, how he was hot and heavy about fooling around, and that I had my period and managed to hold him at bay, and all he could talk about was the next time, thinking I was being coy on purpose. Cooper raises his eyebrows when I tell him that Marcus seemed charged by this game of pretend.
“He wants to tie me up,” I tell him.

Coop whistles, and I don’t know if it’s for my benefit or for the giraffes.

“This is where you provide me with a nugget of manly wisdom,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Not good,” he says.

“What’s not good?” I ask and stop walking. One of the giraffes lowers his eight-foot neck, nudges my back, and I fly forward, flapping my arms like a goose in flight. Somehow, I manage to keep my balance and not fall on my face.

“They’re cranky and tired,” he calls from behind.

I increase the distance between Geoffrey and me. “Aren’t we all,” I say.

“First of all,” he says catching up with me. “Let me ask you a question. Do you have a blender?”


“Okay then. Do you use it?”

I think about this. Frozen margaritas, maybe, but it’s been a while. “Not really,” I say, and wonder, where’s this going?

“Well, that’s how I see this whole Marcus thing happening again. He’s kind of like a blender: you think you’ve got to have one, but really, you’ve got no use for it.”

I give Cooper a look.

“Okay,” he says, holding up his hand. “Don’t give me the hairy eyeball. That’s all I’m going to say on the subject. Now about the kinky shit. Here’s my theory: you’ve lit a fire under Marcus. He thinks you’re like some Amazon woman climbing in a tree. Then you shift gears and play coy, keeping his balls bluer than the bloodline in Buckingham
Palace. Frustrated as he is, this just makes him want your ass all the more. And now he wants to tie you up?"

We get to the pen, and Cooper opens the gate.

“Wait here,” he says. “Let me get them settled, and we’ll talk on the way out.”

I stand aside and watch the giraffes stride past me. I’m awestruck by their movement, their size, their beauty. They’re such creatures of habit, I think, and it hits me. Maybe I need to swap some poop of my own. I mean, what if enrichment for me means more than one man? Or a different man? Or a man and a different attitude?

Coop takes a while to come back, and I jog in place to keep my feet warm and wonder if maybe he’s reading them Goodnight, Moon or something.

“Okay,” he says coming from behind the gate. “Let’s go.”

We walk at a pretty good clip, and I figure Cooper’s got other things on his mind like catching his plane and saying goodbye to Olivia.

We get to the parking lot, and he walks me to my car.

“Here’s what I think in a nutshell,” he says. “You think Marcus’ passion is related to some renewed interest in you. Well, who am I to say there’s not some truth to that? And you think that the two of you will get back together, and you’ll have some great, albeit a little kinky, make-up sex. And once again, who am I to say there’s not some truth to that? But based on the little info you shared with me, it sounds to me that as long as you’re a fantasy to Marcus, you’re a hot number for him to pursue.”

“Meaning, I should agree to letting him tie me up?” I ask.
“Hey, if that’s what floats your boat, Lexie,” he says. “Ninety-nine percent of fantasy is what goes on in our head. If the two of you are into this role-playing, then go for it. I personally don’t see you in that light, but then again, what do I know?”

“What should I do?” I ask him.

Cooper shrugs his shoulders. “Look, a little variety is healthy for a relationship. We’re like the giraffes. Give us the same old same old, and we mope around chewing our cud. But for most of us in the human species, the keyword is relationship. You’ve got to have some solid trust before you start swinging naked from the rafters. Otherwise, you’re just in it for the ride.”

“So can you have the sex and then build on the relationship?” I ask him.

The shoulders shrug again.

“I think the sex becomes the relationship. It’s the connection. The appetite that has to be fed. It gets hungry in different ways. Look out, is all I’m saying, Lexie. You and Marcus could end up being fuck-buddies, and if neither of you wants anything more than that, then go to town. There’s a raw honesty to that. But what if the tying up gets old and he wants to move on to other stuff?”

“Like what?” I ask.

The shoulders shrug again.

“I’ve got to go, Lexie,” he says. “You’re a big girl, figure it out. Just stay out of trees and off rafters.”

It’s a long drive from the zoo to my apartment. The finagling of changing lanes and breaking during stop-and-go rush hour traffic keeps me from daydreaming too long on the subject of sex. And Marcus. And sex with Marcus. I keep going back to my
thought about the giraffes. What’s wrong with bringing in a new scent? Like Duncan. Why can’t I choose to date more than one guy? If I have sex with just one of them, I could do it. If I don’t have sex with either of them, I could do it. Besides, why should sex validate who I am? Hell, I’ve got a vibrator at home somewhere in one of my drawers, if all I want is an orgasm. What I do want now is food. I’m starving. I stop at a McDonald’s and pull in the drive-through. I’m caught in a tangled web of lies, I think while waiting for my food. The girl with the fresh young face and the Mickey D visor hands me my bag. Isn’t sex like fast food? I want to ask her. Fast food. Fast sex. Stuff it in, get it over with. Have-it-your-way sex. Whopper and fries sex. Taco Bell sex, Kentucky Fried Chicken sex. I suddenly feel sick and wonder, is this how I want to eat and fuck for the rest of my life?
Chapter Five

After work on Friday, I dash home to change, then head directly over to Home Depot. In my jeans, light pink ribbed turtleneck, raspberry wool coat, and black boots, I’m not exactly a torrid temptress of fashion—but then again, Olivia can’t accuse me of posing for the centerfold in *The Farmer’s Almanac*.

I don’t know if Duncan is even working today. Part of me hopes he’s not. I mean, there’s all that effort that goes into a new relationship. Awkward pauses, second guesses. Everything gets measured and sifted like a cup of fine flour. And there’s always the chance that I might say something that gets misconstrued and then the whole thing is over before it gets started. Or what if he comes on like gangbusters, and I haven’t quite made up my mind if I like him? Or I do like him, but I’m not his type. He could be a breast man, for instance. Or maybe he likes the outdoorsy girl and gets turned on by the catcher for the Women’s Home-Depot Softball team, or what if he likes his girl dressed in Tundra pants and a hunter’s cap, and he’s proud of the gun rack in the back of his truck and has a bumper sticker that says *Hunters Do it for a Buck*? But there’s no way around the getting-to-know-you part, and I’m never going to figure out my options if I don’t just go for it.

And speaking of options, who knows what the heck is going on between Marcus and me? Are we back together or not? It’s this whole kinky sex bit that has me puzzled. When we were a couple, we were a normal-sex kind of couple. Well, there was that time
we did it on the upper deck of a ferry in a lookout cabin where any one of the roaming passengers could have walked in and seen us. And there was our little whipped cream party on the kitchen floor and the Jacuzzi sex we had in the apartment pool when everybody else had gone home. But nothing like this tie-me-up-cops-and-robbers’ stuff that Marcus seems to want now—nothing quite that creative. The suggestion alone scares me to death. I imagine some torture chamber complete with leather tethers and iron shackles. Marcus has an executioner hood over his head, and I’m dressed like a virgin in a flowing sheer white gown. Well, maybe that’s a bit medieval, but I’ve got to say that giving up control like that scares the crapola out of me.

The flip side, of course, is what if I try it and like it? Do I really want to go down that road of kink? Maybe I’ll find myself a regular at Rubber Willie’s Sex Toys, buying deluxe bondage kits or spinning sex swings that hang from the ceiling. That’d be kind of hard to explain to my mom when she makes her annual visit to Boston. *Oh, that’s just a big old plant hanger, Mom.*

Yep. Duncan might be just the kind of normal that I need in my life.

Once I get inside Home Depot, I go up and down the hardware, plumbing, and tool aisles but I can’t find him. Maybe it’s his day off, or he worked the early shift, or maybe he quit and now he’s working at Lowe’s. Or what if he’s at a Lamaze class with his pregnant wife? Just because I don’t remember a wedding ring on his left finger doesn’t mean he’s not married. He could have an allergy to the alloy in the gold as Dr. Gregory’s wife did. But then again, I suspect that my boss got his ring on one of his south-of-the-border jaunts to Tijuana. Anyway, all I’m saying is maybe Duncan can’t wear a ring.
Well, let’s suppose Duncan’s *not* rubbing his wife’s pregnant belly while she practices her transitional breathing. He could be in any number of places. He might be at the dentist’s office getting a root canal for all I know. I pick up a mop pail I’ve been meaning to get, then linger in the plumbing aisle since this is where Duncan and I first met. I’m scanning the items, curious about waste shoes and trip buckets when an older orange-aproned man comes toward me and asks if I need help. I tell him that I’m looking for Duncan because he was the one who helped me before with some plumbing issues. I notice that the guy’s face and neck are unusually flushed, and I want to tell him to go have his blood pressure checked. I see the creases in his fat neck, and I can’t help but think of the Christmas ham I studded with cloves and threw in the oven last month. He tells me to stay put. He’s sure that Duncan is around somewhere. Give him a minute to find him, he says.

So I’m alone with the PVC piping, drain stoppers, and a slew of toilet seats that feature no wobble-hinges displayed on the wall like some Kindergarten art: fat cats, tulips, butterflies, sailboats, and rubber duckies welcome butts to “take a seat.” The opposite wall’s stocked with bathtub sealer trim, drain stoppers, water dispensers, and what the heck are in-sink-erators? Now I’m wondering if being here is such a good idea, because what could Duncan and I possibly have to talk about if all the paraphernalia on these shelves, in this aisle, in this store is his domain? I mean, I can barely tell the difference between a wing nut and a picture-hanging doohickey. I’m daydreaming about Duncan coming home to me with his tool belt slung low around his hips talking about tie downs and stretch cords, and then I realize that I’ve got my men mixed up. I really snap out of it when I hear a page for Duncan to go to the plumbing aisle boom like the word of
God from above. I run down the aisle, my pail swinging from my arm and pass the John Deere tractors parked by the exit. The automatic door opens, but a security guard steps in my way and asks if I’d like to pay for my merchandise. I’m so embarrassed because the customers and the orange-aproned people are gawking at me. The guard points to a cashier and I slink past the people in line, my eyes cast to the floor so that all I see are pairs of Reeboks, hush puppies, zippered boots, and copper penny-loafers.

I don’t need a mirror to see that my face is changing colors faster than a chameleon in heat. My hands are cold, my face and ears are hot. I start sweating, my pulse accelerates, and my hands shake. At twenty-five, I’m way too young for menopause, and unless I’m coming down with the flu, I know that I’m having a full-blown panic attack. I do some deep breathing and fan my face while I wait. I’m just about to dump my pail on a nearby bag of Cypress shredded bark chips and exit legally when someone taps me on the shoulder. When I turn around, Mr. Honey-Baked Ham says, “I found Duncan for you, Ma’am.”

There’s Duncan standing next to him, all smiles and freshness in his face. There are pieces of flair on the bib of his apron, and for a minute, I wonder if he had to do something to earn them. Does Home Depot award merit badges or something?

“This is the lady who says you helped her with her plumbing,” Honey-baked says. He presents me to Duncan with a grand sweeping arm movement like I’m a freestanding range that just went on sale.

“Need some help?” he asks, and I know now that Duncan doesn’t remember me. Of course, why should he? It was days ago, and hundreds of people have come through
these automatic sliding glass doors since then. This rejection doesn’t help my panic
attack, but fortunately, my heart is no longer trying to escape through my eyeballs.

“My toilet,” I say.

“Your toilet?” he asks. Ham-man walks away, and I want to call out, go easy on
the salt.

“You helped me with the broken chain in my toilet,” I say, and feel like such an
idiot.

“Of course,” he says; his eyes widen, and he smacks the heel of his hand against
his forehead. “I knew I’d seen you before.”

I’m focused on his adorable dimples and a smile that reminds me of Chiclets and
bubblegum. It takes another minute of my studying his face—the small crinkles stamped
around his nutmeg-colored eyes, his not-too-big-not-too-small nose, his Tom Cruise
stubble/goatee look—when I realize that we’ve been standing here staring at each other
in complete epoch-long silence.

“Are you in line?” asks a pudgy man standing behind me with a flatbed cart piled
with sheetrock. I look in front of me and see that there’s a gaping space between me and
the guy placing paint thinner on the scanner.

“Is this all you came here to get?” Duncan asks. He looks at the pail dangling
from my arm.

I try to think of something else that I need, and then I remember. “My ficus,” I
say. “It’s dropping leaves. I think it’s sick.”

Pudgo scrapes my ankle with the wheel of his cart.
“Hey!” I say to him. I want to tell the guy that he looks like a garden gnome without the beard, and if he’s not careful, I’m going to find his balls for him and tie them in a knot. Sheesh! Where’s this hostility coming from?

“Lady,” Pudgo says. “If you need to get some bug spray, then get outta line. Will ya?” He looks at Duncan. “Buddy, how ‘bout a little help here?”

Duncan ignores the guy but takes my arm. “Come on,” he says.

I get out of line and walk alongside Duncan but not before I whisper to Pudge to go sit on a toadstool.

Duncan laughs, and I think, okay. This is good. The guy’s got a sense of humor. We pass the paint aisle, carpet and flooring, a blow-out sale in lighting and electrical, and shelving before we get to the garden shop. I make a mental note to check out the stackable closet maids so I can better organize my baggy clothes.

We’re standing in the herbicide section, looking at rows of cans, spray bottles, and powders, and it’s apparent to me that if something’s “bugging” you, Home Depot has the “control.” There’s flying insect control, yellow jacket and wasp control, flea control, hornet control—hey, how about horniness control—okay—just kidding on that last one. He studies the label on a can of fungus and disease control as if curing my ficus is more important than, say, “world hunger.” My eyes wander to the jeweled-bug wind chimes while he does this and then to the bird feeders, garden hoses, outdoor candles and torches. I finger a tomato tower and wish I had a backyard.

We finally settle on a treatment that requires me to spray down my ficus leaves every day for two weeks. I stick the can in my pail.

“Anything else?” Duncan asks.
I can’t tell if he’s hopeful that we might spend more time together or if he’s working on another piece of flair to win Employee of the Month.

“Can you help me find a fan?” I ask. What the hell, I might as well go hog wild since I’m here. I’m thinking that maybe there’s chemistry between us. That Duncan’s kind of shy and just needs a little shove. But yes, there’s definitely something happening here.

“Be happy to,” he says and gestures ahead. “This way.”

We walk together, past the axes, sledges, mauls, loppers and picks, make a left at the gas grills and patio furniture with 12 months, no payments, no interest placards propped on each table, and the thought crosses my mind, if Duncan wasn’t wearing his orange apron, people might think we’re a couple. I try to think of something clever to say, but nothing’s popping in my head.

“So what’s your name?” he asks, as we pass the push brooms and approach the lights.

My name? This is definitely not a standard Home-Depot question. I know we’re in the lighting department because it’s way too bright all of a sudden. There’ve got fifty chandeliers hanging from the ceiling—each with a dozen hundred-watt light bulbs illuminating every clogged pore on my face.

“Lexie,” I tell him.

He smiles, and now I feel like Sandra Bullock in Miss Congeniality when she says to Benjamin Bratt, I think you like me. You want to kiss me.

We move over one aisle. “What do you do, Lexie?”

“I’m a nurse. I work for a pediatrician.”
“That’s really cool,” he says. “I love kids. I never really grew out of that Legos-comic books-Saturday morning cartoons stage.”

I’m thinking yep—this is good.

We come to the aisle with a hundred fans whirling from the ceiling. The two of us have our heads thrown back, our mouths open; we’re gaping at the rotating blades above us like baby birds waiting to be fed.

Duncan spends a lot of time with me going over all the fan options. Do I want a five blade or three blade? A fifty-two inch or forty-eight inch? Do I want a lighting fixture attachment? Oak, mahogany, or white? Should it be mounted on an extension pole or ceiling mounted? I suppress the thought of him mounting me and answer, “The white Casablanca five blade, fifty-two inch, without a light fixture, and definitely mounted—on-the-ceiling mounted.” Or in the bed mounted, I think, or on the kitchen table or hell, how about right here up against the boxed display of halogen lights? How’s that for kinky, Marcus? I mean, Duncan.

My fan comes in a box that’s about the same width as the spread of my arms. Duncan asks if I need help to my car. I take this as a sign that he’s interested. That and the fact that he’s turned three other customers over to an orange-aproned woman with hair that resembles a Brillo pad. We’re still standing in the fan aisle, and now I’m wondering if by help, Duncan meant for me to go find myself a cart. I don’t know what my next step should be, and who will hang my fan? I suppose I could get Cooper to do it, but he’ll probably suggest my landlord, and well, I don’t want that scuz bucket near my bedroom. I can’t think of anything else that I need, or that I could carry, and we’re into one of those silent moments again, so I gather up my nerve and ask him if he’d be willing
to install the fan for me, and if he’d like to—because I’d understand completely if he
didn’t—stay for spaghetti served with my famous red sauce?

Duncan says sure, and I’m so excited that I tell him to come over tomorrow night
at seven. A woman taps him on the shoulder, and Duncan turns toward her. I figure it’s
time for me to leave, so I say goodbye and guess I’ll see you later.

He calls out to me, “Where do you live?”

“6 Chaucer Street. Apartment 2B,” I say walking backwards. I see Duncan jot it
down on a pad he pulled from the pocket of his apron. He waves. I’ve got the boxed fan
held against my chest; my arms are wrapped around the edges, my mop pail rocks from
my elbow, the bug spray knocks around inside it. I do this little kick with my foot and tilt
my head in response to his wave, and figure I look something like Sponge Bob dancing
down the aisle.

Back at home, I scrub my apartment until there are little ridges on the pads of my
fingertips. I call Olivia and tell her about my date. She says that if it all goes well on my
end, we should double date at Johnny D’s for drinks on Wednesday night. There’s
supposed to be a great band there, she says. I figure that could be fun. Maybe grab a few
beers, have a few laughs, dance a little. Duncan and I can act like a couple.

I’m feeling pretty good about things. I take a shower and spray the leaves of my
ficus before I go to bed.

In the morning, I have a fissure in the corner of my mouth that bleeds if I part my
lips just a hair. I load it up with Vaseline and swallow some extra Vitamin E, knowing
it’s good for the skin. I catch my reflection in the window of the microwave. I look like a
lopsided marionette. I take some stress reducing Vitamin B6 with my orange juice.
I drive to the market around noon and see that it is jammed with shoppers. I pick up a package of hot Italian sausage, then put it down. I pick up a package of sweet Italian sausage, then put it down. I hold one of each package in my opened hands—hot or sweet? Sweet or hot? I’m doing bicep curls with the sausages trying to make up my mind. I go with the hot.

At home, I play a Dave Mathews CD while I chop onions and sauté garlic and sausage in olive oil for my sauce. I add some Italian seasoning, dried basil, white sugar, red wine, and a pinch of red pepper to some tomato paste and puree and stir. There’s garlic bread ready to go in the oven. I realize that I should have gotten some salad mixings while I was at the store. I have a few romaine lettuce leaves that’ll do once I trim off the brown edges. There are only five cherry tomatoes left, and even if I give him three on top of his lettuce, it still looks pitiful, so I cut the little suckers in half so that the tomato bits spread a little further across the green. Fortunately, I have a box of brownie mix in the pantry, so I whip that up and spread the mix into a pan and stick it on top of the oven, next to the bread. Then I grab the two funky chunky candlesticks that Olivia gave me for Christmas and stick them on the table.

My little episode of domestic engineering takes three hours of my afternoon. The sauce is simmering on the stove, and now Black Sabbath is competing with my Dave Mathews Band. The music’s coming from the apartment next door where the kid with the chain from his nose to his earlobe lives. Already it’s six-twenty, and Duncan is coming in forty minutes. I’ve yet to shower and shampoo.

I go to take a shower, knowing that it’s totally unrealistic to ask the other residents in my duplex to refrain from using the toilet or running the dishwasher or
starting a load of wash in the duplex basement for four and a half lousy minutes. So I deal
with it and realize that taking a shower in my apartment is kind of like dancing with a
schizophrenic. It’s tricky and all in the timing. I turn on the water and start to count: one,
two, three, four, wet my body down in one-quarter rotations, the water hitting my knobby
shoulders, my freckled back, the space between my boobs that’s wide enough for a small
plane to land, my thighs that have a bit of that orange peel wobble. I grab the soap and
step away from the showerhead in one swift motion on the count of five because the
spigot is hissing water from hell scalding my bony, veiny feet, then I soap up my skin
that has the pallor of chalk, step into the tepid water for two quick spins, then drop back a
step because there are icicles shooting from the spicket now, and lather shampoo in my
hair while I hum two verses of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” I step forward and do three-
quarter turns, backing away right before the water gets too hot or too cold. When my
hair’s rinsed, I turn the dial off and step from the stall. I towel down, comb my wet hair,
and start throwing on my makeup.

The crack in the corner of my mouth starts to bleed again. I try some chap stick,
then dab some cover-up into the slit. I apply some aloha pink lipstick that feathers into
the crack, so now I resemble Pinocchio with left-sided facial droop. In my rush, the
mascara brush pokes me in the eye, so I have to wait several minutes for the tearing to
stop, then I barely have time to blow dry my hair, put on my bikini bottoms, padded
Wonder bra, pink knit top, jeans, socks, and boots.

I go to check on supper and find that the sauce has bubbled over and splattered on
the stove. When I stir what remains, little black flakes rise to the top. The bottom of the
pan is burnt and so is my sauce. I go to take the pot off the flame by grabbing the handle
with my bare hand. It’s so damn hot that I barely get the pot to the sink, and when the pan
tips, sauce spills down the drain. Now there’s a layer of red sauce covering the bottom of
the sink. The thought crosses my mind to start scooping up the spilled sauce, but I can’t
bring myself to do it, worried that Ajax residue left from my cleaning frenzy will mix
with my spaghetti sauce. There’s maybe a cup and a half of red sauce left in the pot. Even
if I barely spoon any on my pasta, there won’t be enough for dinner. I shove the bread and
brownies in the oven, light the candles, and think about my sauce dilemma.

There’s no time to go the store, so I tap on my neighbor’s door. I can’t remember
his name. Shark? Skank? He answers, a white streak down the middle of his black hair—
a slice of pizza in his hand—it looks pretty damn good. I’m starving.

“Skunk,” I say. “Got any spaghetti sauce?”

His face goes blank like I just asked him for the capital of Bosnia.

“You spilled something on your shirt,” he says, staring at my right boob. There’s
a blotch of red at nipple level—bull’s eye—he jabs at the spot with his finger, and my
padded bra, dimpling at the poke, gives my perky breast an inverted nipple appearance.
This seems to confuse the kid, who watches my boob reinflate right before his dilated
pupils. I follow him to the kitchen and watch as he roots through his refrigerator.

“Forgot I had it in the fridge,” he says, handing me half a jar of Ragu sauce.

Brown crud
crusts around the lid, but it doesn’t smell putrid, and I am pretty desperate. He offers me a
slice of pie, and I can’t help myself. Skunk serves it to me on a paper plate, and I sit at his
kitchen table wolfing it down while Ozzy Osbourne shouts that Satan’s coming ‘round
the bend. I sit mesmerized by a goldfish swimming around in a peanut butter jar.
Back in my kitchen, I dump Skunk’s Ragu into my famous red sauce and stir. I dab water on the splat of sauce on my boob, and by the time I’m done, the circle of wet around my nipple makes me look like I’m lactating.

By eight, there are pools of melted wax in the candles. Half the loaf of Italian bread is gone, and flakes of bread sprinkle the little bit of sauce that’s left after all my dunking.

By nine, the last bit of Merlot gets poured into my glass, and I nibble at what’s left of the brownie crumbs. Tonight was a total waste of makeup. I pledge to boycott Home Depot and tell all my friends to do the same.

I call Olivia and tell her that I was stood up.

“Are you sure it was a date?” she asks. “Maybe it was just a service call, and he got the day screwed up.”

I’m feeling a little punchy from the wine, so I say, “Oh sure. I always cook dinner for guys who make service calls. The exterminator’s coming next week, and I’ve got a leg a lamb with his name on it in the freezer.”

I want Olivia to return the fan and get my money back. She says maybe she’ll buy it from me to put over her own bed to cool off her and Cooper’s sweaty post-coital bodies. I want to say no. Make them suffer. Misery loves company, and I’m not getting any, so let the horny toads peel their bodies apart like fruit roll ups from the plastic sleeve. But now I’m thinking that I don’t even want the damn fan in my apartment. Let her have it.
She tells me to come on over. It’s Saturday night. Cooper won’t be back until tomorrow evening. I should spend the night. Don’t worry about Pee Wee, she says. He’s rooming with a divorced dockworker. It’ll just be us girls.

I’m convinced that going to Olivia’s will be good for my morale. I’m taking her the fan, and she wants to borrow my mop pail to wet down some wallpaper she’s going to hang in the bathroom tomorrow. I throw some clothes and toiletries in my overnight bag and sling it over my shoulder. I have to take the T because I’ve had too much wine to drive. I’ve got the pail handle in the crook of my elbow, and the fan box is hoisted against my chest in Sponge Bob style.

I waddle to the T. It’s only several stops to Olivia’s, but I’m surprised how crowded it is tonight. I manage to get a seat between a heavy set woman, who looks like Roseanne Barr snoring like a trucker, and a college kid wearing headphones. The kid is nice enough to put his backpack on his lap so that I can set the box on the floor in front of me. I hold my overnight bag in my lap and the pail on top of it, and now I can’t see in front of me. We make a couple of stops, and the kid gets off at the second one. Roseanne doesn’t budge. She’s ripping like a happy warthog now, and I think about shoving an elbow in her ribs. Instead, I slide one hiney space over, then stick the pail on the seat between us. I think about Duncan and how I’ve been stood up. How pathetic is that? Stood up by a guy in an orange apron with kangaroo pockets. I close my eyes thinking Marcus is my better choice. I mean, how weird can kinky sex get?

When I get to Olivia’s, she answers the door wearing a pink slip as a dress. She looks as if she’s still undecided in her outfit, because under her slip, she’s got on black
stretch pants that flare at the bottom. The platform boots give her another three inches in
height, and the only piece of her ensemble that I covet is her short black velvet jacket.

I put down my stuff and Olivia gives me a maternal hug and pats my back. “Why
me?” I ask, and smell Burberry at the base of her throat. “Why didn’t he show?”

“Things happen for a reason,” she says.

I take off my coat and toss it on the back of her couch.

“Maybe you and Duncan weren’t meant to be,” she says.

“Olivia, you’re killing me with warm fuzzies.”

“Well, I’m not letting you mope around,” she says. “We’re going out.”

“Out? I just got here.”

Olivia nods. “I was thinking about it on your way over here,” she says. “Okay, so
it’s Saturday night. Couples’ night, I know. But who cares? We’re not on a man mission
tonight.”

“More like a pity mission,” I say.

“It’s not,” she says. “It’s for me. I’m feeling claustrophobic. I need to get out and
have some fun.”

“I don’t get it,” I say. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Not really. But you think being a couple is everything, Lexie. Well, it’s not. You
know too much when you’re a couple. I know the rhythm of Cooper’s toothbrush, for
crying out loud. And there are globules of hardened toothpaste in our sink. I’m tempted
to chisel them off and put them on Cooper’s pillow as after-dinner mints. And I put odor
eaters in his sneakers because his feet stink. Did you know that he stirs his coffee one
hundred and forty-nine times?”
I try to visualize Cooper swirling his coffee and shrug my shoulders. “Maybe he only has time for three or four swirls when he’s with me,” I say.

“Well, be thankful you can’t hear him clanking his cereal bowl in the morning,” she says. “I can hear it from the bedroom. Little milk bubbles splatter beyond the placemat onto the glass table. I see them when I get my coffee. They’re like tiny landmines that go off in my head.” Olivia puts her hands over her ears. “And sometimes I sit on the toilet in the morning thinking whoever said ‘love is blind’ never saw the body hair that covers my bathroom tile. Our bathroom’s lined with it. If I push the wooly rug around with my feet, the hairs cling to it like fringe.”

“But Cooper isn’t here tonight, so why don’t we just hang out?” I ask.

“Because I have cabin fever. Because I want to dance,” she says, and throws me off balance with a hip check. “You know Cooper hates to dance.”

I think about the times I’ve seen Coop be-bopping all over the dance floor and wonder if Olivia knows the same Cooper I know. “Okay then,” I say. “I guess I’m up for it.”

Olivia smiles, then looks me up and down.

“You’re not going like that,” she says.

“Really, I’m fine for Johnny D’s,” I say. “It’s a slacker place, Olivia. Let’s just go.”

“Come with me,” she says, and grudgingly, I follow her into her bedroom.

“You’re getting a new look.”
I watch as Olivia considers the clothes in her closet: sequined tops—pass, zebra stripes—pass, leopard spots—pass, pale pink taffeta tutu—“No way, Olivia,” I say, as she holds the frilly skirt against my waist.

“Perfect,” she says. “You don’t even have to change your top.”

“Forget it,” I say.

“Okay then, how about this black corset skirt?” she asks.

“I’d freeze to death for one thing,” I say.

“You wear Victoria Secret fishnets under it, Silly. And my strappy sandals. Oh wait. Someone left them at Club Elixir’s New Years’ Eve,” she says, and looks at me.

“Hold on. I know just the thing.” She pulls her fuck-me over-the-calf boots out of the closet.”

I shake my head. Olivia sighs.

“Okay then, wear your ordinary jeans, but at least change your top. Here, try this on.”

It’s a long sleeve, candy-apple red leather shirt held together by rawhide laces that go all the way down the front and the back. The ties pull together at the base of the shirt, and once I get it on, I have to do some readjusting of the laces for obvious reasons. Olivia puts on a retro Rolling Stones CD and cranks up the volume. She’s jumping around the bedroom to *I Can’t Get No Satisfaction*, swiveling her hips, and rocking her arms above her head.

I look in the mirror and realize that my bra’s got to go, because it’s visible in the very low neckline. I work it off without having to take the shirt over my head again, and I
can’t see my bra anymore, but I’m sure the shirt is meant to show off some cleavage, which it’s not.

“Want some duct tape?” Olivia calls to me.

“What?” I ask.

“You can tape your boobs together and push them up to give you cleavage,” she says, and demonstrates squishing her ample breasts together. Her boobs look so big she could feed a family of four.

She laughs, and says, “C’mon. Let’s kick it.”

Twenty minutes later, Olivia and I get off of the T, and she hands me her red lipstick.

“You look like Casper,” she says.

We get a couple of whistles from some guys across the street.

“They probably think we’re hookers,” I say, and zip my jacket up to my neck.

It’s nearly midnight by the time we get to Johnny D’s, and the place is hopping. There’s a band that sounds like Chicago playing in front of the bar, but I can’t see them because people are dancing everywhere. Olivia has her coat draped on her elbow.

“Give me your jacket,” she says. “I’ll tuck it away with mine over by the window seat.”

“That’s okay,” I say, and wave her off. “I’m kind of chilly.”

“Give it to me,” she says.

“Yeah. Give it to her,” says this guy passing by with a bottle of beer. “Then we can dance.”

“Oh. No thanks,” I say. “I’m kind of involved with someone.”
He shrugs and gets lost in the crowd.

“Liar,” Olivia says.

I’m really dying from all the body heat in the place, so I peel off my jacket and hand it to Olivia.

“Get us a couple of beers,” she calls to me. “I’ll be right back.”

I’ve got a little satin purse hanging from my shoulder that Olivia gave me to accessorize. I get out a ten and approach the bar. I think someone pats my ass, but I’m not sure. I order a couple of Coors Lights and start to back away from the bar. Some guy wraps his arm around my waist and starts humping me from behind to the beat of the music. I feel him fiddling with my laces.

“If I yank on this cord, will your engine start?” he says in my ear.

I’ve got a bottle of beer in each hand, so I can’t bop the guy, but I stomp on his foot, and it’s enough to discourage any more pumping of my behind.

Olivia finds me in the crowd and takes her beer. “Isn’t this band great?” she asks.

“It’s the one I wanted us to hear on Wednesday when we double dated.”

I give her a look.

“Sorry,” she says.

A guy with wire-rimmed glasses and a lip stud asks me to dance. I tell him that I’m just here to listen to the music. When he tries to yank me onto the dance floor, I tell him that I’m getting over a break up, so I’m not in the mood.

“First you’ve got a boyfriend, then you don’t five minutes later?” Olivia asks.

I shrug and gulp half my beer. The cool liquid makes the crack in the corner of my mouth feel better.
“Well, you can’t give me an excuse,” she says. “Let’s go.”

She pulls me by the hand, and we’re trudging through layers of people, pushing through forearms and elbows that yield to us like turnstiles.

The music is hot, and Olivia and I dance around like maniacs. Pretty soon, guys are dancing with us, and I don’t care about Duncan or Marcus or having a boyfriend or a baby when I’m thirty. I’m just a girl who wants to have fun.

Olivia and I sleep until noon on Sunday. She tries to talk me into helping her with the wallpaper in the bathroom. She wants to surprise Cooper, who’s apparently been vindicated for all the petty annoyances of yesterday. I tell her that I really have to get home. My ficus plant is supposed to be sprayed twice a day, I tell her and smirk.

No sooner am I home, when someone knocks on the door. I forget to look in the peephole, so when I open the door, I’m surprised to see Marcus standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Babe,” he says. “Thought I would’ve heard from you before now.”

“I was helping Olivia wallpaper her bathroom,” I say.

“And how is your vintage friend?” he asks. “Still trapped in Cyndi Lauper’s closet?”

I step away so Marcus can come in. He kicks the door shut with his boot and before I get a chance to swallow the lump that’s in my throat, Marcus is on me like hot pants on hooker. I’m gasping for air by the time his tongue disengages from my throat, and I can feel the crack in the corner of my mouth split open again.

“I need to take a shower,” I say. The tip of my tongue roots around the crevice in the corner of my mouth. “You know, all that wallpaper paste and all.”
“A shower sounds good,” he says, taking off his jacket. He tosses it on the kitchen chair and pulls his T-shirt over his head in one swift move. I’m left staring at his naked skin, which is the color of olive oil.

“You remember my shower gets hot and cold?” I ask him.

“Kind of like you,” he says, and pulls me into him so that his chest hairs tickle my nose.

“I’ll get the shower started,” I say, and pull back. “Why don’t you grab something to drink?”

He lets me walk away, and I’m thinking we’re going to do it, and why the hell not? I don’t have my period anymore, and it’s not as if anyone else is knocking at my door these days. I walk into the bedroom and shove Marcus’ tie-me-up scarf, which was lying on top of my dresser, into one of the drawers. Maybe out of sight out of mind, I think. I take off my clothes and turn on the shower faucet.

“Hey, Babe,” Marcus calls out to me.

“What is it?” I shout back to him. The shower water’s heating up, and I’m having slippery thoughts of Marcus soaping up my body.

“Some guy says he’s here to hang your fan.”
Chapter Six

The shower is running. There’s a half-naked man in my apartment, and one that’s fully dressed at the door. I’m in my bathroom, bare-assed, and shivering like a wet Chihuahua.

I turn off the water and throw on my underwear, bra, jeans, and a navy jersey that says, *Always Remember You’re Unique* on the front and *Just Like Everyone Else* on the back. I’m putting on my socks and boots when Marcus comes into the room. He’s fully dressed and wearing his jacket.

“I’m going to split,” he says, jiggling his keys. “This fan bit sounds like it could take a while.”

“Oh. Right. Fan,” I say, as if I’m learning to read my first Primer. I’m glad Marcus is leaving because I’d trip over my tongue if I had to be in the same room with both Marcus and Duncan.

Marcus hooks his fingers under the waistband of my jeans and pulls me into him.

“When Spanky is done hanging your fan, why don’t you come over to my place?” he whispers. “I’ll pop one of my tawa-tawas in your mouth.” He nibbles my ear, then adds, “I’ll even drizzle it with honey.”

His Bolivian fried fritters make me drool. Sprinkled with honey? Very tempting.

Duncan’s cough from the living room startles me. I tell Marcus I better take care of my service call. This causes him to raise an eyebrow. He’s always thinking with the
wrong head.

“How often can sex be on one man’s mind?” I ask in a low voice so Duncan can’t hear.

It’s a rhetorical question. So I’m surprised when Marcus says, “About every three seconds.”

I think he’s joking. I mean every three seconds?

“How is that possible?” I ask.

He shrugs. “My equipment’s on the outside, you know. It’s always getting shifted around and touched.” He smiles. “Or it wants to get shifted around and touched.”

I don’t know what to say to that, but I count one second, two seconds, three seconds. Is he thinking of sex?

“Don’t let Spanky tire you out,” he says.

Yep.

Marcus leaves, and I tiptoe down the hallway and peer around the corner into the living room. Duncan is sitting on my couch, flipping through the Boston Globe. I creep back into my room and close the door so he can’t hear me talking on the phone.

I call Olivia, and Cooper answers, “City Morgue. You stab ‘em, we slab ‘em.”

“Coop,” I whisper. “I need a humongous favor.”

“Are you in the pokey again?” he asks.

I don’t think this is very funny, and I can hear Olivia in the background saying she’ll bail me out this time.

“I gave Olivia my fan and now I need it back,” I say, and explain that Duncan is here to hang it. Who’s Duncan? he asks, and I tell him that he should ask Olivia for
details because I don’t have time to go into it now. I tell him Duncan’s in my living room, so he should tell Olivia that maybe I got the dates mixed up or Duncan did, and now he wants to hang up the fan that I no longer have.

“I haven’t even unpacked my bags,” Cooper says. “Tell him to come back tomorrow.”

“Coop, please. You’ve got to do this for me,” I say. “I’ll do anything. Scrub your toilet, pack your lunch—I can get you drugs.”

Cooper tells me I’m a few beers short of a six-pack.

“And speaking of which,” he says. “This caper’s costing you a case of Sam Adams Triple Bock.”

“Yes, yes. Whatever. Listen, I’m going to ask Duncan to go with me to get a bite to eat. That way, you can come over, let yourself in with the key I gave you, and leave the fan in my bedroom, okay?” I ask.

“Alright,” he says. “But when your fan is up and spinning, you can come over, let yourself in, pop me a cold one, and put the rest in the fridge.”

I hang up the phone and figure it’ll take Cooper twenty minutes to get here because he has to find a parking spot, which is hard to do on Sundays because no one moves cars on this block. I fluff my hair a few times and then go into the living room where Duncan is drumming his fingers on my coffee table. He sits on the edge of the couch, his legs parted, his feet firmly planted on the carpeted floor. He wears layers: a white T-shirt under a denim button-down, a rust crew neck sweater beneath his unzipped navy blue parka. For a fleeting moment I try to imagine what he must be thinking, but then I’m drawn to the lines of his faded jeans, the curve of his knees, the shape of his
long lean thighs, the brown leather belt wrapped through the loops above his narrow hips.
Tan laces weave through the eyelets of his camel-colored work boots. His hands go to his
knees when he sees me. Tousled sandy brown hair fans across his forehead. He smells
like musk. What could I possibly say to him about the half-naked man that let him into
my apartment?

“So, I guess you met my brother,” I say.

He gives me this puzzled look.

“Marcus,” I say. “The guy who didn’t have his shirt on when he answered the
door because he was fixing a leak under my kitchen sink, and . . .”

“Your brother calls you Babe?” he asks.

I think about this.


Why I even feel the need to lie is beyond me. I guess I’m thinking there’s some
logical reason why he stood me up last night, and I did say that I was going to date more
than one guy, so keeping Duncan in the playing field until I figure out what the story is
seems only fair. Besides, I’m too embarrassed to tell him that I hastily gave away the
Casablanca fan he spent so much time helping me buy.

“You don’t look alike,” he says.

He’s right. My pale skin—Marcus’ Latin bronze—how do I get around that one?

“Different fathers,” I say.

He nods. “Is this a bad time?”

I shake my head, then remember I have to get us out of the apartment before
Cooper gets here with the fan.
“Actually,” I say, “I haven’t had a thing to eat all day.” Which is true. “And the only edible foods in my fridge are mozzarella sticks and black olives.”

Duncan’s smile causes his dimples to form.

“I was hoping that before you hang the fan we could get a sandwich at the Bistro a couple of blocks from here. Would that be okay?” I ask.

He looks at his watch, and I’m thinking he’s going to pass and just ask me where the damn fan is because he wants to get it the hell up and split. But instead, he says, why not? and we leave and start walking up Chaucer, and I’m looking for Cooper’s Volkswagen, thinking we should’ve come up with some cellular all-clear code between us.

We get to the Bistro, and I order a BLT on rye toast. Duncan gets the Smothered Chicken Platter. While we’re waiting for our food, I want to ask him why he didn’t come over last night, but I hesitate because what if I was the one who got the days mixed up? Still, I know that I asked him to dinner, and here he is with me at three o’clock in the afternoon, and I’m wondering what’s the deal?

“So, I guess something came up last night,” he says.

Aha! It was last night.

“So it seems,” I say, and figure this is where he tells me how he screwed up, and how sorry he is for any trouble he put me through, and now he wants to make it up to me by taking me to a fancy-shmancy restaurant where they don’t list prices on the menu.

He cocks his head, then puts a finger to his lips like he’s trying to shush me, except I’m guessing that what he’s really doing is thinking about what he should say. I’m
kind of touched by this thoughtfulness and decide that when he tells me how he messed up last night, I’ll tell him that he’s forgiven.

“Maybe I should’ve knocked harder,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

“The music,” he says.

The waitress puts my sandwich in front of me and gives Duncan his steaming chicken platter. She goes to get him the ketchup he wants, and I can’t figure out which food group it’s going on. I watch Duncan pierce a piece of chicken with his fork, thinking I might have to get my ears checked because surely I’ve missed a few lines of humble apology.

“What about the music?” I ask him.

“It was loud,” he says, and thanks the waitress for the ketchup. He douses his Smothered Chicken with it, then takes his fork and spreads the ketchup around so it forms an even coat over his entire meal.

“But you don’t seem like the Black Sabbath type,” he adds, and that’s when I get it.

“You were knocking at my door?” I ask.

He nods and puts a forkful of mashed potatoes and ketchup in his mouth.

“And you could hear Black Sabbath?” I ask.

“You should eat,” he says. “Your toast’s getting stale.”

He offers me the bottle of Heinz, but I shake my head and chomp on the dill pickle.
“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” I say. “You came over to hang my fan, but the music was so loud that you thought I didn’t hear you knocking on the door. So you left?”

“I didn’t have your number,” he says. “Otherwise I would’ve tried to call you.”


“I guess I could have,” he says. “But I knocked for a good ten minutes, then I figured maybe you just decided to go out and forgot to turn off your music.”

“That was Skunk,” I say.

“What was Skunk?” he asks.

“My neighbor,” I say.

“Your neighbor’s got a skunk?” he asks.

“His name is Skunk,” I say, and get this peculiar look from him. “Don’t ask,” I say, and wave my hand. “Skunk was playing Black Sabbath, and I went over to get some sauce from him because I dumped mine down the sink.”

“You dumped your sauce down the sink?” he asks.

I’m thinking the Grand Canyon can’t top the echoes at our table.

“Not on purpose,” I explain. “But I did go over to Skunk’s, and I bet you came when I was there,” I say, but omit the part about sitting at Skunk’s table eating his pizza while Nemo swam around in a peanut butter jar.

“So you thought I forgot?” he asks.

“I thought you stood me up,” I say.
He reaches for my hand and gives it a quick squeeze. This makes me blush, and I think about him kissing me and wonder if my skin will chafe against the stubble on his face.

“You made me brownies?” he asks.

“They’re gone,” I say.

“Did we have wine?” he asks.

“Merlot,” I say.

I take a bite of my BLT, and the cold hard toast scratches my throat when I try to swallow it down. I point to the bottle of ketchup, and he grabs it and holds it out of my reach.

“Will you make me some more brownies?” he asks.

“Only if you’re there to eat me this time,” I say.

Duncan’s face gets all red.

“I mean them!” I say. “Eat them!” I want to float under the table like a dust bunny. Duncan laughs and I laugh with him.

Either way, I’m thinking, doesn’t Home Depot guarantee my satisfaction?

As we’re walking back home, I tell Duncan that I have to make a quick call to a sick friend. I dial Cooper, and while his phone is ringing, I pray that he will give me a verbal thumbs up on the fan, so I know it’s there for Duncan to hang. When he answers, I say hi, but I don’t want to come right out and ask him if he delivered the fan, so I try a more cryptic angle by asking Cooper how he feels.

“I feel it in my fingers,” Cooper sings into the phone.

“What?” I say.
“I feel it in my toes,” he sings again.

I try to cup the mouthpiece so Duncan can’t hear Cooper’s bellowing voice.

“Your love is all around me,” he sings some more. “And so the feeling grows.”

Groan. Why can’t Cooper ever be serious? I’m one and a half blocks from home, walking next to the Home-Depot guy who’s going to eat me and my brownies one day, but not before he hangs the fan that I don’t even know if Cooper’s delivered.

“Coop,” I say, interrupting his serenade. “What’s new?”

I smile at Duncan.

“New York, New Jersey, New Mexico,” Cooper says.

I want to reach inside the phone and strangle him.

“Did you drop that specimen off at the doctor’s?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Oh, you mean my sperm sample? Olivia was just about to help me get that started,” he says.

“You haven’t done it yet?” I ask, panicking about what I will do if the fan’s not there. I mean, how many times can we walk around the block?

“Chill, Lexie,” Cooper says to me. “I’m just yanking your chain. The fan’s at your place.”

“Thanks, Coop,” I say, and look over at Duncan. “I mean, thank God you’re feeling better. Let me know if I can help in any way.”

“You wanna help with my sperm sample?” he asks.

I hang up on Cooper and put my phone and my hand in the pocket of my jacket.

“How’s your friend?” Duncan asks.
“He’s really sick,” I say, and make a mental note to smack Cooper the next time I see him. We’ve got a block to go, but now I can relax.

When we get back, I unlock the door, and tell Duncan to make himself at home while I brew some coffee. I tell him the fan’s down the hall in my bedroom, and he says he’ll go get things started. I hang my jacket on the rack by the door, wash out a couple of dirty mugs, put the coffee on, and walk in the bedroom to see how he’s doing. His parka and sweater are off, and the fan is assembled and lying on my bed.

“Got a ladder?” he asks.

It never entered my mind that he’d need a ladder. I shake my head and figure this is as far as we’re going to go today.

“I’ve got one in my truck,” he says, and reaches into his jean pocket for his keys. “I’ll go get it.” He’s on his way out of the bedroom, but stops and hands me a note that was lying on the bed. “This was taped to your fan.”

The note is scrawled in Cooper’s chicken scratch. It says, To: Indian Giver!

From: Kemosabe.

Pleading ignorance is my only defense. I shrug my shoulders and look at Duncan. “I better go get the coffee,” I say, and head for the kitchen.

Duncan does a really good job hanging my fan. It hangs straight, there’s no wobble, and it gives my hodgepodge décor a classier look. I almost feel as if this is our first purchase together, kind of like he’s invested in my fan as much as I am now. He closes up his black toolbox. I would have preferred a tool belt slung around his hips, but maybe he saves that for the bigger jobs. It’s still early, but the fan’s up and the coffee’s
all gone. What’s left for us to do? I’m thinking about asking him if he wants to get cozy and watch a little television when he asks me if I want to catch a movie.

“Have you seen the Lord of the Rings sequel?” he asks.

It’s is not my first choice for movie entertainment. I’d rather see a good comedy or suspenseful drama. And isn’t Lord of the Rings a three-hour show? My butt will fall asleep.

“If we hurry,” he says. “We can catch the one playing at 7:30.”

The other thought that’s bouncing around in my head is what to do about Marcus? He thinks I’m coming over tonight. I never committed to being there, but what if he gets impatient and comes over just as Duncan is walking me to the door or something? God. I never thought it’d be raining men. Hallelujah?

I figure I’ll deal with Marcus tomorrow, and for now, I try to focus on one man at a time. Duncan and I go to the movies. We get some popcorn, Twizzlers, and a couple of Cokes. The theater has stadium seating, and we grab some center-screen seats about halfway up. About midway through the movie, I’m really into it. The hairy-footed Frodo is trying to cast the evil ring into the lava river, and the freakish conniving Gollum is making trouble. I’m rooting for the little hobbit when Für Elise sounds from my phone. I quickly grab my cell out of my pocket, and put it on silent mode. The call goes to my voicemail, and I see from the number flashing on my screen that Marcus is calling.

“Problem?” Duncan whispers.

I shake my head, but figure I better find out what Marcus has on his mind.

“I’ve got to use the restroom,” I say to Duncan.

He nods, and I get up and go into the lobby.
I listen to Marcus’ voicemail. He says that he’s waiting for me and hopes I’m not going to disappoint him tonight. Call back, he says. I’m tempted to speed dial him, to hear the sound of his pleading voice. His pursuit is a whole new phenomenon for me. If I call now, I could discourage Marcus from showing up at my place later when Duncan’s there. God knows I want to keep the two of them apart. Maybe I could put Marcus off by telling him I’m tired and wouldn’t tomorrow be a better day to get together? I speed dial his home number. His line rings twice, then I get to thinking, maybe I shouldn’t make it so easy on him. I mean, I’m not even sure where we stand, and do I want to hop back into bed right away? Well, yeah, I sort of do, but maybe I need to get a road map first to find out where we’re going. Is this a long-distance trip or a sprint around the block? On the third ring, I push the end-call button and slip the phone back in my pocket. I’ll call him tomorrow and figure out something to say. What I need to do now is stay in the present and that means paying attention to Duncan.

I really do have to pee, so I hit the bathroom and then return to my seat. Duncan puts his arm around my shoulder, and his fingers tickle my neck. His touch makes me all tingly, and I feel like a schoolgirl and don’t know why. Is it because I like him? Or because this is all new and I want him to like me? I can’t figure it out right now, but I wish the hobbit would throw the damn ring in the lava, because the movie’s starting to get a little creepy with all the ogres, gargantuan elephants, and flying monsters grabbing at people with their gigantic claws and dropping them so they splatter on the ground below.

Later, Duncan walks me to my door. He says he’s got to go, so I thank him again for hanging my fan and for taking me to the movies. I’m waiting for him to kiss me. All
he has to do is lean in a little bit more, and it’ll happen. I lick my lips and can part them without too much pain, because the crack in the corner of my mouth is healing. I tilt my chin and try not to blink as I look into his brown eyes that, now, I see are sprinkled with little specks of green. He just stands there inches away from me, not saying a word, not making a move. Sheesh. Just kiss me, I’m thinking. My mouth is watering, my eyes are stinging, and I don’t want him to stick his tongue into the pool of saliva that’s collecting in the back of my mouth, so I swallow. My neck’s getting stiff, so I tilt my head to the other side. I can’t stand it any more, and I get to thinking maybe he’s waiting for me to make the first move. I’m just about to yank on his jacket to pull him into me when he reaches over and kisses me on the cheek. On the cheek! What’s up with that?

“I need your number,” he says, and smiles.

I’m still rattled by the brotherly peck, but I give him my number, and he punches it into his cell.

“Hey, do you ice skate?” he asks.

Ice skate? Am I back in junior high? The last time I put on a pair of skates, I was thirteen, and I wore a little jean skirt and tights, and Ritchie Terwilliger’s sweaty hand held mine. He scooted me over to a line of skaters. Twenty or so kids holding hands snaked around the ring. When we joined it, I was the last one on the line. We went faster and faster, and I got whipped around, and Ritchie let go of my hand. To this day I don’t know if it was on purpose or not, but I went flying and couldn’t keep my balance and landed on my ass spinning across the ice like a hockey puck, slicing into an old couple—the woman falling and breaking her hip, I think, because they took her away on a
stretcher—the man falling on top of me, mission style, wheezing and hacking in my face because I had knocked the wind out of him.

“It’s been a while,” I say to him, then remember that Olivia and I talked about a double date. “A couple of my friends are going to Johnny D’s on Wednesday night. We’ll probably get there early and grab some dinner.”

“Cool,” he says.

“Yeah. They’ve got a really great band,” I say.

“Well, you’ll probably have a good time,” he says.

One minute I think he likes me, and the next, I’m not so sure.

“You can’t make it?” I ask him.

“Oh sure,” he says. “I didn’t know you were asking me to go.”

We make plans to meet at my place on Wednesday night about seven. When I get into my apartment, I’m so tired that I kick off my boots, shrug out of my jacket, and head straight for the bedroom. I don’t even bother to brush my teeth. Most nights, I sleep in my flannel pajamas, but tonight, I squirm out of my bra and jeans and scoot under the covers in my jersey and underwear. I set the alarm, fluff up the pillow, and close my eyes, thinking about Duncan. I play the scene at the door over in my head only this time Duncan kisses me on the mouth and his tongue slips in and tastes like peppermint Certs, and then his hands are all over me, and I barely get the key in the lock and open the door before we’re tugging at each other’s clothes. He tells me I’m hot, and says he’s got to have me right now, and wait a minute—my REM-ing comes to a halt because tonight I am hot, and I pull down the comforter and remember, hey, I have a fan. I get out of bed, and flip on the switch, and feel the draft from the spinning blades. I climb back to bed,
close my eyes, and snuggle into my pillow. Okay, so we’re tugging at each other’s clothes and . . .

At work the next morning, Dr. Gregory drops a nuclear stink bomb in the bathroom that’s so bad I have to hold my nose while I pee. When I open the bathroom door, Candice passes by and waves her hand under her nose. What died? she wants to know. I try to tell her that Dr. Gregory was in the bathroom before me, but she’s quickened her pace down the hall.

“Use the citrus air freshener,” she calls out to me. “That’s what I bought it for.”

For some reason, it’s not too busy at the office—a few immunizations, respiratory infections, and one case of cellulitis where a kid shot himself in the foot with a BB gun. It’s not until mid-morning when I’m looking for some change for the vending machine that I realize my cell is still set on silent mode. Five missed calls are logged in my phone—one is from my father, one’s from Olivia, and three are from Marcus. Dad leaves a message that says he and Brenda are in Cambridge for the jazz festival. I should join them for dinner at Rialto’s in the Charles Hotel around seven, he says, and bring a friend if I want. Brenda is my father’s thirty-two-year-old hot new babe, and I refuse to acknowledge her as my stepmother. I think of her as a byproduct of my dad’s male menopause—figuring somewhere between his back waxing and skydiving on his fiftieth birthday. Who could I ask to join me for dinner with my dad and his midlife crisis? I don’t want to expose Duncan to my dad’s eccentricities quite yet, and I can’t split up the Olivia/Cooper combo. I guess I could invite them both, but then I’d be the only “single” at the table.
Olivia’s message just says give her the scoop on Duncan. The calls from Marcus make me feel badly because he says he’s neglected and misses me. I don’t know what to make of his one-eighty turnaround. It can’t all be about sex, can it? I mean, surely he has other girls he could call if all he wanted was a fuck buddy? So I figure that maybe he’s really trying, and I can’t cut him loose just because Duncan’s in the running now. I’ve invested all that time in Marcus, and what if he is changing? And Marcus likes my dad so I might as well ask him to join us for dinner.

Later that night, I meet Marcus in the lobby of the Charles Hotel. I get there before him, take off my coat, shove my hat and gloves in the pockets, and drape it over my arm. When Marcus comes in, he’s wearing black pleated pants and a cream-ribbed shirt, looking very yummy. He whistles when he sees me and twirls me around so he can catch the rear view of my black slinky dress.

“Sexy Momma,” Marcus says.

“I don’t look like a ho?” I ask him. There’s lace on the straps and the low-cut neck. Below the see-through band of lace that’s around my hips are strings of tassels that swing and separate when I walk. The dress was one of those late-night-if-I-buy-this-I’ll-either-look-like-the-Victoria-Secret-model-in-the-catalogue-or-a-bedspread-in-a-brothel kind of purchase.

Marcus arches his eyebrow. “You look like a Spanish dancer,” he says, and growls in my ear.

And to think it only cost twenty-nine bucks.

I can’t miss my Dad and Brenda at the bar when we first walk into Rialto’s. Dad’s the guy with the full head of salt and pepper hair. Brenda’s the redhead my dad’s stroking.
like an Irish Setter. Marcus shakes Dad’s hand, but his eyes pop when he meets Brenda for the first time. She must think she’s the Queen of England or something because she leans forward and holds her hand out for him to kiss. She’s wearing black leather pants and a scoop-neck blouse that sparkles with speckles of gold against black. She crosses her legs and no one can miss the black stilettos. She’s got plenty of cleavage, and Marcus probably gets an eyeful when he bends to kiss her jewelry-laden hand. When our table is ready, Brenda swivels on the bar stool and the heel of her shoe hooks Marcus under his calf. She giggles as she tries to disengage.

What can you expect from a twenty-dollar lap dance, I think. Actually, Dad says Brenda was a certified massage therapist that he met at a Sedona spa last year. I look at her two-inch nails and think, massage therapist my butt—with her Edward Scissorhand nails, she could shape foliage on neighborhood lawns.

It’s my first time to the hotel’s restaurant, but Dad raves about its Mediterranean fusion cuisine. The waiter tells us the specials for the night. Marcus orders Bouillabaisse, Dad and Brenda get Moussaka, and I order some lamb dish I can’t pronounce. We drink French wine, and Dad talks about their ski trip to Vale last month and how Brenda’s opening a bead shop in Greenwich.

“She made the bracelet she’s wearing now,” my dad says.

“See this red one?” Brenda says, fingering the oblong bead. “I blew it myself.”

“She’s got a little glass blowing kit,” Dad says, beaming.

Brenda smiles like she’s the Dali of beadwork. “I order the gems from the rusted hills of Sedona,” she says in her husky, sandpaper voice.

“Nice,” I say.
“I can make one for you,” she says, and pats my hand.

“She does necklaces, earrings, even rings,” Dad says to me as if he’s her agent or something.

“Great,” I say, and smile.

“You really could use a little color, Hon,” Brenda whispers to me. “Black absorbs all your natural glow. I’m autumn, you know, but you’ve got summer skin. Go with earth tones like greens and blues. A tad of coral on your lips maybe.”

“Right,” I say.

“Wait, I have some in my purse,” she says, and roots through her little red leather bag. She pulls out a tube of lipstick, pulls off the cap and twists the bottom of the tube until a Lucille Ball-orange-shade of lipstick pops its ugly little pointed head.

“Here, Lexie,” she says. “Try this.”

“No, really. I don’t think it’s my color,” I say, but she grabs my jaw with her daggered hand and dabs the stick across my lips.

“Blot, blot,” she says when she’s done and smacks her lips as she wants me to.

I see Marcus cringe when he looks at me across the table.

“Doesn’t she pop?” Brenda asks Dad and Marcus.

The waiter brings our dishes, and I grab the white linen napkin from my lap and wipe the orange smear off my lips.

The rest of the meal is uneventful. Marcus talks about the sixty-nine Pontiac GTO he’s restoring. Dad talks about his turbo-charged 2004 Mustang convertible, and I can almost smell the exhaust fumes and burning rubber from all the flexing of their muscles.

Dad suggests we come with them to the Regatta Bar.
“It’s the Diva of Boston’s jazz clubs,” he says.

I’m kind of tired, but Marcus is up for it, so I figure what the hell. Maybe we’ll have our own fun on the dance floor.

The club is just down the hallway, and we get a seat at a table in the back. The band’s still setting up, and Dad says thank God we got here early enough to sit down.

“Give it another fifteen minutes,” he says, “and the place’ll be packed like Vlasics in a pickle jar.”

We order drinks, and even though I order Chardonnay, Dad tells the waitress to bring me a Harvey Wallbanger.

“It’ll put hair on your chest,” he says.

He should only know.

Brenda leans over and whispers in my ear. “Your honey’s a doll,” she says.

I just smile, nod my head, and think—my honey? The band starts playing and right away Brenda’s pushing back her chair, shaking her hips like a blender of Margaritas.

“C’mon, Sweetie,” she says to my dad.

Dad scrapes his chair back from the table, then he bebops over to Brenda with his fingers snapping, and his head wobbling like Stevie Wonder.

“Ain’t she a pistol?” he says to Marcus and me before he hightails it to the dance floor behind her.

The waitress brings our drinks. The Harvey Wallbanger tastes sort of like a Screwdriver but with a splash of Galliano in it. It goes down way too easy, and before I know it, I’m done with mine and reaching over to grab Dad’s. Marcus scoots his chair
closer to mine. My fingers and toes feel a little numb, even my lips feel as if they’ve been anesthetized by a shot of Novocain. I make a joke to Marcus that maybe the drink’s named after some guy named Harvey who had a few too many of these and walked into a wall. He thinks that’s funny and puts his warm hand on my thigh. Maybe it’s the woman scatting to the bluesy number and the drummer’s muffled sweep across the snare, or the whine of the trumpet, the riff of the sax, and the vibrations of the bass player’s strumming in my chest that make me feel all dreamy inside. Okay, maybe it’s the Harvey Wallbangers. When I look at Marcus and he smiles at me, I feel as if anything is possible between us.

Dad’s sweating when he comes back to the table ten minutes later.

“I need a beer,” he says, scanning the back of the room for the waitress. “Guess I’ll go to the bar. Need anything?”

Marcus shakes his head and looks at me.

“Another Banger’d be cool,” I say.

The band shifts gears and plays a Latin jazz piece. Brenda comes back to the table and dangles her hand in front of Marcus.

“C’mon, handsome,” she says, flashing her Hollywood-white smile. “You look like you could salsa a girl ‘round the dance floor.”

Marcus waves her off but she grabs his hand, and he smiles as she tries to yank him out of his seat. He stands. They’re still holding hands, and Marcus shrugs his shoulders for my benefit, no doubt, as the two of them work their way to the dance floor. I watch them wiggle their hips for a second or two but lose sight of them when they mix with other couples.
Dad’s got a couple of beers between the thick fingers of one hand and my Harvey Wallbanger in his other when he returns. He sets the drinks down on the table, and points to the empty chairs.

“They’re on the dance floor,” I say.

“Come on,” he says, nodding his head in the direction of the music. “Let’s you and the old man samba.”

He looks like a pissed-off motorist the way he obscenely pumps his arms.

“Salsa, Dad,” I say. “And no thanks.” I slurp my drink half way down.

He gives me a pained expression as if I just hurt his feelings, so I give in and let him take my hand so we can weave through the tables to the dance floor up ahead. Dad doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing, and I try to lead him for a while, but his feet want to cha-cha while his arms do the polka. I catch a glimpse of Marcus and Brenda dipping to the salsa beat. Marcus executes an overhead hand sweep, which twirls Brenda around, then he cuddles her in a side-by-side position while Dad’s spaghetti arms spin me like an out-of-control ballerina. At one point, we get close to the band members and the bass player winks at me. At first I think he’s flirting, but when Dad grabs my other hand and twists me like we’re dancing to his favorite Chubby Checker tune, I realize it’s probably a pity wink. Finally, the song ends, and Dad and I work our way back to the table. We hear the singer tell the crowd that the band’s taking a break. I look for Marcus, but he’s not among the people returning to their tables. Dad orders another round from the waitress even though I tell him that it’s getting late and I better head on home.

“I’m going to look for Marcus,” I say to Dad.

“Probably went to the head,” he says.
When I push through the club’s doors, the cool air in the corridor feels good against my damp skin. I walk in the direction of the men’s room, but Marcus is not around. I decide to use the ladies’ room, which is around the bend. I figure Marcus will be back at the table by the time I’m done, then we can head on home. The only stall in use is the handicap one. I use the first bathroom and appreciate the paper toilet seat covers in nice places like this because I don’t have to squat over the toilet, which I wouldn’t trust myself to do tonight since my legs are so wobbly—like walking-in-a-tinghy-in-choppy-water wobbly. When I wash my hands, I see in the mirror that the crack in the corner of my mouth is gone, but a blob of mascara smudges my cheek. I go back into the stall to break a piece of toilet tissue off the roll, and when I come out, I notice Brenda’s black stilettos beneath the handicap bathroom door. Since I’m leaving, I call out to her and say goodbye. She doesn’t answer so I’m wondering if she’s ill or something, and I knock on the door and ask if she’s okay. Still no answer. I look below and see her shoes, but now I realize that her feet aren’t in them and I should be able to see her leather pants, but I don’t.

I think about getting Dad, because maybe she’s passed out in the corner of the stall or slumped over the toilet. I’m about to knock on the door again, but then I hear some thudding against the wall, and I realize that there’s movement in there. Someone grunts from the space, a low guttural male groan, and then I think I hear Brenda moan. The thumping continues, and now the wheels start churning in my head. Something’s rotten in Boston, I think. An image of Marcus kissing Chiquita Banana the night of the Halloween party comes to mind, followed by the time I saw him driving around in his jeep with some random chick. Oh, and how about the punker with the macaroni-and-
cheese-colored hair? Wait a minute. That was after we broke up—but still—there’s a pattern of dirty dog behavior going on here. Who am I kidding? I saw the way the Marcus and Brenda danced—hips too close together, fingers fanning across butts, lingering a little too long in those side-by-side cuddle moves.

A visual of Brenda up against the bathroom wall comes to mind. Her pants are tossed to the side; her legs are wrapped around Marcus’ hips, her arms around his neck. Maybe she’s broken one of her goddamn nails in the heat of passion. Marcus, on the other hand, probably has his slacks around his knees; one arm’s wrapped around Brenda’s lower back, the other arm’s under one of her thighs. I see the sweat on his brow, and the fervor in his eyes changes his tropical green color to a deeper hue—like raw seaweed.

The rhythmic knocking against the bathroom wall gets louder. I can’t stand it. Why did I let him do this to me again? That’s my stepmother in there! I bite on my index finger and pace. What should I do? What should I do? I start to hiccup, tears run down my cheeks, and I sniff back the snot that drips from my nose. I think I’m hyperventilating because I can’t catch my breath. Oh God! I’ve got to get out of here. I run from the bathroom thinking, you mother fucker, Marcus!

I’m out in the corridor headed back to the bar, breathing a little bit better in the cool hallway air. My hiccupping’s now about as regular as labor pains. It dawns on me that I’ve got to tell Dad what’s going on. I don’t know if I can handle that. I wipe the tears from my face with the heel of my hand and see a man and a woman look at me as they pass. They probably think I had a silly fight with my boyfriend or something. What are you looking at? I want to ask them. My boyfriend’s boinking my stepmother, I almost
shout to them, and now I have to go tell my dad who thinks his fucking wife is the answer to his sprouting liver spots. I slip into the little phone alcove and hold my breath so my hiccups will go away. Damn, I’d like to see Marcus talk his way out of this one. Give him a second chance after he dumped my ass. Ha! Just who does he think he is? I don’t need this shit. Hell, I’ve got Duncan now. Hiccup. I bet Brenda and Marcus think they’re going to get away with it. Well, come to think of it, I can do something about that. Damn straight. I’ll show Marcus that I’m no fool, and Brenda’s going to know that Dad’s no chump. I’ll expose their exposed asses. Once Dad finds out, he’ll buy Bimbo Brenda a one-way, hiccup, ticket back to her Sedona spa where she can knead the muscles on hairy men’s backs until all her nails break and her fingers are nubs. Now I’m pissed. I head back to the bathroom feeling charged. I’ll show the two-timing nymphos who’s in charge around here. Hiccup.

The black stilettos are still there. I go to the adjoining bathroom stall and push open the door, then stand on the toilet seat so I can peek over the wall. No sooner am I perched on the toilet seat, when the automatic flusher goes off, scaring the hell out of me. My knee buckles and my right foot slips off the seat and plunges into the cold toilet water. The flusher goes off again with my foot still in the bowl, and this time, the bottom of the tassels on my dress gets sucked along with the draining water. I have to tug at the material to yank it back out. I pull my foot out of the toilet, shake it, and hoist myself back on the seat determined to find them in the act. I have to stand on my tippy-toes and do a chin-up to peep over the wall. But when I look, no one’s there. No one. Not Brenda, not Marcus, not the, hiccup, black stilettos. Damn! They’ve must’ve bolted when they heard the toilet flushing. I climb down from the seat, push open my stall door, and look
around. No one’s in the bathroom either, but as I leave, hell bent on catching them on their way back to the table, an older woman in a gray double breasted pantsuit with a diamond brooch on her lapel comes into the room. She smiles at me. Water sloshes between my toes inside my pantyhose. As I approach her and the exit, I see her eyes drop to the dripping tassels of my dress. My footstep makes squishy sounds when I pass her.

I hurry back to the bar and see that a group of strangers are sitting at our table. I scan the dance floor, but few people are dancing to the piped-in music that’s replaced the breaking band. Dad, Brenda, and Marcus are nowhere in sight. I head out to the lobby of the hotel and look around. I don’t recognize anyone. A few people are gathered on the walk outside of the lobby. I go through the revolving door and the cold air makes me gasp. My hiccups are gone. Marcus is standing out there smoking a cigarette.

“Where’s Brenda?” I ask him. He stands there looking at me, not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle in his pants. He’s got his jacket on. How’d he get that so quickly? I wonder.

“It’s freezing out here,” he says, and flicks the ashes of his cigarette to the concrete walk. “Where’s your coat, Lexie?”

Don’t give me this consideration crap, I’m thinking. I’m on to you.

“Where is she?” I ask him again, certain that I’m not letting go of this. I’ll force him to tell me what he’s been doing. What does he think I am? Stupid? He takes a drag of his cigarette, then exhales. A wisp of smoke thins into the night air. I’m wondering how the hell he can be so nonchalant?

“Who?” he asks.

“She’s with your dad,” he says.

“Where?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Up in their room, I guess,” he says. “Brenda said something about a migraine.”

“Oh sure. Now she’s got a headache. Isn’t that convenient? Didn’t have one a minute ago, did she?” I ask, and figure this is where he’ll come clean. Spill your guts, Marcus—you coward. He furrows his brow as if he doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

“My dad wouldn’t just leave without saying goodbye,” I say to him. “He was upset, wasn’t he?”

Marcus shrugs again. “Don’t think so. He said something about calling you in the morning.”

Marcus walks over to the hotel’s chromed ashtray and snuffs his cigarette out in the sand. None of this makes any sense. I feel like an actress who hasn’t rehearsed the scene with her leading man. Where’s the fucking script? I’m all mixed up!

“Go get your coat,” he says. “I’ll hail us a taxi.”

“How long have you been out here?” I ask him.

“Long enough to have a couple of cigarettes,” he says. He whistles to a cab that’s parked at the base of the hotel driveway. The taxi heads our way. “Go ahead. I’ll hold the cab for us.”

I go back into the lobby and get my coat from the bar. On the way out, I pick up one of those white courtesy phones and ask the front desk to connect me to my dad’s room. It rings and rings and rings. Finally, my dad picks up.

“What’s holding up our chocolate-covered strawberries?” my dad says.

“Hi doll,” he says. “You and Marcus decide to hang around a bit longer?”

“Dad,” I say. “When I was in the bathroom . . .”

“Be right there, Cupcake,” Dad calls out.

“Dad?” I say.

“Listen, Lexie,” he says. “I promised Brenda a back rub. You and Marcus have a great time. Call me, okay?”

The telephone’s drone lets me know that Dad’s disconnected our call. There wasn’t a hint of anger in his voice. Dad’s not pissed, and Marcus isn’t acting guilty. Is there a conspiracy going on or have I invented this whole mess?

Marcus is waiting in the back seat of the cab. I get in, pull the door shut, and give the cab my address. I tell Marcus that I’m tired and going home to sleep—alone. Maybe this whole Duncan/Marcus tug-of-war is too much for me. Maybe Harvey’s been banging on the wall of my brain. My head’s too fuzzy to figure it out.

“Say it’s not so,” he says, and spreads my tassels with his fingers. “Whoa!” he says, and draws his hand away. “How’d your tassels get all wet? You fall in the toilet or something?”

I can’t even trust my own instincts. Was some other guy cheating on his girlfriend in the handicap bathroom of the Charles Hotel with a woman in black stilettos? Marcus tugs me closer to him and I hear the rip of tassels caught in the cab door. I’m really sleepy and maybe a little bit crazy. I put my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, imagining the tassels of my dress whipping in the wind like feathers on a bird.
Chapter Seven

The next morning, I’m late for work. Dr. Gregory’s not too thrilled to say the least. I agree to sort through the lab studies over my lunch break to get us back on schedule. My head is clogged, and I don’t know if it’s because of my kick-ass hangover or if I’m really getting sick. Come to think of it, my glands are swollen and I think I have a fever. I go into one of the exam rooms and stick the electronic thermometer in my ear. While I’m waiting for it to register my temperature with a little beep, I go over to the mirror above the sink, open my mouth wide, and stick out my tongue so I can check my tonsils to see if they’re red and inflamed. Candice opens the door to let a little girl and her mother into the room. In the mirror, I see them looking at the pistol-shaped thermometer that’s shoved in my ear.

“Close your mouth,” Candice says to me. “You’re going to scare the kid.”

By three o’clock, I’m listless and sneezing all over the patients’ charts. I’m not on my deathbed, so Dr. Gregory doesn’t send me home like any boss with a human heart might do. He puts me to work in his office auditing charts for the upcoming HMO review so I don’t infect the kids. I get through a stack of twelve records doing a pretty good job of deciphering the doctor’s handwriting. I’m tired. And achy. My lower back hurts from sitting in this straight-back chair. I look over at Dr. Gregory’s cushiony black leather executive chair and figure, why should he mind if I finish up the chart review sitting in
his chair? It’s not as if he’s using it right now. I get up and plop in his seat. Hey, this thing’s like a rocking chair. I swivel to the right so I’m facing the wall of diplomas and certificates. Look at that. Dr. Gregory’s got a Certificate of Appreciation from the Ronald McDonald House for volunteering his services. So he isn’t a block of ice after all.

There’s a lever on the side of the chair, and I yank on it and the back of the chair reclines and the footrest pops up. Cool. I reach over the desk to get one of the charts. Might as well make myself comfy if I’ve got to stay here. Hey, I remember this boy, I think, looking at the chart. He’s the fourteen-year old that came in with left testicular torsion. His poor scrotum was the size of a baseball, and I thought he’d go through the roof when Dr. Gregory squeezed his balls. We got him seen by an urologist that afternoon. Okay, so the HMO can’t rule that as an inappropriate referral. God, I feel like crap. I yawn, stretch, and close the chart. My eyes sting so I shut them just for a sec.

I peek over the bathroom stall and see Brenda up against the far wall. She’s got a red leather mini skirt up around her waist, her black lace panties are looped around her thigh like a bride’s garter, and one black-stilettoed foot is on top of the toilet seat. She’s shouting, “Do me, Marcus!” Her eyes are closed so she doesn’t see me watching. “You’re hung like a race horse,” she shouts. “Faster! Harder!” Marcus is going to town, and I think it’s peculiar that I notice his technique of balancing Brenda against the wall while he bangs the hell out of her. For some reason, I think about that stupid little test of coordination where you rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time. Or was it pat your tummy and rub your head? I don’t remember, but Marcus is definitely coordinated. Brenda opens her eyes and looks at me. “Notice his rhythm,” she says to me. I nod my head and watch. Marcus’ head spins on his shoulders as if he’s possessed by the
devil. “This is all your fault,” he says. “I wouldn’t need to fuck your stepmother if you
gave it up once in a while.” His forked tongue comes out about ten inches, then he’s back
in action. I watch them go at it for a while. “See how I rock my hips to welcome his
thundering thrusts?” Brenda says to me like some Harlequin Romance chick. I write this
down on a small notepad because it might be important. “Now you try it from there,” she
says to me, then closes her eyes and ooohs and ahhhs.

I rock my pelvis up and down.

“Lexie!”

I flutter my eyelids to the sound of my name and pump my hips. “See? I’m
welcoming his thundering thrusts,” I say.

“Well, go welcome them somewhere else,” says Candice.

“What?” I open my eyes as Candice grabs the lever, and my chair bolts forward in
an upright position.

“Christ, Lexie,” she says. “If Dr. Gregory knew you were masturbating in his
chair, you’d be history.”

“Oh my God,” I say, cupping my face in my hands. “I fell asleep.” I look at my
watch, then get out of the chair. Marcus is still spinning in my head. “Where’s Dr.
Gregory?”

“He’s in with the Roseola kid,” she says, picking a chart up off the floor.

My watch says five-thirty. “It’s late,” I say.

“Yeah, well, we’re short-staffed,” she says, and arches her eyebrows. “Because
you’re sick, remember?”
“I am sick,” I say. “Feel me. I’ve got a fever.” I step into her space so she can place the back of her hand against my forehead.

“Why don’t you go home?” she says, stepping away from me. “This is the last patient. I’ll tell Dr. Gregory you took some charts to work on.”

After I leave the office, I take the T and get off at my stop. I’m walking up my block when Olivia calls me on my cell phone.

“I’m so out of the loop,” she says. “Tell me about Duncan. How’d it go with the fan and all?”

“I’m sick, Olivia,” I say, turning into my walk.

“Define sick,” she says.

“Really sick,” I say, and climb the stairs to my place. “I’m burning up and my head feels detached like a balloon on a string. It hurts when I swallow.”

“You probably caught something from one of the kids,” she says. “Are you in bed?”

“Almost,” I say, and slip the key in the lock of my apartment door.

“Need anything?” she asks.

I kick off my shoes and head for the bedroom. “I’ll call you later,” I say, and hang up. My teeth are chattering and I’ve got goose bumps. Even the hair on my legs hurts. I wrap my full-length, terry-cloth bathrobe over my scrubs, climb under my down comforter, and sleep.

I don’t know how long I’ve slept, but my room is dark when I wake up. I’m surprised when I look at the clock and see that it’s only eight. My mouth tastes as if I
swallowed a dirty sock. I get up, pee, and brush my teeth, letting the water run in the sink until I’m done. I’m definitely calling in sick tomorrow, I think, as I drag myself back to the bedroom.

I take off my robe and scrubs and open my dresser drawer to get my flannel pajamas. I’ve got the pants on and I’m buttoning my top when I hear a noise in my apartment. It might be coming from Skunk’s place, I think. But when I hold my breath and listen again, it sure sounds as if someone’s messing in my kitchen. I look around for something to grab. I should call the police, I think. Where’s my phone? I look in my purse and across the top of my dresser. Did I leave it in the living room? In the kitchen? Generally I charge my phone in the cradle on my nightstand, but it’s not there. I pick up my boot. What am I going to do? Clobber him over the head with it? I toss my boot on the bed. There’s nothing around to defend myself with. I know, I’ll jab him with a pair of scissors. They’re in my sewing kit. Which, I remember, is in the linen closet in the hall. I hear some rattling in the kitchen. What’s he looking for in there? I wonder. God knows I have nothing worth stealing. I sneeze, then freeze. Oh God! What if he heard me? I pick up a hairpin. When he comes into my bedroom, I’ll . . . I’ll . . . what? Poke him in the eye? I drop it on the dresser. Maybe I should climb out onto the fire escape. Could I get the window open, climb out, and down the stairs before he gets me? Just my luck he’ll run out the front door and be waiting for me at the bottom of the fire escape. Maybe if I’m real quiet, he’ll just go away. Take what you want, I’m thinking. Take my mother’s second-marriage wedding china. I don’t care. She sure as hell won’t mind. Okay, now there are footsteps coming down the hall. I hide in my closet and close the louvered bi-fold doors behind me. He’s in my room. I can hear him breathing. I feel a sneeze coming
on. I grab a sweater from the shelf and bury my face in it so the sneeze is muffled. Is he
gone? I don’t hear anything. I crack the door and peek into my room. Nothing. I’m
walking out of the closet into my room at the same moment that Cooper comes from my
bathroom.

“Whoa,” he says backing away when he sees me. “You’re scary when you’re
sick.”

My scream is a second delayed. I smack him.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Sorry,” he says. “I thought maybe you drowned in the
tub or something.”

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Olivia made you soup,” he says, and points to the tray on my bed. I see steam
coming from the bowl. “I figured you’d be sleeping so I let myself in.”

“Where’s Olivia?” I ask him.

“She’s got her Tai Chi class tonight,” he says. “So I’m the delivery man. Do I get
a tip?”

“Yeah. Creeping up on people in their own homes makes them very cranky,” I
say.

“So climb back under the covers and we can play doctor,” he says.

I smile and smack him again.

He rubs his upper arm. “Is this any way to treat a do-gooder?” he asks. “I’m
supposed to get major points for this mercenary kindness.”

“Okay. I’ll give you points for bringing the soup, but you lose some for scaring
the crap out of me.” I sneeze into a tissue.
“I wasn’t looking for points from you,” Cooper says. “I’m working on a blow job from Olivia. Brownie points help. Besides, she’s on the rag, so it’s hummer week.” He smiles.

“Gross, Coop,” I say. “You’re supposed to make me feel better, not make me puke.”

“That only happens if you gag,” he says.

I shake my head, climb back into bed, and prop the pillows behind my head so I can sit up.

“You women are all alike,” he says, and puts the tray on my lap. “You’re all for swallowing Spermin’ Herman when we’re dating, but after you’ve snared us, it’s like we asked you to eat shit and die. And forget about tooting our skin flute in the morning.”

“You know,” I say, “Just because it’s awake when you get up doesn’t mean we have to kiss it good morning.”

Cooper laughs. I take the spoon off my tray and swirl the soup with it.

“What kind of soup is this?” I ask him. “There are chunks of white cheese floating around.”

“It’s Dou Chi or Dumb Chi or something like that,” he says. “It’s a Chinese cold remedy.” He points to the lump of white that’s on my spoon. “I think that’s tofu.” He scrunches up his nose. “Or maybe it’s fermented soybean.”

“I’m not going to try it,” I say. “You try it.”

“Whaddaya think? This is a Mikey commercial?” he asks.

I make a face but put a spoonful of soup in my mouth.

“Swallow,” he says. “It’s high in protein.”
Cooper keeps me company while I finish the soup. It really doesn’t have much flavor, but the warm broth feels good against my raw throat. He tells me things could be worse.

“Take the camels at the zoo,” he says. “They’ve got this funky parasite. Today I had to shoot them a vaccine through a needle injected by a CO2 cartridge from a spear gun.”

“Ouch,” I say.

“It hurt me more than it hurt them,” he says. “Switching topics though, I see you’ve got your fan up.”

I look up at the fan and nod. “He did a good job, didn’t he?” I ask.

“What do I know?” Coop says. “I can hose down lions in heat, but I could fit what I know about fans inside . . .” He looks around the room. “What do you call that thing tailors put on the tip of their finger so they don’t prick themselves?”

“A thimble?”

“You got it.”

I move the tray next to me on the bed and hug my knees.

“So are you hittin’ it?” he asks.

“Duncan?”

“Fan. Duncan. C’mon, stay with me now. God knows the pendulum of love swings back and forth in Lexie’s heart,” he says, making a sweeping back and forth movement with his hand.

I smile. “I like him,” I say. “We’re supposed to double-date with you guys tomorrow night at Johnnie D’s.”
“We are?”

“Didn’t Olivia tell you?”

He shakes his head. “But that’s cool. Let’s see if he passes my litmus test.”

“Oh my God,” I say. “I just remembered. I don’t have his number, and what if I’m still too sick to go out? I can’t be hacking all over him. What if he just shows up here at seven?” I look at Cooper as if he has the answer. He shrugs.

“Think positive thoughts,” he says, and points to the empty bowl. “You’ve been cured by Olivia’s soup.”

“One bowl?”

“There’s a whole container in the fridge,” he says. “Bon appétit.”

There’s a part of me that wants to tell Cooper about my suspicions last night. There’s another part that wants the whole thing to just go away. If only I could rewind, then delete. But I can’t do either, and my circuits are overloaded. I think I might burst like a dropped watermelon, if I don’t tell someone about Marcus and Brenda.

“I think Marcus fucked my stepmother,” I say to Cooper.

“Holy crap!” he says, and nearly falls off the bed.

I tell him everything that I can remember.

“So you were standing on the toilet?” he asks.

I nod.

“Does that mean you were high on pot?”

“What?”

“You know, high on the toilet—high on pot?”

Groan. “Give me a break.”
“Okay, then. Was he porking her in the bathroom or not?”

“Well, here’s the thing,” I say, grabbing a tissue. I blow my nose, then take a sip of the bottled water I keep on my nightstand. “I might’ve had a few Harvey Wallbangers last night.”

“So you were plotzed,” Cooper says.

I nod. “But I know I saw her black stilettos.”

“Okay, so those are the kind with the spiky heels, right?” Cooper asks.

I nod again.

“And how many women were walking around the Charles Hotel with black shoes with spiky heels?” he asks.

I cock my head and look at him.

“Were you wearing black heels?”

“Yes,” I say. “But not fuck-me heels.” I spread my thumb and pointer finger apart until the web of skin between them is stretched. I want Cooper to see the kind of heel I’m talking about.

“And no one else was wearing black shoes with I-wanna-get-fucked heels?”

I think about this, and a mental video of women strutting the halls of the Charles Hotel with black stilettos plays in my head.

“Oh God,” I say, and bury my face in my hands. I look up at Cooper. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Look, all I’m saying is that it’s possible it wasn’t Marcus in the bathroom,” he says. “You know I’m not the guy’s biggest fan, but on the same token, shouldn’t he get his day in court?”
I don’t know what to think. I want to come right out and ask Marcus the next time I see him, but if I’m way off base, he’s going to think I’m schitzo.

Someone shouts hello from the front door.

“It’s Olivia,” Cooper says.

Olivia pops into the bedroom wrapped like the Michelin Tire Man in her quilted gray coat. She hands me a large Styrofoam cup.

“How’s the patient?” she asks Cooper.

“Hallucinating,” he says, and looks at me.

I remove the lid from the cup. “What’s this?” I ask Olivia.

“Ginger tea,” she says taking off her coat and scarf. She’s wearing her Tai Chi vinyl blue sweatpants. Her matching shirt has frog buttons and a mandarin collar. “It’s another cold remedy,” she says. Olivia reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a baggie. “I brought you some garlic cloves, too. Mash one tonight and swallow it with a glass of water.”

I make a face. “Get real, Olivia,” I say.

Cooper laughs.

“Go ahead,” she says. “Doubt me. But all the health experts claim that a garlic clove a day . . .”

“What?” I ask. “Keeps the doctor away?”

“I swallow one every night,” she says. “And never get sick.”

“So you’ll swallow garlic,” Cooper says. “But you won’t swallow . . .”
Olivia puts her hand over his mouth. He grabs her across his lap and tickles her ribs. She falls back on my bed, and Cooper leans into her.

“Stop,” she says, but she’s laughing.

I watch the two of them play. This is what I want, I think. And why can’t I have it? When Marcus pops in my head, I think “sex.” Just looking at Marcus can take my breath away. With Duncan, it’s . . . well, it’s sex, but it’s other stuff too, stuff that leads up to sex, like dinner, and movies, and dates. Real dates, and handholding, tickling, and kisses goodnight. And ice skating. Well, maybe not ice skating, but normal Olivia-and-Cooper-couple stuff. Yes, I think I can catch my breath with Duncan.

Olivia sits up but stays on Cooper’s lap. “How was the soup?” she asks.

“Yummy,” I say, and Coop sticks his tongue out to the side and rolls his eyes at me.

“So are you crushin’ on Duncan?” she asks. “What’s the story?”

“She’s working it because we’re double-dating tomorrow night. End of that story,” Cooper says. “Now ask her about Marcus.”


I give Cooper a dirty look, and quite frankly, I don’t have the energy to go over it again. I sip on the tea and wave at Cooper to go ahead since he’s like an old fisherman’s wife spreading stories through the village.

Cooper gives Olivia the Reader’s Digest version of the story, but I can tell by the way he slants it that he’s taken Marcus’ side.

“He’s guilty,” Olivia says.

Nice to know we have equal representation here, I think.
“Well, he is,” she says. “Just look at his prior history. Why should the fact that this woman is Lexie’s stepmother keep the primal-testosterone-pumping Neanderthal from acting on impulse?”

“Now tell us how you really feel,” I say to Olivia.

“Olivia, it’s all circumstantial,” Cooper says like a good defense lawyer.

“His record speaks for itself,” Olivia says. “And you’re just defending him because he’s male.”

“Hey, I’m just telling it like it is,” he says with his outstretched arms and palms facing up. “If Lexie caught him in the act, then I’d say—fuck him.”

“Great choice of words, Einstein,” Olivia says, getting off his lap.

Cooper shakes his head.

“Listen, guys,” I say. “This is not your battle.” I sneeze three times. “It’s mine, and I’ll figure it out. Just don’t fight, okay?”

Cooper shrugs and Olivia stands away from him with her arms folded across her chest.

“C’mon you two,” I say. “Kiss and make up.”

Cooper pulls Olivia on his lap, and the tickling starts all over again. The two of them kiss and slobber for two minutes.

“Okay, enough,” I say. “Go home, or do I have to hose you down?”

On Wednesday, I stay in bed. I pass on the garlic but eat three more bowls of soup and sleep most of the day. About two-thirty in the afternoon, I’m feeling pretty good. Kudos to Olivia.
I watch my old time favorite DVD, *Sleepless in Seattle* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. The movie’s almost to the part where Meg tells what’s-his-name, the guy she’s engaged to, that she has to go to the top of the Empire State Building to meet Tom. Her fiancé takes it so well. Doesn’t want to be second fiddle, he says. Okay, now here’s the best part of the whole movie. Tom finds his kid on the roof of the building, and they leave down the elevator, then Meg gets off the elevator a few minutes later and is looking around thinking she’s missed her one opportunity to meet this guy, and then she picks up the little boy’s book bag and walks to the elevator just as the doors are opening, and then who the heck’s calling me? The sound’s coming from under my covers. I look at the incoming number. It’s Marcus. I let the refrain of *Für Elise* play again, not sure if or when I want to talk with him. Curiosity gets the best of me, so I push the green talk-button to hear what he’s got to say.

“Hi,” I say, and watch Meg and Tom and the little boy get back in the elevator.

“Hey, Babe,” he says. “How goes it?”

Tom takes Meg’s hand. Happy endings are sappy, I think. I ask Marcus to hold on while I wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

“I’m home from work today,” I say. “Kind of sick.” I’m hoping this will hold off any talk about his coming over.

“Yeah? Taking anything?” he asks me.

“Just some Tylenol and soup Olivia made for me,” I say.

“Oh yeah,” he says. “Watch out for the eye of the newt. It might be a bit slippery going down.”
I know he’s making fun of Olivia, but I’ve got to wonder where this conversation’s going.

“Guess you can’t come out and play then,” he says.

“Not a good night,” I say.

“Too bad,” he says. “Want me to come over and take your temperature?”

I muster a half-hearted laugh. “Think I’m going to sleep in a little while.”

“Okay then,” he says. “Last night was fun, huh? Your dad’s a cool dude.”

“Yeah,” I say. “He’s okay.”

“And Brenda,” he says.

Okay, here we go.

“She’s a handful,” he says, then laughs. “Two handfuls.”

“Spare me the details,” I say.

“What?”

“Just tell me if . . .” I can’t get the words out. I want to ask, did you bop Brenda in the women’s bathroom? But the words choke in my throat.

“Hey,” he says. “You there, Babe?”

I listen for a while to his breathing. I know he thinks we’ve lost our connection. I wait until I hear the dial tone, then hang up my phone. Maybe he won’t call back, I think, but then the phone rings right away. I drop it on the bed like it’s a bomb about to explode or something. I swear, I’m changing the damn ring tone on my cell. Für Elise is beginning to haunt me. The song goes on and on. I feel like such a chicken shit right now. One part of me wants to know what’s going on, but the other part wants to avoid hearing, Yeah, Babe. Your stepmommy was a great lay. Finally, the refrain quits and the phone’s
just an instrument, not some evil messenger. I scroll through the ring tones, pausing at the
*Waltz of the Flowers*, when my cell beep-beeps in my hand. That’s my cue that Marcus
left me a message. I can’t handle hearing what he has to say right now, so I head for the
kitchen to nuke some more soup.

I shower around six and the steam really helps to clear my head. Marcus hasn’t
called back again, and I’m hoping he thinks I’ve gone to sleep.

Seeing Duncan again has got me psyched. I decide to wear something simple
tonight: black slacks and boots with a white man-tailored blouse. I stick some extra
tissues in my purse and wait for him on my living room couch. I’m sticking my hair
behind my right ear, when I realize that my gold hoop earring is missing. The stick-
thingy must have dislodged from the hole-jobby. I follow my tracks back to the bedroom
and look everywhere. I’m on my hands and knees fanning my palms across the carpet
when I hear knocking at the door. I give a quick look around the floor one more time,
then get up off my knees and go to answer the door.

Duncan’s wearing black pants and his navy blue parka. I can see the neck and
collar of his white shirt so I know that he’s got on a similar button-down as mine. Great.
We’ll look like two halves of a Klondike bar, I think.

“Hey, want me to hook you up with a doorbell?” he asks.

“Might not be a bad idea, huh?” I say, and study his face for a moment.
Something’s different. His nutmeg eyes still look like the speckled marbles I played with
as a child. But he looks younger tonight. I don’t know, more clean-cut. His stubble’s
gone. That’s it. He’s shaved, and now his face is as smooth as a baby’s patootie.

“Been knocking long?” I ask. I move away from the door and he comes inside.
“Not really,” he says looking around. “Your friends here?”

“Coop and Olivia are going to meet us there.”

He nods. “Ready to go?”

“First I have to change my earrings,” I tug on my naked earlobe. “I lost my hoop somewhere.”

Duncan reaches over and touches my breast pocket. “You mean this one?” he asks, holding my earring between two fingers. “It was hooked on your pocket.”

“Thanks, David Copperfield,” I say, and stick the earring back in my lobe. I put on my jacket and gloves, and Duncan and I leave to go to Johnnie D’s. We’re lucky to get a parking spot down the block from the place. It’s pretty chilly outside. My nose starts to run, so I’m happy to get inside where it’s warm. We stand for a second in the lobby area. Scanning the bar, I don’t see Olivia and Cooper around. The place is filled with the last of happy hour stragglers. Duncan follows me as I lead the way into the larger central room where the tables and dance floor are. He keeps his hand on my shoulder as we weave through the crowd.

There’s a dull roar in the dining room—everyone’s talking, dishes are clanking, glasses are clinking, silverware’s scraping. Later, when the band starts, the center dining tables will be moved to make room for dancing. I see Olivia waving her hand at us from across the room.

“There they are,” I say to Duncan.

We get to the table, and I introduce Duncan to Cooper and Olivia. Cooper stands and Duncan shakes his hand, then Duncan reaches over the table to greet Olivia. The
waiter comes over to us and asks Duncan and me what we want to drink. We order a couple of beers.

“Might as well kill off the rest of the germs,” I say.

The Amazon Rainforest is sprawled across Coop’s shirt. He cheers me with his mug of beer. “If the germs don’t die, then the brain cells will.”

“God, that’s profound,” Olivia says to him. “Feel better?” she asks me.

“Yeah,” I say, then turn to explain to Duncan. “I had a fever and the sniffles.” He scoots his chair away from mine.

“Hey,” I say. “It’s not the plague.”

He laughs and slides back next to me. There’s some small talk about what everyone does at work, and Duncan asks the question I know Cooper hates.

“What’s it like working at a zoo?”

“Zooey,” he says, and sips his beer. “No, really, it’s cool. Today, I had a little problem with a hornbill.”

“That’s a ground bird,” Olivia says. “Looks like a giant turkey.” Cooper nods. “This bird gets excited whenever she sees me and pants like a dog. Kind of like Olivia does when I come home.”

Olivia shakes her head. Duncan laughs.

“Don’t encourage him,” she says.

“So the bird’s snapping her huge beak, gnawing at my ankles. All in play, you know. I can usually divert her attention by giving her a toy or something. But today, she wants all of me. Kind of like . . .” He looks at Olivia. “So I’m spreading seed and
shoveling poop and tending to my daily routine stuff, and the bird’s dancing around me, nipping at my coat, sticking her nose in the pocket of my pants. Kind of . . .”

“Don’t even say it,” Olivia says, holding up her hand.

“Okay, so this new worker comes into the pen.”

Coop starts to laugh, and it’s contagious because we’re all giggling now.

“Then what?” I gesture for him to continue.

“This guy’s six-foot three, maybe. Weighs two-seventy or so. Played lineman for U Mass. He saunters into the pen like it’s a petting zoo or something. Hey, Cooper, he says. That a Southern Ground Hornbill? he asks. I tell him, Yep, sure is. But she doesn’t know you yet, so you might want to back off some. Well, the player keeps coming, and the bird stops chewing on my laces, because she sees the guy, and then wham! She’s hauling ass after him, snapping her bill like she means to tear him to pieces. The guy scrambles for the gate, but the hornbill’s got the inside track closest to the fence, and the poor guy can’t cross the pen to get out, so he’s running in circles with the bird chomping at his ass.”

Cooper’s practically crying in his beer. We’re all laughing, too, because he’s been gesturing and bobbing at the table, role-playing the worker, then the frantic bird.

“You didn’t help him?” I ask.

Cooper shakes his head. “I never mess with a pissed off female.”

“So what happened?” Duncan asks.

Cooper waves at the air. “She got bored with the guy after a while and came back to me.”

“Because you’re so irresistible,” Olivia says.
“Right,” Cooper says, and tousles her hair. “And it also proves that you females can’t handle two males at the same time.”

I’m not touching that comment, I think.

“A guy, on the other hand,” Cooper says. “Right, Duncan? Knows what to do with a couple of women.”

Duncan laughs. “I think you’re a dead man walking on that one.”


Thank God, the waiter comes back, because everyone stops talking about two women and two men and who can handle what. The whole direction of the conversation’s driving me batty. We order some chicken wings and potato skins to munch on and get a pitcher of beer. Olivia asks Duncan how long he’s been working at Home Depot, and Duncan tells us that the job keeps the lights on at home so he can build furniture.

“You sell it?” Olivia asks.

“Some,” he says.

“Where do you build the stuff?” Cooper asks.

“In my basement. I’ve got a duplex over in Somerville,” he says.

“You own it?” Olivia asks.

Duncan nods, and I catch Olivia’s seal-of-approval look.

The food comes, and I notice that Duncan waits for the three of us to serve ourselves before he forks a potato skin and a few wings. He grabs the ketchup bottle and squirts a pool of it inside his potato skin. I see Cooper watching this and wonder what he’s thinking. Potatoes and ketchup? I guess that makes sense. Olivia’s oblivious; her bone-sucking sounds could be heard on the other side of town. The band’s about to play,
and fortunately, we’re at one of the side tables so we don’t have to move. After we eat, Olivia and I head for the bathroom. She’s taller than me in her platform boots, and wearing a pair of low-riser jeans with bellbottoms and a mint-green peasant blouse. Silver porpoises dangle from her earlobes. We pee in adjoining stalls, so she speaks to me between flushing toilets.

“He’s got a peaceful aura,” she says. “I like him.”

“Me, too,” I say, and give my nose a good blow.

People are dancing when we get back, and Olivia grabs Cooper’s hand, and they head for the dance floor. I watch the two of them for a while. Olivia jumps around like she’s some kid on a pogo stick, while Cooper bobs on bended bowlegged knees, rolling his arms as if he’s mixing a vat of cement.

“You want to?” Duncan points to the dancing crowd. I get up from the table, and by the time we join Olivia and Cooper, the band’s playing a slow song. Duncan holds my right hand in his left and wraps his other arm around my waist. We dance this way for a few minutes, then he starts rubbing my back with his palm. He drops my hand, and now both of his arms are around my waist. I hook my free arm around his neck. We’re dancing close like tongue-and-groove—my head’s in the nook of his neck; our hips are pressed together. Duncan smells like musk, and I feel dreamy and hopeful, lost in my own little world and yet I’m aware that I’m also part of this couples-only crowd; all of us are like eddies swirling in a stream. Cooper winks at me when we circle around and then he’s gone; he and Olivia get sucked into the eye of the swirl. Duncan breathes in my ear. I close my eyes and follow his footsteps: forward, backward, rock left, and turn. When I open my eyes, I see him—the slope of his broad shoulders, his narrow hips and waist that
lean into the bar. Oh God! What’s he doing here? His midnight-black hair’s tucked
behind his ears. He sculpts words in the air—gesticulating in that Bolivian-expressive
manner to the someone who’s listening and laughing. I burrow deeper into Duncan’s
neck, then peek like a periscope above his shoulder searching for help—searching for
Olivia and Cooper.

I see them, just a few couples from us, and now I’m leading Duncan over to them.
No more front, back, rock left, then turn. I’m nudging to the right—stick a rose between
my teeth and tango with me, Duncan. I’m on a mission. I try to catch Cooper’s eye, but
he’s got both peepers closed, and he’s stuck in a tick-tocking motion. All I see is the back
of Olivia’s head. Duncan drops his hand to my butt. Oh God. Any other time, I’d be
orgasmic, but now, all I can think about is when are they going to end this stupid song.
Finally, it’s over and I break away from Duncan, grab Olivia, and whisper in her ear that
Marcus is here.

“Fuck him,” she says.

Duncan’s ahead of us heading for the table. Cooper gives me a what’s up look.
The three of us walk together, shoulder-to-shoulder like chorus-line dancers. I pull on
Cooper’s sleeve and he leans over so I can whisper, “Marcus is at the bar.”

Cooper looks for him as we walk. I see Marcus talking to the bartender. We’re
almost at our table. Duncan’s standing there waiting for us.

“Do something,” I mouth to Cooper.

“Like what?” I hear him say, but it’s too late to brainstorm because now we’re at
our table joining Duncan. The four of us cluster—no one sits.

“Want to split and grab some coffee?” Cooper asks.
I’m nodding like one of those plastic head-bobbing dogs people put on the
dashboard of their car.

“Good idea,” Olivia says.

“Yeah, sure,” Duncan says.

I’m ready to make like a tree and leave. People are dancing. The bar’s pretty
crowded. I’m thinking we can boogie right past Marcus and slip out the door.

“I’ve got to use the can,” Cooper says.

By now my eyes are diabolical. The world is your toilet, Coop, I think. Pee somewhere
else.

“We’ll get the coats,” Olivia tells Cooper. “Meet us outside.”

The three of us head for the bar. We’ve got to pass by the group Marcus is
standing with.

It’s the only way to get to the exit. I let Duncan go ahead of me to pave the path.

Olivia and I crouch down low like we’re four-foot midgets, hugging the half-wall
between the bar and the band. I’m pretty sure we get passed Marcus without being seen,
then we get our coats, push through the door, and the cold air slaps my face when we step
outside.

While we wait for Cooper to empty his bladder, Olivia tells Duncan about the
dessert choices at the coffee house. After a few minutes, I peek in the beveled window.

Duncan peers into the window with me.

“Here he comes,” he says.

Sure enough, I see Cooper heading our way. Thank God. It’s freezing out here,
but that’s okay. If it means not running into Marcus, I’d rather gnash my chattering teeth
to a pulp. Wait a minute. Why is Cooper turning around? He’s shaking someone’s hand. C’mon Coop, I’m thinking. Cut the crap. This is not the time to be socializing. The guy he’s gabbing with comes around to Cooper’s side.

“Hey, Lexie,” Duncan says. “Isn’t that your brother?”
Shit, shit, and triple shit.
“Your brother?” Olivia asks. She looks through the window.
“See?” Duncan says. “Cooper’s talking with him.”
“Oh brother,” Olivia says.

Cooper’s got his head thrown back, and I can tell that he’s laughing. Marcus slaps him on the back. And now—yes—Cooper’s heading our way again, and Marcus, thank God, is staying put. Good. Come on, Coop.

We back away so Cooper can come through. Olivia hands him his coat, and he puts it on.

“Br-r-r,” he says. “You guys are nuts to stand out here. Lexie, there’s icicles in your moustache.”

“Funny,” I say. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t you want to say hello to your brother?” Duncan asks and points to the bar’s window. He reaches for the handle of the door. “Better yet, let’s ask him to join us.”
Chapter Eight

Here I am thinking that Duncan’s going to swing open the bar door and call to my “brother” to come and have coffee with us, but he’s in a holding pattern, looking to see what I want to do, I guess. My inner voice’s going ballistic. *Do something, you numbskull,* it says. I should at least offer a tidbit of sibling insight for why asking Marcus to join us would be a silly idea. Like, he’s allergic to coffee beans so I know he wouldn’t come with us. Or he avoids places with fluorescent lighting because he had the mumps as a kid, which caused his sperm to be sluggish, and now he worries about sterility. What else? I know. He shares his Transylvanian great grandfather’s photosensitivity trait. Wait. Will that work if he’s supposed to be my half-brother? And which parental unit do we share? God. I can’t remember. Right now, you could pull wisdom teeth from my mouth without anesthesia—that’s how catatonic I am. Cooper, on the other hand, moves quickly into action. He tells Duncan not to sweat it, that he’ll head back into the crowded bar, find Marcus, and be sure to drag him away from his bevy of beauties to join our little coffee clutch.

I still owe Cooper a case of beer for that whole fan ordeal. Now I’m going to owe him big time. But now that he’s in the bar, gone a good five minutes already, I’m wondering what the hell he’s doing in there. Having another beer? Playing a game of darts? Asking Marcus if he wants to come out and meet his competition? With Cooper, I never know. Ordinarily, he’s the good-Samaritan type, but every now and then, the
wolves howl and the skies grow dark in the corners of his devious brain.

It’s getting pretty damn cold outside, and Olivia and I are stomping our feet and clapping our gloved hands trying to stay warm. Duncan has his nose to the window watching the action in the bar. I’m gesturing like a hitchhiker to Olivia that we should get the hell out of here. She walks her fingers in the space between us. We’re on the same wavelength. I suggest to Duncan that we start walking to the coffee shop, which is two blocks over.

“Cooper will catch up to us,” I say to Duncan who seems reluctant to give up his post outside the bar.

We hike down the sidewalk with our hands in our pockets breathing in the cold air. Small vapors of air precede our steps so that we look like three smoking locomotives.

“You don’t think your brother’s coming?” Duncan asks.

I look over at Olivia and wonder what would make him ask this.

“Probably not,” I say, and examine his face for signs of suspicion or doubt. There are none—the dimples are charmingly creasing away.

“I figured you didn’t since you only said Cooper will catch up.”

Oops. Insert foot in mouth.

“I’m guessing Marcus just got to the bar,” I say.

“And he’s probably on the prowl,” Olivia adds.

I roll my eyes. She’s such a big help, that Olivia.

Cooper’s still MIA by the time we get to the coffee shop. We take off our gloves and coats and grab a booth. I order a decaf mocha java, Olivia gets the Serena Organic Blend and an espresso roast for Cooper, and Duncan asks for a large cup of Sumatra. We
get a piece of carrot cake, two éclairs, and something called Banofee Pie, which Olivia says is yummy with chocolate gobs and bananas. A few people come through the door, but Cooper’s not among them.

“Is Marcus your only sibling?” Duncan asks.

I shove the end of an éclair in my mouth and nod because my mother taught me that it’s not polite to talk with your mouth full.

“It must be nice having a brother,” he says. “I hated being an only child.”

Oh. We have that in common.

“How about you, Olivia?” Duncan asks. “Got any brothers or sisters?”

“I’ve got a younger brother,” she says. “He just moved here from Hoboken.”

Keep talking, Olivia, I think. Better to focus on her rather than me. She tells Duncan that Pee Wee’s still trying to find his way around the city. He got confused on his way to Somerville to look at a brownstone because the landlord didn’t tell him that the street names change so he kept thinking he was lost and called Olivia at work while she was trying to get a hit-and-run ready for a viewing and answer the phones.

“Sometimes they ask me to do the makeup,” she says.

I’m thinking that Duncan’s probably not into this, but I let Olivia ramble because we’re off the subject of Marcus and me.

“My brother called me four times when he was lost,” she says. “Got me so distracted, I forgot to put the deceased’s glasses on, and the family got all upset, then my boss freaked out. I wanted to tell everyone that it’s kind of ridiculous putting glasses on a person who’s never going to see again. A dead man, who’s never going to open his eyes, wearing glasses? Hellooo. Is this realistic?”
Duncan says something about people’s comfort zones, and then there’s a lull in the conversation. My eyes dart to Olivia. She sips her coffee. I look at Duncan. He bites down on the remaining éclair. I just know the conversation’s coming back around to Marcus and me, and I’m not ready. Let me get my facts straight. If Marcus and I have the same father, then is our last name the same? How long did we live together as brother and sister? Did we share Christmas mornings together? What’d I get him for his last birthday? Has he ever seen me naked in the shower? Let’s talk about something else: the war on terrorism, hybrid cars, the Ephedrine scare, the Michael Jackson scandal. Life on Mars. I don’t know. Anything. Sign me up. I don’t want it to be my turn again. If this were a game of Uno, I’d throw down a reverse card.

I send Olivia a telepathic message: Come on, Olivia, quit sampling the desserts, and say something so the conversation doesn’t rebound to Marcus and me again. You weren’t born with those hips, you know.

I glance at Duncan and smile. He puts down his fork, and I think he’s going to say something.

“He lived with Olivia and Cooper,” I blurt. My Tourettes-like outburst causes the two of them to jerk. “Until he got a job making copies at Kinkos.” I nod like I’m making profound contributions to the table talk.

Olivia raises her eyebrows, and I know she’s thinking, Lexie, you’re bonkers. So what? Someone’s got to keep the Pee Wee bit going.

“That’s when he got his own place.” I say. “Right, Olivia?”

Olivia doesn’t answer, but Duncan’s nodding his head, taking it all in. This is good. Let’s see, what else do I know about the little dweeb?
“That’s great,” Duncan says to Olivia.

It’s working.

“I bet your brother’s moving here keeps the two of you close,” he says.

I watch as Olivia slides a forkful of Banoffee Pie between her lips. I look at my watch and wonder where the hell’s Coop? As I squish graham cracker crumbs with the bottom of my fork, my mind starts drifting to possible scenarios in the bar. Cooper tells Marcus that I’ve got a date tonight, and Marcus doesn’t bat an eyelash. He goes on talking about the Bruins’ chance at the Stanley Cup, then he shares a couple of filthy jokes about female orifices. The raunchiness makes the guys at the bar laugh, and the necks of Corona bottles clink together.

Half the crumbs on my plate are clinging to the prongs of my fork. The bar scene replays in my head only this time, Marcus is fuming when he hears the news. He starts breaking bar stools over patrons’ heads, then he picks off the whiskey bottles that sit in front of the mirrored wall with the pair of six shooters he happens to have in the holster wrapped around his hips.

“Earth to Lexie,” Olivia says.

Olivia’s blue eye shadow comes into focus. “What?” I ask.

Olivia nods in Duncan’s direction.

“Are you and Marcus?” he asks.


“They’re like this,” Olivia says, crossing her fingers.

Great, Olivia. You’re making things worse. I guess God’s punishing me for the
“big hip” thought. I think about this, but I still kick Olivia in the shins under the table.

“Cool,” Duncan says.

I can’t explain why I’m doing this. Lying to Duncan. Hiding from Marcus. I’ve set up so many emotional landmines that I have to be careful where I step, so I don’t get blown to smithereens. I know I’m here with this great guy—he’s kind, and handsome, and sexy. He’s got his own house, builds furniture in his spare time, probably has a Golden Retriever he throws Frisbees to every Sunday in the park. There’s stability in those brown speckled eyes. And instead of enjoying this moment, I’m daydreaming about Marcus. Where’s the payback on that? I wonder.

Cooper bolts through the door. His coat’s covered with flakes of snow. He takes off his Bruins’ cap and slaps it against his thigh, then hangs it on the hook next to the booth.

“I think it’s going to stick,” he says, taking off his jacket.

“I got you an espresso,” Olivia says, pointing to his coffee cup. “What took you so long?”

Cooper tosses his jacket on the hook and sits next to Olivia. He rips open a handful of sugar packets, dumps the contents into his cup, and stirs for a good fifteen seconds. He sips his coffee, makes an ahhhh sound, forks a huge piece of Banoffee Pie, then piles it into his mouth.

“Marcus and I were flapping our jaws,” he says, not shy about talking with his mouth full. “He wanted to know if I was slumming.”

Olivia purses her lips and shakes her head. “Classy guy,” she says.
“He passed on the coffee invite,” Cooper says to the three of us. “Said he was working on getting lucky.”

Duncan laughs.

I nearly choke on the chunk of éclair I have in my mouth.

“What’d I tell you,” Olivia says.

Now that it’s settled that Marcus is not showing up, the talk at the table is comfortable. Duncan turns out to be a Bruins’ fan, and from then on, it’s slapstick city. Coop offers a season ticket to Duncan for this Sunday’s game. He has an extra one because Olivia’s going to a training for mortician assistants in Rockville Center.

“My boss wants me to start picking up the corpses,” Olivia says. “I’ll have to wear a beeper so the hospitals and nursing homes can contact me.”

“So the beeper’s like the call of death?” Duncan asks.

Cooper nods. “I’m calling it the grim beeper.”

Duncan says Olivia’s job is kind of creepy and more power to her if she can handle being around dead people all the time. It turns out that Duncan can’t go to the Bruins’ game either because he’s going to Key Largo to stay at his folks’ summer house on the canal for four days. I wonder if he’s going alone. Hey, maybe he’s got a Key Largo girlfriend. That’s an unsettling thought. I don’t know, though. Duncan seems like the monogamous type to me. But when it comes right down to it, I start to wonder, what do I really know about this guy? I know a lot of stuff about Marcus. For one thing, I know he grinds his teeth while he sleeps, and he lounges in his jockey shorts when he’s home. He also picks his toes while he’s watching TV, makes little piles of toenail slivers on the arm of the couch. He hates cauliflower and beets, smokes cigarettes and
occasionally cigars, likes it when I rub the back of his neck, and he’s the king of orifice sound effects (burps, farts, spits). He can cook a few of his mother’s Bolivian dishes, can’t stand drivers that merge in front of him, then go slower than the checkout lane at Shaws’ Market. I happen to know that he’ll kill anyone who touches his tools, loves classic rock, hates hip-hop, is always adjusting his privates, eats Cheez Whiz from the can, and the guy can bring me to the big “O” every time we go to town.

What do I know about Duncan besides the fact that he’s sexy, handsome, and kind? I just found out that he likes ice hockey. Go Bruins! He works at Home Depot, but his real passion is building furniture. He loves kids. As far as I can tell, he puts ketchup on everything but dessert. He’s got to be patient because we’re not even to second base, yet. He drives a truck and is an only child—apparently with parents wealthy enough to have a summer home in Florida. What else? I hope there’s nothing freaky about him like he’s bisexual or wears women’s thongs when he’s home painting his toenails.

The snow’s still falling when we walk back to the parking lot. Cars are capped with a blanket of white. The streets are covered, too, and the sidewalk’s slippery. Duncan holds my arm, and I take little Geisha footsteps so I won’t fall on my ass. Olivia and Cooper walk in front of us with their arms wrapped around each other. Snowflakes fall on my eyelashes, and I blink them away. I’m so ready for winter to be over.

When we’re near the bar, we say goodbye to Coop and Olivia and get into Duncan’s black truck. He pats the seat next to him, so I scoot on over, feeling a little bit silly, like I’m a redneck’s girlfriend or something. But I get over that really fast when he squeezes my thigh. The streets are slick and we fish tail as we leave the parking lot. The evergreen tree air-freshener that hangs from his rear view mirror rocks back and forth.
When we get to my place, Duncan walks me to the door. I turn the key, push the door open, and we both walk into the foyer. I want to ask him to stay over, but I don’t want to sound presumptuous. I mean, this is the guy who kissed me on the cheek the last time we said goodbye. This gets me thinking. What if he’s this polite in bed? I don’t know. Things are pretty good with Marcus in the sack category. What if Duncan doesn’t measure up? Maybe he just needs some coaxing. Could be that the skiddy roads are a good reason for a sleepover.

“It’s getting kind of slippery out there,” I say.

“My truck’s a four-by-four,” he says. “It’ll plow through anything.”

Okay. So much for staying over and jumping my bones.

He leans over and kisses me on the lips. It’s a sweet kiss. Not perfunctory, but not slobbering either. Then he slips his arms around my waist and gives me a python squeeze, lingering way past the we’re-just-friends-see-ya-around kind. I feel comfortable in his arms. He breaks just long enough to kiss me again. His tongue parts my lips this time and slowly rolls around mine. I’m thinking, unhurried and romantic—that’s how Duncan makes love. He probably goes for hours. Lots of foreplay. Likes candles and soaks in the tub. Long back rubs. Bet he snuggles. Doubt he plays goofy sex games like Marcus does. I’m not sure I see Duncan sporting a hand towel on his member saying, Look Babe, no hands, or catapulting edible tidbits from the head of his penis, shouting, Let-er-rip, boys, as he tries to pop them in his mouth.

“Better go,” Duncan whispers in my ear.

I try to change his mind by giving him my sultry you-don’t-know-what-you’re-missing look.
“Am I stepping on your foot?” he asks, backing away.

“Why?”

“You just had this pained expression on your face.”

So much for my sultry look, I think. Better go for “hungry” next time. I wonder what “horny” looks like?

“How about breakfast tomorrow?” he asks. “Have you eaten at Sound Bites?”

I shake my head.

“It’s a little place in Davis Square. Well, technically, it’s Ball Square. You know, in Somerville. They’ve got the best coffee, homemade waffles, and three-egg omelets that’ll melt in your mouth.”

“Yum,” I say.

“How’s nine o’clock sound?” he asks.

It sounds good to me, and I tilt my chin as a nonverbal sign that I want another kiss. Duncan presses his lips against mine. Hmmm. This is dreamy. When he leaves, I close the door and sigh. I feel as if we’ve taken some baby steps tonight. At this pace, we ought to consummate our relationship by the spring thaw.

I go to bed feeling good about Duncan, but not feeling so good about myself. How am I ever going to get out of this convoluted mess? I wonder. Something’s got to give. Either Duncan will dump me because our beginnings are based on lies, or Marcus will dump me because—I don’t know—because he did it before, I guess. But here’s where it gets gray. Can Marcus dump me if we’re not officially back together? I mean, there are no relationship rules to follow here. I know I can’t forget about the whole
Brenda-Marcus quandary. And even if he didn’t fool around with my stepmother, does that really change things?

I’m so confused. I flop on my belly and bury my face in the pillow. I guess there’s another possibility, I think. Both could dump me, and then I’ll be all alone again. I consider being alone versus being with Marcus. Well, I’ve been through that pain once before, but I’ve got to admit, this time around, I really like having Marcus hot on my tail. And I’ll take being with Duncan over being alone any day (hour, minute, second). I’m thinking that he could be the real thing. He’s the best candidate for my five-year plan. I see us strolling down Harvard Square with baby Isabella in the stroller. He’s got Duncan Junior up on his shoulders. We live in his Somerville home surrounded by rich mahogany tables and oak floors and walnut chests of drawers, all designed and crafted by Duncan’s big, talented hands.

I roll on to my back and pull the covers up to my chin. If I ever expect to have a long-term relationship with Duncan, then I figure I’ve got a few choices. I can tell him the truth about Marcus and risk losing him. I mean, why would he want to start a relationship that’s got more lies than a slice of Swiss cheese has holes? I can solve the whole problem by telling Marcus that it’s over between us. But just what’s between us is the question. God knows, sex is a big part of it. But is that all it is? Are we back together or are we just lusting? Has our attraction for each other made this second go-around a casual sex thing waiting to happen? Are we one step away from being fuck buddies? I turn onto my side and hug the spare pillow. My other option is to continue seeing both of them until I figure out what the hell to do. I close my eyes with that feeble plan in mind.
The pounding on the door jars me from my sleep. It’s nearly two o’clock!

Duncan’s changed his mind, I think, so I tear ass out of bed. Maybe his truck got stuck after all. Or maybe he’s been sitting in my parking lot with his engine idling this whole time, and now he’s all worked up about wild-can’t-wait-for-the-next-date sex with me. Oh shit, I think, as I plod across the living room floor in my bare feet. Look at me in my flannel nightgown. I could’ve stepped off the set of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Duncan’s really hammering on the door.

“I’m coming,” I sing out, then blow into the palm of my hand to check for funk breath. Okay, I’m not exactly smelling like a basket of potpourri, but I don’t have dog breath either.

I swing the door open and flash a big welcome back smile.

“Granny, what big teeth you have,” he says.

Marcus is standing in the doorway, one hand stretched up against the doorframe as if he’s keeping it from tumbling down. His hair’s hanging over his eye, and his bone-melting grin unnerves me. He’s got a five-o’clock shadow that’s been working overtime. Snowflakes fleck the wool collar of his black leather jacket. His jeans are snug, and he’s wearing his camel Timberlands. If I wasn’t so surprised to see him, I might drool on the spot.

“This is where you say, all the better to eat you with, my dear,” he says to me.

I kind of smirk and want to tell him that that's his line because if anyone’s going to be doing the eating, it’s going to be him. Wait. What am I thinking? A little while ago, I said goodnight to the best candidate for father of my unborn children (if Duncan and I ever get past the hand-holding phase, that is). And standing before me now is the guy
who days earlier might have been boinking my father’s wife in the women’s bathroom of the Charles Hotel. I mean, I can’t fool around with a guy whose you-know-what was in the same you-know-where as my father’s—God, I can’t even say it.

Isn’t that incest?

I back away as Marcus comes into the foyer. Never taking his eyes off me, he kicks the door closed behind him.

“I think granny’s nightgown,” he says, coming toward me, “would look a whole lot better on the floor.”

He unzips his jacket, shrugs it off, and lets it drop on the foyer tile. He’s got that glazed-Jack-Daniels’-been-good-to-me look.

Gulp.

“Let me make you some coffee,” I say, then zigzag to the kitchen.

He’s right behind me like a pit bull, snagging my waist, stopping me in my tracks. He starts kissing my neck. Damn. He knows I crumble when his tongue flicks that fleshy spot right below my ear. I feel the material of my nightgown bunching up around my knees.

“It’ll only take me a minute to brew . . .”

He grabs a handful of my hair and my head turns in to him. He kisses me on the mouth; his warm tongue rolls over mine. He bites my upper lip, then licks my cheek, my eye, my ear. He nibbles my chin.

“Of course, there’s always instant . . .”

He covers my mouth with his, and my twisted spine and hyperextended neck makes enjoying this nearly impossible. I do a semi-pirouette within the circle of his arms.
Now that I’m facing him, he pulls his black ribbed crew neck over his head. I get a whiff of cigarette smoke, then the woody smell of deodorant, and now that I’m inches from the apex of his heart, the unmistakable splash of Brut. He works his arms out from the sleeves, then slingshots the shirt across the room as if he’s my own personal Chippendale.

“Don’t you want . . .” I point to the coffee maker on the counter.

He shakes his head, then takes my pointing finger, brings it to his mouth, and sucks on it like he’s trying to get to the marrow of a chicken bone. I think I might wet my pants. He takes my finger out of his mouth and places my hand on his crotch so that I’m cupping his balls. My hand brushes against the rest of him down there. The man is hard—and huge. I mean, we’re not talking Vienna sausage. Now his tongue’s back in my mouth, rooting across my teeth, probing my molars. I expect a full dental report when he’s done. I kind of let my hand fall from his crotch. I mean, he couldn’t possibly want that thing to grow any bigger. I latch on to the belt loop of his jeans. He buries one hand in my hair and hikes my nightgown up with the other. I feel his hand slide up against the side of my thigh. He walks me backwards until my rump knocks against the kitchen table. His fingers stop crawling when he reaches the elastic of my underwear. He presses his pelvis against mine, and the hard wood of the table rams my butt. There’s a tug, then a rip, and ohmygod, my Victoria Secret buy-one-get-one free underwear’s torn in half. I open my eyes and see the creases in his eyelids, his long feathery lashes, his black arched eyebrows, the dime-sized, lima-bean shaped freckle on his temple that’s one shade darker than the rest of his skin.

He tries to free his hand from my hair, but it’s snagged in my bed-head snarls. He works through the knots, but not without a little hair pulling, a sensory trigger that stirs
up childhood memories of having my unmanageable hair tugged into a rubber band. Speaking of rubber, I think about the condoms in my bedside stand. Who would have thought to keep a few handy in the kitchen utility drawer? Stack them right next to the pushpins. Oops. Wait a sec. Wouldn’t want them to get pricked. Maybe next to the AA batteries.

In between groping, and pawing, and sloppy kisses, an angel/she-devil tug-of-war starts messing with my head. The angel’s dressed in my nanny gown, halo cockeyed on top of her head. She’s pacing on my left shoulder, wagging her finger, telling me that Duncan’s the one, reminding me that Marcus and Brenda were probably doing it in the handicapped bathroom of the Charles Hotel. She’s making sense. I’ve got to get some perspective here. Getting the low down on the other night would be a good start.

Marcus yanks up my nightgown again. His hands are everywhere. Now the she-devil’s strutting in her razzle-dazzle red teddy on my right shoulder. She’s wearing black stiletto heels. Whaddya nuts? she asks. You’ve been on a dry spell so long that moths are flying out of your crotch. A girl’s got needs too, right? Love the one you’re with, Honey!

And now I’m wondering how I’m supposed to think straight with Marcus’ tongue in my ear?

He massages the muscles of my upper back. God. That feels good. Now he stops. Whoa. My nightgown’s up around my neck. I get my arms free and my shoulders cleared, but the opening of the gown won’t go over my ears because, number one, the buttons of the nightgown are fastened, and number two, the hole’s too narrow. The material’s inside out and draped over my head, and I suppose I look like a headless bride with the trail of material behind me. And on top of that, the rim of the gown is caught in my mouth like a
horse’s bit. Marcus keeps tugging, but my ears are staying put, and I’m wheezing through the flannel weave, saying, I can’t breathe. He quits yanking for a minute and starts kneading my boobs like he’s making loaves of bread (okay, so maybe they’re dinner rolls). I try to undo the buttons of my pajamas by creeping my fingers under the rim of the neck, which is a soppy thick wad between my teeth. I get two or three buttons unfastened while my breasts are being reshaped. Finally, the neck of my gown is wide enough to slip my head through. I pull my flannel veil off, gulp at the air around me, and wipe the drool off my chin.

More composed but less sure of how to flick off his switch, or at this point, not sure if I really want to, I lean against the table au naturale and grip the edges with my hands. Marcus undoes the buckle of his belt, then unfastens his button-fly riveted jeans. He undoes the laces of his boots, kicks them off, then peels his socks from his feet.

“Marcus,” I say, watching him boogie out of his pants.

He looks at me as he places his thumb under the waistband of his jockeys. The jockeys come off and Big Jim and the twins (his affectionate terminology) are tickled pink. Big Jim, like a trumpeting elephant’s trunk, heralds the start of the game by poking at my belly button.

“Marcus,” I say again.

“I’ve got one,” he says, and reaches down for his jeans. He pulls a condom out of the pocket and drops the pants back to the floor. He rips the foil with his teeth, and in two seconds, Big Jim’s donning his all-weather gear.

“Wait,” I say, as Marcus steps toward me with a shit-ass grin.

He shakes his head, and kisses me again.
“What about Brenda?” I ask, when his tongue’s no longer occluding my airway.

“Brenda who?” he asks, and hoists me up so that I’m straddling his waist. His hands cup the base of my butt.

“Brenda-my-father’s-wife Brenda,” I say, my arms wrapping around his neck.

He twirls me around like a whirly whig, and my sink, stove, and countertop become a blur.

“Screw Brenda,” he says, and my back slams against the cold refrigerator. Magnetic letters slide off, releasing a recipe for chicken cordon bleu, my Bruins versus Flyers ticket, and an ad for shapelier thighs in thirty days.

“Did you?” I say, and hear the water-cooling gizmo kick on.

“Shhhh,” he says.

And like a puck sliding into the net—he’s in.

He pumps, and my back grates up and down on the refrigerator door. A few grinds later, we’re on the move again. This time, we travel through the living room. I hang on like a long-armed chimp, screeching in monkey-like chatter. We pass the club chair with the faded blue cushions. He nearly trips over the footstool, then plops me on the rim of the couch. We try to do it there, but every time Marcus thrusts, my butt scoots further and further away. I lose my grip around his neck and fall backwards. My head bounces off the cushion of the couch. This gets me laughing so hard, we nearly disengage. Marcus yanks on my outstretched hand, and pulls me in to him. He carries me down the hallway, bumping into my grandfather clock. It bongs three times. I start slipping, so Marcus has to stop in the hallway to hoist me back up. I’ve got the giggles and snort in his ear. We make it to the bedroom, and after all that effort to keep male and
female parts together, we unhitch when we fall on the bed. I flip on to my belly and start crawling to my pillow, but Marcus grabs me under my pelvis and slides me back to the base of the bed. He’s on me again, and this time it’s doggie-style, and he’s panting in my ear, and then the swell of a wave, rippling under my G-spot, rushes, then builds to tidal wave volume until it crashes—leaving in its wake—an orgasm of oceanic proportions. Marcus grunts like a wild boar, and when he comes, gooseflesh chills his arms around my waist.

We collapse, and for a while, he stays on top of me; his weight crushes me deep into the mattress. He rolls off and lies spread-eagle on the bed, then looks up at the ceiling fan.

“Whew. Turn that sucker on, will ya, Babe?” he asks.

I get up, turn on Duncan’s fan, then go into the bathroom. My hair looks as if I stuck my finger in a wall socket. My skin’s flushed with softball-size splotches here and there. There’s a crease across my right cheek, probably from being pressed into a wrinkle on the spread. Is that a hickey on my neck? Oh God. Women my age don’t get hickeys. I go and sit on the toilet and pee. Reaching to scratch my back, my fingers trace a small S-curved indentation on my right shoulder blade from one of the magnetic letters. After I wash my hands in the sink, I splash cold water on my face and twist my upper torso just enough so I can see the mirrored-reflection of the “S” etched in my back. “S” for “silly,” I think, or “stupid” because I didn’t get any clearer on Marcus and Brenda. I’m feeling a little sore between the legs and think, “S” for “steam sizzling sex.”

I grab my knock-around clothes hanging on a hook behind the bathroom door. My jersey goes over my head, and I yank on my sweat suit bottoms, then tie a bow with the
drawstring. I pull my hair back in a scrunchie, and pass the slumberous Marcus as I head to the kitchen for a glass of cold water from the carafe in my fridge. When I get back to the bedroom, Marcus is on his back without any covers, looking like an innocent Adonis. Apparently, he’s been up to the bathroom in my absence because flaccid not-so-Big Jim is in the raw. I flop on the bed next to him, shake his shoulders, and call out his name. Not a muscle twitches. I pat him on the cheeks, blow in his face, try to pry open his eyes. Marcus is comatose.

Between his sonorous snoring and my disturbing nightmares (mostly the logistic maneuvering of the naked man in the bed next to me and the one coming to pick me up for a breakfast date in less than six hours), I can hardly sleep. I think about calling Duncan, but I can’t believe what a moron I am for not getting his number. I could throw some cold water on Marcus’ face early in the morning, I think, but that’d only get him pissed, and what’s to say that once he’s awake he’ll go home like a good boy. At four in the morning, I decide that the best plan of action is to let sleeping dogs lie. See, another thing I know about Marcus is that he can sleep through a heavy metal concert. Chances are good that I can sneak out of my own bed in a couple of hours and get ready for my date before Marcus blinks one feathery lash.

At seven, I slide out of bed, gather my clothes and toiletries, tiptoe out of the bedroom, and pull the door, that squeaks like a badly-played violin, closed. I hold my breath for at least a minute, waiting on the other side of the bedroom door for sounds of movement. It’s quiet. Marcus is still dead to the world. I take a shower in the hallway bathroom and get ready for my date. I dress in a pair of faded jeans and a cranberry turtleneck (to hide the purple Picasso on my neck).
When I go out to the kitchen, I see the shambles from the night before. Magnetic letters are everywhere. I pick them up and stack them back on the fridge, thinking that I should’ve cleaned up last night when it didn’t matter how much noise I made. I find my shapelier thighs ad and stick it next to the Frigidaire sign. I scoop up my nightgown, hang it over the kitchen chair, and bury my ripped underwear in the trash. Marcus’ jeans are in a heap on the floor. I pick them up and feel his pockets. His keys are in the front pocket along with his comb. His other pocket has loose change, a crumbled pack of Marlboros with two broken cigarettes inside. I feel the outline of his wallet in his back pocket. I know it’s none of my business what’s in it. Still, I slip it out and run my fingers over the brown leather bifold. Maybe I don’t want to know what he carries around—little scraps of paper with phone numbers, women’s business cards. Who knows? He had a condom in his jeans, I remind myself. And aren’t I glad that he did? Hell, I think. The guy’s sleeping in my bed, isn’t he? I think that’s intimate enough to grant me peeping rights to the contents of his wallet.

I peek in the living room just to make sure he’s not sneaking up on me. He’s been known to hide in corners and closets waiting for me to pass so he can jump out and scare the crap out of me. Sick puppy. I open the bifold and search through the credit cards. Nothing out of the ordinary here. He’s got twenty-three bucks in his billfold. I slip my fingers in one of the inner creases of the wallet and pull out a piece of paper. It’s an invoice for a Mustang part. The corner of what looks like a white business card pokes out of another crease. I grab the sucker, ready to see the name and number of my own competition. Whew. It’s his gym card for the Y. I flip through the plastic picture sleeves. There’s his license, some insurance card, and oh my God. There’s a picture of Marcus
and me sitting on a split rail fence at Cape Cod. I smile, remembering the weekend, the bed and breakfast we stayed at, the lobster we dipped in sweet melted butter. Later, sitting on the boardwalk, the water lapping under the pier.

What the hell am I doing? I can’t deal with this little trip down memory lane. I’ve got to get out of here before Marcus wakes up Big Jim and the twins. I shove the wallet back in his pants, collect his jockeys, his jacket, and find his shirt, inside out, in the foyer. I stuff his socks inside his boots. My first thought is to hide the clothes in the foyer closet. God knows, I can’t leave them lying around, and I don’t exactly want to open the squeaky bedroom door again. Maybe I can put them in the second bedroom or the hall bathroom. Marcus can go on a seek and search mission for them. I think about the photo he’s kept of us all this time. Right now, it seems like a mean trick to hide his clothes.

I decide to write Marcus a note, then I’ll creep back into the bedroom and leave his clothes and the note on the bed. I set the shoes on the kitchen floor and lay his clothes on the table. Finding a piece of paper in a tablet and a pen in the basket of junk—I’ll-get-to-someday, I write him a note. Morning, Marcus. Went to breakfast with a friend.

Scratch that. He’ll ask me a thousand questions, and I’ll trip over my answers. I crumple the paper and start over. Hi Sleepy Head. Went to the Laundromat. Wait. What if he’s still here when I get back? I won’t have a pile of clothes with me. How would I worm my way out of that one? And Duncan’ll be with me, and just how do I explain the fan guy back in my apartment? I crinkle that note thinking that I need to write something that sends Marcus on his way, that lets him know that I’m out for the day so there’s no sense sticking around waiting for me to hurry back. I look at the blank piece of paper and start again. Marcus. My mother’s in town. Gone shopping for the day. Cell phone’s dead.

I walk in my stockinged feet down the hallway, carrying the note and boots in one hand and his clothes in the other. I listen outside the door, and hearing nothing but his resonant breathing, turn the knob. I don’t know what theory I base my decision on, but I figure there’ll be less squeaking if I open the door with one grand swing than if I inch it open. This works pretty well, but the sweeping door creates a gush of air that moves the hair on Marcus’ head. I tiptoe the few steps to the bed, drop the clothes on the spread, lay his shoes down on the floor, then sidestep over to my side of the bed and place the note on top of my pillow. I leave the room without incident, breathe (I’ve been holding my breath this whole time), pull the screeching door closed, then wait a few critical seconds more, ready to bolt if Marcus stirs. When I’m sure that all’s quiet, I creep away wondering if my double agent life is secure another day.

I decide that it’s best to wait for Duncan down by the curb. All I need is for him to knock on my door. I’m a goner if that happens. I slip on my boots, then grab my coat from the foyer closet. Wait a minute. What’s that? I hold very still. Shit. Is that my toilet flushing? Oh God, it is! Instead of running straight for the door like I should, I stand there dazed like a deer caught in the headlights. The bedroom door squeaks. *Get moving*, I hear my brain tell the malfunctioning synapses of my nervous system.

“Babe?” I hear Marcus call.

Why the hell didn’t he stay in bed and read my note? I wonder, then I hear him yawn like a baboon in a rainforest. His footsteps plod down the hallway.
“Man, you should’ve seen it,” he calls out.

My feet spring in to gear, then skid across the foyer tile.

There’s a rapping at my door. I grab for the knob, but hear Marcus behind me.

“I just gave birth to a long skinny brown dude.”
Chapter Nine

There’s no getting around it—I’m caught like a firefly in a jar. There’s no possible way out. It’s going to play out right here, right now. Duncan’s on one side of the door waiting to take me to breakfast. Marcus is standing in his jockeys on the other side, sporting a cowlick that could get him a job as a barnyard rooster. At least Big Jim and the twins are under cover, I think, and thank God for small favors. Well, not that they’re small favors, but well, that’s not important now. It’s just that if Marcus were naked, this’d be a freaking fiasco, a regular circus sideshow. The ballyhoo in my head’s saying Step right up, folks. See the Naked Man who’s not her brother meet Mr. More-Than-Just-the Fan Guy. See them squirm, breathe fire, become human pincushions.

I try to get a grip. I can’t think of a thing to say that would make any sense. Marcus wants to know where I’m going and when do I plan on answering the door?

“All right, all right,” I say, and sigh. “It’s just as well.” I take a deep breath, and turn the knob on the door. “Marcus,” I say. “I hate to tell you this, but I’m having breakfast with . . .” I swing open the door and hide behind it, so I don’t have to see the looks on their faces.

“The Girl Scout?” Marcus says.

I step into the foyer, and there’s this three-foot, chubby little girl bedecked in bilious-green Girl Scout attire. She’s standing in my doorway alongside a wagon full of cookies, smiling at us with teeth imprisoned behind rows of barbed-like wire.
“Hi. I’m Ginger Holland from troop 347.” She presents her red wood-sided wagon, stacked knee-high with cookies, with the grand sweeping motion of a mini Vanna White.

“I’m selling cookies,” she says. “There’s Thin Mints, Peanut Butter Patties, Caramel deLites, Animal Treasures.” She sucks in air, and her little chest barrels. “Lemon Pastry Crèmes, Shortbread, and new this year, Piñatas.” She literally blows through the last three kinds of cookies with the high-pitched squeak of an asthmatic.

I’m so thrilled that Duncan’s not at the door that I want to jump up and down shouting, *there is a God, after all*. Instead, I say to Ginger Girl Scout, “I thought you were my mother.” She sticks the tail of a braid in her mouth and sucks. Seven honey-brown freckles dot her nose. I turn to Marcus and repeat myself. “I’m having breakfast with my mother. I wrote you a note.” I know I must appear over-zealous at this mother-daughter outing.

“Not the meddling Battleaxe,” he says, and shudders dramatically for effect, no doubt.

I give Marcus a knock-it-off look and think it’s a funny thing about mothers. You might want to trade them for what’s behind door number two on a bad day, but let someone else look at them cross-eyed, and you’re ready to knock his lights out.

“How many boxes do you want?” she asks.

This must be the new sales approach, I think. Assume they’re going to buy from the get-go. Very market-savvy. Yet, it’s nearly nine o’clock on a Sunday morning, and the kid’s roaming the hallway all by herself. I think about asking her where her parents are, but I’ve got more pressing interests on my mind.
“Do you want to buy any?” I ask Marcus. I’m hoping there’s still a chance I can get outside before Duncan gets here. “I’m running kind of late.”

Marcus gives me his answer by patting the seams of his jockeys. Oh I get it, nothing in his shorts but the family jewels. I turn away from Marcus and smile at the little girl.

“No thanks,” I say. “No cookies today.”

“But I can win an 8-Megapixel Canon PowerShot if I sell the most,” she says.

Great. I’ve got the valedictorian of cookie-selling-boot-camp at my door. Maybe the quickest way to make her disappear is to give in and buy something.

“I’ll take a box of shortbreads,” I say, and pull two singles out of my purse.

“Just one box?” she asks. “You could buy a couple for the troops overseas. They’re tax deductible, you know.”

This budding Donald Trump is one smart cookie. I grab a five-dollar bill from my wallet. “Give me a box of Peanut Butter Patties,” I say, and hear my stomach grumble like a troll.

“Those mints look good,” Marcus says, looking over my shoulder.

“Okay, okay,” I say. “A box of those.” I point to the Thin Mints arranged in neat little stacks in her portable kiosk. “But that’s all.”

I scope out the hallway while the pint-size salesgirl gathers my order in her arms. She hands me the boxes, and I turn around and give them to Marcus.

“Don’t eat them all at once,” I say to him.

“That’s ten-fifty,” Ginger Girl Scout says, then straightens a green sash that’s covered with twenty-something badges.
“What?” I say. “For three boxes of cookies?”

She shows me her calculator, and I’m wondering, where the hell did that come from?

“Three-fifty a box times three,” she says. “I can take a check if you don’t have enough cash.”

I mumble something about highway robbery and pull a twenty from my wallet.

“You probably can’t make the change,” I say. “And I really have got to go, so why don’t you come back another day.” I turn to Marcus who already has the flap of the Thin Mints pried open. “Give her back the cookies,” I say. Marcus points at the Girl Scout, and that’s when I see Miss Junior Bank-of-America unzipping the green, camouflaged fanny pack around her waist. She finds my change, gives it to me without even a thank-you, collects the handle of her wagon, and moves on.

“Nice doing business with you,” I call to her, as I put my change in my wallet. “Gotta go,” I say to Marcus. I think about kissing him, but not when I see the coat of chocolate sludge on his tongue.

“Give Dragon Queen my love,” Marcus says.

“I’ll think I’ll skip that part,” I say. “Oh, and my note says my apartment’s being sprayed for roaches today.” I wonder if a spoken lie that was previously lied about in a written note counts twice?

“Oh a Sunday?” he asks.

I shrug. “You won’t want to stay around for that,” I say, and hope for one of those serendipitous moments where a troop of those ugly prehistoric buggers scoot across the tile floor. Lights. Cameras. Roaches.
“Got that right,” he says, popping another thin mint in his mouth. “Later.”

I nod and close the door, knowing that was way too close. Ginger Girl Scout’s banging on Skunk’s door. I pass her and see Duncan climbing the last step of the staircase. First, my heart tap dances across my chest, then I get a wicked whiplash from snapping my head in the direction of my apartment door. Whew! Thank God, it’s still closed.

“Hey, Mister, want to buy some Peanut Butter Patties?” the cookie monster says to Duncan.

The hallway’s barely wide enough for two people, let alone a barreling wagon. The rear wheel goes up and over my foot as she heads for him.

“He doesn’t want to buy any,” I call after her.

“Well, sure I do,” Duncan says, and squats so he’s on her level. “Whatcha got here?” he says, perusing her wares.

The imp turns and gives me a smug look. I roll my eyes. Duncan stands when I’m at his side and hands me a bouquet of yellow carnations. How thoughtful, I think. Now what do I do with them? I’m not going back in my apartment. Maybe I should start sneezing. Say I’m allergic to them or something. God. If lies were crap, I’d be covered with shit up to my eyeballs by now.

“You know, I think I’ll take a box of those chocolate mints,” he says.

“That’s what her other boyfriend got,” the precocious Ginger Scout says.

Duncan looks at me. I just swallowed my tongue.

“The one who’s still in his underwear,” she goes on, and puts her hand to her mouth as she giggles.
I whisper in Duncan’s ear that the little girl must’ve caught Skunk in his briefs. He gets his wallet open, and the kid’s giving him her troops-overseas pitch. He hands her a ten and says he’ll take two boxes. He cradles the cookies against his chest.

“You want to put those in water before we go?” he asks, pointing to the flowers.

I look at the carnations, then up the hall to my apartment door. Marcus is probably eating my box of shortbreads by now. Who knows? Maybe he’s gone back to bed. No way I’m going to try and explain my brother in my bed eating my cookies.

“I’d love to take them with me,” I say, the bouquet up against my nose.

Now that’s no lie.

Duncan smiles. “Okay. Let’s go.”

We leave Ginger Girl Scout behind, and Duncan shakes his head. “If she were my kid,” he says, “she wouldn’t be knocking on strangers’ doors. Just think of the low-trousered perverts wanting more than just her cookies.”

Sound Bites is packed with people. Most are crammed at small tables; others hover around the nooks closest to the half-glass-paned door. Still others, like Duncan and me, are waiting outside in some disorganized fashion of hierarchy sandwiched between the chalky skies and the shoveled cement walk. Street slush caps the mound of plowed snow that lies along the curb. There are four Asian women ahead of us chatting about Cosmo’s “Naughty Dares to Try with Your Man Tonight,” and in front of them, is a guy with black ropey dreadlocks and fingers tucked in the back pocket of his girlfriend’s jeans. A waiter in hospital-orderly white swings open the café door and asks if anyone’s
eating alone. One of the Asian girls turns to the line that’s now snaking beyond the neighboring second-hand clothes’ store and bellows to the crowd, “Who’s eating alone?”

Echoes of anyone eating alone? are heard behind us, apparently for the stragglers at the end of the line that might not have heard her. For some reason, I’m feeling sorry for the anyone who comes forward and a tad smug that it’s not me this time. Duncan goes inside to get some coffee from the self-serve bar.

While he’s gone, I think a little about last night and tug my turtleneck collar until I feel the wool rubbing under my chin. Couples and clumps of people shake their heads as they pass by Sound Bites, and I’m suddenly missing Duncan at my side. Probably those en route think we’re all loony for standing outside in the cold waiting for the Sound Bites’ God to let us in. On the other hand, I can’t help but think that maybe it’s me they’re judging, because I’m the only oddball without a partner at the moment. I scoot closer to the Asian girls, hoping the passerbys will figure I belong to them. When the girls get serious about limbering up their groin muscles for the night ahead as Cosmo suggests, I laugh. One of them looks my way, and the conversation shifts to their native tongue. I turn away from the group and focus my gaze on the jagged mortar seamed between the red bricks of the building.

“Here you go,” Duncan says to me. His hand holds a mug of steaming coffee.

I smile, take it from him, and welcome the warmth of the cup between my hands. I’m feeling relieved that Duncan’s back at my side again, and this makes me mad at myself for worrying about being alone. I mean, what am I? That little girl back in school who’s told by the teacher that she can come out from the corner now and join the class? What’s the big deal about eating alone? Or being alone for that matter? I want to know
why it’s okay to go shopping at the mall by myself, to drive solo in my car or to travel on
the T by myself, but it’s criminal to eat alone or sit in the movies by myself. Who makes
up this single zone shit anyhow? And what if someone’s standing in this line all alone but
has a considerate somebody getting her a hot cup of coffee or another somebody back at
home eating her shortbreads in bed? Is that okay? And why the hell do I care, anyhow?

Duncan rests his hand on my shoulder as he’s done it a thousand times before.
The couple at the head of the line goes inside. The Asian women are gabbing in English
again, this time about “Dirty Daydream Dares,” and I want to share with them my fantasy
about spanking Brad Pitt. I curl my toes inside my boots, thinking this will keep them
warmer. Duncan apologizes for the wait and says the place is worth it. He puts the empty
mug of coffee in the pocket of his jacket and pulls me into him so that my face is
scrunched up against his navy blue parka. A down feather pokes from a seam, rams up
my nose, and makes my eyes water. I pluck it and try to discern its gray shape from a sea
of grays as it floats to the ground. Duncan rubs brisk circles over my back with his hands.
I try to remember if Marcus has ever done this but can only recall massaging the muscles
of his neck and back with body oils I carefully warmed between the palms of my hands. I
look up at Duncan. The tip of his nose is red.

The Asian women are discussing Cosmo’s “6 Signs You’re Really Meant for
Each Other.” The waiter’s calling for the next seating of two, and it’s the first time since
we got in this blasted line that I want to stay and eavesdrop so I’ll know some of the
signs. If really good sex is on the list, then Marcus and I go to the head of the class.
Duncan and I skip in front of the girls, and something tells me they’re talking about us.
Maybe they think we’re a cute couple or could be they’re just bitching because they’re still standing out in the cold.

My skin tingles with the change in temperature once we’re inside, and my nose runs as if someone just turned on a faucet. I have no tissues, so I have to dab my nose on the cuff of my jacket sleeve. Breakfast dishes are still being cleared from our table, which is in the middle of the room, and I’m so starving that I want to say to the waiter, *hey, leave that half-eaten toasted bagel, will ya?*

We get settled in our seats, and our waiter gives us menus. I hear a customer at the table next to us say there’s a ‘no newspaper’ rule at Sound Bites, because they want you in, then they want you out.

“*The stuffed French toast is good,*” Duncan says.

I scan the menu and see that the French Toast’s stuffed with cream cheese and strawberry preserves. Way too sweet for me. Maybe I’ll have the Swine and Swiss, I think. My eyes wander across the room to the waiting group of standing customers practically hugging the tables closest to the door. There’s a bulletin board swamped with announcements, some I can’t read because the print’s too small, but I notice a flyer for Moe’s Moving Men, a rental ad for one studious single/no pets/no smoking/no kitchen privileges, and several upcoming events along the Charles River. There’s an autographed black and white of Rosie O’Donnell with some guy who I guess is the owner of the place, one of a Bruins’ player I don’t recognize, and a laminated sign written in bold black letters that says *When you are seated, think about the line outside. After you have enjoyed breakfast, please give others a chance.* The rest of the walls are stacked with brightly painted contemporary art. The waiter’s back at our table asking us what we want. I see
the Asian women peering in the glass-paned door and wonder if it’s Stuffed French Toast, rather than mouthwatering male bodies, that they’re lusting over now.

“Lexie, do you know what you want?” Duncan asks me.

The waiter’s standing next to me, his pencil tapping his pad.

“Art, Tom, and Jack,” I say, because it’s the first thing that catches my eye when I look at the menu again.

Duncan gets the French toast. There’s no ketchup on the table. I almost ask the waiter for some and wonder what that means.

“Funny choice,” Duncan says.

“What?” I ask.

“Your breakfast,” he says, and points to the selection in the menu lying flat on the table’s edge.


“I hear it’s good,” he says. “I don’t eat artichokes though. Don’t like the feel of them on my tongue.”

When our food comes, Duncan gives me a bite of his French toast while he waits for the waiter to bring him the ketchup. In my omelet, the combination of tomatoes and Jack cheese is perfect. I tell Duncan the artichokes are yummy and make him try a bite. He lets it sit on his tongue for a second, then takes a slug of coffee and swallows it down.

“No fair,” I say. “You cheated.”
“I’m not the cheating kind,” he says, then takes a sip of coffee and clears his throat. “But since you brought it up.”

OhmyGod. What’s coming next? He knows about Marcus after all? Hey, is there anyone else in my head? Wake up people. Which one of you Lexie wanna-be’s wants to deal with this?

“I don’t know if you’re seeing anyone else,” he says, and there’s a long pregnant pause. I’m waiting for him to go on, but he looks at me expectantly. I realize then that he wants me to answer. It would be a relief just to come clean about Marcus, my brother/lover, right now. Who knows? Maybe we’ll have a good laugh over it all.

“Nothing serious,” I say, which is partially true. I mean, the sex is serious—seriously primal. The rest of Marcus and me? Hmmm. Can we ask the judges for a serious definition of “serious” here?

“I like you, Lexie,” he says. “And I’d like to see a lot more of you.”

He’s got my hand in his now and is rubbing little circles with his thumb over the tender fleshy part of my palm. I’m nodding my head. He’s smiling.

“But I’ve got to tell you,” he says, a deadpan expression now on his face; “I wish this could be exclusive.”

I feel like one of those two-faced mini-wheat cereals. One side’s frosted as in this is so sweet. I think Duncan’s asking me to be his girlfriend. The other side’s some somber shredded wheat as in uh-oh. Is that the other shoe I hear dropping?

“I don’t want us to hide anything from each other,” he says.

Like you from Marcus? Like Marcus from you? Like me under this table?

“I really want to do this right,” he says.
What’s this? I’m thinking.

“So I need to tell you,” he says. The thumb circling stops.

My heart’s jump roping in my chest. This is it. Duncan wants us to be an item. I can deal with that. We’re on the same wavelength—a good indicator that we’re made for each other.

“I need to tell you that I’ve been caring for another woman for about six months now,” he says.

*All Engines—Full Stop!* is the command that’s screeching in my brain.

“She’s a widow,” he continues. “Her husband got shot in a hunting accident last winter. Left her with a little two-year old boy and one of those shaggy Portuguese Water dogs. We call him Pep.”

Wait. You’re going too fast, I silently scream. Rewind, please. I’m still stuck on ‘another woman.’ I watch his Adam’s apple bob up and down in his throat. Did he say something about a peppy Portuguese kid? And a two-year old dog?

“I’ve been helping her out some,” he says. “She moved in to my place a while ago because things got a bit tight for her. Probably, I shouldn’t have said it was okay, but there was an investigation into her husband’s death—some question about suicide. Anyway . . .” He swipes his hand in the space between us. “That’s a whole other story,” he says. “Maybe I shouldn’t have let her stay, but you know how things go. I guess I wanted to . . .” His eyes drop to his plate. “I don’t know, take care of her, I guess.” He looks at me again. “But the reason that I’m telling you this, Lexie, is . . .”

Gulp. So you can let me down easy, I think. I want to put my hands over my ears and sing, *la-la-la-la-la* like I used to do on the Kindergarten playground when I didn’t
want to hear bratty Harold Jerkowitz call me Connect-the-Dots because that’s what he tried to do with the freckles on my nose. Wouldn’t you know it? I think I meet the perfect guy only to find out that someone else has first dibs on him. I hear him talking to me, but it’s like I’m underwater—his words are muffled and distorted. I’m kind of curious. I mean, how can the guy (who may have blown it as the prime candidate in my five-year plan) want to see a lot more of me when he’s living with the widow woman?

I think he just said something about being glad that he met me. Did he just say that? And now I’m competing against a woman with a dead husband. And this is fair? My nose drip drips into my coffee cup. I give it a swipe with my paper napkin. It’s only because I’m in the same boat as Duncan and because I really like him, too, that I don’t get up from my seat and announce to the anyone eating alone chilling in the line outside, that a seating for one just became available. I grab the handle on my coffee mug, then remember that there’s nasal drip swirling in my mocha blend. My pinky stays hooked in the crook of the handle when I pull my hand away, so the cup tips and spills onto the table. Duncan’s quick to throw his napkin onto the coffee puddling on the tablecloth, which makes me think of a boxing match, when the boxer’s corner calls it quits by throwing in the towel.

“You probably think I’m nuts,” he says, mopping up the mess.

I shake my head. No. Well, maybe. Yes, dammit—Oh, I don’t know. I’m not exactly in a position to judge.

“Let me get you some more coffee,” he says, pushing back his chair.

“No, really,” I say, waving the suggestion away with my hand.
He scoots his chair back in toward the table. “Look,” he says. “Why don’t we finish eating, then maybe we can go back to your place and talk some more.”

Did he say my place? Oh God. Maybe it’s my turn to confess. His live-in girlfriend is a widow. My brother’s my lover. I try to weigh these on the imaginary scales tipping in my head. I think the scales are in his favor. I mean, who could fault a guy who takes in wretched widow women, little waifs, and creatures with wagging tails?

“I don’t mind talking now,” I say.

He shakes his head and picks up the ketchup bottle.

“Eat,” he says. “It’d be a shame if that gets cold.” He points to the omelet on my plate.

I put a small bite in my mouth. It’s cold. Duncan forks a square of French toast while a ticker tape of questions scrolls across my brain. I try to imagine life in his home. Does she sleep in his bed? Well, of course she does. That’s why he hasn’t put the moves on me, right? I see them all at the breakfast table. Peppy’s eating Fruit Loops—a few banana slices mixed in for nutritional value. The widow’s making oatmeal for Duncan—something hearty to stick to his ribs on these cold winter mornings. Duncan’s . . . what’s Duncan doing? Ah yes. Getting the ketchup out of the fridge to slather over the cinnamon bun that just came out of the oven. I wonder how they met? Did she look for him in Home Depot? Have trouble with the broken chain thingy in her toilet? Maybe she opted for the free installation, then the sink clogged after that, and the back screen rattled—and the rest—is Mr.-Home-Improvement history. Damn. I want to pitch my tent at Duncan’s feet. Sheesh! Jealousy can make you say stupid things.
The waiter asks me if I want a to-go cup of coffee, and I say that’s a good idea. Duncan passes on the refill. I don’t want to talk about the widow woman. I definitely don’t want to talk about Marcus. I search the archives of my brain for something safe to chat about with Duncan. There’s still food on our plates. We can’t sit here chewing and staring blankly like an old married couple with nothing left to say. The Asian girls are seated at a table next to ours. One of them is talking about her boyfriend’s foot fetish. I used to know a guy in college who got an erection sucking on my big toe. I watch Duncan drag his French toast across the smear of ketchup on his plate and guess a conversation about sexual turn-ons is not appropriate any time too soon.

“Tell me about your vacation,” I say instead.

“I’m really looking forward to it,” he says. “Go there about this time every year.”

“By yourself?” I ask, then want to rewind and delete my words. Do I want to hear that he’s taking her, the boy, and the dog? Oh God! I’m so stupid.

“Just me,” he says. “My folks spend a lot of summer time there, but they don’t get antsy to use the place until the Memorial Day weekend. I like this time of the year because it’s quiet. No jet skis revving up, no boats launching, or backyard barbecue parties. I like to catch up on my reading, do a little fishing, have a few brewskis, eat some grouper. I’ve got a couple of projects I’m working on there.”

He makes the bacon strips skip along the ketchup trail. I can’t help but question his ability to taste anything that doesn’t smack of the stuff. The widow probably keeps the family-sized squeeze bottle in the fridge.
“I’m extending the deck in the back for one thing,” he says. “And little by little the first floor is being renovated, so there’ll be room for guests. Right now there are only two bedrooms, and my parents like to entertain.”

I wonder if the widow woman’s been there.

“So this sounds more like a working trip,” I say. The waiter brings my coffee.

“Yes and no,” he says. “I work at my own pace, do what I want. There’s no time frame. Are you going to eat your toast?”

I shake my head.

“Do you mind?” he asks, pointing to the piece of rye on my plate.

“Go ahead,” I say.

He reaches over, takes it from my plate, and smears it in the remaining ketchup, then he scoops a spoonful of my No-Place-Like-Home Fries off my plate, dunks it as well.

“You really like that stuff,” I say to him.

“The ketchup?” he asks. For a minute he looks embarrassed, then he smiles. “I’ve been dunking my food since I was a kid. Bad habit, I guess.”

“Oh no,” I say. “Just unusual. I’ve got a few of my own.”

“Now we’re talking,” he says, wiping his hands on a napkin. He leans back in his seat. “I’m thinking you’re perfect.” He points at me with his index finger. “Beautiful bright, independent, you work with kids, have great friends, you’re easy-to-get-along with.”

*Come on,* his hand gesture suggests
“Tell me some of your little quirks,” he says. “Do you chew tobacco? Spit the stuff into an empty coke can?”

I laugh.

“I know,” he says. “You eat your Special K with chocolate milk.”

“Well, if you must know,” I say, and feign sticking my knuckle up my nose.

“Gross,” he says. “That could be a deal breaker. You don’t . . .” He sticks the tip of one finger in his mouth.


He laughs, then pushes back his chair. “Ready to go to your place?”

Nope. I look at my watch. It’s been an hour and a half since I left Marcus in his jockeys. I stall by sipping on my coffee and wonder again if this is as good a time to tell him about Marcus. Let’s see, how can I broach the subject? How about: since we’re swapping stories about lovers, Duncan, I want to tell you that my brother’s really my old boyfriend who I’m still sort of seeing, and by the way, want to see the hickey he gave me last night?

“Are you done?” asks the waiter.

“I’m just sipping my coffee,” I say, still stalling for time.

“Well, sip it outside,” he says, and hands Duncan the bill.

He pays, and I insist on getting the tip. He helps me on with my jacket, and opens the door. The cold whips under my jacket, chills the small of my back. “Hey,” he says, grabbing my hand as if we’ve decided something important. “I’ve got a great idea.”

We cross one lane of the street holding hands, then stand on the dividing yellow line for the cars to clear. A bus swishes past; the slush from its tires splatters on my boots.
There’s a break in the traffic, and Duncan pulls me forward. A cab’s approaching, about two car lengths away. We dash in front of it and hop over the curb.

“Why don’t you come to Florida with me?” Duncan says.

Our feet crunch over a pile of packed snow.

How is that possible? I wonder. And why me and not the widow?

“I’ve got some frequent flyer miles,” he says, as we get in the car. He turns on the ignition, buckles his seat belt, and puts the car in reverse. “We’ll just kick back and enjoy ourselves.” He pulls out of the parking space, and I hear the whish of his tires spraying slush as we pick up speed on the street. My carnations lie on the console looking wimpy and tired—I can relate. Duncan fiddles with the CD’s that are racked on his visor. He inserts one of the disks and hits the track button several times. Jimmy Buffet’s *Margaritaville* plays, and Duncan pats my thigh. “Something to get us in the mood,” he says. “I’ll grill up some grouper; we can bask in the sun. Maybe we’ll take the schooner out, catch the sunset. Sip margaritas. Whaddya say?”

He’s got the heater on, but I swear cold air is blowing from the vents. I think about the warm Florida sun, sandals on my feet (need a manicure), cotton shorts and T-shirt (need some spray-on tan), maybe a bathing suit if it gets warm enough (better get a bikini wax), birds chirping, palm trees swaying, margaritas or piña coladas with purple paper umbrellas at our sides. I think about the widow pining away for Duncan. The little boy wanting his new Daddy to read him *Hop on Pop*. The dog panting on the braided bedroom rug. Hey. Wait a minute. My scrambled thoughts stumble over an earlier remark. I thought Duncan said he wasn’t the cheating kind. What’s up with that?
“What about the other woman?” I ask, and can’t believe I just said that. For one thing, maybe I’m the other woman. I mean, the widow came first, so that makes her the alpha dog except that term’s only used for the male species, so what is she? The alpha bitch? Okay, so that makes me the . . . what? I’m not even the mistress. Guess I’m the wanna-be bitch.

“She won’t be there,” he says.

Hmmm. Maybe they’ve got an open relationship, I think. Well, doesn’t it work both ways? I mean, I’ve been driving myself wacky worrying about Duncan finding out about Marcus. So now what? If he’s got a main squeeze, can’t I have a side order of Marcus with my Duncan?

On the way to my place, I talk Duncan into stopping off at Olivia and Cooper’s on the pretense that I need to get my meatloaf pan that Olivia borrowed from me the other day. Weak excuse, I know, but it was all my warped brain could come up with in my panic mode. There’s no further talk of the widow on the ride over, and I tell Duncan that I’m thinking about his invitation to Florida. I don’t call Olivia, because I’m afraid that she’ll tell me it’s not a good time. I figure if we drop in on them, they’ll have no choice but to let us in.

Olivia is breathless when she answers the door. At first I wonder if we interrupted something intimate, but then I take in the locker-room gray shorts, the oversized T-shirt, socks, sneakers, headband, hand weights, and the fact that Olivia’s marching in place. The logical conclusion is that she’s working out to some exercise video.
“I’ve got to keep my heart rate up,” she says. “Come in. Cooper’s around here somewhere.”

We walk into the living room and see that Olivia’s kickboxing video’s on pause. She picks up the remote control and starts doing knee raises with the guy on tape that’s sweating like he just sparred with Jet Li. Cooper staggers from the bedroom unaware that we’re standing there. He’s wearing his navy sweatpants and white polo shirt that says, *Help Keep Albatrosses off the Hook*. His hair’s going every which way and one hand’s scratching his butt.

“Good morning,” I say to him.

He looks at me as if he’s trying to focus. “What? No bagels?” he asks.

I shake my head. Duncan holds out his hand. “How’re you doing, Man,” Duncan asks. “Probably, we should’ve called.”

Duncan shakes Coop’s hand, which I wouldn’t do because I know where’s it’s been.

“Coffee,” Cooper says, heads for the kitchen, and signals us to follow.

“Almost done, guys,” Olivia calls from the living room. “Three, two, one. There!” She clicks off the TV set and plops on the couch. “Cooper?” she yells. “You promised me breakfast in bed!”

“Lack of oxygen to the brain,” Cooper tells us as he points to his temple. “Causes her delusions of grandeur.”

I leave Cooper and Duncan in the kitchen making coffee and tear into the living room where Olivia’s body sags like a hammock. I sit down on one of the cushions and shake her.
“Olivia,” I whisper. “He’s living with another woman.”

She opens one eye, and I think of Popeye the Sailor Man. She nods her head as if she’s not the least bit surprised. “Now maybe you’ll cut him loose,” she says.

“But I don’t have the whole story yet,” I say. “She’s a widow with a two-year old.”

“God help her,” she says.

“I thought you liked Duncan,” I say.

She nods. “That’s why I’m saying, get rid of the dead wood.”

“Who wants coffee?” Cooper yells from the kitchen.

I pass, because I’m already quirpy from the morning’s hairpin-turning, death-defying-looping roller coaster ride.

“Mega cup for me,” Olivia calls out to Cooper.

“You’d rather I stay with Marcus?” I ask Olivia. “I mean, the thought did cross my mind, because at least with Marcus, I know what I’m getting, and I’ve got to tell you that it’s a good thing that I dismantled my smoke alarm when I burned the bacon last week, because we had some pretty hot sex last night. And with Marcus, I’m not kicking out a woman whose husband may have shot himself.”

Olivia’s eyes get wide.

“Who knows why he did it?” I say. “Maybe he wanted his Portuguese wife to get the insurance money to pay off the house, and maybe he needed to sock some money in the boy’s college fund. But anyway, Duncan took them in along with the water dogs, and . . .”

Olivia puts her hand over my mouth. “What are you smoking?” she asks.
I pry her fingers away. “You just called Duncan dead wood,” I say. “I’m trying to explain.”

“Duncan’s the one with the other woman?” she asks.

I nod. “That’s what I’ve been telling you.”

“Get out of town,” she says. “I thought you were telling me about Marcus and one of his chickies.”

“Marcus has a chickie?” The words machine-gun from my lips, and I feel the green-eyed monster creep under my skin.

Olivia shakes her head. “Sometimes you’re such a twit,” she says.

I tell Olivia that Duncan and I went to breakfast and left Marcus at my apartment in his jockeys. “He thinks I’m here to get my meatloaf pan you borrowed.”

“Who does?” she asks. “Can you drop the masculine pronoun and give me first names? Jiminey criminey. I need a scorecard to keep track.”

“Marcus thinks I’m out for the day with my mother. Oh, and that my apartment’s being sprayed for roaches,” I say. “Duncan thinks I’m here to get my meatloaf pan.”

Honey,” she says. “The last time I cooked a meatloaf, I stuck it in a bundt pan, and the thing jigged like a Jell-O mold when I flipped it onto a serving platter.”

“He wants me to go on vacation with him,” I whisper.

“Names, Lexie,” she says.

“FLO-RI-DA!” I mouth each syllable. “He’s leaving the widow and kid at home.”

Olivia’s quiet like she’s thinking this over.

“Is he at least taking the Portuguese water dog?” she wants to know.
“Who cares about the dog?” I say. “What should I do? Do you think Marcus is still at my place? Should I go or should I stay?”

“You’re making me dizzy,” Olivia says. “I need some caffeine.” She starts to get up from the couch, but I grab her wrist, and she loses her balance, falls back on the cushion, and our foreheads clunk.

“Ouch,” Olivia says, rubbing her head. “You’re dangerous. D’you know that?”

“Just give me your opinion,” I say.

Olivia shrugs. “The way I see it,” she says. “Duncan’s got someone on the side. You’ve got someone on the side. I’d say this is a sure sign. The two of you are meant for each other.”

I’m thinking this isn’t what *Cosmo* had in mind.

Cooper and Duncan come into the living room, each holding two mugs of coffee. Cooper hands Olivia a cup big enough to plant a geranium. He sits with his legs crossed on the floor in front of her. Duncan gives me some coffee even though I said that I didn’t want any. He tells me to be careful because it’s hot. He sits on the loveseat across from me. Cooper tells Olivia that Duncan’s place is on the water. Duncan says he wants me to go with him. Olivia jabs me in the ribs.

We stray from the vacation subject and talk about benign topics like how fifty-inch Plasma TV screens for hockey game action are the way to go, and how the salted roads are crapping up the paint on our cars, and how alternate side of the street parking is getting to be a pain in the butt this winter, and how the pros and cons to standing in line in the freezing cold for the good food but rushed, not-so-pleasant service at Sound Bites. It’s after twelve, and I figure the coast has got to be clear at home. I suggest to Duncan
that we get going. There’s still a whole discussion ahead of us about the Portuguese platoon living with him.

“What about your meatloaf pan?” Duncan asks me as we head for the door.

I look at Olivia. She makes a *tsk* sound with her tongue and rolls her eyes at me. She opens one of the lower cabinet doors and a couple of pot lids fall out. She squats on the kitchen floor and yanks on a pot handle. An iron frying pan falls on her foot.

“Shit,” she says.

“That’s okay, Olivia,” I say. “I can hold off on the meatloaf.”

If looks could kill, I’d be in full rigor mortis by now.

“You want the meatloaf pan. You’re *getting* the meatloaf pan,” she says through gritted teeth. The racket of her rearranging pots and pans is deafening. She comes up with the infamous bundt pan and says that if the meatloaf doesn’t work, she’s got a killer recipe for Death by Chocolate.

Duncan and I drive back to my place. We walk to my building. I carry my carnation bunch in one hand and gaze down at the patches of brown scorched on the flowers’ dog-eared edges. Duncan carries Olivia’s bundt pan and holds my free hand all the way to my apartment door. There’s a note on lined paper hanging by a strip of scotch tape. I grab it off the door not knowing if it’s private and hope that Duncan’s not a speed-reader. The note gets scrunched up in a ball and shoved in my coat pocket.

“What did it say?” Duncan asks, and gestures that I should go ahead of him to the kitchen.

The truth is that I don’t know what it says. It could be a note from my landlord or a solicitation for carpet cleaning for all I know. Or more than likely, it’s an incriminating
love letter from Marcus asking me to bring over his scarf for a game of tie-me-up cops and robbers. Marcus is big on notes (I submit his breakup post-it as evidence). Though why would he tape this one on the outside of the door?

My eyes dart around my apartment. A few cushions are out of place on my couch, and the newspaper’s sprawled out on the coffee table. Other than that, all seems normal.

“It’s a note from the landlord,” I say, pulling the crumpled ball of paper from my pocket. I toss it into the wastebasket, and it hits the rim, bounces twice, then rolls to within inches of Duncan’s reach. He bends to pick up the crumpled note, but I’m like the roadrunner beep beeping across the floor. I snatch it before he does, walk the paper ball over to the trashcan, and bury it under last week’s linguine and clam sauce. “An extermination notice,” I say. “Damn roaches.” Might as well stay consistent.

I find a glass vase under the sink, fill it with water, and stick the flowers in it. Two stems bow; their yellow heads dangle upside down.

Duncan fingers the box of Thin Mints on the table.

“It’s empty,” he says.

“Damn roaches,” I say.

Duncan snickers, then excuses himself to use the bathroom. “When I come back,” he says, “we can explain everything.”

I give him a weak smile. What does he mean we?

While he’s gone, I fish the crumbled note out from the trash and flatten it against the hard wood of the kitchen table. It’s a note from Marcus alright, but it’s not addressed to me. LANDLORD is written in magic marker on the top of the paper, then the scribble
below says, *Cancun bag stray. Lennon’s hour sucks.* I’m hunched over the note and read it again like it’s some dense Catholic catechism.

“What?” I ask no one. My fingers trace the letters. Is that an “L” or a “T?” “And what the hell’s a bag stray?” I say out loud.

“It’s Bug Spray.”

Every muscle in my body freezes so that I look like one of those live human statues in the park. I don’t shriek, and I don’t look up. There’s a remote possibility that auditory hallucinations are a manifestation of my psychotic meltdown. I tell myself that I’m *not* hearing Marcus’ voice behind me.

“See?” Marcus points a very tangible finger at the words in question. “B-u-g  s-p-r-a-y.” He flicks away a smidgeon of clam. “It says, cancel bug spray. Tenant’s home sick.”

When I turn to face him, he grins as if he just won the lottery.

“I had a wicked hangover, Babe,” he says holding his head. “And then I ate all those cookies.” He points to the empty box on the table. I look down and see that the man is still in his jockeys. “And half of your shortbreads.” Now he’s holding his bare stomach. I’m wondering if there’s a cookie crumb trail that leads to the bedroom. I turn back to the note, rest my forearms on the table, and look at his hieroglyphics, trying to see on paper what he told me it says. Marcus stands behind me, looking over my shoulder.

“Hi guys.” It’s Duncan!

Snapping to attention, my peripheral vision catches his blue parka and jeans. I smack my head against Marcus’ chin.

“Thit!” Marcus says, his head reeling back. “I bith my thongue.”
“Try beer,” Duncan says.

“What?” Marcus says.

“A cold one,” Duncan says. “Got any?” he asks me. He’s thumbing toward the fridge.

I try to speak—to tell him there’s ‘three’—it’s a single word. I hear it in my head; it’s walking onto my thick tongue, and here’s where it trips and rolls around. I try to spit it out, “Th-th-th . . .” Porky Pig’s got nothing on me.

Duncan walks on over to the fridge, pulls open the door, pushes aside the carton of Wonton Soup and Moo Shoo Pork, and grabs the three Heiny’s. He twists off the cap of one and hands it to Marcus. “Here, this’ll numb your tongue.”

Duncan asks me if I want one, but my tongue’s already numb. When I don’t answer, he puts the bottle down on the table next to me. My hand’s over the crinkled note, and I work it into the palm of my hand, my fingers moving like spider’s legs—spinning cocoons into curled leaves. I jam the note deep in my pocket, concealing it under used tissues and Trident wrappers.

“Thanks,” Marcus says.

The two of them clink bottles as if they’re best buds. Duncan takes a few chugs of his beer. Marcus tosses down half the contents of his bottle, makes a smacking sound with his lips. He belches, then says to Duncan, “Something wrong with the fan, Dude?”
Chapter Ten

Something wrong with the fan? Cripes. Duncan’s looking at me like he’s expecting an answer. Oh, great. Now, Marcus is checking me out—probably because he sees Duncan’s eyeballs locked on mine.

I can taste the salted beads of sweat dripping from my upper lip. The prickly rash emerging under my turtleneck is so itchy that I have to scratch it. Heat’s climbing up my spine like mercury in a thermometer. Suddenly, it’s claustrophobically crowded.

Something wrong with the fan? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with the fan. It’s not blowing here in my goddamn kitchen!

Wait a minute. Why didn’t I think of this before? “Exactly!” I say, then squish between the two of them so that I’m out of the kitchen and into the foyer. I do an about face. “It’s the blades,” I say. “They’re making a clicking sound.” I do a little helicopter blade twirl with my finger in the air. “Click, click, click,” I say. “Drives me nuts.” I touch Duncan’s sleeve. “Would you mind?” I ask him, then point down the hallway.

“Right,” Duncan says. “I should look at it.”

We walk down the hall, me in front of Duncan, Marcus behind him. Hold on. Marcus behind him? Whoa. Guess I didn’t think this through. I don’t know what to do now, but my feet keep going. Why the hell not? They’re out there in front of me—one foot in front of the other, clomping on down to my bedroom, leading this fucking parade.

We get to my room—all three of us. My bedspread’s discombobulated—half on,
half off. The mattress cover’s exposed because one corner of the fitted sheet’s untucked. My pillows are propped against the headboard, the fanned Sports Section’s in full view—the Bruins’ loss to Calgary blaring in bold block letters. A half-filled coffee mug’s on the bedside table. Why didn’t I think beyond the fan? About the incriminating mess in my bedroom? Like Marcus’ clothes now strewn in a heap on the floor. I move into action like a chambermaid caught napping. I fluff the pillows, then plop them in their side-by-side position. When I go to fold the newspaper, I discover my box of shortbreads under the paper’s pitched tent. The rush of my movement causes the plastic sleeve to upend. Crumbly cookies spill onto the sheet. I refuse to look up to see if Duncan finds any of this a little bit odd. Maybe he thinks Marcus is staying with me for a few days. Was hanging out in my bed because . . . because it’s bigger? Cozier? The light’s better in here than in the spare bedroom? Damn Marcus. Any other time I might light into him—call him a slob. Ask him if I look like his mother or something. I might tell him to get his act in gear and clean up after himself. But right now, I’m like a criminal tampering with the evidence, now you see it, now you don’t, brushing perfectly good shortbreads into the wicker trashcan I press against the side of my bed.

Duncan flips the switch by the door, and the blades whirl. I tuck the sheet under the mattress, yank on the spread until it falls over the pillows. The draft from the fan finds its way through the mesh of my collar and cools the back of my neck. It parts the hair on my head as I smooth the wrinkles of the spread with the palms of my hands. Marcus and Duncan watch the blades of the fan, listening to the soft whop-whop. I gather Marcus’ clothes—shove them in the bathroom between the plunger and commode.

“I don’t hear a click,” Duncan says.
“Did it click?” Marcus asks me.

I nod, stacking up the lies like a tower of Legos. The two men in my life stand side by side: Duncan taller by a head, Marcus with more muscle mass across his chest and arms—darker in complexion, eyes like Jamaican waters, hair black and blowzy. He sees me look at him and winks. The corners of his mouth curl just a hair. Duncan reaches into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out his keys. His face is serious—difficult to read. There’s no lilt to his voice, no dimples. I don’t know what he’s thinking. Still, I don’t think he’s suspicious. Or maybe he is. He needs his ladder, he says, and some tools. Maybe the blades need tightening, he tells me. I’ve got a few screws loose I want to say—got anything for that?

“I put your stuff in the bathroom,” I whisper at Marcus when Duncan leaves. If I could, I would get him dressed, wrap his kinky scarf tightly around his neck, and shove him out the door. I anticipate Duncan’s questions and wonder why it is that I can figure pediatric drug dosages, differentiate breath sounds, determine how deep to suction a gurgling toddler, decide where best to start an IV in a two-month old, but can only frame the lamest of answers to what I think Duncan will ask about Marcus, in my head?

“So what’s this guy doing here on a Sunday?” Marcus asks.

Not expecting you to be in your jockeys, I think, or lounging all day in my bed. “The better question is, why didn’t you crash at home?” I ask, hoping I can redirect the flow better than some of Boston’s city cops. “You trashed my bedroom.” I raise my hands, then let them drop to the sides of my outer thighs with a slap. “The roaches are going to have a field day with my shortbreads.”
“Chill,” he says. “You can reschedule the bug guy.” Marcus points to the fan. “Does he have to do this now?” The ends of the blades blur—phantom panels appear between the physical ones. “Don’t even think you’re getting back into bed,” I say. He’s got that I-can-do-ungodly-things-to-your-body look in his eyes. “Are you wearing underwear?” he asks. “What?” I ask. “Cause when you were making the bed, and your fanny was bent over the mattress.” He doesn’t finish his thought—just smiles. I shake my head. “So that means you’re not?” he asks. “Go home!” I point to the bathroom, my arm locked at the elbow, stiff as a tree limb. “I think I hear your mother calling.”

Marcus shrugs. “You’re no fun,” he says, then heads for the bathroom. There’s a knock on my apartment door. I get a visual of Duncan in the hallway: the ladder heavy and awkward, his toolbox in hand, waiting on me because the damn door locked behind him. I run across the bedroom carpet—bang my ankle on the bed frame because I misjudged its corner. I hop-hop-hop, then have to stop, pull down my sock, and rub the spot. There’s a nickel-size gouge in my skin. Soon it’ll be a purple bruise and match the one on my neck. This time when I take off, my eye’s on the bedroom door, so I don’t see whatever it is on the floor that makes me trip. My momentum falters; my right knee buckles. I see the shag of my carpet—tweedy brown, looking like wiggly earthworms. My posture’s stooped like I’m going to sack a lineman.
All I can think about is the rug burn I’m going to get when I hit and slide. I try to catch my balance, slow my speed, get some control of my spastic, gangly limbs, but I’m running out of floor space. I’m going to smack into the closet door—splat like a mosquito hit by a flyswatter. I hold up my hands to brace myself, crash into the door, and think I hear a snap. I’m surprised by my rebound off the door and how I fall on my ass. Marcus comes out of the bathroom, fully clothed. His hair, combed back with tap water, looks oily and slick like the feathers of a double-crested cormorant. I’m cradling my left wrist; my legs scissor beneath me. I look from Marcus to the something on the rug that tripped me and see his boots, flopped on their sides, wool socks nestled inside them like a couple of newborn kittens.

“What are you doing?” Marcus asks

“Bouncing off the walls.”

He stoops.

“I think it’s broken,” I say.

“What? Your arm?”

“Yes.” He smells of Listerine. A bead of water trickles from his sideburn down to his jaw line. I look at him and love the arch of his eyebrows, the soft downy hair on his earlobes. He holds my forearm in his hands like it’s an ear of corn, raises it to his lips and kisses the crease at the base of my hand. I give him a weak smile because the pressure of his lips is killing me and because he’s trying to be sweet. He palpates my forearm with cool fingers; the pads press and shift, press and shift like he’s playing chords on a keyboard. He moves on to the knobby bone on the outer aspect of my wrist. I cry out and see him wince.
“C’mon,” he says. “Lay your arm across your chest.”

I look at him.

“Do it,” he says, then puts one arm around my waist, the other under my legs. He lifts me with ease, and maneuvers us through the bedroom door, down the hallway, into the living room. He lays me on the couch. “Stay here,” he says. There’s a rap on the door.

“Who the hell’s that?”

“It’s Duncan,” I say.

“Who’s Duncan?”

“The guy,” I say. “He was just here.”

“The fan guy?”

“Yes, yes,” I say. “Let him in.”

Marcus opens the door. Duncan comes in with his ladder under his arm, the toolbox gripped in the other. He sees me on the couch, my left wrist in the palm of my right hand.

“She fell,” Marcus says. “I’ve got to get my boots on and take her to the emergency room.”

“I can take you.” Duncan says to me.

“I got her, Dude,” Marcus says. “Don’t sweat it.”

Duncan pauses. Looks at me, then back at Marcus. “Right,” he says.

Marcus goes back down the hallway toward my bedroom. Duncan lays the ladder down against the back of the couch and puts his toolbox down on the carpet. He sits on the couch next to me; the shift in the cushion jars my wrist in my hand. I gasp and smell
the freshness of the outdoors on his clothes, in his hair. Fist-size rosy pockets circle his cheeks.

“Does it hurt?” he asks.

“Like a son-of-a-bitch,” I say.

Duncan gets up from the couch. I try to anticipate the lurch in the cushion by tightening the grasp on my wrist. It’s kind of like compensating in a rocking boat. Going with the heave. Steady with the ho. He heads for the kitchen. I hear him rustling in my freezer.

“Your icemaker’s broken,” he says. One of those household items low on my list of things-to-do. Right up there with changing the filter in my heating unit, replacing the butter dish I broke last Easter, getting batteries for the remote, finding a three-way light bulb for the living room lamp. Duncan comes back to me with a frozen bag of peas. He stoops on the floor this time, lays the bag on my wrist; the Bird’s Eye logo upside down—the microwave directions easy to read.

Marcus is back in the room with his boots and jacket on. “Get the door, will you?” he says to Duncan.

“I’ve got to get it x-rayed,” I explain to Duncan.

He nods. “Good,” he says, and stands. “That’s good.”

Marcus comes over to the couch. The two of them tower over me. Marcus looks at Duncan and says nothing.

“Oh, right,” Duncan says and heads for the door.

“I can walk,” I tell Marcus and try to put my feet down on the carpet.
“I’ve got you,” Marcus says. His arms cradle me like before. The peas drop to the floor. Duncan’s got the door ajar. Marcus carries me through it and down the hall.

“Wait,” Duncan says.

Marcus turns to face him. My foot scrunches against the wall. Reverberations of aftershock hit my wrist. I grit my teeth.

“Careful,” I say.

Duncan disappears into my apartment. The door closes, then opens a fraction of a second later. I think he unlocks my apartment door. He gives Marcus the frozen bag of peas, and I can tell from the look on his face that Marcus doesn’t know what to do with them at first. Then it clicks. I see it in his eyes.

“Put this on your wrist,” Marcus tells me. “It’s like ice.”

Duncan unzips his navy blue down parka, takes it off, then places it across my chest.

“I’ll take care of things here,” he says, his head motions back to my apartment

“Thanks,” I tell him.

“I’ll call,” he says. “You’re in good hands with your brother.”

My wrist is broken—more specifically, it’s a Colle’s fracture. The joint of my wrist rests behind its normal anatomic placement, the doctor says. I’m wearing a one-size-fits-all hospital gown that’s tied at the nape of my neck. This one’s sized for The Hulk. My turtleneck sweater’s crumpled on a chair. Getting it off was a bitch—working the sleeve off of my right arm, pulling it over my head, creeping it over my left arm, slow motion inching over my broken wrist. It’s not going back on—too much effort. Besides, I
know the cast wouldn’t fit within the narrow sleeve. I’d have to cut the material up to my elbow. Marcus says I can wear his ribbed shirt. He’ll go bare-chested under his leather jacket.

The pain’s so bad that my teeth chatter, and I ask for a warm blanket. I’m trying to be a brave patient, trying not to complain, but when the doctor takes my arm in his hands, I whimper. He manipulates my wrist as if he’s making me say bye-bye. It’s more than I can stand. I beg for medication—how about a morphine drip? He says, aren’t you a nurse? Meaning what? Nurses are supposed to be stoic? Next, he’ll be singing “Big Girls Don’t Cry.” Didn’t you work here a while back? he wants to know. I nod, and think, cut the chitchat, Doc. Give me narcotics.

“This is the worst of it,” he says, and I know he means that the hot poker jackhammering over my break will subside once he immobilizes my wrist.

I’m biting my lip; my right foot crosses my left and starts pumping overtime. I don’t care that the cragginess of the sienna nail polish on my toes looks like the Appalachian mountain range. Marcus is rubbing my back for the first time since I can’t remember when, and I know he’s trying to help, but I feel every pulse of his fingers in the fracture of my arm. A nurse pulls at the cream cubicle curtain; ball bearings slide along the track above. She’s got a basin in her hand, some casting material, and blue Chux pads, which are folded over her arm. The doctor drops my arm when he sees her, but I’m not paying attention when he does, because I miss the hand-off. My arm falls flaccidly onto my lap. It smacks my hipbone. A jolt of electricity screams in every nerve fiber of my body, and I shriek. “Get me some fucking drugs!” I feel the spittle collect in the corners of my mouth. “Now!”
The nurse gives me a disapproving look. I’m so enraged that I could snap her scrawny neck with my good right hand. I pick up my wrist from my lap and hold it gingerly as if I’m supporting the head of an infant. I’m crying and shaking and foam’s probably spewing from my mouth now.

“Give her a hundred of Demerol,” the doc says to the nurse. “And twenty-five of Vistoril.” The nurse heads for the break in the curtain, then stops, probably in response to the commotion in the next cubicle. An overhead call of “Code Blue” spurs a flurry of activity. A crash cart pushed by a technician zooms into the space next to me like a red Corvette. My nurse stands still, her head cocked like she’s listening to a secret.

I’ve worked in this hospital, so I know that not everyone responds to an emergency otherwise, people would be tripping over ventilator plugs or knocking over IV poles, or worse, sticking epinephrine injections in the wrong person’s ass. I mean, there’s a code team, and everyone else is supposed to keep doing what they’re doing. Don’t get me wrong; I’m certainly not insensitive to the person in trouble next door. But my nurse is frozen—she’s neither here or there—what’s up with that?

“My shot?” I say to her, but she ignores me, intent on looking at the curtain as if it’s a big screen, and she’s waiting for the movie to start.

My doctor pulls open the cubicle curtain that separates me from whatever’s gone wrong with the patient next door. He disappears from my view. The nurse puts the basin and supplies at the foot of my stretcher and follows the doctor through the opening near my head. I hear the snap of the bearings colliding above when the curtain’s yanked closed. Silhouettes move behind the drape like shadows that dance on garden walls. The
curtain billows from the bend of elbows and bulges from protrusions of variously sized rear ends in the space back there.

Marcus looks at me. I know he’d rather be somewhere else, watching “Fear Factor” on TV, tightening a loose lug nut on the rim of a tire, sticking bamboo shoots under his fingernails. I groan, splint my broken wrist against the wall of my chest.

“I’ll get someone,” Marcus says. He leaves, and I’m all alone.

I hear a voice call for an amp of sodium bicarb. Respiratory therapy comes flying past my stretcher. The curtain shifts at the base of my bed, opens about six inches. I see an elderly woman knitting her hands in the hall outside my cubicle, a man’s jacket, too big for her, drapes from her shoulders. A younger guy, maybe in his forties, is dressed in a gray pinstripe suit, crisp white shirt, and power-red tie. He paces, then bunches up my curtain looking for the opening. He seems surprised to see me on the other side, lying on the stretcher. His hair stands on end from the static electricity.

“That’s my dad,” he says, and points to the separating curtain. He spreads his hand across his face.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

He nods, and together we watch the shadows move.

Marcus comes back with a guy whose badge says he’s Kim Wu, a physician’s assistant. Wu’s got a needle in his hand. Marcus looks at the man in my cubicle, gives me a what’s up gesture.

“It’s fine,” I say, then turn onto my right hip. The physician’s assistant rubs an alcohol pad over the left upper quadrant of my butt that’s hanging out for all to see. He
darts the needle into my skin, the medication stings as it penetrates my muscle, then the needle’s out, and the area’s massaged with the swab.

I wait for Kim Wu to leave the cubicle before I tell Marcus that this is the son of the man next door. He just popped in, I whisper in Marcus’ ear.

The side rails are up. My head’s on the pillow, my legs outstretched, a blanket covers my lower half. Marcus strokes my hair, holds the straw in my cup of water so I can take a sip.

“You two married?” the suit guy asks.

We both shake our heads.

He looks back at the curtain. “Just so you know,” he says, and I wonder if he’s talking to us, or to his dad, or to the folks working away back there. I watch his profile—see him bite his lip. He turns on his heels so he’s facing us. “It can go.” He snaps his fingers.

“Sorry, Buddy,” Marcus says, and rises from his chair. He offers the guy a seat.

The man shakes his head. “No, thanks,” he says. “Fifty-one years they’ve been married.” His hand smooths the flyaway hair on his head. “I ask you: where can you find that kind of love these days?”

Marcus nods as if he agrees with the guy. One part of me wants to say, See, Marcus. We can have that love. We have to try harder, that’s all. The other part of me knows that Marcus isn’t thinking in such abstract terms. He’s just nodding to be polite to an understandably distraught man. Duncan flashes into my head—there’s so much at stake here, I think—the widow, the boy, his four-legged friend.
I worry also about the old lady left outside the cubicle. She’s the other half, I assume, of the half-dead man in the space next to me. Should she be alone? I want to ask the suit guy. I almost send Marcus out to get her, to bring her into our little circle, but just then, the movement of the stretcher draws the curtain open. The three of us gape as it wheels by—the patient’s white as the sheet that floats over his lower legs. Wires and tubes and IV bags sprout and extend from his body. Spikes and inverted tents move along the portable monitor leaning against the side rail. An entourage in blue moves with the stretcher like choppy surf in an ocean. Someone at the head compresses an Ambu bag; others hold the chrome rails and propel the stretcher forward. The man in the suit takes up the rear. The old lady waits, shuffles forward, then stops and looks around as if she’s forgotten something.

I want to shout to the old woman that everything’s going to be okay—that her man’s just got to make it. I mean, he can’t die. We’re talking fifty-one years! That’s a lifetime of doing things a certain way. Half a century of nuances and signals and body language that speaks only to them. God. What will she do without him? Probably, she can’t manage alone in that big old house, and none of the kids want to convert their dining room into a bedroom for Ma. The old lady and dying man are like bookends—take one away, and everything topples over. They’re like a bicycle that can stand alone because it’s two-tired. I think about fifty-one years of sleeping with the same man. My thoughts flash forward to Marcus taking his teeth out at night, giving me a big gummy kiss. Viagra gives him angina—sex is kaput. Or there’s Duncan dragging his dried-apple ass to bed right after “Jeopardy.” I consider fifty-one years of Marcus snoring, hacking up lugies after all those cigarettes. Fifty-one years of slaving over a hot stove so Duncan can
slather ketchup over the food I cook. Up to now, this woman’s never known the meaning of “alone.” I think about this, then wonder—what if she’s looking forward to it? What if the old man choked the living daylights out of her—okay, so probably, those are not the best choice of words, but seriously, what if he nicked and dimed her, tracked what she spent on Fix-a-Dent, Metamucil, single-ply toilet tissue? What if she couldn’t turn around without him tripping over the laces of her orthopedic shoes? Maybe the old lady stopped having original thought when she got married. God knows, I wouldn’t want my life to be processed like luncheon meat.

A Pink Lady returns, takes the crook of the old woman’s elbow, and promenades her away.

This makes me think of the old woman and her man walking along the Charles River in the early morning hours, her hand in the crook of his elbow, sauntering around the dew-wrapped thistles. They’d point at the disappearing white-tail deer alarmed by the sound of their voices, comment on the bullfrog calling and vesper sparrow bathing in a puddle from yesterday’s rain. He’d tell her that he has chosen her many times since they’ve been married as they pack up the Winnebago and drive to Winter Haven—snowbirds in the month of February.

Something tells me the old man and woman are experts at turning stumbling-blocks into stepping-stones. Something tells me that I could learn a lot from them. Look at me. I can’t even make it beyond a year with a guy.

Now it’s quiet. I’m beginning to feel the effects of the drug—there are halos around everything—even the litter on the floor from the code has curly edges and seems to creep towards me like hairy caterpillars.
“How’re you doing?” Marcus asks.

I’m chewing on the straw from my plastic cup of water. He takes it out of my mouth, and I frown.

“Super-doooper,” I say, and stroke the scissor-sharp stubble on his cheeks. “But b’fore you take your teef out, there’s something I wanna know.”

Marcus nods his head.

“Did you pokey-hokey with my dad’s . . . ? What’s her name?” I ask.

“You’re bonkers,” he says, and laughs. “Close your eyes and get some rest.”

“No by the hair on chinny-chin-chin. Wait. I mean, not by the hair on my right nipple,” I say, and pat the pectorals beneath his trimming ribbed shirt.

“Then maybe you should come with subtitles,” he says, “because I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Liar, liar. Pants on fire,” I say. “I was standing on the toilet seat.”

“You’re goofy,” he says.

“Your nose is longer than a telephone wire,” I say.

He shakes his head.

“You shtoooped my wife,” I say. “I mean, my Daddy’s wife-a-rooney. And that’s the trufth.” I give him a raspberry as I’d seen Lilly Tomlin do from her big old rocker in reruns of “Laugh In.”

“You’re flying,” Marcus says. “I haven’t been with anyone since we’ve been back together.”

Did he say back together? Oh. Help me. I’m m-e-l-t-i-n-g.
I see him shove Duncan’s jacket in the bag marked Patient’s Belongings.

“Shweetest thing,” I say, pointing to the bag. “He’s got a Portchageese child, you know. And uh-nuther woman. Fancy that. And a dog—he waters it.”

“Are you talking about the fan guy?” Marcus asks.

“Yes, indeedy,” I say.

“Hey, how come he thinks I’m your brother?” he asks.

I laugh. “How ’bout that?” I say. “Brother.” I go to pat Marcus’ chest, but end up clawing his nose with the nails on my right hand. I feel his skin wedge under my fingernails, see the beads of blood surface on the bridge of his nose. Marcus wipes it with his hand, looks at the smear on his fingertips. Brother? I think, and wonder if Duncan already knows the truth?

The doctor comes back into my cubicle.


I nod. “Good stuff,” I say to him. “Can I get a doggy bag?”

He looks at Marcus, who shrugs his shoulders.

“So let’s set that wrist in a cast,” he says.

“Whadda ‘bout the old man?” I ask, and pick at a thread on the sleeve of his white lab coat. “S-s-snowbirds.” I flutter my right hand in the air.

“Holding on,” he says, and wraps my arm with some soft felt material. Then he starts winding the wet plaster around my wrist, my forearm, and the webbed area between my thumb and forefinger. Marcus stays at my side. After the last wrap is applied, the doctor yanks off his gloves and asks me to wiggle my fingers. I find this very funny and want to reach out and touch the pitting of his skin at the base of his jaw. He puts a sling
around my neck, pins the bunched material so that my arm is snug in a right angle position. Then the doctor questions the swelling of my right ankle that peek-a-boos from under the blanket. There’s a blue-purple haze over the bony prominence. For some reason, Marcus has to wait outside of the cubicle while my physician notes the bruise on my neck, my ankle, the break in my arm and asks if I feel safe at home.

“Oh, God. No,” I say. “It’s nothing like that.”

The doctor leaves me with a prescription for Darvocet N-100, which I can take every four to six hours as needed for pain. Marcus’ shirt hangs on me like a nightgown. He helps me into Duncan’s jacket. My good arm’s lost in the sleeve; my casted arm’s tucked behind the zipper. The other sleeve hangs, empty of an appendage. It probably looks like one of the noodles kids play with in the pool. I think about the fact that I’m wearing layers of men. The thought warms me, yet gives me the chills. Marcus helps me to the Jeep. I’m still riding the Demerol wave, hanging ten. Marcus and I are back together. The two of us, bopping down the Pain Pill Pipeline on our way to get me more drugs.

Duncan’s gone when we get home. There’s a note on the fridge held by one of the magnetic letters. Marcus reads it with me. Fan’s fine. Hope you are, too. Call you later.

“Pretty chummy for a fan guy,” Marcus says.

I say nothing. My head feels disconnected as if it’s three feet above the rest of me floating around like a cumulous cloud. I just want to go to bed and sleep until the spring equinox.

Marcus helps me out of my clothes, and for once, he’s not groping body parts or making lewd suggestions. I guess that I believe him about Brenda. God. That means I’ve
been jumping to conclusions. Imagining the worst. I question my ability to make sound
decisions. I’m losing my edge—if I had one in the first place. I give Marcus back his shirt
and let him redress me in my oversized Bruins’ jersey. I’m liking this TLC. He even puts
socks on my feet.

“You all set?” he asks me.

I nod.

“Good. I’m taking your keys so I can get back in. I’m going to my place,” he
says, “to get a few things. I’ll be back in an hour at the most.”

OhmyGod. Is he planning on staying? Why would he? Maybe he feels guilty. I
mean, it was his clodhoppers I tripped over, after all. But then again, maybe he’s staying
just because he wants to. Now, that’s a pleasant thought. I can live with that—him—
whatever. Now what do I do about Duncan?

I stir in that still sleepy state where the softness of dreams taps against the hard
corners of truth. Are Marcus and I really back together? And just what does that mean? Is
he moving back in or just staying until I can tie my own sneakers, hook my bra, button
my blouse, snap and unsnap my jeans? Ugh, my tongue tastes like Elmer’s glue, my
wrist’s throbbing, and I’ve got to pee like a kid on a road trip. My digital clock says it’s
eight-thirty. I don’t even know how long I’ve been asleep because I never looked at the
clock when I got back from the hospital. Where’s Marcus? I wonder.

I go to the bathroom and manage to twist the cap off the toothbrush by using my
back molars. I brush my teeth and tongue, spit into the sink, and rinse. I’m wiping my
mouth with my hand towel when I see Marcus’ black vinyl toiletry bag on the bathroom
counter. He must have put it there while I was sleeping. This gets me thinking about his plan to stay with me and makes me wonder just how serious it’s going to be this time around. Before it goes too much further, we’re going to have to discuss some things. Like when it comes to my heart, there’ll be no squatters, no subletting, no rent-to-buy, no quitclaim deeds, no assumable mortgages, no automatic extensions. If Marcus wants to occupy my heart, he’s going to have to qualify, to fork up some good faith escrow, to agree to a lock-in period. In other words, my heart’s not for rent—either sign on the dotted line or not.

Listen to me. I’m so full of crap.

I see in the mirror that my hair’s fluffy on one side of my head and looks like the flat end of an iron on the other. I let the tap water run over my fingers, then wet the puffy hairs so at least now I’m symmetrically flattened.

I find Marcus sitting on the couch watching Beverly Hills Cop on TV. It’s the first movie, made when I was five. Sheesh. Are those bellbottoms on the screen? Marcus has a bag of microwave popcorn on his lap and is sipping the last Heiny.

“Hey,” he says when he sees me, “if it isn’t Princess Grace.”

I smirk. He pats the cushion next to him.

“How’s the arm?” he asks, as I sit down.

“It still hurts,” I say. He’s got an angry crusted line on his nose where I scratched him. “I’m going to need to call in sick tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” he says. “About tomorrow. I’m putting a tranny in a ’57 Chevy for a customer. It’s a rush job. He’s giving me an extra C-note to get it done. Otherwise, you know I’d stay home and help you convalesce.” Marcus winks. “If you know what I
mean.” He mimes the playing of a drum in the space between us to the words. “Bodka-
boom.”

I’m feeling about as sexual as an amoeba right now. “Maybe Olivia or Cooper can
spend part of the day with me,” I say.

He tosses a handful of popcorn into his mouth, then squeezes my bare knee and
says, “Cool. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I see my cell phone on the coffee table, and wonder, what’s it doing there? My
keys lie next to it. “Any calls?” I ask.

He shakes his head. There’s a car chase on TV. Marcus’ eyes are glued to it. I ask
him to pass me the phone so that I can call Olivia. He gives it to me.

“I didn’t want the phone to wake you,” he says. Maybe he wants me to see the
halo humming over his head. I smile, and he turns back to the television. “You know,
your fridge’s empty,” he says. It’s a statement, not a question. “I tossed the Moo Shoo
Pork. And something’s swimming in your Wonton Soup.”

I check out the call log on my cell and see a Somerville number. Duncan must’ve
phoned while I was sleeping.

“I thought you said no one called,” I say.

There’s a commercial for Bud Light. A horny talking monkey’s asking his
owner’s date how she feels about back hair. Marcus looks at me.

“Oh yeah,” he says. “I forgot. The fan guy called. Do you want to get a pizza?”

“What did he say?” I ask.

Marcus shrugs. “How about half pepperoni? You like anchovies, right?”

I shake my head. “He said nothing?”
“He wanted to know how you were doing,” Marcus says. “I told him you’ve got a cast on your wrist.” Marcus unclips his phone from his belt. Punches in a number. “You want stuffed crust, right?”

I hear Marcus order a pizza before I can say a word and think he should know that I hate anchovies. He also asks for a liter of coke. The commercial’s over, and the movie’s back on. Eddie Murphy’s wisecracking to some white-bread detectives. I get up, walk past Marcus, and block the TV screen momentarily.

“I’ll call Olivia from the bedroom,” I say, rounding the back of the couch, “so you can watch your movie.”

Marcus nods.

“That fan guy’s stopping by to get his jacket tomorrow,” he says. “I think he’s got the hots for you.”

Gulp. My throat’s really dry. I stop in the kitchen to get a Diet Coke. When I open the door, the refrigerator clunks. I get out a soda and hear the clunk again. I let the door close, grab a glass from the cabinet, and hear it again. Is that ice? I hold my glass up to the electronic ice and water dispenser, depress the button for crushed, and am surprised when ice shavings fill my glass. That Duncan, I think. What a thoughtful guy. Damn.

Marcus. Duncan. I’m right back where I started. Can I go on changing my mind and men like I do my underwear? Wait a minute. Am I wearing underwear?

“Let me know when the pizza’s here,” I say, then head down the hallway with my iced cold coke in hand. I want to call Duncan back. Yet if I do, what will I say about tomorrow? Come on over, Big Boy. The coast is clear. Hold on. How long does a tranny take? Better not take a chance. It’ll be more like, here’s your jacket, Duncan, what’s your
hurry? Then there’s the whole issue of Florida. I think my broken arm’s a weak excuse. It’s the middle of January. Not likely we’ll be shredding up the water in a waverunner. But Marcus is here, and I don’t know. I mean, how could I? Guess I’ll have to tell Duncan, sorry, I can’t go to Florida with you. Maybe you should take girlfriend number-one because my brother . . . my brother what? Okay, maybe I could say that my brother lost his lease, and now he’ll be sharing my bed? I mean, my apartment, and I don’t feel comfortable leaving him alone because . . . because he’s a diabetic who just went on insulin, and I’ve got to teach him how to self-inject and check his blood sugar and . . . well, maybe that’s a little over the top, so what if . . .”

“By the way,” Marcus calls after me. “The fan guy knows I’m not your brother.”

Where the hell are my pain pills?

I can’t get up my nerve to call Duncan, especially now that I know that he definitely knows about Marcus. What could he be thinking? He’s got to know that I lied to him. I mean, Duncan may be living with another woman, but at least he told me about her before he asked me to go to Florida. God. What will I say? I was going to tell you, Duncan, but then my coffee spilled on my three-egg omelet? And then Margaritaville distracted me? And then my mind was on my meatloaf pan? How about, I was going to tell you, Duncan, but I tripped over my lover’s boots and broke my wrist?

I can’t help but wonder who told whom? Did Duncan come right out and ask Marcus if he was my brother? Could be that he put two and two together: Marcus standing around in his jockeys in the middle of the afternoon, Girl Scout cookies in my bed—plus—the remainder of Marcus’ clothes in a heap on the floor, the sports section
sprawled on the sheets. Or maybe Marcus set him straight: *If she were my sister, Dude, we’ve been breaking some fornication laws lately.* Damn. I wish I knew what was said between the two of them. I sip on my soda thinking about this.

Maybe it’s all for the best, I decide. Could be that when I broke my arm, I also knocked some sense into my head? Marcus is physically here with me, so why don’t I just go with the flow? What do they say? Keep it simple, stupid? Not that Marcus is simple. But God knows, the jury’s still out on defining what Marcus is to me and what I am to Marcus. Damn. What am I thinking? I mean, look at Duncan. The guy’s not even single. He lives with another woman, for cripes’ sake. What could I possibly be to him? An extra? A spare female? A little Heinz 57 to spice things up? And it’s not only Duncan. I’m just as bad. He’s got someone; I’ve got someone. We’re running back and forth between partners like monkeys in the middle.

For all I know, it wouldn’t matter to Duncan that Marcus is even in the picture. And what about Marcus? I shake my head at this. Nope. Marcus is not the sharing type. He wouldn’t even split a milkshake with me after I paid for it. Well, maybe I’m exaggerating a little, but the only thing open-ended that I definitely know about Marcus is the gazillion number of copulating positions he’ll consider trying.

I think about the suit guy in the hospital and want *that* kind of love. The ‘til death-do-us-part kind, the fifty-one years, the having another half—the whole kit and caboodle. Is Marcus part of my caboodle? God knows he’s the one that my tear ducts super-secreted over, the one I climbed-up-an-animal-infested-frickin-tree-in-the-middle-of-winter over, the one I desperately-wanted-to-love-me-back-even-if-it-meant-bribing-him-
with-Chinese-food-and Argyle-socks over. He’s definitely the one I’ve been ga-ga over for more than a year now.

I look for my bottle of pills, wondering if this means Marcus is back in my five-year plan.

My Darvocet bottle is on the bottom of my purse, and I’m guessing it shifted below my wallet and brush when Marcus removed my phone. I think about Marcus being "the one" and ask myself: if this is what I want, then why do I also want to deport Duncan’s Portuguese pack so I can have Duncan all to myself? More to the point, why do I want Duncan at all? So many questions—so few answers. I push down on the child-proof cap on my bottle of pills, but the plastic container keeps scooting away from me. Finally, I sit on the bed, stick the bottle between my knees, then squeeze against it like a vise. This time when I press down and twist, the top comes off in my hand. I remove the seal and the cotton on top, pop a pill onto my tongue, swallow it down with a long gulp of soda, then leave the bottle on top of my dresser. A wad of cotton sits in the upturned bottle top, looking oddly like a stuffed mushroom.

In the scope of everything, I decide to wait and see what tomorrow brings. Maybe it’ll bring Duncan. Maybe it won’t.

Back on the bed, I dial Olivia at home while removing the stupid sling that’s cutting into the back of my neck.

Cooper answers: "Road Kill Café. You kill it. We grill it."

"Coop," I say. "I’ve got a cast on my arm."

"I’ve got a rubber on my dick," he says. "No, wait a minute. It’s gone. Maybe it was there earlier in my wet dream."

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"Cooper," I say. The guy’s got ADD.

"Right," he says. "How’d you break your arm?"

"I smacked my wrist against my closet door."

"You know, if we were a comedy duo, you’d be the straight guy," he says. "You keep feeding me lines."

"I tripped," I say.

"See you next fall," Cooper says.

"Is Olivia there?" I ask, and crawl across my teal comforter like a wounded four-legged animal.

"Now you’re hurting my feelings."

"I could use some help tomorrow," I say, reaching my pillow. I roll onto my back and stare at the expanse of white ceiling above me. "I can’t cut up my meat." Or dust the cobwebs in my ceiling corners, I think.

"Need someone to wash your back?" he asks.

"I need someone to be with me."

"Then I’m your man," Cooper says. "Now you know that’s just a figure of speech, right?"

I tell Coop to come tomorrow and hang up before he says something gross. Suddenly I’m tired, and my brain’s about as useful as the dusty tendrils that blow with the draft of the fan. I hear some muted voices coming from my living room. For a second, I think about Duncan. Maybe he’s come to see how I’m doing. Maybe he and Marcus will duke it out in the living room. Maybe these pills are kicking in and making me goofy.
"Pizza!" Marcus calls from the other room. "Come and get it, Lexie, while things are still hot."
Chapter Eleven

Marcus tells me if I smack him one more time with my cast, he’s going to tie it to one of the fan blades.

"Then you can ask your fan guy, who’s so eager to please, to come and cut you down," he says with a throaty growl.

Aren’t we a little testy, I think, and shift positions in bed so that I’m flat on my back now with my right hand tucked under my butt cheek. My casted arm’s stuffed inside the pillowcase that lies at my left side. It’s wedged under the pillow part, so that the next time I swat Marcus in my sleep, hopefully, the foam rubber will cushion the blow.

I have crazy dreams all night long. In one, Duncan and I are at his Key Largo summer place. The sun’s setting: a mango-orange fireball blazing on the horizon. We’re lolling in a macramé hammock on the deck, drinking cranberry coolers, nibbling on shrimp canapés, and laughing about Marcus being my brother. Duncan treats the revelation like a big practical joke. Boy, you pulled a fast one on me, he says. Yuk, yuk. What a kidder. One minute we’re swaying between two shaving bush trees where yellow pollen tops the silky rose-pink stamens, then out of nowhere, a squall whirls onto the canal like a tornado—the mother of all hurly-burlies. We have to batten down the hatches, because now we’re on a boat, and Duncan’s at the helm, and I’m his first-mate, scared shitless because I don’t know how to swim, and I’m not wearing a life preserver, but the widow, boy-Peppy, and the dog are there in full regalia, sporting rescue-orange
inflatable vests, goggles, and flippers. They’re playing badminton on the deck, swatting birdies that fold into the white froth of the breaking surf.

The swells that rise around our little schooner are menacing walls that threaten to flush us down like toilet paper. The widow’s at the bow, leaning against the railing like that chick in *Titanic*—long raven locks whip in the gusting gale, her bosoms heaving under her corset blouse. The watering dog, justly named for his innate abilities, tugs on the little boy’s pant leg, dragging him below to the cabin that wasn’t there a minute ago.

I’m up in the watchtower for some ungodly reason. The mast creaks and groans. Duncan’s peering through one of those wooden telescope thingamajigs to his eye. The boat careens, dangerously near capsizing. It pitches the widow into the water. She bobs about the choppy seas like a harbor buoy. Duncan blows the whistle that hangs around his neck. *Widow woman overboard*, he shouts.

As first mate, I hurl from my crow’s nest in a tucked position, my body somersaulting like a beach ball. Once I plunge into the water, the angry waves churn and agitate my body like a heavy-duty washer. It draws me under as if I were a pair of dirty jeans. I surface and see that even with her life jacket on, the widow’s going down for the count. Through the pea-soup mist, I see a guy in his jockeys rowing a lifeboat. It’s Marcus. He’s here to save me, to make everything okay. He yanks me into the boat. But, hold on. Where’s he going? He dives into the churning water after the drowning widow. I count one one-thousand, two one-thousand. He hasn’t surfaced yet. Four one-thousand, five one-thousand. *Marcus!* I yell. *Come back. It’s me you want. I mean, it’s you I want.*

I’m gazing into a swirling black hole. Next thing I know, Duncan jack-knifes into the water from the tip of the schooner’s main halyard. My lifeboat drifts, climbs the crest of a
wave, then daringly dips on the other side. *Duncan*, I call, and wave my hand when I see
him surface. *Here I am.* I see him looking all around then, he dives below. *Come back.*
*It’s me you want. I mean, it’s you I want.*

Both of my men are underwater—searching for the widow woman. I hold onto the
handles of the rubber dinghy; a strong undercurrent carries me further away. The
schooner’s about the size of a seagull now. Maybe the widow’s grown scales, I think, and
fins, and a tail. Yes. That explains it—she’s become an alluring mermaid, hearkening my
guys to join her, to become her mermen. Alone, I hunker low in my little ketch,
swallowing the shark chum that collects in the back of my throat.

I awake alone—tangled in a sea of blankets. There’s no Marcus or Duncan or the
fishy femme that took them away, only me and my casted arm, that’s now fastened to the
underside of my pillow with a wad of duct tape.

Later, after I call in sick to work, I wrap my cast in a plastic garbage bag and take
a shower. I look and see that there’s just a hint of the hickey on my neck. By the time I
get dressed in my khakis and a cream cable-knit t-neck, manage a bit of makeup, take a
pain pill, and sort of make the bed, I’m famished. Timing is everything, because
someone’s at the door, and I’m hoping it’s Cooper. My plan is to get him to take me out
for brunch—a big juicy bacon cheeseburger and fries slathered in grease would really hit
the spot. It’s funny how physical and emotional stress can make a girl hungry.

It’s Coop, thank God. He’s wearing jeans, a black fleece jacket, his Bruins’ cap,
and slate gray mountain moccasins. An army-green backpack slings from his shoulder.
"You’re plastered," he says, when he sees my cast.
"Well, maybe a little looped," I say. "I’m on Darvocet. It’s the quicker picker-upper."

Cooper looks around the living room. "Are we alone?" he asks. "Or do I have to do a walk-through? Could be that some of Lexie’s men are lurking in the shadows?"

"Ha-ha," I say. "Marcus is working. And Duncan—well, that’s another story. Can we get outta here? I’d kill for a burger this thick." There’s a three-inch web space between my pointer and thumb.

"No can do," he says. "Olivia’s bringing lunch over on her break—chicken-broccoli-tofu something or other."

I groan.

"Meals-on-wheels," he says. "Don’t knock it. But wait. I was put in charge of dessert." He pulls his knapsack off of his shoulder, unsnaps it, reaches in, and rummages around. "Wa-la!" he says, and pulls out a bag of Oreo cookies. A plastic quart container of milk appears in his other hand. "I thought we’d have a Dunkin’ party."

The pun is hardly worth a laugh. The cookies start a Pavlov-saliva soiree in my mouth.

"I’ll get the glasses," I say.

Cooper follows me into the kitchen, unzips his jacket, shrugs out of it, hangs it on the back of the chair, then plops down on the seat. He opens the bag of Oreos. I fill two glasses of milk, put them on the table, and sit next to him. A beady-eyed, square-muzzled runty thing stares at me. Cooper’s T-shirt says it’s a Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat. Apparently, it’s endangered; it’s so ugly it must have scared off the rest of its species.
Coop’s a twist and dunker—each cookie comes apart and gets dunked in his glass of milk.

"So Lexie," he says, crumbs sprinkle from his lips. "Dare I ask who’s winning the race these days?"

I know what he’s talking about, but shrug and shove a whole-non-dunked Oreo in my mouth because I can’t manage the Coop-twist-dunk-pop-and-chew. I grab another and don’t care about the burger anymore, and I definitely don’t care about anything with tofu.

"I’ve got a theory about Oreos," I say, my mouth full of black chalky muck. "They’re chocolate substitutes that simulate the feeling of love."

"Is that the same thing as sex?" he asks.

I gulp down half a glass of milk, then smoosh two Oreos between my teeth. There’s a rap at the door. I push back my chair, grab another cookie for the trip. "I don’t know," I say, and feel the Oreos pack into the pit of my molars. "Maybe we should ask Olivia." I pop the third one in my mouth, grab the doorknob. Cooper winces at my suggestion, and I laugh, open the door, and there stands Duncan.

"How’s the wrist?" he asks.

I could swallow the still-whole third cookie like a communion wafer; but instead, I chomp wildly like a chipmunk might. I nod, so I don’t have to open my mush mouth quite yet.

Duncan comes in, sees Cooper in the kitchen. "Hey, Man," he says.

Cooper holds up the bag of Oreos to Duncan, who waves the offer away with his hand.
"I came for my jacket," Duncan says to me.

I feel my face flush. This is not a social visit. He knows Marcus is not my brother. He knows that I lied to him. His hands are shoved into his pockets. He’s uncomfortable—I can feel it. He looks beyond me, like maybe he thinks Marcus will spring from the bend of the hallway, morning erection blousing the front panel of his jockeys, rubbing sleep from his eyes because he just left the warmth of my bed. I panic when I think this may be the last time that I see Duncan.

"Oh," I say. "Right." I walk away from him, feel the sting in my eyes. I turn and face him again, but keep walking, backwards. "I’ll just go get it." Still moving, I point behind me like I’m backstroking, then turn, heading in the direction of my bedroom.

Once I’m in my room, I find Duncan’s parka on my corner chair. I grab it, but can’t bear to walk back out, watch him take it from me, and leave. I toss it on the bed, go into the bathroom to look in the mirror to make sure that my face isn’t all blotchy from choking back the tears. A flat, lacy rash covers my cheeks and my neck’s flushed. I sigh, pick up my toothbrush, and see patches of cookie mush smeared on my teeth, some of them totally blackened. Oh, great, I think. Not only does this have to be the last time that I see Duncan (unless I shop for that three-way light bulb), but now his final image of me will be this. There are gaps in my smile. I look like a derelict in desperate need of a dental plan.

What does he need his stupid jacket for anyway? I think. He’s wearing a perfectly good oatmeal corduroy one, and besides, he’s going to Florida soon. I swoosh the black chalky gunk away with mouthwash before I brush my teeth. Maybe I could tell Duncan that I can’t find his jacket or that I left it at the hospital and need to pick it up—
someone’s holding it for me and won’t release it to anyone else. Yeah. That’s it, I think, then spit, and rinse. He should go without it, spend a few days relaxing in Key Largo. I won’t seem so wicked after a while. Then . . . when he comes back, we can start over. I’ll tell him everything. About Marcus, our breakup, our quasi getting back together (think I’ll leave out the tree-climbing bit). Then we can talk about the widow and where I fit in to that whole bizarre puzzle. I brighten at the thought of buying more time. The navy blue parka gets shoved under my bed. I tell myself that this time I’m telling a little white lie that’ll get forgotten when things get better.

The guys are talking when I come through the living room without Duncan’s jacket. All eyes are on me as I approach, and I smile so Duncan sees that I’ve got all my teeth.

"Wouldn’t you know it," I say, tapping the heel of my hand to my forehead.

“Your jacket’s in one of my friend’s lockers at the hospital.”

Duncan’s eyes squint like he’s on to me, and I can’t tell if Cooper just bit his tongue or if the eye-rolling, mouth curling antics he’s performing from his chair in the kitchen mean that he can see right through my lie.

"An oversight," I say. "I know, what a ditz I am, but things got a little crazy in the ER, and I was really snowed from the pain med."

His shoulders relax a bit. I think he’s swallowing it.

"If you don’t really need it just now," I say. "I can pick it up in a day or two. Then, when you get back from Florida, we can get together." He tilts his head and looks at me. There are worry lines indented on his forehead. "I mean, I’m sure I’ll have it for you then."
Duncan nods. "Okay," he says. "We’ll square up later."

What does he mean, ‘square up?’ Is that like ‘get even?’ Or make things ‘right?’ I look at Coop who’s shaking his head at me behind Duncan’s back. He pours some more milk in his glass, drops a cookie on his tongue, holds his glass in the air in a mock toast, brings it to his lips, and sips.

"I better get going," Duncan says.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

He looks down at his camel hiking boots, then back up at me. He nods.

“See ya,” Duncan says to Cooper. The two of them shake hands.

“The Oilers’ game’s coming up,” Cooper says. “Call me when you get back.”

Duncan nods, heads for the door.

“What did he say?” I mouth to Cooper who’s now standing at the base of the foyer.

Cooper shrugs. “He thinks you and Marcus are . . . you know.” Cooper slides the finger of one hand through the circle made with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand.

The Oreos quake at the back of my throat.

Cooper heads back to the kitchen. I follow Duncan. When he opens my apartment door, I lean my shoulder against the frame to prop it open. Cooper can’t see us from here. I drop my voice to a low whisper.

"I’m sorry about Marcus," I say. "I wish you’d stay and let me explain."

He shrugs. "What’s to say?" he asks. "The signs were there. You’re with the guy."

"No, no. It’s not like that," I say.
"You’re not with him?"

"Well, yes, but it’s complicated," I say and want to kiss the tea bag shadows under his eyes. "There’s a history between me and . . ." Shit. I almost said ‘my brother.’

"Between me and Marcus."

He nods. "Just not a family history," he says, and there’s a hint of a smile, not enough to make the dimples flash, but it’s something—unless it’s a nervous twitch.

"I meant to tell you," I say. "Things just got crazy. And then there was the whole widow thing, and . . ."

"Mother-fucking-son-of-a-bitch," I hear Olivia say. She’s on the staircase. At least that’s where I hear the racket—paper rips, glass breaks.


Duncan and I both run to the stairs. Olivia’s near the top, a white shopping bag’s torn down one seam, a casserole dish sits at the base of the bag, split in half; Olivia’s still got one of the bag handles around her wrist. Noodles slop on the step, a pot of something green and goopy is in Olivia’s hands. The green gooiness drips between her fingers. A canvas bag’s hooked on her left elbow; her purse hangs from her shoulder. She looks up at us; wet bangs peek from under her wool hat.

Duncan’s quick to descend the steps. He takes the pot from her. She thanks him, looks at the glop on her hands, on the cuffs of her jacket. Cooper comes from the apartment and stands next to me. He sees Olivia, rocks on his heels, hesitates like he’s thinking about hightailing it back inside where it’s still safe and sound. I see the wheels cranking in his pea brain. Probably thinks he could insist that he was in the can minding
his own business, out of earshot. "Oh boy," he mutters under his breath. Duncan climbs the stairs, sets the pot down on the platform. Cooper moves. He walks down the few steps to where Olivia’s flinging green goop from her hands. The staircase wall gets slimed. He unhooks the handle from her wrist, wraps the broken casserole in the bag, kisses the tip of her nose. I go to head down the stairs, too. I figure I can retrieve the lid, make myself useful. Duncan swings his arm out in front of me like a restraining seat belt.

"You stay here," he says.

He goes back down, passes Olivia and Cooper, and retrieves the pot lid that’s resting against a stack of newspapers on the main floor landing. I’ve got to wonder if Duncan’s being protective. Doesn’t that mean that he still cares? Or maybe, he thinks I’m a klutz and doesn’t want to be the one to take me to the ER when I trip and break my other wrist. Olivia looks below to see where the cover of the pot’s landed. Duncan’s got it in his hands. She turns from him and casts her eyes on me; the look suggests that I personally had a hand in breaking the freaking elevator.

"Has your landlord ever heard of the ADA?" she asks me. "He’s in violation, for Christ’s sake. I should report him."

She gets to the top of the stairs. I give her a hug. "You smell good," I say. "Kind of like broccoli."

She scowls.

"And tofu," I say quickly.

"Tofu doesn’t smell," she says, then looks at my cast. Her eyes soften. "Come on. Let’s see what’s salvageable."
All of us go back to my apartment. At first I worry that we’re all locked out, but Olivia’s got a key to my place on her key ring. I’m excited that Duncan’s back inside. He puts the pot in the sink, turns on the faucet, rinses off the stuff dripping down the sides, then grabs some paper towels from the rack, wipes the pot, puts it on the stove, cleans off the lid, and sets it on the pot. He’s a take-charge kind of guy, my Duncan, and I feel my heart leapfrog across my chest.

Olivia wants details on how I broke my wrist. I don’t want to bring up Marcus’ name with Duncan standing there, so I simply say that my closet door jumped out in front of me. She fires up one of the stove’s burners and stirs the glop in the pot.

"You’re staying for lunch, right?" she asks Duncan.

He tells her that he just came over for his jacket, that he’s working the afternoon shift at Home Depot and really has to get going. I feel a little better about this, thinking that there’s a logical reason why he can’t stay. It’s not just because he doesn’t want to be around me anymore. He’s got to go to work—there’s a widow at home cooking the food that Duncan buys, and a growing boy that needs new shoes. And a dog—biscuits and Alpo and worm pills. It all costs. The man’s a provider.

"It smells good, though," he says, and this makes Olivia smile.


I look at Duncan who’s holding up his hands to object.

“I don’t want to intrude,” Duncan says. “You’re probably expecting Marcus for lunch.”

Gulp. I smile at Duncan, give Cooper my wide-eyed-can’t-you-control-her look, and clear my throat.

Olivia ladles some of the goop in the bowl. There’s some recognizable chicken and, yes, I think those are carrots. Wait. Maybe they’re bell peppers, and cubes of potatoes? I remember the spongy white stuff floating in the chicken soup Olivia made for me when I was sick. So I’m guessing that those "potatoes" are really chunks of tofu. I see Cooper folding up the bag of Oreos. Would it be rude of me to eat, say, about a dozen more?

“If it were up to me, “Olivia says, sticking the bowl, chuck full of hearty stew, in the microwave. “Marcus would go . . .”

“Hungry,” I say, giving Olivia a hip check as I get a spoon for Duncan from my utensil drawer. I give her a sideways look that says shut up or you’ll find your big hips up around your ears, then I hand Duncan the spoon. Wait a minute. Maybe he needs a fork. And a knife to cut the chicken? God. I’m so inept. I bet the widow would know exactly what Duncan needs.

“I know about Marcus,” Duncan says.

Coop gives me a see-I-told-you look.

“Well, I for one am glad it’s out in the open,” Olivia says. “You may not want to talk about it, Lexie, but there’s a goddamn horse in the kitchen. Everyone sees it but no one talks about it.”

Cooper pops an Oreo in his mouth. “It’s an elephant.”

“Horse. Elephant,” Olivia says. “Jackass is more like it.”

“Okay,” I say to Olivia. “Let’s talk about something else.”
“Or not,” Duncan says.

We all look at Duncan. The microwave beeps. I busy myself by taking out Duncan’s bowl. Green stuff’s splattered everywhere. It looks like an iguana’s been nuked.

“You could’ve told me, Lexie,” Duncan says. “Everyone else seems to know.”

“You’re right,” I say, and set the bowl down on the table for Duncan. “I was confused.” I get the bottle of ketchup from the fridge and hand it to him. Duncan takes off his jacket. He’s wearing a forest-green pullover. It matches the green in his speckled eyes.

“ Forget about Marcus. He’s only a legend in his own mind,” Olivia says.

Oh God. Someone get that girl a muzzle.

“Eat your stew while it’s warm,” Olivia says. “Otherwise the tofu gets all spongy.”

For a moment there’s only the clink of Duncan’s spoon against the bowl.

“This is good,” he tells Olivia. “But nobody else is going to eat?”

"We’ll wait," Olivia says. "You’re in a hurry." She gestures for him to go ahead.

"Eat."

We all watch him take another mouthful.

"So, Duncan," Olivia says. She turns her back to him and cranks up the heat.

"What’s the deal with your live-in widow?"

Duncan drops his spoon and inadvertently tips the bowl when he scrapes back his chair. He stands, goes to the sink. I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe he wants to get the hell out of here. I see the muscles in his back heave. He wheezes like he’s trying to
hack up a fur ball. He pounds on his sternum with his fist, then turns and looks at me. I see the panic in his eyes. One hand’s stacked on top of the other at the base of his throat.

"Do something!" Olivia says. "He’s choking on my stew!"

Cooper smacks Duncan right between the shoulder blades.

"No," I say, and shove Cooper with my cast. "That might wedge it further." I wrap my arms around Duncan; my cast’s bulky and awkward. I try to punch some air into his windpipe, but I can’t get enough oomph with my thrust. I climb onto the kitchen chair, pull Duncan into me, wrap my arms between his navel and chest, and squat like a Sumo wrestler so I’ve got enough leverage to pump against his solar plexus. I make a fist with my right hand, press my casted palm against my knuckles, and give a quick upward thrust. Shit. Nothing happens.

"He’s turning purple, for Christ’s sake!" I hear Olivia say.

This time, I thrust as hard as I can; my fist’s jammed in the fleshy part of his belly just under his rib cage. I pump upward, three times, feeling the weight of Duncan’s body pulling forward. He barks—a piece of tofu shoots across the kitchen, pings off the refrigerator door, knocks off the magnetic letter that holds my shapelier thighs’ ad, and falls at Cooper’s feet. This causes Cooper to wretch and upchuck Oreo chunks onto the braided rug that’s lying on the floor. I’m watching the scrap of paper that’s supposed to motivate me to firm up my quads one day glide like a paper plane. It disappears under the fridge.

Duncan’s okay now. I feel his muscles relax, and I ease up on the pressure of my arms around him, but I don’t release my hold. He puts his hand over mine, and pats.
"Oh my God!" Olivia says, in a single short breath. She’s still got the soup ladle in her hand. Pea-green rivulets snake up the inner aspect of her arm. Drips splatter at her feet.

Cooper wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Olivia throws a dish towel to him.

I let go of Duncan. He helps me down from the chair, then shakes his head like that was way too close. I smile. He holds open his arms, and I let him caress me; the rancid smell of vomit and the gunk warming on the stove makes my eyes water. I nestle my nose into Duncan’s shirt. It smells like fabric softener.

“Sorry about the widow comment,” Olivia says.

“Yeah,” Cooper says, wiping his mouth with the hand towel. “She didn’t know you’d get all choked up about it. Hey, if you choke a Smurf, I wonder what color it turns.”

“Oh God. Stuff that towel in your mouth, will you?” Olivia says.

Once everyone’s regrouped, Duncan swears that he’s fine and wants to go to work. Olivia insists on straining some stew for him. She’s already got the pot cover in her hand.

“Put a lid on it,” Cooper tells her.

I walk Duncan to the top of the stairs, leaving Coop and Olivia to deal with the mess.

"Can we talk when you get back from Florida?" I ask.

"I guess I owe you that," he says.

He’s standing there, dimples in full dimpling mode.
"Maybe you could send me a postcard," I say.

"I’m only going for a few days," he says.

I shrug. "Still going alone?"

He nods.

"She doesn’t want to go?"

He gives me a puzzled look.

"The widow?" I say.

"She’s a non-issue."

What the hell does that mean? He taps me on the nose with his finger, tells me to be careful, watch where I’m walking, then heads down the stairs.

"Can’t you take me as a carry-on?" I call after him.

“I’ll call you,” he says, and waves.

I’m hopeful again.

"Prop the door open," Olivia says, when I come back in. "We need some air circulating in this kitchen." She’s waving a hand in front of her nose. "Your rug’s history. Cooper’s going to throw it in your dumpster."

I see Coop shoving the rug in a trash bag. His eyes are watering, and he’s gagging a little. He pulls the drawstring, then holds the bag out in front of him like it’s a poopy diaper. When he passes me, he says, good job, Florence Nightingale. He goes through my opened apartment door, then calls back, "I’m going to try the hind lick maneuver on Olivia when I get back."

Olivia’s got a sponge in her hand and uses it to wipe up the spilled stew mix on the table. "Wow," she says. "Wasn’t that something?"
"God, yeah," I say. "You nearly killed him asking about the widow. What the hell were you thinking?"

"Didn't you say he was going to explain her?" she asks.

"To me," I say, shaking my head.

“Oh.” She turns back to the stove, stirs her concoction, taps the wooden spoon against the pot, then asks, "Ready for lunch?"

Too much excitement, I tell her, and my arm’s aching from slamming it around. Maybe a little later, I say. She looks pained, but says she’ll pass, too. She’s got another pot at home. She puts a potholder on the top shelf on my fridge, then sets the stew on it. I ask her to follow me into my bedroom, so I can take another pill.

I take the Darvocet about an hour before I’m supposed to—maybe it’ll put me to sleep or at least make me groggy so I won’t have to deal with anything—like the rest of my life.

Olivia sits on the bed—there’s a spot of broccoli-green on her yellow smock shaped like a boot—maybe Florida—no, more like Italy. I lay on my side with Duncan’s rolled parka under my head.

Olivia looks at her watch. "I’ve got to be back in twenty-minutes," she says. "Tell me what’s going on."

I don’t know where to start—how I broke my wrist, Duncan knowing that Marcus is not my brother, Marcus spending the night, my stupid dream about the two of them, me lying to Duncan about his jacket, his going to Florida without me.

"What’s up with the widow?" she asks me.

"She’s a non-issue," I say.
"What the hell does that mean?" she asks.

Cooper walks in the bedroom, fingers the opened bottle of pills on the dresser, then leaps on the bed. Olivia and I bounce with the movement.

"Whaddya talking about?" he asks, and kicks off his shoes. His breath smells fruity—like he’s dehydrated.

"You need a breath mint," I say, and pinch my nostrils together.

"How about one of your pain pills?" he asks. "We can both take a shot of siesta—or better yet." He looks at Olivia, nudges her tush with his toes. "I could go for a little afternoon delight. Whaddya say?" The toes move up her spine. "While Lexie’s napping, you and I could go into the spare room and play hide-the-salami." He raises and lowers his eyebrows like Groucho Marx.

I kick Cooper. "Stop it. First you puke in my kitchen. Now you want to fuck in my bedroom? Enough with the bodily fluids for one day."

Coop rubs the place where I kicked him. "You know," he says. "I’m this close to filing assault charges." The web space between his pointer and thumb’s about the same distance as my wishful burger was earlier. "First you smack me with your cast in the kitchen." He rolls up his T-shirt to show me something that’s supposed to make me feel bad. "Wait. You’ll see. Tomorrow it’ll be bruised."

"You’re such a baby," I say. "What I gave you was a love tap. I didn’t want you killing off Duncan."

"Back to the widow," Olivia says. "The two of you have the rest of the day to bullshit." She looks at her wristwatch again. "I need the Reader’s Digest version. Why is the widow a non-issue?"
"She’s a non-issue?" Cooper asks.

I sigh. "Well, all I know is what Duncan told me when I asked if the widow was going to Florida," I say. "She’s not going because she’s a non-issue, and I’m not going because Duncan now knows that Marcus is not my brother."

"Marcus is not your brother?" Cooper asks, like he’s shocked.

“Okay. I’ve had it,” I say.

“I hope you didn’t give it to me,” Cooper says.

"Hit him for me, will you, Olivia," I say. "I’m likely to knock his lights out."

“How’d he find out about Marcus?” Olivia asks. “Did you tell him, Cooper?”


"As best as I can piece it together,” I say. “I was napping, and Marcus took my cell, then Duncan called me, and Marcus told him."

"Told him what exactly?" she asks.

I shrug. "Don’t know. I’m afraid to ask him what he said—he’s likely to start pumping me about the ‘fan guy.’ "He already thinks Duncan’s being too chummy." Not chummy enough is what I think. "But now Duncan knows that I lied to him."

"And Marcus still thinks he’s the fan guy?" Cooper asks.

"Fan guy or not," Olivia says to Cooper. "As long as she’s still putting out, Marcus will be coming back for seconds."

"Not sloppy seconds," Cooper says.

"Guys," I say. "Can we focus here?" Olivia nods. Her yin-yang earrings rock in her earlobes. Cooper shrugs. "It took a little heimliching, but at least Duncan’s willing to talk to me when he gets back. I figure, that’s something."
"You ready for your hind licking?" Cooper says to Olivia.

She ignores him.

"So," Olivia says. "You’re still going to date a guy who’s living with someone else?" She shakes her head. "The whole thing’s so quirky. He’s practically a bigamist, you know. But of course, on the other side." Her hands go palm up as if she’s meditating.

"There’s Marcus."

"Who slept here last night," I tell them.

Olivia looks disappointed like I just told her I have no intention of ingesting her green chicken glop even if it were the last thing in my fridge—which it is. "Come on, Lexie. You can’t be serious about Marcus," she says. "You know you can’t change the spots on a zebra."

"What?" Cooper asks.

Olivia waves him away. "Oh, you know what I mean. Lexie can’t expect Marcus to get up and fly straight."

"Straighten up and fly right?" Cooper asks.

"That too," Olivia says.

"But he was so sweet to me yesterday," I say, and think about how he did everything right. Well, with the exception of ordering anchovies on the pizza, and spilling the beans to Duncan—oh yeah—and hog-tying my arm to my pillow with duct tape.

"Look. It’s your life," Olivia says. "Do what you want. All I’m saying is that you ought to have someone without baggage. A widow with a kid—that’s a shit load of cargo."

"A mini-van full," Cooper adds.
Olivia nods. "And you deserve someone who knows when to keep his dick in his pants."

"And when not to," Cooper adds.

Olivia swats him.

"Such violence in this place," he says.

Olivia looks at the time, gets off the bed. She stomps in her orange clogs (I doubt it’s part of the standard uniform attire), probably to relax her lemon-yellow slacks that are scrunched up around her white anklets.

Maybe Olivia’s right. Why is it that I attract men who are not emotionally available? Am I relationship-challenged or something? What’s wrong with me? Am I missing a gene that allows for meaningful commitments? I think about my mother and her three husbands, my father and his midlife-Brenda crisis. Christ. I’m genetically predisposed to fuck-up!

Olivia gives me warm-up instructions for her chicken stew. They’re going in one ear and out the other. You want me to do what, Olivia? Pour it down the garbage disposal? Cooper says he’s going to pee, then he’ll hit the road, too. I whine that I want him to stay. We can have a napping party, then wake up, eat the rest of the Oreos, play Five-hundred Rummy, watch Days of Our Lives. Olivia reaches into her smock pocket, pulls out one of those Listerine melt-in-your-mouth strips.

"Open," she says to Coop. He wiggles his tongue at her like Alice Cooper performing on stage. She drops the tape in his mouth. His eyes get wide. "Kiss," she says, and the two of them smooch. Then Cooper rocks himself to a sitting position, gets up, goes into my bathroom, and closes the door. I hear the exhaust fan run.
I leave my very comfortable position on the bed, sway a little in my standing stance to catch my balance, and think it’s a good thing I’m not operating heavy machinery. I give Olivia a hug, thank her for bringing lunch, and for being my friend.

"Maybe you’re pushing too hard," Olivia says. I wonder if she’s going to give me the plenty-of-fish-in-the-sea talk. "There are other options besides Duncan and Marcus."

Yep. There it is. But what, I want to ask her, if Marcus and Duncan are no more, and I discover that one of them was the big fish I hooked, then let get away? It’s easy to talk, I almost say to Olivia, when someone’s fallen for you hook, line, and sinker.

I hear the apartment door slam. "There’s crap all over the staircase." It’s Marcus. "I got it all over my fucking boots." I hear his footsteps coming our way. "Phew," he yells. "What the hell died in here?"

Olivia looks at me as if to ask, *And this is what you want?*

I count his steps, wonder what he’s tracking on my floor. He appears at the doorway, sees Olivia. "Well, look who’s here," he says to her. "Been a while, huh?"

"Marcus," is all Olivia says to acknowledge him.

"So are you coming or going?" he asks her.

"Going." She pats my cast, signals a ‘call me’ with her hand to her ear. "Going," she says again and walks out of the bedroom. "Gone," I hear her sing to us from the hallway.

"Looney tunes," Marcus says, and shakes his head. "I don’t know what Cooper sees in that girl."

"Don’t say that," I say, and smack him with my cast on purpose this time. "That’s my friend you’re talking about.”
"Whatever," he says. "But tell me you don’t think she’s just a little bit _loco en la cabeza._" He swirls his finger in a circle by his ear, and I can’t help but compare Marcus’ assessment of Olivia to Duncan’s, who thinks Olivia’s “a great friend.”

The toilet flushes, the fan goes silent. I almost forget who’s in the bathroom.

"Cooper," I say to Marcus and point to the bathroom door.

I hear water rushing in the sink. Cooper’s singing Counting Crows’ “Accidentally in Love.” “I’m a snowball running,” he belts out, then skips over some of the words, hums what he probably doesn’t know. “What’s the problem, baby,” he sings, then hums, hums, hums. "Don’t know nothing ‘bout love." Cooper’s gone flat. The toilet quits running; the singing halts. "So, Lexie," Cooper shouts from behind the closed door. "Are you fucking this guy, yet?"

Marcus looks at me. " Fucking who?" he asks, then points to his chest. "Me?"


I try to push Marcus into the hallway.

"Duncan," Cooper calls. "The fan guy."

He swings the bathroom door open. Marcus wedges himself in the door jam.

Cooper repeats, "Are you . . . " I see him wiping his hands on a towel as he steps into the room and watch his expression change from curiosity to ‘Oh shit!’

"Fucking the fan guy?" Marcus asks me.
Chapter Twelve

“So are you fucking him?” Marcus asks me again.

Cooper tosses the hand towel onto my bed. “Gotta go,” he says, whisking between us. “Olivia’s getting pregnant and I want to be there.”

His footsteps clunk down the hallway; my apartment door bangs shut.

“Are you?” Marcus asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing’s going on,” I say, partly because it’s true. Like it or not, I’m not fucking the fan guy.

“Something’s going on,” Marcus says and cocks his head. I get a sense that he’s trying to tunnel a path to my thoughts from this new angle.

I think about how much I should tell him. If Marcus knew the truth, he might... I don’t know—leave, maybe. There’s an itty bitty part of me that wants him to know. I mean, it’s always been Marcus cheating on me, not the other way around. I could say welcome to my world, Marcus.

“So?” he says.

“What?” I say.

“What’s up with this guy?” One hand goes palm up. “Cooper wouldn’t just throw that shit out for nothing. Is something going on?”

Okay, here it goes. I’m just going to put it out there, get it over quick; it’ll be like ripping off a band-aid. Let me test it in my head first. Something’s going on. Short and
simple—that’s good. But then he’s going to ask: What? What’s going on? And I’d have
to say, *your guess is as good as mine* because I haven’t got a clue. What I *do* know is that
Marcus and I are “supposed” to be back together. That’s something. And do I want to risk
Marcus’ something for Duncan’s nothing? I think about Marcus leaving me again, and
my very next thought goes to how I might miss the buzz I get from *him* wanting *me* this
time around. Maybe I’ll just mention that Duncan and I went to the movies or that I was
at Johnny D’s the night he ran into Cooper. Let’s see, how would I phrase that? *I don’t
know how you could’ve missed me, Marcus. I was the idiot walking past you with my*
*head zipper-level to every pair of pants on the way to the door.*

I fidget, and Marcus looks down at his watch. Cripes. Now he’s timing me? What
am I? A contestant on *Jeopardy*? I’ll take Nervous Breakdowns for a hundred, Alex.

“C’mon, Lexie,” he says. “I didn’t ask you for the meaning of life.”

“What was the question?”

While Marcus exhales loudly, I wonder, does he really need to know about my
breakfast date with Duncan? Or the flowers? Or the kiss? And if Duncan didn’t have a
widow or Peppy waiting for him at home, he might’ve spent the night and maybe Marcus
and I wouldn’t be having this conversation. No, I’d be getting a Brazilian wax job right
now and lying between two light-emitting surfaces like a naked sandwich filling, frying
the surface of my skin for my Florida tryst.

Marcus stares at me; large pupils eclipse the green irises of his eyes.

“Is something going on or not?” he asks again.

I try to figure out where I stand with Duncan. I mean, he did ask *me* to go to
Florida, didn’t he? Does that mean something’s going on?
“He lives with a widow for cripe’s sake,” I say. “How could there be?”

“Then how come the guy’s got the hots for you?” he says, and before I can respond, he’s into my personal space, brushing the hair from my eyes, rubbing his knee against my inner thigh, pressing his pelvis against mine. My brain feels numb and giddy from the Darvocet, and the twirly thing Marcus is doing with his fingers around my left nipple is kind of soothing. He walks me over to the bed; my jelly legs buckle when the mattress butts against the back of my knees. His mouth is on mine, and we collapse on the bed like a couple of wobbly dominoes.

Before I can blink, Marcus has his hand up my shirt, and I feel the warmth of his fingers travel over my belly, across my ribs, onto my breast. But here’s the thing. Nothing’s happening in my you-know-where. By now I should be hotter than the Logan Airport tarmac in July. I’m not. My libido elevator’s stalled between floors, stuck on the fact that Marcus is turned on by Duncan’s interest in me—it’s like he’s got a reason now for marking his territory—lifting his leg on a few bushes, fence posts, or fire hydrants so he can tell the Duncans of the world that my body’s off-limits. But then again. Maybe the Darvocet’s kicking in here. Even now as Marcus tugs on my earlobe with his teeth, I don’t have the energy to moan. He moves on to a spot behind my ear. I close my eyes and colors pop: mosaics of dandelion yellow and splotches of lawn green. He unsnaps the button of my jeans, yanks down the zipper, tries to wiggle his fingers down to the crotch of my underwear except my pants are too tight or his hand is too big, and he walks his fingers back out. I’m so sleepy that I yawn while he pulls at the material around my hips.

“Can we do this later?” I ask, too tired to wriggle out of my pants or maneuver my arms from the sleeves of my shirt.
Marcus kisses me again.

When I yawn a second time, he snaps his tongue out of the gaping cavern of my mouth. He asks if he’s keeping me awake, and I tell him—sorry—I just need a teeny power nap—a little shnooze, and curl away from him like a shrimp on a bed of lettuce.

“Spoon me,” I say.

I hear him groan.

“I’d rather fork you,” he says, but then I feel the warmth of his body against my back. His arm slips over me between my hip and ribs.

“I’m hornier than a three-peckered rooster,” Marcus whispers in my ear.

I don’t comment.

“In a hen house,” he says.

“Shhh,” I say.

“Come on,” he says, and makes another pass down my pants.

“Just let me sleep a while,” I say, in response to the pelvic rocking going on against my butt. I pull away from him, my knees drawn against my chest. There’s a shift in weight behind me, and I know that Marcus is off the bed. I open one eye and see him head for the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“To do the five-knuckle shuffle. To run some errands. Christ. It’s four in the afternoon,” he says. “I can’t sleep.”

Funny, I think. If we had forked, I mean fucked, Marcus would be snoring like a leaf blower—the industrial-strength model that could drown out a Bruins’ Stanley Cup game.
“When will you be back?” I say and know I’m whining like a puppy.

“Later,” he says.

I reach for the end of the comforter and fold it over my lower half. This warms everything between my ankles and hips. My feet are still cold. If Marcus were in bed, I’d put my toes between his legs. The man generates more heat than all the ironworks in Pittsburgh. I log roll across the bed, away from Marcus who’s standing at the door jam. I’m wrapped like a pig-in-a-blanket or maybe like an asexual cabbage slug, I think, as I hear Marcus leave.

I promise to sleep just a couple of hours, then I’ll get up; maybe toss a couple of Marie Callender’s Stuffed Shells in the microwave. Get a French baguette out of the freezer. Spread a little garlic butter across it. Wait. I don’t have a baguette in my freezer. And didn’t I eat those stuffed shells about a week ago? The corner of the spread tickles the tip of my nose. I blow it away, and wonder if Marcus is really coming back. The spread plops on the bridge of my nose and both nostrils get covered. I breathe in the weave of the fabric, look at the triangle wedge cross-eyed this time, and wish Duncan wasn’t going to Florida tomorrow.

When I wake up, it takes a while before I can make out the distinguishing outlines of my dresser, closet, and door in the dark. I listen for familiar background sounds that surround my apartment like the whoosh of my new fan, the flush of Skunk’s toilet, and the whir of the elevator that’s back in operation. My clock radio says it’s eight-thirty. I’ve got to go to work tomorrow, and now I wonder if I’ll be up all night.

My wrist’s aching a bit, and I’m way overdue for a pain pill, but I figure it’s time to make the switch to some non-drowsy-over-the-counter drug. I can’t be on narcotics
and draw blood from a writhing toddler or shove a swab down a baby’s throat tomorrow. I take a couple of extra-strength Tylenol, gargle with some minty Scope, throw some cold water on my face, wet down the porcupine spikes that jut from the back of my hair, and make sure that all snaps, buttons, and zippers are in their upright and locked position. Marcus is nowhere around. I call his cell phone, but get flipped to his voice mail after the first ring. I don’t leave a message, but figure he’ll see my number logged as a missed call and know I’m looking for him. Maybe he’s not coming back here tonight. Possibly, because I’ve pissed him off acting like one of the seven dwarfs—Sleepy, maybe. No, wait. Grumpy’s probably more in line with his thinking, unless Marcus considers my klutzy trip over his boots—then it’s Dopey for sure.

I’m pretty sure that the narcotics are gone from my bloodstream, so I think about driving over to his Marcus’ apartment and picking up some smoked turkey and asiago on roasted garlic and parmesan from Finagle-A-Bagel, but then my thoughts drift to Duncan, and I wonder what he’s doing tonight. Maybe he and the widow are watching TV. I see them spooning on the couch. They’re talking about non-issues: the unfinished crossword puzzle, the Dr. Scholl’s wart remover commercial that’s playing on television right now, the four-cent increase in postage stamps, the dippy blonde nurse who dates her brother who’s really her lover. I catch myself on this last entry remembering that the widow is the non-issue, not me. Maybe she can’t go to Florida because she has a fear of flying, or maybe she’s being deported back to Portugal because she’s an alien without a green card. I look at my watch. By this time, the two-year old’s sleeping in his bed; the dog’s at his feet, legs twitching, occasionally yipping as he dreams of chasing squirrels up the
bitternut hickory that cowers over the red oak deck in the backyard. They’re like a perfect cookie-cutter family in my mind. Why the hell would Duncan want me?

I throw on my coat, grab my purse and keys, and head over to Olivia and Cooper’s house. I don’t want to be alone—and considering their part in the fiasco this afternoon, they owe me big time.

Olivia answers the door wearing Betty Boop flannel pajamas. “Oh my God. What are you doing here?” she asks.

“I already gave at the office,” I hear Cooper shout.

When I walk into their living room, I see Coop sitting in his beige leather Lazy-Boy wearing a pair of gray sweats and a frayed white T-shirt bearing a red-cross sign. He stretches his arms above his head when he sees me; his laptop precariously balances on top of his crossed legs. His shirt’s splattered with tomato-sauce red. It says, Give Blood/Play Hockey.

“Are you mad at me?” he asks.

I shake my head and explain that the whole fucking Duncan bit made Marcus horny.

“Man titties would make Marcus horny,” Olivia says.

I plop on their couch and work my arms from the sleeves of my coat. “I don’t think he’s coming back tonight.” My cast snags the lining, and when I give it a tug, there’s a rip, then my casted arm is free, arcing behind me like a Wimbledon backhand. It bangs into the lamp on their end table. My fingers close around the beaded fringe around the lampshade as I try to catch the wrought-iron base. A strip of teardrop crystal tassels unravels; the lamp topples to the rug and does the whirling Dervish act.
“Oh God. I’m sorry,” I say, looking down at the six-inch strip of fringe in my left hand. Olivia scoops up the base of the lamp and plops it on the table.

“No harm done,” she says. “I’ll stick it back on with my glue gun tomorrow.”

“I’m a disaster,” I say, holding my casted arm up like the Statue of Liberty. “How am I going to handle babies at work?”

Olivia shrugs. Cooper taps on his computer keyboard. The tip of his tongue curls above his lip. Another quarter of an inch and he could touch it to his nose.

He looks up at me. The tongue darts back in his mouth—he’s like one of those lizard creatures. “So the thought of you and Duncan got Marcus pretty juiced?” he asks.

I nod. “Go figure. I blew him off though,” I say, then see Cooper’s eyebrows arch.

“Get your mind out of the gutter. Sheesh. You guys are all alike.”

“Yep,” he says. “I saw a bumper sticker today. It said, WANTED: Meaningful Overnight Relationship.”

“I think the one that says, Guys, just because you have one, doesn’t mean you have to be one, is better,” Olivia says and heads for the kitchen to get us some Snack Wells’ low-fat chocolate wafers. She says we can have three a piece. I tell her that I skipped dinner so I can have six—no, make that an even dozen. I need to keep up my strength, mend bones, stave off nervous breakdowns.

I lean over and peak at Cooper’s computer screen. “What are you doing?”

“Olivia’s got me signed up for one of these bachelor auction deals,” he says. “I’m writing my segue. Wanna help?”


“You know how to hurt a guy,” he says, looking pained.
“No. Really. Olivia doesn’t care if you go out with another woman?”

Coop shakes his head. “The proceeds go to this animal shelter that rescues puppies from Death Row. You know, from places that’ll kill them if no one adopts them.”

I read what Cooper’s written so far.

“You’ll go ape, ladies, for Boston’s sexiest zookeeper?” I read out loud.

“A little over the top?” Cooper asks. “How about, you’ll want to put his tiger in your tank?” Cooper types this on the screen, then deletes “tiger” and types “cockatoo” in its place. “Get it?” he says, pointing to the word. “Cock-or-two?”

“You’re a regular hyena,” I say. “A big baboon—a pig—a silly goose.”

“They’ll buffalo on over to claim me, right?” he says.

“He’s telling you about the auction?” Olivia says, carrying a kitchen tray. I see cookies on a dish and something with mounds of whipped cream. She puts the tray down on the coffee table. “We can have angel food cake,” she says, handing me and Cooper a plate and fork. “With strawberries and fat-free Cool Whip.”

I’m starving, so I shove my fork deep into the pile of whipped cream and wonder if we can have the pile of cookies that are still on the tray.

“He’s supposed to come up with a package,” Olivia tells me.

“I’ve got a package,” Cooper says, grabbing at his crotch.

“A date package,” she says. “You know, like a horse-drawn carriage ride through the back bay areas of Boston, dinner at The Elephant Walk, dancing at Johnny D’s.”

“And it won’t bother you that he takes another woman to those places?” I ask.
“Olivia thinks out-bidding a hundred females will keep them from spending the night with my bod,” he says.

Olivia throws a couch pillow at him, but Cooper’s quick to deflect it away with his hand.

“You’ll be lucky that I’m bidding on you at all,” she says. “You’ll be parading your stuff to a silent crowd. I’ll be saving you from absolute humiliation.”

I pat Coop’s hand. “I could shout out a pity bid.”

“I’ll take a pity bet,” he says. “I’m going to carry one of the chimps on stage. Women’ll want to pet him—then me; you’ll see.”

Olivia tells me that the auction’s tomorrow night. She says I should go, just for the heck of it. She shows me a flyer—blank ink on grape paper. It says, Meet our Eligible Bachelors. Johnny D’s got posters all over town, she says, and is surprised that I haven’t seen any. I want to tell her that posters that advertise male auctions, even if they’re for a good cause, don’t get plastered on hospital emergency room walls, and the only other place I’ve been is holed up in my apartment.

“But it’s tomorrow night,” I say. “How come Cooper can enter now?”

“Look,” Olivia says, pointing to the bolded Male Volunteers Needed. “We called Johnny D’s and they said to just show up.”

“So come,” Coop says. “Maybe you could find yourself a bargain.”

“Maybe I’ve got enough on my plate. Like right now, I’m curious about the widow and what’s up with Marcus.”
“What’s always up with Marcus is his third appendage,” Olivia says. “You know that. What I can’t figure out is why you’re wasting your time with him. Just go over to Duncan’s place and stake your claim. I mean, you want him, right?”

“Sure,” I say, “But even if I wanted to go there, I don’t have a clue where he lives.”

“Across from Powder House Park,” Cooper says, hammering the keyboard. “I’m on a roll here. Do you spell pectorals with one “l” or two?”

“You know where he lives?” I ask. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“I just did,” he says. “Which sounds better? Strapping or Herculean? I know: Gladiatorial.” I hear the tapping of the keys, see the blue vein on the underside of his curling tongue.

Finally, I get from Cooper that Duncan’s house is the only one on the block with slate-look shingles and copper-roof trim. Features I’m not exactly sure I could identify in the dark. Apparently the renovation of Duncan’s duplex was part of their mini conversation when I was stalling in the bedroom with Duncan’s jacket.

“What else?” I ask, looking for some defining detail. I want to do a drive-by, check out the place, see if there’s a tricycle in the backyard, maybe peep in a few ground-level windows.


“Good idea. I’m an animal,” Cooper says, as he types.

I leave the two of them bickering over adjectives, get in my car, and head over to Powder House Park. I don’t know much about Somerville, but I do know that the park is
over by Tufts. I figure I’ll cruise around the area, see if there’s a black truck in one of the
driveways. Take it from there.

I find the park okay, but it’s on the corner of College and Broadway, and I don’t
know which way to go. There’s not much traffic, so I crawl up one road doing about five
miles an hour, checking the vehicles in the driveways and on the streets. A thought
crosses my mind. What if there’s no driveway at Duncan’s place? What if he parks his
tuck wherever he can find a spot on the street like all the rest of these cars? I’m at the
end of the street, about to give up, when I see a black truck whose grill is facing the road.
The Christmas tree air-freshener’s still hanging from the mirror, so I’m pretty sure it’s
Duncan’s. Fortunately, it’s in a driveway, and I look beyond it at the white clapboard
duplex that’s set back behind a couple of big hickory-oaks and think, hey, this is a pretty
nice place. It’s kind of traditional with its dark shutters and isn’t that some coppery stuff
around the roof? I don’t want to pull in behind his truck for obvious reasons, so I find a
parking spot way down the block, then shove one of those mini-flashlights I use to check
the kids’ pupils into my pocket, and hike back up to his place. I tell myself that I’m just
going to do a quick survey, see if there’s any activity—any sign of Duncan, or the
widow, or Duncan with the widow.

There are lights on in his house, and when I get closer to the front porch, I can
hear some music—Seals and Crofts, I think. It’s got to be close to ten. Won’t the music
wake the little boy? I wonder. Tiptoeing up the porch steps, I notice some white wicker
furniture, one of those swinging loveseats, and a cord of firewood stacked in a pile. I’m
being really really quiet, because I don’t want anyone to hear me and I don’t want the
watering dog to start barking. I’m just hoping that if I can hear their music out here, then they can’t hear me trespassing, in there.

The inside of the windows are covered with white plantation shutters, but the slots are opened, so I take a peek. No one’s in the living room—but the light’s on, and there’s a ripping fire in the fireplace. Nice mantle, I think, and figure that Duncan must’ve made it. Hey, whose wine glass is that on the table? I wonder and crane my neck to see if I’m missing something to the left or right in the room. Can’t miss that big screen TV. Cooper’d pimp himself to have that. I take in the furniture that looks like it’s made from heavy solid wood—fat furniture, I’m calling it, you know, wide arms and thick legs. And that looks like a Persian rug on the floor. There’s a bunch of books in the built-in bookcases, which makes me wonder what Duncan’s reading—*The Da Vinci Code* or maybe *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*? God knows I’m blackballed from *that* list. I scan the mostly black-and-white prints and photographs on the wall—wonder if it’s his stuff—could be he’s got a darkroom in the basement.

Maybe something’s going on over here, I think, and pass the side-by-side front doors so I can look in the window on the other side of the porch. The light’s not on in this room, so I see nothing. I wonder if it’s a front bedroom or a den or something. I decide to climb down from the porch and see if maybe there’s a kitchen in the back of the house. Probably Duncan and the widow are hanging out there, unless they’re . . . Oh my God. The fire. The music. The wine. What a dope I am. They must be in the bedroom. My eyes lift to the windows on the second floor. Probably up there, I think, where it’s pitch black. They’re doing it. And here I am standing out here on this snow-covered yard; frozen dog
turd’s probably caked on the bottom of my shoes. My wrist is pulsing inside my coat sleeve. Look at the lining; it’s drooping like a dandelion gone to seed.

I jump when I hear a buzzing sound coming from the backyard and walk around to the side of the house where I see a light on in the basement window. I step into the horse-shoe-shaped well that cups the window. My feet crunch the layer of hardened snow; below its surface are mushy, foul-smelling leaves. There’s not much room to maneuver in here—it’s a one-man fox-hole, but I want to see what’s going on in the basement, so I hunker low to peek into the window. It’s pretty bright—fluorescent lighting on the ceiling. Tools are everywhere on the workbench and hanging from the pegboard. Looks like Duncan’s building something. I see some wood lying across a couple of those, what do they call them? Sawhorses, I think. It looks like a mini Home Depot down here. So where’s all the action? I can’t see the basement stairs from here, but I . . . yikes! What the hell was that? Something jumped into the well. It landed on my shoe. Damn. Where’d it go? I hear it rustling around, finger the pen light in my pocket, flash it onto the ground, but see nothing. Shit! I think I feel something crawling up my leg and that’s when I leap from the hole like an Olympian high jumper. I stomp my feet on the ground about a hundred times, then roll up my pant legs to the knees so I can brush away the sizable slug that’s got to be sucking me anemic by now. Okay. So there’s nothing on my legs. Whatever it was is gone, thank God. “But it was huge,” I say out loud. “A jumping spider on steroids or a frickin’ sewer rat or a . . .”

“Tree frog,” someone says behind me. It’s Duncan, standing there in his T-shirt and jeans. A saddle-brown leather tool belt’s slung low around his narrow hips. There’s a baseball bat in his hand and sawdust on the laces of his boots. Curls in his tousled hair lift
in the night breeze. There’s enough light for me to notice the stubble on his face, and yes, the dimples are still there. My emotions cycle faster than a manic-depressant off Lithium.

“Well, it should stay in the goddamn tree,” I say, trying to collect myself some more. I shove the penlight back in my pocket, roll my pant legs back down to my ankles, and brush shreds of rotten leaves off the knees of my pants.

“What are you doing here?” Duncan asks.

“What are you doing with that bat?” I ask.

“I thought the raccoons were back,” he says. “I bang on the garbage cans, scare them away. I’m going to build a shed when the weather warms up. Why did you say you were here?”

“I couldn’t sleep?” I say, and hold up my casted arm. It’s a pathetic excuse, but I’m looking for sympathy—no, I’m looking to save face for the umpteenth time.

“So you thought you’d camp out there?” he asks, pointing to the home of tree-frogs, jumping spiders, and God knows what else.

“Not exactly,” I say. “Cooper told me that you . . .” I point to his house. “Nice place.”

Duncan’s just standing there. I expect the widow woman to come out any minute. Probably she’s peering through the window, wondering who her honey is talking to. Maybe she thinks I’m homeless, and Duncan just caught me garbage-picking with the raccoons.

“Well, it’s late, and I guess you want to get back inside, and . . . take care of . . . stuff,” I babble.

Duncan takes a step toward me.
“I should go,” I say.

He takes another step, drops the bat.

“Gotta work tomorrow,” I say, pointing in the direction of my car, down the street, about a city-block away. “You know, like normal people do.”

Duncan’s so close that I can feel his breath on my cheek. He tilts my chin up with his fingers so that I’m looking into his nutmeg eyes. I want to make pumpkin pie with him and hot buttered rum, and what else do you make with nutmeg? He kisses me, lightly at first, and it’s enough to set signals twittering in my you-know-where. Then his tongue’s swimming in my mouth; we’re kissing and groping; my lungs feel as if they might burst like a thundercloud if I don’t catch my breath, so I gulp the air around me, and the pleasant cold snap cools the heat in my body. My skin’s tingling; every nerve fiber’s alive and popping. I can’t keep track of his hands—they’re all over me, climbing up and down like wisteria gone wild. I knock him in the forehead a couple of times with my cast trying to run my fingers through his sandy hair. He scoops me up, carries me like a new bride toward the front porch. My hand tucks under the sleeve of his T-shirt searching for more of his naked skin.

He climbs the steps, grabs the doorknob with his one free hand, kicks the brass plate at the base of the door with his boot, and now we’re in his living room. The heat from the fireplace stings my eyes. I close them but whisper in his ear: “Where’s the widow?”

He sets me down so that my feet touch the hardwood floors. Already my jacket’s peeled off. It falls to the floor inside out. I see the tattered ends of the torn lining, but don’t care.
“Where’s the widow?” I say again, because I do care about the woman that might be creeping down the stairs.

“Somewhere,” Duncan says, his hand travels under my sweater. The scent of pine and fresh air is what I smell when he lowers his head to my neck and oh, where’d he learn that tongue-flicking move. I can’t stop thinking about the widow. I mean, what if she’s upstairs in his bed, warming the sheets? And how come she doesn’t hear us because we’re not exactly quiet church mice down here. Maybe the music drowns out our sounds, I think, or maybe she does hear us, and she’s used to this sort of thing. Takes it in stride—accepts Duncan’s philandering just so she can stay with him. How pitiful is that? Or she’s got the pillow over her ears trying to drown out the lovemaking going on right here, right now. Nope, I think, as Duncan pulls his T-shirt over his head. This has got to stop!


Duncan gets this what’s-wrong-with-you woman dazed look on his face. I put a little distance between us, smooth out my sweater, scoop my jacket from the floor, shove the frayed lining back into the sleeve. What if the widow’s reached her limit? Maybe she’s crazed, driven mad by Duncan’s late-night love fests. Could be that she’s going to pop out of the closet wielding a Samurai sword and take it out on me? Yes. She saw Kill Bill and wants revenge.

“Look,” I say, searching the shadows in the living room corners. “I know it wasn’t right for me to lie about Marcus.” My eyes flash to the swell in Duncan’s pants,
then I look away. “But this isn’t right either. I mean, there’s a widow upstairs. And what about Peppy?” And Wonder Dog, I think. “Some watchdog your watering pup is.”

Duncan walks over to the stereo, turns the music off. He picks up his glass of wine, sips it, studies me. “Are you sure you didn’t bang your head when you broke your wrist?”

“I’m serious,” I say. “How can you want to make love to me when the widow’s right upstairs?” Or hiding in the closet? I think, but keep this little bit of paranoia to myself.

“The widow?” Duncan asks. “You think the widow’s upstairs? Is that what this is all about?” He starts to laugh—not a hearty Saint Nick belly laugh, but a shortling, a little snigger that’s got to be right there bubbling at the back of his throat. “I need a refill,’ he says and heads to the back of the house. “Want one?’

Hell yes. I think that potted fern just moved. I follow Duncan into the kitchen. He reaches for a wine glass that hangs in the rack above the butcher-block island. My lips are dry, and I’d like something to wet them, so I don’t refuse when Duncan hands me the wine-filled glass.

“Sit down,” he says, pulling out a chair from the table. I sit, cup my hand around the stem of the wine glass, feel the cool mahogany wood beneath the fingers of my casted hand. He unhooks his tool belt, lets it drop to the floor, then sits across from me, leaning into the spindles of the ladder-back chair like this was a lazy Sunday afternoon and we’re cutting coupons from the paper or something. His elbows rest on the arms. “You’re a little kooky,” he says.
“I may be, but what do you call blatantly . . .” Was that the slamming of a car door? Oh God. That’s definitely a woof-woof coming from the front yard. The widow’s outside! She’s going to walk right through the door and find us sitting at her kitchen table. Get a grip. I can handle this. Who am I? Why am I here? My mind is a blank—I’ve run out of lies. Wait. We’re not doing anything wrong. Isn’t it perfectly all right for the two of us to be sitting here, having a glass of wine, talking like a couple of old friends? Right, like she’s going to believe that. Look at Duncan. He’s showing all that naked flesh, and then there’s my chin, chafed by Duncan’s stubble, which probably looks like steak tartar.

Duncan gets up from the chair.

“Should I go out the back door?” I say to Duncan.

“Nope. I want you to meet Anita and the clan,” he says, heading to the front door.

Gulp. Now she’s got a name. And a clan. It’s Anita the widow woman, her boy Peppy and the woofing watering dog, right? Anyone else?

I hesitate, listening to the footsteps on the front porch. I tiptoe across the living room rug like being quiet will make me invisible. Duncan’s got his shirt back on.

“Hi,” he says to her. “How’d it go?”

“Good. Good,” she says. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

“Here, let me have him,” Duncan says, and the little boy gets passed from the widow to Duncan. “Hey, Slugger.”

I’m standing just behind the door jam, watching through the front door panels. The little boy’s head is tucked into the nook of Duncan’s neck. He’s wearing a brown bomber jacket with a lamb’s wool collar, and I can make out that those are airplane
patches stitched onto the shoulders. Oh. Look at that. He’s wearing footy pajamas. I can see the bottom half of Spiderman swinging from his web. Peppy’s fingers twirl tufts of his straw-blonde hair which probably smells like Johnson & Johnson baby shampoo, I think. Hey, cutie. Don’t wake up. The man who sleeps with your mommy has been a bad boy.

The dog starts barking, charges across the front yard.

“Pep!” the widow calls, climbing back down the steps. “Get back here.”

The dog’s named Pep?

Now the widow’s coming back. Oh Lord. What can I say to this woman that doesn’t sound trite or brash or like I just walked on to a soap opera set?

“Hi,” I say, pushing through the door. “I’m selling Mary Kay cosmetics. Want to schedule a facial?”

“Lexie, can you get the door for me?” Duncan says.

“Oh sure,” I say, and turn back toward the house. I hold the front door open so Duncan can enter with the little boy in his arms.

“The other door,” he says, and at first I’m confused. I’ve got to walk out onto the porch to see what he’s talking about.

“This one?” I say, and point to the second of the side-by-side doors.

“That’s it,” he says, and I finally figure it out. The widow lives in the other half of the house! She doesn’t live with Duncan! She’s a non-issue! A ticker tape parade’s going off in my head. I want to dance across the porch, shouting, “The widow’s a non-issue! Whoopee!”
I open the door, and Duncan walks on through. “I’ll put him to bed,” Duncan tells us.

The widow comes toward me; she extends her hand.

“I’m Anita,” she says. I shake her hand, thinking she’s younger than I imagined, looks kind of pixy-ish with her short black hair and almond-shaped eyes. She’s about my size, only thinner. Thinner like I could-wrap-my-thumb-and-forefinger-around-her-wrist thinner. “Nice to meet you, Lexie,” she says. “Duncan didn’t tell me that you sell Mary Kay.”

“You know who I am?” I ask.

“Well, of course I do,” she says. “Duncan talks about you all the time. Do you want to come in?” She points to her door.

“Okay,” I say, and want to be her friend. And the dog, whose snout I push away from my crotch, wants to be mine.

“Oh, by the way,” she says, when we’re inside, standing in her foyer. “Does Mary Kay still carry extra emollient night cream? I used it back home.”

“Mary Kay’s in Portugal?” I ask.

“She is?”

“Who’s in Portugal?” Duncan asks, entering the room.

“Not me,” the widow says. “Not now. Not ever. Boston and Baltimore are the furthest I’ve been from Prospect Park. Been to Brooklyn, Lexie? Avenue of the Americas?”

I’m so confused. Is Mary Kay in Brooklyn?
By the time Duncan and I get back to his place, it’s nearly eleven. I should go home, but I’m feeling befuddled.

“Okay,” I say. “Let me sort this through. The widow . . .”

“Whose name is Anita,” Duncan says.


Duncan nods. “And Casey.”

“The dog,” I say.

“The boy,” he says.

“Oh boy,” I say.

Duncan smiles. “Anita’s had a hard time. First, she lost her folks. You heard about the ’99 Amtrak derailment in Illinois?”

I nod.

“Then her husband bites the dust,” he says. “So really, she’s got no one.”

“She’s got you,” I say.

“I watch over her,” he says. “It’s not much. She’s been visiting her in-laws in Baltimore, trying to get on better terms with them since the death of their son. Remember I told you it was probably suicide.”

“Yes.”

“Well, for a while, Anita’s mother-in-law blamed her for his death. I don’t know. I guess she couldn’t reason that her son could be depressed without a cause. Anita was the scapegoat. But now, things are looking good. She’s been going down to Baltimore the past four or five weekends, and probably, in another few months, she’ll move to Annapolis, so Casey can grow up near his grandparents.”
I feel really shitty for thinking Duncan is the cheating kind. Once again, I’ve got my men mixed up.

“I’ve got to work half a day tomorrow,” I say. “And if I’m ever going to get up on time, I better head on home.”

“Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.” Duncan puts on his corduroy jacket and I feel guilty because his warmer down parka is on the window seat in my bedroom.

We’re almost to my car, and things are looking up—I’m more centered now that everyone knows everything—well, everyone except Marcus that is. I’ve got to set things straight with him, and that’s my very next plan. But for now, I just want to make sure that Duncan and I are going to be okay.

“When will you be back?” I ask. Duncan grabs the door handle, opens the driver’s side.

“Tuesday,” he says. “I’ve got a nonstop out of Miami that I think gets in around sixish. I should be home around seven.”

“We could do something,” I say. “I could make some more of my famous red sauce.”

Duncan smiles. “We’ll see,” he says and kisses my right temple.

Back at home, I set my alarm and barely remember my head hitting the pillow. I have fuzzy dreams about waterfalls. Duncan and I are standing under one. I’m wearing a bikini—my skin’s brown like caramel candy and there’s no dimpling on my thighs. Duncan’s kissing me. The water’s falling all around us, and it’s loud, and it’s—running in my shower! I sit up, look around. There’s Marcus’ jacket plopped on top of Duncan’s. I get up and take care to walk around his toppled boots, his balled-up socks. His jeans,
lying on the floor, look as if he just stepped out of them. I pick them up, see one of those grape flyers sticking out from his pocket. His dusky blue cobble cloth shirt’s inside out on the foot of my bed. The only thing missing is his jockeys and oh my God . . . he slept next to me last night, and I didn’t even know it. That’s final. I’ve got to tell him about Duncan. I’ll just say, Marcus, you were right to think that something’s going on. What else? I know. And Marcus, you and I . . .

“Babe,” Marcus says, coming out of the bathroom. My bath towel’s knotted below his hip; the hairs on his chest are still wet and tightly coiled. “You were dead to the world last night.”

“Right,” I say. “I’m glad that you’re here, Marcus, because . . .”

He comes over to me, kisses the top of my head. “I’m glad, too, Babe, because I’ve come to a decision . . .”

“Me too, Marcus,” I say. “And . . .”

“I’m going to move back in,” he says. “I mean, I’m here a lot, and I’ve got a month-by-month lease, so . . .” He unwraps the towel from his waist. Big Jim and the twins say good-morning. “I’m baaack!” he says and starts towel-drying his hair.

“Wait,” I say. “You can’t just say . . .”

“That I’m moving back in?” he asks, looking up at me. “Babe, close your mouth. It’s a good thing.”

I shake my head.

“Go on,” he says. “Get your cute little ass in the shower. I’ll get some coffee going. I’ve got something going on tonight, but we’ll go out tomorrow and celebrate.” He
wraps the towel back around his waist, heads for the hallway. I groan when he shouts back to me, “How’s Fire & Ice?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, and I don’t have time to hash this out with him because it’s late, and I’ve got to get my sorry ass to work. I wrap my cast in a plastic bag and am thankful that at least the water coming from the shower head is still hot. When I get out, there’s coffee in my favorite Red Foxx health-nuts-are-going-to-feel-stupid-someday-lying-in-hospitals-dying-of-nothing mug sitting on the bathroom counter. This is Marcus’ put my-best-foot-forward routine, I think, and flip the cap from the toothpaste, so I can brush my teeth.

I get my terrycloth robe on and hear the TV in the living room. Probably Marcus is sitting on the couch with his wet towel, watching the morning news.

“I’ll get it,” I hear Marcus say.

What’s he getting? I wonder, and walk down the hallway. I turn the bend and see Marcus standing at the open door. Duncan’s out in the corridor. Okay. It’s here. My nervous breakdown, like a category-five hurricane—it’s finally made landfall.

“You again?” Marcus says to Duncan. “Gotta stop making these house calls, Dude. Fan’s working fine. No handyman stuff’s needed today.”

“Where’s Lexie?” Duncan asks.

“Look, Mr. Fan Guy. It’s none of your business where she is,” Marcus says.

“No, wait. Marcus,” I say, “Don’t...” and now I’m standing at the door with the two of them.

“That’s okay, Babe,” Marcus says, gesturing for me to stop. “I got this covered.”
Duncan looks at me. He’s got a pastry bag in one hand, a cup of Starbuck’s coffee in the other. He must’ve thought to stop on his way to the airport.

“Look I don’t want any trouble, Marcus,” Duncan says. “I just want to say something to Lexie.”

“You know, I don’t get you,” Marcus says. “Aren’t you shacking with a widow?”

“Cut it out, Marcus,” I say.

“I’m just trying to set the guy straight, Lexie,” Marcus says. “I live here, too, so . . .”

“He lives with you?” Duncan asks.

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” Marcus says.

“You do not,” I say.

Yep, I do,” Marcus says. “My mail’s being forwarded as we speak.”

“You can’t just . . .” I stop, because I catch Duncan shaking his head in my peripheral vision. I turn and look at him. “It’s not like that,” I say.

“When you figure out what it’s like, Lexie,” he says, “why don’t you let me know?”

He hands me the pastry bag and the cup of coffee, then walks away, down the hall.

“Wait!” I say. “You had something to tell me.”

“Come to think of it,” he says, walking back. He snatches the paper bag from me, and I get a whiff of Cinnamon Buns. “I think I’ll see if the widow wants breakfast.”

“Now you’re talking, Dude,” Marcus shouts, as Duncan walks away from me.
Chapter Thirteen

“Cripes, Marcus,” I say, staring at the empty corridor. “Look what you’ve done.”

“Whaddaya talking about?” he asks, pacing up and down the hallway like a sentry. “That guy’s a stalker.”

“Oh God,” I say, and go back inside.

Marcus follows me. “You should’ve thanked me for getting rid of him,” he says. I close the door and watch him walk into the living room.

“Look,” I say. “We’ve got to talk.”

“You bet your sweet bippy we do,” Marcus says. “I’ve got a shit load of stuff to cart over.” He drags my club chair to the corner of my living room. It taps the pot of my ficus. Leaves quiver like the wings of hummingbirds lighting on windowsill feeders. He walks back to the depression in the rug. The pitted fibers still remember the legs of my chair. A buffalo-head nickel lies on the carpet next to an old guitar pick that stayed behind after Marcus left me. “I’m thinking my recliner goes here.” He does one of those hand movements that makes me think of the guys who guide airplanes to the gate. I get that he wants to dock his chair in my space so it lines up with the T.V. I’m distracted by the man in a white lab coat on my television screen telling me how to decode a child’s cough. What program is this? I wonder. Then I see the Saturday Early Show logo in the backdrop and the camera pans to one of the show’s co-anchors. That blonde chick
Gouda? Greta? Why the hell am I standing here? It’s got to be after nine already. I’m so friggin’ late!

“I don’t have time for this,” I say and whiz past Marcus toward my bedroom.

“I wouldn’t listen to anything that doctor dude says,” Marcus calls after me. “He’s so out of shape. I bet he can’t put his belt on without a boomerang.”

I throw on my scrubs and lace up my sneakers. I don’t even have time to throw on mascara. I toss the tube in my purse along with my blush and my imperfection eraser because I look as if I just stepped out of a boxing ring, and I don’t have time to put cold cucumber slices on the bags that droop under my eyes. Dr. Gregory’s going to kill me.

“If Dr. Gregory calls,” I tell Marcus on my way out. “Tell him I’m on my way—say something’s wrong with the T.”

“Nothing’s wrong with these T’s,” Marcus says, squeezing my breasts like he’s checking the ripeness of cantaloupes—okay, so like he’s checking the firmness of tomatoes.

“Stop it,” I say, and slap his hand away. “Must you always be pawing?”

“Someone forget to take her happy pill this morning?” he asks.

“Marcus,” I say. “I’m late. Dr. Gregory’s going to fire my ass, and I’ve got things on my mind. Sex is not one of them.”

“I’ve noticed,” he says, opening the door. “Go. But don’t forget. I’m doing stuff tonight. But—tomorrow.” Marcus gives me the thumbs up. “It’s you and me, Babe.”

I can’t think about tomorrow because my brain’s replaying the scene at my door. I see Marcus puffing up his naked chest. And then there’s Duncan storming away from me. Damn. Why didn’t I go after him? Well, duh! He had a plane to catch, didn’t he? And
with Marcus standing right there, what could I have said? You see, Duncan. Technically, Marcus doesn’t live with me. He just happens to have a key so he can hop in my bed, any time, any day. Groan. Duncan’s number’s still logged on my phone. I figure that he’s probably on the plane by now, but I try to call him anyway, on my way to work. I get his voice mail, and now that I hear his voice, I stumble and can only manage to say call me, please.

I’m thirty-five minutes late for work and the place is hopping when I come through the door. Some kid’s playing with the beads-on-wire toy. A couple of boys are building towers with the giant cardboard blocks. The sick room’s full too, only there are fewer toys and things to do in there, considering the great germ exchange. A few kids are watching a Magic School Bus video. It’s the Bugs, Bugs, Bugs episode, I think. A couple of mom’s jiggle babies in their arms. A family of five just walked through the door. Holy Moly. How are we going to do this? We’re here only until twelve.

Candice slams a stack of patient charts on the front desk while I let some kid draw a dragon on my cast. Dr. Gregory comes out of an exam room, and he’s headed in my direction. I grab one of the patient charts and start flipping through it as if I’m looking for some crucial piece of information.

“Let’s see it,” Dr. Gregory asks.

I hand him the chart, but he doesn’t take it.

“The wrist,” he says.

I present my casted wrist to him like it’s a worthy excuse for being late. “I’m trading it for a fiberglass one next week.” I’m also trading my so-called life for the loony bin, I think.
Dr. Gregory nods, then turns to Candice. “Schedule the McGrath kid for a sweat test. I think he might be cystic.” Candice nods, and as soon as the doc is out of sight, she slides a chart my way.

“This one’s yours,” she says. “It’s a three-year-old. Looks like scabies.”

“Fine,” I say, taking the chart. I know she’s pissed for having to take up the slack lately, but the truth is, I’d rather handle a kid infected with the human itch mite than try to jostle an infant with plaster on my wrist.

When I walk into the exam room, the kid’s sitting in his underwear, tearing up his armpit. His mom’s telling him to stop scratching probably for the millionth time. I snap a glove over my right hand and have to do some major stretching to get the other glove over my cast. I look all over the three-year old’s body. Little burrows snake under both arms. There are red bumps between his fingers and on the soles of his feet. Dr Gregory comes in the room and the kid goes bonkers—he screams like a flock of seagulls descending on a picnic. Dr. Gregory gives me a what-did-you-do-to-the-kid look.

“It’s okay,” I say, to the little boy. “He’s just going to look.”

The toddler pipes down, and Dr. Gregory checks him out, then he tugs the earscope off the wall bracket, and the kid’s ready for the Vienna Boys’ Choir.

“He just wants to look in your ears,” I say, but the kid’s shaking his head.

“Look,” Dr. Gregory says to him. “There’s nothing to it,” and before I know it, Dr. Gregory’s tugging on my earlobe.

“Hey,” I say when the cone-shaped plastic locks in my ear.

“See,” Dr. Gregory says, peering into the canal of my ear. The kid’s quiet now.

“I’m just looking at the wax build-up that’s in Lexie’s ears.”
"I don’t have wax build-up," I say and pull away.

Dr. Gregory shrugs. "You could grow potatoes in there."

The toddler laughs. Okay, I think. Whatever.

The scabies’ kid leaves with an Elimite prescription, and I don’t have much time to think about Duncan or Marcus because there’s a steady flow of strep throats, common colds, gastrointestinal viruses, a couple of influenza vaccinations, one sports physical, a urinary tract infection, a pink eye, and then we’re done. It’s been a day of changing diapers, blowing noses, and cleaning up bodily fluids. All in all, my casted wrist faired pretty well—it wasn’t much of a handicap—but my skin’s kind of itchy under the cast and everything I try to shove between the felt padding and my dry skin is either too bulky, too short to get to the scratchiest spot, or a wasted effort because it doesn’t do the job.

"Knitting needle," Candice says when she sees me jamming the antennae of my cell phone down my cast. "I broke my leg skiing a couple of winters ago. Knitting needle’s the only way to go."

"I don’t knit," I say, and now the antenna breaks and I can’t reach the tip of it so I can yank it out of my cast. "Crap. It’s stuck."

Candice tries to wedge it out with her nine-inch nails, but it’s not budging. "Here, hold your arm up like this," she say, grabbing my arm so that my fingers are in the air. "Now shake." I give my arm a wiggle. "No. Pretend you’ve got a couple of pom-poms in your hand and you’re a cheerleader for the New England Patriots."

Not in my lifetime, I think.
“Come on. You’re waving one of your pom-poms to a fan on the tippiest row of the bleachers.” Candice shakes her arm like she wants me to do. Dr. Gregory stands behind us now.

“Do I want to know what you’re doing?” he asks.

“She shoved her antennae up her cast,” Candice tells him.

“Up her what?” he asks.

“My cast,” I say, enunciating the *kuh* sound.

“Right,” he says, and pulls a pair of Kelly clamps from the pocket of his lab coat. He sticks the tip down my cast and drags my antennae back out. “Try baby oil on the end of a long cotton swab next time.”

“That’s a good idea,” I say and make a mental note to grab some of the swabs from our supply room.

“Now go home,” he says, and I think, that’s an even better idea.

On the way back to my place, I try Duncan again on my cell. His voice mail message is cryptic—sounds like the Morse code. The connection sucks without my antennae, and I’m worried that anything I say after the beep’s going to be all garbled. I figure I better get my phone fixed in case Duncan calls me back. I know there’s a Cingular store in the strip mall next to Olivia’s funeral home. I figure I’ll take care of my cell problem, then bop next door to see Olivia. The T takes me to within three blocks of the mall. I don’t mind walking the rest of the way. The air’s chilly, but it clears my head enough so that I know that talking with Marcus has got to be at the top of my list. I don’t know what I’m going to say, but the two of us need to sit down and hash things out.
The guy in the Cingular store tells me that I need a new phone because the antennae’s not replaceable and my warranty’s expired. I hadn’t planned on forking over money for a new phone, but I have no choice. It’s a necessity, like paying my electric bill. I mean, what if Duncan calls? I buy one of those camera phones. I don’t know why. Probably because my charge card’s not maxed out, and when Visa says *Sure, Girl—we approve your purchase*, I think, okay, Visa’s got confidence in me. Go for it. And this phone camera will come in handy tonight, I think. I’ll snap Coop strutting his stuff on the catwalk. That’ll be a trip. I mean, as long as I’m going to this bachelor auction, I can’t pass up Coop’s Kodak moment.

From the cars in the funeral home parking lot and the conservatively dressed people milling in the foyer, it’s obvious to me that a viewing’s going on. I feel really out of place in my robin-blue scrubs. Some guy dressed in a suit wants me to sign the guest book.

“Are you here for the Sylvester Cobb party?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Our other party is laid out in the coral room,” he says. “Lovely woman. Estelle Hertz.”

Did he just say “it still hurts?” He guides me to a room full of mourners. I try to tell the guy that I’m not here to view, but he dumps me in front of the casket and all I can say is thank God, the damn thing is closed. Someone asks me how I knew “it still hurts” and I mumble something about Bingo and get a lot of strange looks. I see Olivia coming up one of the side aisles wearing her matching yellow smock and pants. As she moves among mourners dressed in black, I can’t help but think that Olivia looks like a lemon
cough drop. I start walking toward her, and we meet between the humungous pink
carnation heart on an easel and a three-foot cross that’s covered in lavender roses.

“What are you doing in here?” she whispers in my ear.

“Well, I’m not working the crowd,” I say.

Olivia hooks her arm through mine and we split.

“I couldn’t help her,” Olivia whispers, her thumb hitchhiking back to the casket.

“She was a train wreck.”

“She was hit by a train?” I ask.

“No. That’s just an expression we use in the trade,” she says. “It means her face
was a mess.” Olivia tugs on my elbow, and we head down a staircase.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Olivia’s in front of me now, skipping down the stairs. “I want to show you where
I work,” she says. “It’s okay. My boss is at a cemetery way over in Worcester and all the
rest of the mucky-mucks are busy. I’ve got a live one in the embalming theater.”

“Alive?” I ask.

“Well, he’s ready to be souped up,” Olivia says.

I don’t know what the hell this means, but I’m scuffing my heels on the staircase
landing. “I don’t think so, Olivia. This whole funeral stuff creeps me out.”

“C’mon. The guy’s definitely flat line,” she says. “It’s no big deal.”

Easy for you to say, I think.

“Besides,” she says. “I want to hear about last night. Did you get to see Duncan?”

I smile at the mention of his name. “Yes. And the widow.”
“Really,” she says, as we enter the embalming theater. The room’s chilly—got to be sixty-five degrees; cold steel gray is all that I see. Wait. I see dead people. There’s one lying on the table with a white sheet draped to his chest. His toes are sticking out from under the drape, and it’s not the purple toenail beds that get to me, or the pasty pallor of his feet, but rather, it’s the toe tag flapping from the draft of the heating vent. This is what totally unnerves me. I watch Olivia put a paper bib under the man’s chin—and wonder what’s going to happen next. Does she plan on cleaning his teeth?

“You might want to step back just a bit,” she says, then flips a switch on a small compressor on her tray. There’s a humming sound, then the next thing I know Olivia’s spray painting the guy’s face. I mean, little dots of fleshy-pink are covering up the jaundice color on the guy’s skin. I’m flabbergasted. Who ever would have thought?

“Air brushing’s the only way to go,” Olivia says. “It took a while to get the hang of it at first. I kept spraying the hair, but now.” Olivia flips off the compressor switch.

“My application time’s down by a third.”

I’d like to be thrilled about Olivia’s increase in productivity, but the whole spray-on flesh bit gets under my corpuscled skin. I mean, even though the guy looks a little more normal in the scope of I-know-he’s-dead-but-wow-he-looks-like-he’s-just-sleeping mode, there’s the whole formaldehyde-clogging-up-my-nostrils smell to deal with, not to mention that there’s another dead body in the next working station. I think I’d rather be talking to Marcus than standing around a bunch of stiffs. Olivia gets out a pouch of cosmetics. What’s next? I wonder. A little paint-by-number?

“You know, Olivia, maybe I’ll catch up with you later.”
“Don’t go,” she says. “This isn’t The Night of the Living Dead. No one’s getting up from their slabs to seek revenge on the living. Besides, I want to hear about Duncan and we may not have time later. Cooper’s got to be at Johnny D’s by five. And I’m in charge of the monkey until he goes on. You’re still coming tonight, right?”

I nod. “I’m only going for the free cheese cubes and to see Cooper objectified by women.”

“Yeah. He’ll ham it up for sure. It’ll be fun.” Olivia brushes some blush on the dead man’s checks. “See how this blush blends in with the foundation?”

Right. Whatever, Olivia.

“Some over-the-counter cosmetics work on the premise that heat from the skin’s going to help the cosmetic blend in. But—this guy’s not giving out any heat, now is he?”

I watch Olivia swab a beigy color to the guy’s lips. “So back to Duncan. How’d you find him last night?”

I smile. “I was peeping in his basement window, and . . .”

“What is this, like your MO?”

“What?” I ask.

“Never mind,” she says, and picks up a comb, runs it through the guy’s few strands of hair that cross his freckled scalp. “So you met the widow? How’d that go?”

She motions that I should follow her to the gurney in the next working station. “Come on. I’ve got another one to do. You can tell me while I work.”

I hold up my hand. “No, Olivia. I’m totally freaked. Can’t you take a break?” I look around at the cold steel, the bright lights, the two cadavers. You can’t lie your way out of a place like this. Nope. No amount of make up or spray paint’s going to change
that truth. Dead is dead. This guy’s going nowhere, and crap, neither am I. What the hell am I doing with my life besides fucking it up in a major way? I look down at Mr. Deader-Than-Disco’s toe tag flapping in the breeze, and wonder what my toe tag will say, *Lexie lies here. Too bad she couldn’t make up her frickin’ mind*. I see Olivia’s snapping her rubber gloves—she looks like she’s ready to clean house. “How about somewhere other than in here?”

We go to the tiny chapel on the first floor and sit in the first of the two wooden pews. “Hardly anyone sits in here,” she says. “I don’t know why.”

I look around at the place. It’s small and stifling. There are no windows, not even the stained-glass kind. I can feel the walls close in on me—can you say “coffin?” I tell Olivia about last night, how Duncan came on to me, and how I thought the widow was going to spring from the shadows and catch us doing it, but then, I tell Olivia, that the widow, who wasn’t in the house at all, came home from a trip to her in-laws, who by the way, blamed her for the death of their son, and lo and behold, I find out that the widow lives in the other half of Duncan’s duplex.

“My head’s spinning,” Olivia says.

“It’s full of formaldehyde,” I say.

Olivia smirks. “So, you’re telling me that the widow lives next door?”

I nod.

“And there’s no hanky panky going on between them?”

“At least not before last night.”

“So this is good news,” Olivia says.

I shake my head.
“This is not good news?” she asks.

I tell her about this morning. How Marcus slipped into my bed during the night and how I was dreaming about being under a waterfall with Duncan, except the waterfall turned out to be my shower, and . . .”

“Wait. Let me guess,” Olivia says, holding up her hand. “Marcus was in the shower.”

I nod. “And when he gets out, he announces, just like that, that he’s moving back in.”

Olivia’s jaw drops. “He can’t just move in,” she says.

“That’s what I told him. But you know Marcus.”

Olivia shakes her head, and I know she’s thinking let’s not go there. “So what about Duncan?”

“Well, he shows up on my doorstep with breakfast on his way to the airport. How sweet is that? Except you-know-who answers the door half-naked.”

“Again?” Olivia asks.

I think about this and remember that Marcus was half-naked the first time Duncan met him. And cripes! That also happened at my front door! This is all playing out like a freaking sitcom. Half-naked men are on one side, fully clothed men on the other side. I need to change sets, get a new script—Hey, Wardrobe! Dress my boyfriends, please.

“So, don’t leave me hanging,” Olivia says. “What the hell happened?”

“Duncan split and Marcus thinks he’s moving in tomorrow.”

“Duncan’s gone?” she asks. “Like for good?”
I shrug. “I’ve been trying to call him all day, but he’s probably screening his calls, because I keep getting flipped to his voice mail.”

“God. What a mess. Makes me glad I’ve got Cooper. I mean, nobody’s going to shoot you for being single, Lexie. I’m just glad that I’m not part of that rat-race.”

I can’t handle Olivia’s analogy, so I tell her that I’ve got to go. She says I should get to Johnny D’s for happy hour, because that’s when the bachelors mingle with the crowd. I’ve still got to catch up with Marcus, but on my walk to the T stop, I try Duncan again. In my message this time, I tell him that I’m sorry, that there’s a big misunderstanding and I’m on my way to Marcus’ place right now to clear it up.

But Marcus isn’t home when I get there. I walk on over to the garage where he works, but the guys tell me that Marcus only worked half a day. When I leave, I look over my shoulder and see the grease monkeys talking. They look away when they see that I catch them checking me out. Now, I’ve got to wonder if any of Marcus’ other “Babes” come looking for him here. Hmmm. What’s up with the unsettling tinge of jealousy that’s pulsing through my veins?

I spend the rest of the day browsing at the mall, pick up a few toiletries, a new purse, and a pair of Bongo boot-cut jeans. I pass the men’s section in Dillard’s and stop to smell the cologne. I try some of the samples, looking for that woody musk smell that belongs to Duncan. I’m not even reading the labels. I just spray cologne on cardboard swatches, then inhale the vapors, reject one after another after another. The next spray catches me off guard. I recognize it, but the cologne conjures up visions of Marcus, his head in my neck, or mine on his chest, the smell of his clothes, the bathroom moments after his morning shower. I don’t need to look at the label to know it’s his Brut.
Later that night, I wear my new jeans, boots, a teal V-neck sweater, and the silver heart earrings that Olivia gave me for my birthday last year. I dab one of the long cotton swabs, I took from work in baby oil and paint the skin under my cast, then I grab a new swab and clean my ears so the potatoes don’t stand a chance.

Traffic to Johnny D’s is a bitch—and so by the time I find a place to park, it’s after seven. I’ve missed the happy hour and now I’m worried that the bidding’s already started. I’m parked two blocks away from the bar and wondering why the hell didn’t I just take the T? I power walk the rest of the way to Johnny D’s, pay my cover at the door, and hope that I haven’t blown Cooper’s catwalk, the only reason why I’m here at all.

I find Olivia at one of the front tables. She’s wearing a green dragonfly apron top and black pants. I grab the only empty seat in the place, realizing that Olivia must’ve been saving it for me. “You missed happy hour,” she says. “All the bachelors were strolling around—and Marcus is here.”

I look around the bar, but I don’t see him, and wonder why he didn’t call me or ask if I wanted to go. “Where is he?” I ask, and Olivia points to the stage. At least I think she’s pointing to the stage, but all I see is Samantha Bui, the dark-haired DJ from KISS 108. She’s wearing funky lace-up boots, a pair of skin-tight jeans and a strappy top. She taps on the mike to get our attention.

“Oh, ladies,” she says. “Let me hear you say ‘I need a MAAAAAAAAN!’”

By the sound of the mostly female crowd, I’m not the only one who thinks she needs a man. The crowd’s going ballistic, and I feel the masses shifting forward. I look around knowing that there’s no way that I’m going to find Marcus.
“Now, you all know,” the DJ says, “that this auction’s benefiting the poor pups and kittens on Death Row. That’s right. Your bids tonight will go toward rescuing these helpless abandoned animals and finding them loving homes. So, ladies. You’ll want to dig deep into your pockets, get those checkbooks handy, and yes! We even take plastic. So drool all you want, girls, because there’s definitely some hotties coming on stage. But remember, you can look, but the only way you can touch is to flash some green—and I’m not talking about the color of your thongs. Tonight—money talks.”

The place is buzzing; women are giggling. I know I’m pretty stoked to see what’s going to happen.

“Okay, then,” Samantha Bui says, “do you want to hear about our first bachelor?”

Half the room shouts woohoo. The rest say bring him on!

Samantha Bui nods. “Well, our first available guy’s worth every penny in your savings account because he’s definitely in touch with his animal side.”

The women whistle, make yipping sounds, and shout Yeah, Baby.

“He’s tree-tall, loves sweaty sports, and oh my, he’s got a tiger for your tank, ladies.” Samantha Bui fans herself with her hand. “I might bid on this one myself.”

Everyone laughs. “Okay, all you single Boston females. Say hello to Cooper, our sexy twenty-six-year-old keeper of the Franklin Park Zoo!”

The women are screeching, making whoop-whoop noises, and stomping their feet. Everyone claps, but Cooper doesn’t come on stage. “Don’t tell me,” the DJ says, “that Cooper’s buried his head in the sand like an ostrich.”

Then we see the diaper-wearing chimpanzee. He’s got Cooper’s pith hat on his head. People are oohing and ahhing. I’m laughing inside because Coop’s such a jokester.
He’s letting the chimp work the crowd. Now here comes Cooper in his stone-washed jeans, work boots, and a blue-striped button down shirt. He camps it up in response to the stripper music that’s piping over the speakers. Coop walks across the stage, each button comes undone, and then the shirt’s off, flung on one of the stage-front tables. Olivia gets up and snags the shirt from the table to our left. Cooper’s wearing only his T-shirt and jeans now. I’m close to the platform, so I can see that there’s a picture of a monkey on his shirt. I figure that it’s a photo of the little guy who’s climbing up Cooper’s leg right now. Cooper gives him a hand, and the monkey wraps his gangly arms around Cooper’s neck. The women flip out, and I remember my camera phone, so I grab it from my purse, zoom in so Cooper and the chimp are in my view, and snap the shot just as the monkey kisses Coop on the lips.

Cooper walks over to the mike. “Say hi to Koko.”

*Hi Koko* is the uniformed chant from the crowd.

“Koko’s only a year-old and already he’s an orphan,” Cooper says. I look around at the women in the bar. Some have a hand over their hearts; others fan fingers across their opened mouths. “Deforestation and commercial hunting for bushmeat is what killed Koko’s family.” Oh God. I think someone’s sniveling at the next table. “Koko was rescued from the rainforest of Cameroon this year.” And you’d think from the response, from the cheering and applauding, and hooting and hollering that Cooper personally shimmied up the banana tree, amidst the perils of sword-buckling bushwackers, to save the little chimp.

“Well, Mr. Zookeeper,” Samantha Bui says. “I’m thinking that you can whack my bush any time.” Olivia’s practically rolling on the floor laughing. “Here’s what Cooper
promises the lucky lady who wins tonight’s bid: dinner at Maggiano’s Little Italy
followed by laughing at The Boston Comedy Club. And if that doesn’t pump you up,
then hold onto your sports’ bras, girls. This lion tamer’s donating two boxed seats to see
the Bruins knock Montreal on their Canadian ass. Be still my beating heart.”

There are chuckles from the crowd.

“So, ladies. What do I hear for Boston’s King of the Jungle?”

One woman bids twenty-five, another says thirty, the numbers quickly hit one hundred. Olivia bids one-fifty, someone else offers two-seventy-five, but when the
bidding stops with the punch of the gavel, it’s a lanky redhead that pays the three hundred
and eighty-five bucks for a date with Cooper. Olivia’s clapping, and I know she’s okay
with how it all went down, and Coop’s got to be pleased with how much he raked in for
the pups. I lean into Olivia and ask if Cooper’s coming back to the table. She shakes her
head, gives me the hitchhiker thumb, and mouths “Zoo.” Again, I ask her where Marcus
is, but she can’t hear what I’m saying because now the music’s pumping again, and I
guess the DJ doesn’t want to lose the momentum that Cooper generated because here
comes the next guy out on stage.

At this point, I think about leaving. I don’t know where Marcus is, but I don’t
plan on hanging around to find him tonight. Cooper’s done, and I’ve got to laugh at the
clown that’s peeling off his shirt right now. You should keep that beer gut under cover is
what I want to tell him. Oh, God. Now he’s pounding on his flabby pecs. Easy, Gorilla-
man. This has got to be a joke. He swivels around so that now we’re getting a look at his
wooly-mammoth back, and holy shit! Someone’s shaved a #1 there. I look at Olivia and
shudder. She sticks her finger down her throat as if she’s going to make herself puke. The
DJ asks Bigfoot if he’s got any special talents, and the guy answers by doing a belly roll. The place is cracking up. I get this on my camera phone to show Cooper and Candice from work and maybe Duncan, if he ever talks to me again. From the shouts on the floor, I figure that there’s got to be some plants in the crowd because women are bidding on this guy. Women who are all about that caveman shit, I guess.

I try to signal Olivia a couple of times that I’m leaving, but the place is so noisy, and someone’s squeezed between us, and Olivia’s not even looking my way. Latino music starts blasting from the speakers, and Samantha Bui salsas around the microphone.

“That’s right, ladies,” she says into the mike. “There’s a hot Latin lover waiting in the wings.” Oh my God, I think. Listen to these women. They’re orgasmic. You’d think Antonio Banderas was back there. Cripes!

“He’s twenty-seven,” the DJ says. “And he knows how to pop your hood and fine-tune your engine. Vrooom! But that’s not all. I’ve seen this guy’s abs backstage—you’ve heard of a six-pack? Well, he’s sporting an eight-pack. Like a washboard, I’m telling you.”

Yeah, yeah, I think. And what’s his IQ? Same as his shoe size?

“So hock your jewelry, chicas. You’re going to need mucho dinero for this guapo hombre.” Samantha Bui rubs her thumb against the tips of her fingers. “Are you ready for this hot tamale?”

Nope. I get up. I don’t need another Latin lover in my life. Well, quasi-Latin, I think. Marcus is only half-Bolivian and speaks enough Spanish to order pollo borrachos from Be Bop Burrito’s. Olivia looks my way. I gesture that I’m heading out. She shakes her head, points to the stage. I follow her finger and there he is. Marcus, shaking his hips...
like a pair of maracas. Gulp. He moves across the stage. Oh my God! I think. He’s really playing up this Latin shit. The top buttons of his slate blue shirt are undone, the dark hairs on his chest glisten. He’s wearing boots, tight leather pants and a black belt with . . . Hey! That’s the silver Mustang buckle I bought him at the Boston World of Wheels’ Show.

What the hell is he doing up there? Then I remember when I picked his jeans up off the floor this morning, the grape flyer was sticking out of his pants pocket. I don’t know what to think now. Why didn’t he tell me? And what’s he trying to prove, anyway? I sit back down on the edge of the seat when some hussies hurl obscenities at me for blocking their view.

“Take it off!” someone screams from the crowd. Marcus unbuttons the rest of his shirt, wipes his brow with it, then gives it to a fawning girl that’s drooling on the stage. Oh, come on, I think. Get a grip here. He walks to the other end of the platform, squats, and lets the women pat his chest.

“Show us your butt!” A voice calls out. Marcus stands, then gyrates to the beat of the Latin music. He wiggles his tight ass for the crowd. I hear one chick say that Marcus is looking better than her $300 Prada pumps. I’m in a state of shock. This time when I look at Olivia, she sees me. I get a palm up gesture from her that says, this is what I was trying to tell you.

The bidding begins. Someone in the back of the room offers a hundred bucks for the guy who wants to move in with me. A girl wearing a purple lotus dress bids one-fifty. I see Olivia lean into her. What could she be saying? Marcus hops off the stage. He walks among the tables. Women touch him everywhere. On his way back to the platform, Marcus sees Olivia. He salutes her like she’s the Gestapo or something. Then he catches
my eye and seems surprised to see me for only a miniscule of a second. He sits on my lap, speaks in my ear.

“Bid on me, Babe,” he says. I smell the Brut on his chest, taste the salt on his tongue when he parts my lips. I nearly drop the phone that’s still in my hand. The whooping from the crowd is maddening.

“Hey! No sampling the merchandise,” some chicky says at the next table, and then my cell rings. I don’t hear it as much as I feel it vibrating against my palm. Marcus is still on my lap. I look at the incoming number and it’s Duncan! He’s calling me back and here I am sitting at a bachelor auction with my lover’s butt in my lap.

“Bid on me,” Marcus says again. The phone’s still buzzing, and I look again at Duncan’s incoming number this time instead of gazing into Marcus’ Caribbean green eyes. Marcus takes the phone from my hand. I try to get it back, but he’s standing away from me now; my cell to his ear. He doesn’t even say hello. “She’s a little busy right now,” is all I hear Marcus say. He flips my cell closed, slides it across the table, waves his hands in the air for the women in the back, then leans into my face. “Bid on me.”

Marcus jumps back up on the stage. He takes the mike from Samantha Bui, and says, “What do you say we merengue?”

The bids start flying. Two-fifty, three seventy-five. Four-twenty-five is what the woman sitting behind me says. When I turn around to look at her, she’s gaping at the stage. I watch her toss back her mac-and-cheese colored hair, cross her daddy-long legs, and I scratch my head thinking I know her from somewhere. My mind’s reeling from Duncan’s phone call. What must he be thinking now? Maybe he didn’t recognize Marcus’ voice with all this background noise. Oh God. Who am I kidding? And what
about Marcus? Look at him up there dancing with Samantha Bui. He wants every woman in this place to bid on him. I hear the Kraft girl shout, “You’re mine, Marcus!” and it takes another second or two for my brain to recall her, but then I remember that she was the one whose tongue was down Marcus’ throat right before Christmas. I watch her eyeball Marcus as if he’s tomorrow’s main course and think that the ventilation in this place is definitely not keeping up with all this body heat. And then I realize that no one’s topped her bid.

“Okay, ladies,” Samantha Bui rocks the mike in her hand. “Looks like we’ve got a partner for our Latin lover.”

Marcus hovers over the mike. “Wait a sec,” he says to the DJ, “I know there’s a babe at this table right here who forgot to make a bid.” Marcus is pointing at our table. Olivia’s eyes are bulging like binoculars.

The room is humming. I look around and see women craning their necks to see who’s going to out bid the mac-and-cheese chick. The Kraft girl shouts, “Five-hundred bucks.” God. She’s not too bright. She just bid against herself. Marcus puts his hand to his forehead like he’s scouting for Indians. “Come on, Babe,” he says, “tell them what I’m really worth.”

I shrugged, get up from the table, push in my chair, and slowly walk through the crowd of women. I don’t look back at Marcus, but I think I hear him call me. I know I catch Samantha Bui say, “Sold to the lady for five-hundred bucks,” and then there’s the slam of her gavel.

I’m plowing through the women, and I know Olivia’s right behind me because I hear her say, “You go, girl!”
I stay at Olivia’s that night because I don’t want to deal with Marcus. My cell phone rings at two, then three, then five in the morning. They’re all calls from Marcus. I guess I could have turned it off, but I keep hoping that Duncan will call back. I’ve tried to call him, but he won’t answer his phone, and I’m sure that he’s got to be tired of hearing me say I’m sorry. The next day, I change the locks on my door, get an unlisted number, and delete the half-a-dozen numbers I have for Marcus. I hear him try his key in my lock on Sunday night, then he knocks on my door a couple of times, but I ignore him. It’s hard because he pants in the cracks of my door and whispers that he loves me.

I lie in bed on Sunday night looking up at my whirling fan, thinking. It takes me a while to figure out why Coop would be a part of an auction, knowing that it meant spending his night with another woman. I mean, why test fate like that? But then I get it. The cause motivates Cooper. That, in and of itself, is enough for Olivia to trust Cooper and to be confident in their love.

And then there’s Marcus. To tell you the truth, I really wouldn’t have minded if Marcus wanted to raise money for the puppies. But I know better. I know the reason why Marcus flaunted himself on Saturday night. And I know there’s a whole rain forest between Cooper and Marcus. Cooper’s the guy who cares about the animals. Marcus is the animal who cares about Marcus.

It’s Tuesday evening, and the terminal’s busy with peak air travel. I remember that Duncan said his flight would get in around six, and I’m pretty sure that he said he was flying out of Miami. That would make sense, right? Drive from Key Largo to
Miami? But I can’t remember if he told me what airline he’s flying. I check the monitors and see that there’s an American Airlines’ flight from Miami that gets in at 6:18. That could be his plane. My eyes scroll up and down the monitor for other possibilities. There’s a USAir flight that gets in at five-thirty. If Duncan was on that one, then I’m screwed because he’s come and gone by now. Delta’s Miami flight arrives at seven-thirty. That’s too late unless I’ve got the time messed up. If I’ve got it right, then Duncan arrives at American Airlines’ gate 37 in about twenty minutes. I sit at one of the tables outside the duty-free shop, sipping on my Starbuck’s coffee, nibbling on a cinnamon bun. I’m waiting before the metal detectors in the outer area, so every time a group of passengers passes the security check, my heart jackhammers across my chest. My eyes search for Duncan’s sandy tousled hair, for his oatmeal corduroy jacket. I can’t see the green flecks in his nutmeg eyes or the stubble on his chin or the dimples in his cheeks from here. But they’re etched in my brain, vividly thriving on the surface of my memory.

The tip of my nose is the only part of me that’s cold. I’m wearing Duncan’s navy blue down parka that he covered me up with the night I broke my wrist, the same jacket that I’ve kept in my bedroom this whole time. I’m hoping he doesn’t mind that I’m wearing it because his parka warms my heart. This time, when the passengers spill through from beyond the checkpoint, I see him. At first I can’t move. I just watch him, walking, and imagine that his hands are calloused from planing pinewood, that his shoulders are brown from the kiss of the Florida winter sun. He moves with the others toward the elevator, his black duffel bag in his hand. I panic, thinking I might miss my chance. He’s refused to answer his phone and he might refuse to open the door, but my hope is that here, at the Logan Airport, Duncan won’t refuse my welcome home.
I move quickly now, his jacket loosely hanging on my body, my fingers tucked inside the sleeves. I feel the same vinyl lining that touches his skin, that moves with him.

“Excuse me,” I say to the woman pushing a stroller. I maneuver between a flight attendant and an older couple. I get stuck behind a bunch of kids wearing yellow jerseys that say Tournament of Roses, Bengals’ High Marching Band. The group clumps together like white rice. I can’t see Duncan, so I follow the kids along with their pungent smell of French fries and Clearasil, onto the escalator. What if Duncan has no baggage? I worry. What if he didn’t drive to the airport after all? And what if Anita’s waiting at curbside?

When I walk off the escalator, I search for him again. Baggage carousels are to the right and left. The exit is ahead. If I go through the door, I might catch Duncan out by the curb. Maybe Anita’s still circling, still looking for a place to park. Maybe Duncan’s hailing a cab, or taking a shuttle to the long-term parking lot. I see the high school kids gather around the far baggage carousel on the right; their yellow shirts dance like a bunch of Wal-Mart smiley face guys. I head their way and scan the carousel when I approach. I weave amongst the travelers and get in people’s way. Baggage carts are forced to go around me. I block one man’s attempt to get his suitcase off the belt. We watch it disappear behind the vertical strips, then circle once again.

Duncan’s nowhere.

The travelers thin, and it seems obvious to me that I should’ve tried to find him outside on the curb. “Fuck,” I say. A mother claps the ears of her toddler, gives me a disapproving look. Probably thinks I’m a charity case, as if I got this too-big jacket from the Salvation Army.
Someone steps away from behind the column. Oh God! It’s Duncan. He reaches for the black leather bag on the belt. I’m right behind him, wrapped in his jacket, waiting for him to turn around. And when he does, I’m standing there, searching his face for some sign of forgiveness, while my pulse whips wildly in my ears.

Right away, Duncan’s eyes drop to the parka that I’m wearing. I can’t tell if he’s pissed. Maybe he’s preoccupied. He sighs, adjusts the strap on his shoulder, looks away like maybe he was expecting someone else to be standing here. Then he looks in my eyes, waiting.

What can I possibly say to make him understand? I could tell him that I’m not really worried about my five-year plan or that Olivia’s right, no one’s going to shoot me just because I’m single. I know I got it wrong with Marcus. No guy can define who I am. All I really want now is a chance to show Duncan that I care. That’s why I’m here.

“What do you want, Lexie?” Duncan asks, and since he hasn’t walked away from me yet, I lunge at this hopeful sign.

“I want this jacket,” I say.

“It’s too big for you.”

“I mean, I want the man the jacket belongs to.”

“You don’t know what you want,” he says and starts walking away from me toward the exit.

“Duncan, wait,” I call after him, but he doesn’t. He goes ahead, and I follow behind him except I hear this yelping, and see that some kid let his puppy out of the carry-on, and the dog scampers over to me and piddles at my feet. By the time I hop over the puddle of pee and get outside, Duncan’s through the exit. I find him standing at the
curb with several other travelers under a sign that says, Remote Parking Pick-up. An
airport bus is coming, and in another minute or two, Duncan’s going to hop on the bus,
and that’ll be that.

I dash over to the curb. “I know what I want,” I say to Duncan.

Some guy standing next to Duncan looks me up and down, then reaches into his
trouser pocket. He licks the fleshy pad of his thumb, then peels a single dollar from the
wad of bills he holds in his hand. Buy yourself a cup of coffee, he tells me. What? I think.
It takes a sec for my brain to register that this guy thinks I’m panhandling. I just stand
there gaping at the money. I want to tell Mr. Goodwill that Starbucks charges two-
twenty-five for a tall Sumatra, but then I remember why I’m really here.

“You don’t want the buck?” the guy says.

“I want him,” I say and point to Duncan.

The man looks at Duncan, then back at me, then lets out a scoffing laugh that
blows his benevolent side to bits. “Well, I want Pamela Anderson,” he says, “so we’re
both shit outta luck.”

Duncan’s laughing now, and for a flash of a second, I don’t know if I should be
offended or relieved, but then I realize how ridiculous I must look in this jacket, and I’m
laughing too. I hear the hydraulic hiss of the closing door, and it’s just the two of us
standing on the curb when the bus pulls away. I want to kiss his nutmeg eyes and tell him
I don’t care about my five-year plan. I mean, I don’t know if Duncan’s forever and ever.
But I’m pretty sure he’s the right guy for now.