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Adventures of a Former Girlfriend: A Novel

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ADVENTURES OF A FORMER GIRLFRIEND:
A NOVEL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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Abstract

This is a novel about a young woman trying to redefine herself after years of defining herself through her relationships with other people, most specifically her boyfriends, but also her family.

The heroine faces many challenges: the end of a long-term relationship, the illness of her niece, complications with her best friends, and a revelation about her parent's relationship. These ordinary obstacles of everyday living will propel the main character into a confrontation with her perception of herself and the world around her.

Chapter 1: The Split

I was kneeling in the den window seat that overlooked Highland Avenue, reading through the *Bergen Record*, when Jonathan came home. The *New York Times* sat folded on the floor. I'd decided to be informed that year – that was one of my three. I had a habit of only being able to focus on three things at once. I was unaware of this habit, until Jonathan pointed it out. When I finally realized I had no solid argument, after more than a week of stop and go bickering, I decided to embrace this quirk.

This didn't resolve the real issue beneath our argument. Of the three things I had been focused on at that point, none of them even tangentially involved Jonathan. Despite a bit of guilt over carving him out of the center of my life, I became excited by this insight. After all, most people I knew couldn't commit to even one thing. The three focal points at that time were: my new job at Aster Andrews IT consulting firm, Harry Potter books, and the complete organization of our belongings. I spent hours in our den window seat compiling photo albums, alphabetizing spreadsheets of our books and movies, or flipping through

the pages of the latest misadventures of the teenaged, orphan wizard.

Jonathan argued that there was no time for us and that, other than my career, my time was being sucked by worthless pursuits. I personally felt that my career as an administrative assistant at a giant corporation was less worthy than the other two, but I let it go. It was important to Jonathan that I develop professionally and I was finally making some decent money. SO what if I wasn't actually working on Broadway, at least I could afford to buy tickets.

In a move that I thought would pacify Jonathan and capitalize on my quirk, I would continue to commit myself to my job, but I would replace the other two. This wasn't a difficult decision, seeing as I was fifty pages shy of completing the last Potter book and organized everything in our apartment, including canned foods.

I decided to read one local and one national paper a day, cover to cover and to experiment with new cuisine. These were the kinds of things we could do together. There would be stimulating conversations and debates about the state of the Middle East peace negotiations, while we ate Japanese barbeque.

Instead I worked long hours, shared most of my exotic meals with a co-worker during lunch, and didn't lift my head out of the newspaper long enough for Jonathan and I to talk.

Joanthan found his own new hobbies, which I misinterpreted as a good sign. He took up yoga and late night espresso runs with the nineteen year old yoga instructor.

I didn't know the details when he came home that Sunday afternoon, didn't notice him climb up the gray concrete steps of our front stoop, didn't hear him click open the deadbolt lock. I was caught up in an article about new child support legislation signed by the governor. I thought about my parents' divorce and wondered if lawyers had ever been consulted or even considered. I couldn't imagine my parents embroiled in litigation. They rarely fought.

Every time they divorced or separated, it was with little more than a sigh and an eye roll. I thought about calling my sister, but it had been months since we'd last spoke.

Instead, I closed my eyes and tried to see an image of my dad's new apartment, the first time he moved out of our house. I couldn't get beyond a blurred image of brick and

glass. My brain kept switching to a snapshot of his current house and his current wife.

"Hey," Jonathan said from the living room.

"Hey," I said. "You ever have a hard time remembering stuff?"

"Of course."

He threw his keys on the coffee table and walked through the double French doors into the den.

"Everyone forgets things."

He stopped short of the window and turned. There was a slight waver in his voice.

"What's up, Jon?"

Jonathan moved closer to me, but stopped just short of the window seat, and then sat on the floor right below me. I stared down at the top of his head. He lowered his eyes, ran his fingers over the swirls in the lacquered wood. His hair moved in honey-colored curls like the grains of our floor.

"We need to talk, Holly."

"Sure thing," I said. I tried to sound cheerful. I've always thought I could trick people out of a bad mood by pretending not to notice.

"This is serious. I want you to let me say what I have to say, before you answer me."

I didn't like the way he was speaking; it was a new tone for him. There was no anger, no sadness, no excitement. The words were hollow, falling out of his mouth with dull thuds. Jonathan was usually animated. I never learned to anticipate his moods, but they were never jarring either. If our neighbor's mail mistakenly landed in our box - which happened often on our street - he might be playful and consider holding a Christmas card hostage or he might be frustrated at the invasion of privacy imminent in a misplaced credit card bill. I was the more quiet of the two of us, the less excitable. His monotony was more disconcerting than if he had charged into the room ranting and raving.

"Ok," I said. "Want to sit on the futon?"

We both stood up, but only I went to the futon. He paced the room, while he spoke. He circled the futon where I sat. He stopped randomly to pick up or adjust some knickknack or wall hangings. He pulled books on and off the shelves. Turned a lamps on and then immediately off. It was intriguing, this way he moved around me: predatory, slow, and methodical.

It was as though he were wiping his prints off the furniture, erasing his presence, preparing for his crime.

There was a problem, that was obvious, but he took so long getting to it, that I leapt back into my imaginary world where things were dramatic, where my boyfriend of four years was a man I hardly knew, wanted in seven states and Canada, for base crimes with exotic circumstances: charged with date rape out of revenge by the woman he left for me, and exotic crimes with base circumstances: he was the head of an illegal documents' ring, creating false birth certificates for underage drinkers.

He was sexy as he stalked the room around me, and I was distracted when he finally began his monotone speech.

I heard various phrases here and there. Some things like "we hardly touch each other anymore" and "we have nothing to talk about." I plugged in his missing history as the cause of all our problems. He would come clean and we would work to keep his alias airtight.

"So I'm leaving," he said with his back to me.

"You're what?"

He lifted a picture frame off the top shelf of the bookcase he was facing. It was a souvenir from our Savannah trip just a few months earlier. There were mini replicas of Mercer House in the corners; the two of us, with raised mint juleps in hand, smiled out from the center.

"We had a pretty good time there," he said and shook his head from side to side, as though he could barely believe we had fun together.

I looked good in that picture. I had just had my hair highlighted; tiny wisps of strawberry blonde framed my face.

"Yeah," I said, as I watched Jonathan hold the picture frame close to his chest. "But what do you mean you're leaving?"

"Today," he answered without turning around. "I'll have all the stuff I need out of here before you get back from your mother's. We can talk about dividing up the rest some other time."

He paused, waiting for me to speak, I'm sure. I had nothing to say. I couldn't think of a single word that was right. Dumbfounded, I thought about the picture he was cradling in his arms. You could tell my eyes are green in that photograph, which is uncommon. My eyes are small, almond shaped, slanty. They're a pretty color, but they're usually not noticeable in photographs.

"I'll be in touch about that," he added, when I failed to respond.

"About what?" I couldn't follow the dialogue. My mind was clouded with images of Savannah.

Jonathan placed the picture frame back on the shelf and then picked it up again.

"I'm gonna take this with me, ok?" He turned his head a bit to the right. He was biting on his upper lip.

I didn't want him to take the photo. It was our only copy. I didn't want him to be in the photo. It seems I only like pictures of myself when someone else is in them, when some memory I don't want flashing back into my life is as much a part of the photo as I am.

"Ok," I said. I meant to say, no.

Jonathan held the four by six frame in his left hand and wandered over to the window. He sat and placed the photo in front him.

"When will you be back?" he asked the me in the picture, ignoring the me on the futon.

"Not sure, six or seven, maybe." I raised my voice a little more than I wanted to. I considered telling him I changed my mind about the picture. I could scan it and crop it, if I only knew how.

"I'll be done by then." He took a quick look around the place. Almost everything was mine.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna stay with a friend"

"Jeremy?"

"No."

"Marcus?"

"No."

His reflection was clear in the closed bay window. He looked angry, though his words never breached their staccato levels. He spoke in complete sentences but the words were disconnected, as though tabs in the air separated an otherwise linear thought.

"I'll be staying with a friend. You can get me by my cell, if you need to."

Suddenly, I recognized the rhythm or lack of rhythm in his voice. He was like an untrained actor relying on cue cards, except the cues were invisible to me. They were etched in his brain somewhere, carved in by rehearsal: preprogrammed answers to the common questions of a break up, except I wasn't asking.

He grew angry, because I was quiet. He slapped his thigh, coarsely shoved his fingers through his curls. I asked no questions for the most part, reduced his dialogue to a monologue. And then, I asked the wrong question. Where he was going had a response: a friend's house. Which friend had not been accounted for in his Sparks' Notes to a successful breakup. I was doing it all wrong.

"I have to go, we're just not us anymore."

He started answering the questions I didn't ask. The ones I was supposed to ask. The ones the left-behind always ask.

"It's no one's fault."

"We grew apart."

"We grew differently."

"We knew it could happen."

I met his eyes in the reflected glass. He moved to the Lazee boy and sat on the arm of the chair. I looked at the left side of his face now. He continued to avoid my eyes. He was handsome, but he used to be sexier.

As I watched him there a ringing sounded in my ears. I pressed the tips up my fingers to my temples to try and stem the pounding noise.

The ringing kept coming, loud and harsh inside my head.

Jonathan began speaking more quickly.

"I think we'll be friends one day. Not right now, but one day." His words were jammed together in a single breath. "Don't call me, ok? I mean unless it's about our stuff or bills or something."

I didn't answer.

"I mean, don't call me to talk or work this out or anything like that. I need this, Holly. I need to not talk to you."

He fumbled with the photo, pulled a pack of gum from the back pocket of his jeans, stood up, almost looked at me, and resumed his circling of the room.

"I'll leave you some money for my share of the bills. We'll work something out until you get readjusted."

He didn't know what to do with his body. He hadn't practiced that part. How do you script body language? It had never crossed his mind. He didn't know what it would be like with me there. How or when he should look at me. He pulled a book off the bookshelf, returned the picture frame to a lower shelf as he paged through a camping guide.

"I'm gonna take this, ok?"

"Ok," I said. I almost added, instead of the picture?

The ringing in my ears picked back up, louder this time. I could swear it was happening outside my own head.

"You should probably answer that," he said, as he walked out the door.

The phone rang three more times after he walked out, but I didn't answer it. What if it was for him? What would I say? Jonathan doesn't live here anymore was not a sentence I was ready to speak aloud. It was a surreal

concept. Jonathan had lived there for two years. I thought I deserved at least a few minutes of quiet before announcing the news.

Chapter 2: Corn Blocker

The hour and a half drive down the Garden State Parkway felt like fifteen minutes. I listened to sappy songs on the light radio stations, imagining all the ways Jonathan could have made me cry and wondered why I didn't cry. Even though I hadn't expected him to leave me, the bigger shock was how I felt. I felt okay. The only thing I panicked about, was telling my family what had happened.

I got to my mother's house just before three. The barbeque had started at one. Family and friends who were thought of as family were spread out in the yard. I surveyed the scene, hoping the right words would come to mind.

My brother was at the grill flipping burgers. The couple who lived next door clinked their beer bottles in a playful toast. The ladies from my mother's bridge group discussed the state of vibrant bush of azaleas. My mother and her husband and my father and his wife sat at the picnic table. My Aunt Lily leaned against the wide aluminum siding of the house scanning the yard as I was until our eyes fell upon each other.

I had hoped to open the sliding gate in the driveway uneventfully, to slip across the asphalt onto the concrete

patio in silence, to snap open the blue and white cooler beneath the folding food table, and gulp down a light beer before the interrogation. This isn't how it played out, but it could have been worse.

Before my aunt could make her way over to me, my favorite person in the world, Maggie, sprinted across the grassy part of the yard, and shouted back the group of preschoolers in her wake: "She's here! She's here!"

I gathered up my perfect, tiny niece in my arms and swung her around in circles, her legs splayed out like bronze ribbons. She shouted orders to her mother, my sister-in-law, while she was still in flight: "We can go in the pool, now, Mom. Aunt Holly's here!"

I put the breaks on the swinging, threw Maggie up into the air, caught her beneath the shoulders, and stood her on the ground before me. I stooped down and kissed her right cheek, then her left, her left eye, then her right, her forehead, then her chin, and concluded with the customary raspberry on her belly. She giggled and hugged me and then continued with her demands: "Let's go, Aunt Holly. We've been waiting for you."

Behind Maggie stood six remarkably quiet kids - four little girls and two boys. One little girl wore a baby-blue *Rugrats* swimsuit with a giant Angelica head at its center.

Her arms were already wrapped in bright orange swimmyies. Her platinum curls were tied up in high pigtaails. She stared at me wide-eyed. They all stared at me wide-eyed; I controlled the fate of their afternoon.

"Aunt Holly *just* got here. Let her relax a minute." My sister-in-law Dee strolled over to me, gave a side-ways glance and a smirk to my cult following and then kissed me on the cheek.

This was standard operating procedure. Before I spent the bulk of the afternoon immersed in my niece's world, I was obligated to do the rounds with the grown-ups. I preferred my niece and her friends on most days, but considering the events of the morning, I dreaded doing the rounds.

"You know what? It's fine. I'm actually really hot and it's already three. I'll do the pool with the kids first."

I crouched down and gave Maggie an Eskimo kiss.

"Let me go kiss grandma and get into my suit."

Maggie threw a triumphant glance over her shoulder at her friends.

"We'll be in the pool in a second."

Their faces lit up, but they stood perfectly still. She rolled her eyes and gave an order: "Get changed!"

All but the pig-tailed rugrat ran to their respective mothers. She didn't need to change.

We spent the afternoon splashing around my mother's fenced-in pool. The kids took turns jumping into the four foot deep water, so long as I was there to catch them. We were wrinkly and bright pink and the sky was virtually covered in blue-gray clouds by the time my brother wrested me and Maggie - the last ones swimming - from the water.

"So where's Jonathan?" my mother asked.

"Home," I said without looking up from my grilled chicken and corn on the cob.

"Oh," my mom said in a half questioning tone. She continued when I offered nothing else, "What's he doing at home?"

"Packing probably."

My father made eye contact with me first. Wife number three didn't take a break from cutting his steak, but she shook her head slowly from side to side and made a soft clucking noise with her mouth.

My mother reached across the picnic table and placed her hand over mine, blocking me from my corn.

"It's fine," I said. "Really."

It was fine and it wasn't fine all at the same time. Actually at that very moment, it was the least fine it had been all day. How do you explain a breakup? Why do you even have to? I mean it's one thing if you're looking for advice or a shoulder to cry on, but all I actually wanted was to broadcast the news over a loudspeaker and leave the whole business behind me.

"I'm ok, Mom." I spoke with irritation and confidence in my voice. I was very *it sucks, but what can you do about it.*

"Well, ok, but don't go running back to that derelict."

"What? Who?"

She had me here. What derelict?

Wife number three, Ginny, dropped her knife and fork and cleared her throat. My mother glared.

"I've been with Jonathan for four years, mother."

"You know that Ryan Boogaboo"

"Ryan Biguenet?" I burst out laughing; a piece of corn flew out of my mouth, across the table, and onto my father's plate. No one but me and Ginny seemed to notice.

"Who's Ryan Bigaboo?" Peter, step-father number four, chimed in.

"Biguenet," I said. "My high school boyfriend. We haven't spoken in years. I don't even know where he lives."

"Look, it's easy to fall back into old relationships when the current one fails."

My mother looked around the table searching for a kind eye and a nod of agreement, but everyone stared at her as though she'd committed blasphemy. Everyone except Ginny, who nodded in emphatic agreement.

"What? Well it is." My mother adjusted the paper napkin that was spread out in her lap.

That was the story of my parents' relationship, sort of. My mother has been married six times. My father five. Two of each of those marriages were between my mother and father. There were other non-matrimonial reconciliations as well. The two of them were constantly drawn back into each other's worlds. But this wasn't a fallback or a rebound or whatever you want to call it. They were a star-crossed couple in the most literary of terms, a throwback to Shakespeare. I've never met two people more enamored with each other or more wrong for each other. They have nothing but love in common.

The table was quiet except for the light tapping of clear plastic utensils on dark blue chinet plates. My mother sat unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that she had

caused the awkwardness. I was sure she didn't realize the implication of her statement. I considered scribbling a note on a napkin and passing it beneath the splintered, rain worn table, but decided against it. Instead, I reveled in the silence that was not a reflection of my own failure and just enjoyed my corn. Unfortunately, the silence didn't last long.

"Can you handle the rent on your own, Hol?" my father asked.

Good old practical Dad. He knew firsthand what it was like to be kicked to the curb.

"Do you need some money?"

It was a laughable question. My father didn't have any money to give me. Somehow, my barely out of blue-collar working dad, had managed to owe alimony to step mothers one and two and although there was no court order involved, he tended to pay for a lot of things for my mom, as well.

"I'm good, Dad."

As is customary in my family, I started to say good-bye about an hour and a half before I would actually climb into my car and head home. The announcement requires shortish one on one conversations with all the people you've pretty much snubbed throughout the day. I'd hardly

said a word to anyone that day so I was braced for a long series of farewells. I felt excused from prattling along with my mom and dad since I had at least shared the *traumatic* news with them.

First up was my brother, Billy. He's one of those neighborhood heroes. The grown-up whose name every kid knows. That guy who coaches sports and teaches math. The one who organizes block parties. He mows the lawn for the elderly guy on his block every weekend during the warm months and shovels his walkway when it snows. I don't know when my gawky, pot-smoking older brother became the poster boy for family values - it seems he just woke up one morning and had the job.

"Now, seriously, Hol, you call me if you need anything. Some cash to get you through the first months or if you want to move. Let me know. We'll get through this together."

He cupped his large hand over my bony shoulder as he said that last line.

"Billy, I'm really ok. I mean, maybe it hasn't hit me yet" - *it hasn't hit me yet*, was a mantra I'd been chanting inside my skull all day - "but I feel ok. Like this is right."

"Good for you, little girl."

Billy hugged me tight and long. I felt like a doll in his thick arms. It had been years since he held me like that. It was a by-gone hug of sprained ankles and skinned knees. I suppose, for him, it was appropriate.

After Billy's pep-talk, I spent a handful of minutes talking to Aunt Joy. She's not biologically related, but she is my mother's nearest and dearest. My mother would often call her the sister she never had. When I was younger I would argue with my mother.

"But what about Aunt Lily? You have a sister."

My mom would laugh at me and only confuse me more with her logic, "Well, is Aunt Joy my sister?"

I would shake my head to indicate a *no*.

"Then she is the sister I never had, because I never had a sister named Joy."

I didn't hear my mom say what was always just implied, until I was almost twenty and sipping wine with the grown-ups after dinner.

"She's the sister I never had," my mom had said motioning her head toward Aunt Joy. "And that one," she slurred, tossing her head back at the front porch where Aunt Lily was smoking a cigarette, "is the sister I never wanted."

I gave a second hug to the sage-like Aunt Joy, who was one-hundred-percent aware of my recent troubles and yet completely silent on the subject. She knew exactly when to keep her mouth shut, which made her the polar opposite of her best friend, my mother.

After about an hour of hugs and polite kisses on the cheek, followed by a dozen "take cares" and "let's have lunch or something," I picked my purse out from the pile of handbags on the sofa in my mother's living room. It was easy to spot; mine was the only winterish black, matte-leather, silver buckled one among a hill of pale beige wicker, shiny patent-leather pastels, and nursely whites. I strung my purse up on my shoulder and headed for the door.

"Wait! Wait!" I heard my mother shouting.

I turned to greet her flustered pink cheeks - she was still beautiful. In her mid-sixties, my mother still turned heads, but not in either of the traditional ways a woman of her age turns heads. No one ever said things like: "Maureen looks great for her age" or "Maureen must have been a beauty," because they weren't quite applicable. She was, and still is, beautiful and there's no doubt she's in her mid-sixties.

"I just remembered," she said breathily, keeping her volume low. "Jenna's wedding. It's in two weeks."

"That's right." I hadn't thought about the wedding, about the tiny white rsvp card that I filled out almost a month ago.

"Oh good." My mother wiped at her brow. "So, you'll take care of it then."

"I'll call her tonight. She probably hasn't given in the final count yet."

My mother cocked her head and crinkled her eyebrows together. She looked like Marty, her golden lab, when you pretend-throw his favorite tennis ball and he realizes it's still in your hand.

"Debbie didn't give her final count until seventy-two hours beforehand," I tried to explain.

"What exactly do you need to call Jenna for, Holly?"

I answered in a kindergarten teacher voice and I felt my own head drop into the Marty pose.

"To tell her only one will be coming."

"Oh, Holly!" She slapped her thigh with her many-ringed hand, the gold bands and giant stones crashing together in a ting. "Don't be ridiculous!"

She straightened herself up and cleared her throat. I waited in overt mock patience for her maternal wisdom, my hands clasped and eyes wide.

"No one. No one, dear, except in the absolute most desperate of situations does these two things alone" - she extended an amethyst-covered index finger - "go to a wedding" - the middle diamond-decked digit extended - "or go on a vacation."

My mother tends to speak with unhesitating certainty, which often lends her unqualified authority. I was sure she was right. I wasn't sure why, but how could she be wrong with that tone of voice, that posture? As right as I knew she was, I hadn't a clue as to what I was supposed to do. My boyfriend had left me that morning.

"Call up one of your guy friends, ask a co-worker, get someone to set up a blind date, Holly. Do whatever it takes, but DO NOT show up at that wedding with no one on your arm."

Chapter 3: Original Split

The first time he left, my father didn't even say good-bye. I was seven years old. My mother called us into the den to announce the divorce. As we walked to the couch, my thirteen-year-old brother, Billy, held my hand. He'd been here before. Technically, so had I, but I was too young to remember. It's my earliest memory of affectionate contact between Billy and me. My sister, Debbie, was sixteen and like any ordinary teenager, was absent.

"Sit down, guys," my mother said.

We sat. I sent confused glances up at Billy, but he avoided my eyes. Instead he stared at my mother. He was stone. He knew what was coming and he wasn't going to make it easy on her.

"Do you want a drink? Some soda maybe?"

She stalled for time. She offered drinks and snacks. There was small talk. *How is soccer going, Billy? Holly, how did you do on your math test?*

These were not sofa-sitting questions. These were over the shoulder, dish-washing or furniture-dusting questions.

Ignoring the tears welling up in my mother's eyes, Billy answered every question she asked. He was angry with

her for sending our father away again. He would cut her no slack.

I, on the other hand, could not pretend I didn't hear her voice cracking. *What's wrong, Mommy?* I asked a dozen times. *Where's Daddy?* I asked only once.

She told us he had moved out. She said he got another apartment. She said he was close, but not here. She said he was sorry. She said she was sorry. She cried and I cried and Billy just said "fine."

The separation took over a month to process. It felt like he was on vacation, at a long sleep-over. I didn't understand that he could be gone, yet present. I didn't understand how nothing else could change.

I still ate Cheerios each morning. Dinner was still at six every evening. I didn't stop sucking at math or stop getting straight "A"s on my spelling tests. I didn't get kicked off the little league team and Daddy still came to all of my games.

But one Saturday, I woke to the smell of fresh buttermilk pancakes and sizzling bacon. I stumbled into the kitchen to find my father wrapped in an apron, spatula in hand. He had always made breakfast on Saturdays and somehow, for four Saturdays straight, I had forgotten.

"Mornin', sunshine!" He swooped me up with one arm.

"Hungry?"

I was hungry, about a minute before he asked, but it went away. I shook my head from side to side and then pressed my faced into the nook of his neck. I didn't want to eat breakfast on Saturdays anymore.

Chapter 4: The Morning After

The morning after Jonathan moved out - *Monday* morning - I went about my normal routine. Other than waking up in the middle of the bed, my day began business as usual. I pressed the percolation switch on the coffee maker and shuffled into the bathroom. After my shower, I sat out on the small back patio in my blue fluffy robe, a neon green towel wrapped around my head like a turban, and drank my industrial strength cup of joe.

I read through the local section of *The Record*, noting that the Macy's fireworks display would once again be visible from Liberty State Park in Jersey City.

I flip flopped as to whether this was good news or not. I was immediately excited that I wouldn't have to make the trek into the city for the Fourth, braving buses and trains, and hot sidewalks to drink cheap keg beer on the roof of Mary's building. Then I remembered that I'd have to at least call Mary and tell her we weren't coming. *We* weren't coming. Damn. Honestly, I was hoping to let everyone in on the break-up the way I did it with my family - just show up alone and let them ask all the questions they wanted. I abandoned the local news and primped for work.

I decided I should dress extra nice, in one of those outfits I normally wore on a Thursday or Friday in anticipation of after-work cocktails. I pulled my absolute best black pants off the hanger. Like any good metro girl my closets and drawers are teeming with black in various cuts and fabrics. The best black pants were pretty new; I'd only worn them twice, once to an art show in Chelsea and once to work. I wear pieces of clothing sparingly for the first three months I own them. I like to preserve that *look-at-me-in-my-spanking-new-threads* feel. I'd just worn them the Friday before last to work and the art show was only about a month ago, but I figured good clothes would make bad news more bearable.

I paired the pants with a previously unworn, fitted, white, scoop neck shirt. The sleeves were three quarter and the collar and cuffs were stitched with a pale beige zig-zag thread. It was the perfect shirt to compliment my camel-colored, half-priced, leather, Nine West boots. I blew out and ironed my mid-back long dark blonde hair and added a little eyeliner to my normal mascara, blush, and lip-gloss.

I felt stunning until I got on the bus. Then I felt ridiculous. I couldn't possibly tell anyone at work about the break-up looking like this. Looking good is looking

desperate in certain situations. This was definitely one of them.

My preferred bus pulled up at 7:30 am. There was no use in checking bus schedules for the morning commute. Traffic in the Jersey suburbs heading toward the city was impossible to predict. Accidents, rain, snow, construction, faulty streetlights, and tour buses all worked to ensure that you could never predict your time of arrival. I liked to catch a bus by 7:30 because then I could usually get into the office shortly before nine. This is early, but not so early that I look like one of those over-achiever admins.

Technically I'm higher up than the average administrative assistant. My full title is Administrative Assistant/Junior Business Development Associate. I work for the senior business manager in the New York office. Secretary had morphed into Administrative Assistant years before I entered the work force, so my expectations for job responsibilities were low. However, I did not know that salespeople were now business development managers.

During the interview, I was asked to name the three departments I would most like to work in. There were about a dozen listed and only a few of them sounded familiar. I was drawn toward the Marketing and Advertising Department.

Most drones who fancy themselves creative lean toward this department. I didn't want to seem over interested or too artsy, so I put the M&A division second. My third choice was Human Resources. I was after all, an actress (sort of), and I thought this department might allow for some drama, being privy to the private battles of the corporate elite, filing away discrete medical insurance forms, and tallying up vacation and sick days taken. I assumed that I would never get my first choice; I always believe I'm being tested. I'm sure there is a hidden trick to every question asked, every proposition made.

I believed my first choice would say something about my character and ambition. Not being given my first choice would further reveal my commitment to the company, my work ethic, my willingness to be a team player. I chose the Business Development Department as my first choice, half-thinking such a department was nonexistent. Everyone who chose to be primarily interested in *the business* at hand would be top priority.

When I was called back a week later to discuss the terms of my offer, I wasn't the least bit surprised. I was surprised, however, when the director of HR explained that I was assigned to the senior manager of the business development department. It was real?

"It is important that our employees are interested in their work," Janice Richards explained. She pressed the tips of her perfectly manicured, clear polished fingers together in a sort of steeple.

"We just happened to have a spot in the area you chose as your first choice. We had a spot in Marketing, also, but not HR." She smiled wide, her teeth blindingly white and straight. Her fingers were still pressed together. It reminded me of that nursery rhyme about all the little people inside the steeple.

I'd obviously done something right in the eyes of Janice. I wondered how many applicants listed HR in their top three. I decided that I had stumbled upon a trick to get the Human Resources people on your side.

"Really, I'm happy to work in any of those departments. I feel" - I struggled with the appropriate word - "I could thrive in each of them." Too confident? Perhaps a bit too confident, but Janice never stopped smiling and she never showed me the little finger people, either.

"We agree."

That was all she had said and she said it with certainty. I was pleased that I had made such a good impression, that I was assigned to a senior manager. This

meant, I learned quickly, that I would not have to cover the receptionist's desk an hour a day as most new admins did.

Janice was my first friend at the office, but it didn't grow into much and wound up fizzling out during my first two months at the company. Work friendships are established in work. They expand into the rest of your life, but they're based in shop-talk. People who work in HR can only talk to other people in HR, because they are bound by an oath of discretion. Janice could not talk about the latest sexual harassment suit against Carl Scholer, the CFO - what we could never know concretely, was always sketchily revealed in rumor - I was no where near ready to swap relationship dramas and family feuds.

Tricia Matheson became my best work friend and I was both eager to talk to her and dreading facing her that morning. We went over in, mostly banal, but sometimes morbid, detail the events of our respective weekends every Monday morning over coffee on the office veranda, where Tricia could smoke.

I walked down the hard rubbery steps of the bus in Port Authority and let myself fall to the back of the bustling commuter crowd. I sauntered down Eighth Avenue, casually peered in specialty magazine and novelty item

shops, glanced at children in line at McDonald's, and watched businessmen and women ordering steaming hot cups of coffee from corner vendors, moving as though each step were a freeze frame. I couldn't imagine how the split could be discussed nonchalantly, how it could come up naturally and be quickly diagnosed and remedied, like a sinus headache that had slightly deterred me from normal weekend fun. I was also having a difficult time remembering what happened on Friday and Saturday.

Once I told Tricia what happened, she would expect me to collapse into a heap of sloppy sobs. I considered my limited theater training and wondered if I should try my hand at some method acting, but I couldn't compare anything bad that really happened to the nothingness I was feeling over Jonathan. I couldn't call up those emotions that threw people into fits of hysteria, that justified throwing something against a wall, that insisted upon those moments where the only appropriate words to describe your state of mind are: *I was not myself; I was completely out of control*. I don't think I'd ever been completely out of control or, for that matter, completely in control.

Since I'd been walking at a snail's pace and allowing absolutely anything in my path to catch my attention for at

least a second or two, it took me almost a half an hour to get to our building at Rockefeller Center.

While waiting for the elevator to ping open, an elegant woman with silver-white hair in a black - undoubtedly Chanel or Gucci - pantsuit whispered, "That blouse is stunning. A perfect fit for you, dear."

It was exactly the boost I needed. Who cared if I didn't know how to be an ex-girlfriend? My shirt was stunning.

There was no reason for me to feel apologetic for my lack of devastation. I marched right into Tricia's office. She was a Junior Business Development Associate so she had her own office, unlike me.

Before she even looked up at me, I announced, "Jonathan moved out yesterday."

"Don't you look lovely for the occasion?"

Her words lingered in the space between a question and an observation. It was one of those lines that might have been meant as a mental note, rather than a verbal declaration.

"It feels like Friday."

I couldn't think of anything else to say, and my clothes were definitely a Thursday/Friday look.

"Then I suppose it's for the best. Do you have the MobilCon account file?"

That was it. Tricia was neither disappointed nor confused. She didn't pressure me for details or explanations. She didn't offer hot tea or an extra long lunch. She didn't care. Perhaps this wasn't supposed to be a big deal.

I marched over to the open space in front of Jane Peterson's office and settled myself at my desk. A post-it stuck to the metal trim at the top of my computer screen read *Marcia Keys 10:00 am, VIP*. This note meant that I should be, what I always am, attentive and polite to a client. My attentiveness and politeness was the reason why I got my my quasi-promotion three months earlier.

That was when Henry Watkins had walked through the iced double-doors of our suite looking lost. An incredibly attractive, suave older man, he fumbled around in his cashmere coat pockets in search of a clue. He paused in the foyer scratching at his graying temple. The receptionist, Sandra, sat silently. I should have caught on that something was amiss, when her usual charming greeting was absent. Instead I took it upon myself to delay my run to the lobby coffee shop and welcome the man myself.

"Sir." I approached with a cheerleader smile.

"I'm Holly Griffith." I extended my right arm straight out.

"Perhaps I can help you get settled in?"

"This is quite embarrassing."

He slipped out of his luxurious coat, checked the pockets once more as he held it over one arm, and then handed it over.

"How about you have a seat in the conference room? I'll bring you a cup of coffee and we can figure out your itinerary."

"Henry Watkins." He shook my hand again.

He let me lead him down the hall. I was used to this kind of behavior from eccentric CEOs who were being courted by all the top IT Consulting firms. He was probably at the wrong company; we were probably an appointment for next week. That had happened a handful of times. What I couldn't understand was why Sandra's eyes grew even wider as I escorted our guest to the conference room.

He settled himself at the large mahogany table while I took his coat and went to make him a cup of tea.

"Coffee makes me skittish," he'd explained, "even decaf. I'm sure it's psychological."

When I came back with his drink in hand, ready to sort out his agenda, I found him quite comfortably chatting on the silver table phone.

"I will." He was finishing up. "One o'clock, yes. Good bye."

It was a bit presumptuous for a visitor to just help themselves to a telephone, but since we all need to enter billing codes to even get a long distance connection, I knew it had to be a local call. I put his drink on the table in front of him.

"Ms. Griffith," he began.

"Please," I corrected him, "Holly is fine, Mr. Watkins."

I love saying that. I never imagined a life where people would presume to call me Ms. Griffith or an intricate set of conventions that indicated which kind of grown-up I was. It was not impolite to allow someone to call you by your surname during a first or even second meeting, nor was it too forward to insist on a first-name basis, but there was a hidden implication in these details as to how you did business. Prolonged use of the formal address meant conference room meetings with secretaries taking notes; immediate use of the first indicated dinner and drinks with dates making small talk. Of course, this is

a rather black-and-white deduction, but more often than not I found this rule to measure up in reality.

"Henry, of course," he answered.

He then invited me to take a seat on his left and proceeded to ask me questions which started out innocently enough. Things like how long I'd been with Aster Andrews and what my position was, to more pointed questions such as how often I greeted people at the door and how much time I normally spent with prospective clients. As charming and polite as he was, we were definitely crossing into dangerous waters.

What could he possibly need that information for? I kept my game face on and changed the subject as naturally as possible. I had heard about corporate spies, hired to infiltrate enemy headquarters to report slanderous details to the surprisingly small world of information technology or to quietly steal more innovative procedures.

"Well." I patted my thighs with the palms of my hands. "Shouldn't we be figuring out who you're here to see?"

"Robins, ten o'clock." I was taken aback in part by his quick response, but mostly because that there was no Robins in our office. We did however have a Roberts in finance, but she was an in-house accountant and I don't

remember her ever taking a meeting with someone outside the office personnel.

"Do you mean Ann Roberts, sir?"

He squinted at me as though I were hundreds of feet away and he was trying to figure out if he knew me. After a second, he relaxed the muscles in his face and offered a kind, fatherly smile.

"You don't know who I am."

It was a statement, not a question at all.

"Mr. Watkins?"

His smile morphed into a gentle laugh.

"Yes, Mr. Watkins, Henry. VP North American Office."

My skin went hot. I'm not one of those lucky women who blush prettily, the balls of their cheeks turning pale pink. No, I blush randomly with prickly strawberry patches popping up all over my face and neck. I stuttered an apology, offered another cup of tea, a newspaper, a more comfortable office space, breakfast, and a myriad of other things which made the situation more unbearable.

He waited for me to stop rambling before he spoke again.

"You're an asset, Holly, a real asset."

I was pretty sure he was simply being polite, but a month and a half later, Jane called me into her office and begrudgingly gave me the terms of my new title.

My responsibilities have not changed one iota, though my paycheck is a bit heftier and another promotion is lingering closely on the horizon. I will move from Administrative Assistant/Junior Business Development Associate to full Junior Business Development Associate once Jane can find a suitable replacement. She's reluctant to let me go. Though I'd never admit it to anyone at work, least of all Jane, I'm not really eager for the real promotion. I like looking over the little details, making sure people have coffee and pens and lunch reservations. I don't want to sell anyone anything, especially information technology, which I barely understand.

I took my post near the receptionist's desk, exactly where I had greeted Henry Watkins a few months ago, at 9:50 am to wait for Ms. Keys. I was pleasantly surprised to find the exquisite woman from the elevator stroll through the door and announce herself with a wink, at a few minutes past ten.

"Still a stunner," she said, admiring my top as I steered her to the conference room, where I had placed a

small arrangement of fruit and pastries and two decanters—one of coffee, one of hot water for tea.

Marcia Keys was what we all want to be when we grow up, most especially Jane, who thinks she's well on her way. Other than having a jump on the rest of us by being in her late forties, Jane is nothing like Marcia Keys. Marcia is successful, professional. She owns her own business. Marcia exudes strength without the piranha-esqueness of someone like Jane.

"Coffee or tea?" I gestured toward the miniature spread.

"Oh, no, honey, I'll do it myself." She looked amused at the thought of me reaching over her to pour her a drink, while she sat idly by. Marcia's an older woman. She lived through the time when it was absolutely expected that a woman would serve, while the men handled the real business. She probably wouldn't understand that I liked this part of my job.

"And Marcia will do just fine," she added.

"I'll let Ms. Peterson know that you're ready."

"Dreadful woman," she said while clearing her throat.

"Excuse me?" I could not suppress a smile.

"Send her in, Holly. Send her in."

Marcia smiled to herself and went about preparing herself a cup of coffee and a small plate of pastries.

Jane torpedoed at my desk, after her two hour meeting with Marcia Keys, a maniacal, wide, grin plastered across her face. I can always hear her coming. She manages to clack her heels even on the thin carpeted floor of the office. Our eyes met well before I would have liked.

"Well," she said through clenched teeth, still a good fifteen feet away from my desk, "you've certainly made an impression on Ms. Keyes."

"Really?" I feigned modesty.

"Really." She snapped. One foot away.

"Marcia was very kind." I nodded as though I were just putting it all together and purposely saying "Marcia" to get my point across.

"Yes." She tapped her nails on the edge of the short divider wall that wrapped around my desk. "Since she enjoyed your little chat, I thought you might like to join us next time."

Before I could respond, she continued, "Friday, one o'clock, Gabriel's."

She rolled her fingernails on the wall once more and then zipped into her office.

Jane is the embodiment of the fast-paced New York woman cliché. She is never still. Walking is not something you do, it's something you do while. She had added a word or two as she slammed her office door, but I'd stopped listening.

I was absolutely thrilled - not because I was going to an expensed business lunch with an important, elegant, all-be-it small scale CEO - but because lunch was at Gabriel's.

Since I had decided to try new and exciting foods and since Jonathan had shown zero interest in joining me, I had lunch, every Monday, at a restaurant where the total meal would inevitably exceed twenty-five dollars - kind of steep for lunch! I bought a cheaper sandwich at the deli across the street on the other days.

Though I had been venturing into high quality restaurants for months, I had yet to have truly fabulous Italian meal. I could hardly justify an expensive lunch for food I'd been eating my entire life, but I'd been dying for it, especially for Gabriel's.

People at work had been raving about this restaurant ever since the weather had warmed: "perfectly quaint, al fresco, charmingly delectable." Some people really do talk like this. Never truly developing ideas of their own, they reuse catch phrases from the best reviewers. My friends in

Jersey would laugh at the pretentiousness of this, but I had learned to decipher the code relatively early on. Gabriel's was a cute place, with outdoor tables, and the food kicked ass.

I'd heard about the fresh, buttery arugula salad; the tender grilled portabella, meaty as a filet; the sweet, dense monkfish drenched in red grade tomatoes; but the piece de resistance was: penne arrabiata. I could already feel the chunks of fresh tomato, shavings of garlic, slivers of hot, dark green Serrano and bright yellow, banana peppers clinging to the firm, ridged pasta on my tongue. I was blissful for the rest of the day, answering Jane's barks with purrs, until she too softened; obviously she was taking credit for my good mood and to a degree, I suppose she deserved it.

Chapter 5: TGIF

Despite my excessive pleas, no one agreed to an after-work drink on Monday, or for that matter Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I was quickly running through my workplace-to-bar outfits. By the time Friday rolled around I had exhausted my best and my second-best black pants, along with my left leg high slit charcoal gray skirt, my snuggest fuzzy, faux cashmere cream sweater, and my real cashmere black v-neck.

On Friday, however, I had a guaranteed date after work with Tricia and her best friend, David Preston. First we would hit Divine Bar for a couple of insanely fruity, high-priced, so-called martinis, while flirting with the well-paid men who hung out at such a place. After a few uber-expensive rounds, we would head to the much less pretentious Simpson's inspired pub in Brooklyn, not too far from Tricia's place, where I'd be crashing for the night.

As if dressing for a night on the town at two randomly different venues, while dressing appropriately for a day at the office wasn't complicated enough, I was also expected at my first business lunch. The temperature on that early June day was expected to hit the low eighties, but I was forced to dress in layers. I decided to reuse my best black

pants - they were nicely stretched out from previous wear and hung low on my hips - with a satin, muted blue camisole, under a lycra-cotton blend white button down shirt with extra wide cuffs, under a hip length, waist-tapered black blazer. I would remain fully dressed for lunch and work; take off the blazer and open several buttons at Divine; and lose the jacket and button-down all together at Moe's. I was set. I felt like the new metro-Barbie. I could hear the tag line: *Barbie's got a job of her own, but still cutes it up for dinner with Ken.*

Unfortunately plans don't always work out. My dad used to say, *If you want to get God to laugh, make a plan.* It was much too warm in the open courtyard at Gabriel's to keep the blazer on, and even if I'd wanted to brave the heat, I would have been out of place. Marcia wore an elegant short sleeved silk shirt in a barely pink shade with a tiny magenta scarf of the same material loosely tied around her neck. Jane was also dressed casually, but chic in a cap-sleeved, pale yellow twin set and flowing, crinkled white skirt. I was too New York even for these native New Yorkers. We were dining al fresco and I'd somehow missed the cue. I removed my blazer immediately after we were seated and managed to drop an enormous, juicy tomato onto my white shirt only moments later.

Marcia laughed graciously, but I thought Jane was going to have a heart attack right at the table. I recovered well enough, managed to hold several intelligent conversations with Marion about literature and theater and the current state of *The New Yorker*.

Jane excused herself to make a very important phone call in the midst of this conversation. She hated it when publishing reared its head at business meetings.

"Every one's a goddamn actor or writer in this fucking city," she had said one late night at the office and I wondered if she'd forgotten my dreams of the stage, if she had ever actually paid attention to the things I told her, or if she simply didn't care what I wanted and was including me in her damnation. I settled on the latter.

Of course in truth, I am one of those slacker dreamers the city is filled with, who does nothing to foster her creativity and instead, bitches about the lack of inspiration on her particular rung of the corporate ladder. Not to mention I have little in the way of talent or training. I like to say I want to be an actress because it's a dream you're expected not to fulfill.

When Jane returned to the table, Marcia announced that it was time to get down to business - we were already

finishing our espresso (for Jane), cappuccino (for Marcia), and third iced tea (for me).

"I would like you to make your formal pitch at my office."

Jane forced a smile, and if you concentrated on her mouth it almost looked real, but the furrows at the corners of her eyes gave her away. Monday was the formal pitch.

"I prefer that the whole team be involved. We're very democratic."

Jane hated pandering to an office full of executives. She wanted one-on-one meetings with *the* decision maker - the CEO or CIO, occasionally both. It was especially insulting to have Marcia insist on a group presentation, since her company was so small - barely a ten million dollar bottom line, a high priced accessories company, no clothing line, no shoes, just purses and vintage looking jewelry, watches, and wallets, a *Claire's Boutique* for the wealthy. But she was Marcia Keyes, a socialite who managed to preserve her shelf life in a business world that wanted women to be brilliant, gorgeous, and, above all, young. Any IT company with a female sales manager would be courting Marcia Keyes Limited.

"I expect Holly will join you."

It was just getting worse. Jane straightened her blouse, smoothed her wispy skirt with her hands, tucked her bright red hair behind her ears, and swallowed hard.

"Of course." She laughed too casually.

I couldn't believe how terrible Jane's game face was. How on earth had this woman racked up the client list she boasted of? Did everyone else just cave before her?

"And anyone else on your team that might add a little something?"

Jane, at this point, was completely dumbfounded and the blank, deer in headlights stare directed at Marcia, prompted an explanation.

"Jane, I just mean maybe an actual tech person to explain the more complicated elements. I'm sure Charlie will have loads of questions that go far above our heads."

Like music to soothe the savage beast, Jane-enstein mellowed. Her face softened into an almost shy smile, her head cocked in - it couldn't be! - an awe shucks pose.

"That's true, Marcia. We needn't be bothered with those details."

Marcia said *our*; Jane said *we*. By the look on Jane's face, the new tone of her voice, you would have thought they sliced their palms open and clasped hands in a blood sisters' oath. Jane said nothing more on the matter, not

even after we were back at the office. All I got was an email, late in the day, letting me know when we would be going to Marcia's office.

Chapter 6: Bar Scenes

"You don't understand," I said before sucking on a sugared slice of lemon. "I can't go with you. I'd have to come out if I did." I followed with a shot of chilled, citrus vodka.

"You're wasted, Holly." Trish laughed hard, some of her own vodka threatening to shoot back out her nose.

"I'm not gonna kiss you or ask you to slow dance!"

"No, no, you don't get it."

"I'll go with you," David offered, but neither of us paid him any attention.

I tried terribly hard to look serious and explained to Tricia that there was no possibility that I could have her be my escort at my cousin's wedding next week. I had to have a real date, or rather, someone I could easily and comfortably pass off as a real date.

"Trish, no matter who I bring to this wedding, my mother-" My arms flailed about in a giant circle and my hands landed with fingers pointing at my chest. "-will tell everyone it's my new love interest."

"But not if you take me. Problem solved." Tricia slammed her shot glass on the dark wood table top like it was a judge's gavel. Case closed. Except, it wasn't.

"My mother will tell the family I'm gay, even though she knows I'm not, before she would let them think that I could not find an actual date. The Major girls can always find a date."

"Who the fuck are the majorettes?"

"The Major girls. It's my maiden name."

"You were married."

"No, my mom's maiden" - No that wasn't it. I could not remember where the Majors landed on my family tree - "Oh no, my grandma, my mom's mom. I look like them, so I'm a Major girl."

At this point I was twirling around my long empty martini glass like it was a baton. Maybe I was confused into thinking we were majorettes after all.

"Wow, you're good at that," Tricia said.

"I was a cheerleader."

I stopped twirling when I realized Tricia was studying me quizzically.

"Cheerleaders don't twirl." She sounded almost horrified, as though I were pretending to be a doctor and trying to stitch a wound with sticky strings of pink bubble gum.

We shared a momentary revelation of our intoxication and laughed so hard we had to squat on the floor at Divine.

Between Tricia's cackles and snorts and my booming guffaws, David managed to close out our tab, gather up our belongings, and steer us outside to grab a cab into Brooklyn.

We were still making a spectacle of ourselves, as David stood at the curb with his arm in the air.

"Save it for Moe's," he said from a few feet away and then turned toward us wearing an ear to ear grin.

"Please ladies, get it straight." He continued to grin at his own pending joke. "Make out with rich obnoxious men at Divine, roll around on the floor at Moes!"

I was so surprised that he wasn't embarrassed. He wasn't nearly as drunk as we were and we had barely included him in a conversation all evening. We'd been tossing around glasses, shouting, and dancing like we were at a high school house party instead of a posh midtown bar. But he was smiling. He thought it was funny. Jonathan would have been furious.

"Hey, David," I slurred at him as I climbed into the back of a yellow taxi.

He held the tips of my fingers and helped me in.

"Yes, Holly."

"Why do you put up with this shit?"

"Beautiful women make beautiful spectacles," he said, sliding in next to me.

"Oh, ok."

We managed to cart ourselves out of the city and over to Moe's, where we closed the bar down. I don't remember any of this. When Tricia filled in the gaps that her own stupor hadn't erased, she might as well have been talking about an evening she shared with some other friend.

I woke up Saturday morning to the traditional marching band in my brain, a prickly, dry kiwi tongue, and a sharp pain in my lower abdomen. I *had* to go the bathroom; gallons of alcohol were begging to be set free. But I knew that standing would only multiply my ailments, I imagined my symptoms as tiny little gremlins and my bladder as the naïve kid ready to dole out water after midnight.

The morning loomed large as I curled myself up on the edge of Tricia's queen-sized pullout. I scrunched up pillows, twisted blankets, and contorted my body, hoping for just one more hour, one more hour of sleep and I might wake up only needing to pee.

"Cool, you're up." Tricia walked into the living room, freshly showered, her dark hair wet and dripping down her back marking her light blue t-shirt with a liquid V.

"No," I grumbled, my face now buried under a pillow.
"Not cool. Not up."

"Get moving and I'll have breakfast with you before
you head out."

I threw the pillow across the room at Tricia, but
missed her by a mile. She laughed.

"Up, sleepy pup!"

Was she not drinking with me the night before? Where
did she dig up the energy to have an actual morning after a
night like that? Shouldn't the day automatically start in
the p.m.?

"Fuck it," I moaned over my thick tongue, "I'll just
call Jonathan."

She stopped combing her wet hair with her fingers and
stood perfectly still like a statue of an obscure pagan
goddess, *Queen of Confusion and Knower of Unspeakable
Things*.

"Double fuck!" I covered myself up with every single
pillow, blanket, sheet I could get my hands on.

There is no Jonathan. No Jonathan to stumble out of
bed and out the door immediately, pausing only at a drive
through fast food place for a coffee. No Jonathan to
eliminate two trains, a bus, and five blocks of walking.

No Jonathan to tuck me back into our own (my own) bed and pour me glasses of room temperature Coke. No Jonathan.

Before I knew it was happening, I was sobbing into Tricia's guest bedding. She quietly excused herself from the living room, not wanting to impose upon my gasps and wails.

The thing is, I wasn't crying for the right reasons, or at least what I thought were the right reasons.

I kept telling myself, *It's ok, it's been a week, you've busted through denial and now your depressed, maybe angry* and then myself would respond: *yes, angry, irritated, you don't want to get yourself home, to buy and pour your coke, you self-centered bitch, you miss having "A Jonathan" not Jonathan Chase, himself.*

"The thing is..." I paused as the waitress refilled our coffee cups and picked up the empty sugar packets. "I don't really miss him."

Tricia took a deep breath while she stirred her fresh drink. The spoon let out a tinny reverberation against the ceramic cup.

"Ok," she said and raised her hands, palms forward, in that *don't kill me way*, "It's ok to miss him."

She sounded like a self-help tape or a group therapy counselor, speaking to me and yet the whole world, spouting those few truths we are all expected to learn.

"I know," I said. It wasn't fair of me to be laying this on her; it was all so unreal. I mean if Jonathan had been abusive, serially unfaithful, or even just plain dumb, I would be achieving something by not missing him. However, except for the petering out of the last few months, we were a good couple, and then he moved out. Why the hell did it take me a week to shed a tear and why only after realizing I was relegated to mass transit?

Tricia leaned across the table, eyebrows raised slightly, ready for me to continue. She was trying so hard to be encouraging. She probably thought she needed to help me mourn, as though my lack of grief was a greater sign of desperation than actual grief.

"Trish, let me ask you something."

Why was I doing this?

"It's ok for me to miss him, but is it ok for me not to?"

"Well, of course it is!" All of the muscles in her face softened, like I had pulled her away from unsure ground at the edge of a cliff.

"And you will get there!"

She appeared emboldened.

"The sooner you let yourself miss him, the sooner you get to not miss him."

She slapped her hands together like she was closing a book. Problem solved.

Tricia and I walked in silence for almost the entire eight blocks to the subway station. She watched her feet intently, bit at her lip over and over again, and finally paused a half block away from the steps of the train. She looked away from me as she spoke.

"I still think it's a bad idea for you to take David to your cousin's wedding."

"Who said I'm taking David?"

But immediately I remembered that I didn't remember much of the night before and I knew her answer before it came.

"You did."

Chapter 7: The Fairy Queen

The answer machine was blinking at epileptic levels when I got home from the city in the early afternoon. There were a number of annoying "courtesy calls" from the likely sources: Mastercard, Visa, Discover, a "just checking in call" from my best friend, Emily, and a friendly reminder from Dee that Maggie's performance was at four.

Maggie was the star of her preschool's summer musical performance. In the light of my own drama, I had forgotten about hers. I drank a gallon of water, threw up twice, and got ready for her show. Under normal circumstances I would have gone to my brother's house before the show to help Maggie get ready, but I had barely enough time to arrive at her school.

When I got there, the gymnasium turned auditorium was packed. There were very few real seats. Parents were propped up on balance beams and squatting on curled up blue, rubber floor mats. Dee was in a prime, corner spot beneath a wall of construction paper flags of the world, setting up the video camera's tripod. She waved me over.

"Oh, good, I'm glad you made it," she said.

"Where is everybody?"

"Your mom had bridge."

"Oh, well, of course. She couldn't miss bridge on account of her granddaughter's first performance."

"You sound just like your brother." Dee shook her head and went back to fiddling with the camera.

"Good, because my brother is right."

Dee adjusted the legs on the tripod until the camera was chest level. She peeked through the view finder and then turned back toward me, an exasperated look on her face.

"You both give that woman too much of a hard time."

Dee was Mom's savior, her unsolicited legal defense. No one could ever completely figure out why, since my mother wasn't exactly Dee's biggest fan.

"She should be here," I said. I got here with an unearthly hang-over, I thought.

"Maybe, but she was there Wednesday night to take Maggie to see Spongebob. She made Maggie's wings, bought her tutu. She's coming over tonight to watch the video."

"Fine. If you think grand-parenting by closed circuit video is good enough."

"Anyway your dad's here with Jenny."

"Her name is Ginny." I had to laugh. Dee staunchly defended my mother against all wrongs, but refused to give

Dad's current wife the time of day, as if it were Ginny's fault my mom kept kicking my dad out.

"Where's Billy?"

"He's backstage, meaning in the classroom/dressing room, calming your niece down."

"She's nervous?" I couldn't believe it. Maggie's a natural performer. She's forever reciting nursery rhymes and holiday songs for random strangers in grocery stores and ice cream shops. She once even sang the Toys R' Us song for a cashier at the toy store.

"Apparently," Dee said. "I'm as surprised as you. But she woke up a dozen times last night and keeps saying there something buzzing around in her tummy."

"The flu?" I asked.

"Maybe. She could be sick, but no fever, no vomiting. I think it's good old fashioned butterflies. Maybe she's more like me than we thought."

Maggie's first official moment in the spotlight was short lived. She skipped out to the center of the floor, a beautiful blur of white. Her wings bounced and glistened with hundreds of sparkling rhinestones.

"It is time," she shouted in a sing-song rhythm, "to save what is mine. To keep the forest green, you need the fairy queen."

Maggie spun slowly in a circle into a squat on the floor. Her arms were splayed out and her head was down. A gaggle of Maggie's classmates, dressed as flowers and trees, pranced out and formed a circular forest around my tiny niece and chanted a little too loudly, "The fairy queen is here; the forest is not doomed. The fairy queen is here; the flowers still will bloom."

After repeating the refrain three times, the performance came to a halt. The baby shrubs started whispering to the elfish daisies. A plump little girl dressed as a violet picked her nose. Miss Caroline, Maggie's teacher, looked nervously back and forth from the non-performing students to the expectant audience members. Finally a wobbling tree made his way to Maggie and poked her limp shoulder.

Maggie lifted her head a few inches off the floor and threw up. Billy, Dee, Caroline, and I rushed to the center of the room. Billy got there first and swooped his daughter into his arms. Her head bobbed against her father's shoulder. Her skin was white as fresh paint, except around her eyes, where it was ashen.

We all moved with incredible speed, piling into our separate cars. My brother never let go of Maggie. He stood in the emergency room cradling his sick child. His eyes

were narrow and angry. He shouted, "Somebody look at my goddamn daughter, NOW!"

A woman in rainbow colored scrubs rushed to Billy's side and led them through the swinging double doors. Dee trailed them with a vacant stare. Maggie's wings were crumpled in her arms.

Ginny, my father, and I sat quietly watching the mildly sick and grossly injured come in.

A man in his late forties walked through the doors. He scanned the room and nodded with a smile when he noticed the check-in desk. His arm was wrapped in a blood-soaked bed sheet. There was so much blood I couldn't tell what color the sheet had originally been. It was a dark, brownish red at the point. I wasn't even sure it was blood at first. His casual approach, the darkness of the red.

"Oh, I'm gonna be," Missy mumbled with her hand over her mouth, her eyes on the man, and then sprinted to the restroom.

Between the hang-over, the sight of my niece slumped in my brother's arms, and the blood-riddled man, I thought I might need to run to the ladies' room as well.

"Did you call your mother?" my father asked.

I got up from my seat and motioned to the "Please turn off all cell phones" sign.

By the time my mother and Peter made the hour trip to the hospital, Billy and Dee were filling out paperwork to have Maggie released. The diagnosis was food poisoning. The three of them had tried a new diner the evening before. The doctor said that children react more harshly to food poisoning, but that Maggie would be fine so long as she got plenty of fluids and lots of rest.

Chapter 8: The Getaway

It turns out that I had not only agreed to bring David to the wedding when he offered for the fifth time, but we had actually made full-on plans. He would pick me up in the morning in some fabulous rental car. We would drive up-state and have brunch before the ceremony. He would call the Inn and try to get a second room or at least have the room I booked switched to a double.

As I carefully pinned long spiral curls to the top of my head, I realized just how bad this idea was and not only because of his supposed crush. David came from a family that dressed for dinner, owned a four bedroom, six-figure apartment near Columbia University where his mother taught Eastern European literature, bought their only son a one-bedroom in Chelsea, and weekendened at their farm house in the Hamptons.

David held a cushy, low-responsibility, high-profile position at his father's insurance company which consisted of lunching with current clients. He didn't have anything to do with prospectives; he knew nothing about the business plan. He put in about ten hours a week and spent the rest of his time working toward a PhD at Columbia in English Literature. He was simply the beautiful, charming son of

the CEO following in his mother's footsteps while wearing his father's shoes.

Both of my parents were first-generation white collar with a handful of college grads in the immediate family - my mother got her associates' degree the same year I graduated from high school. My brother and I were the first of our generation to move straight from 12th grade to the not-so-ivy halls of the state university system. We vacationed at the Jersey shore or Hershey Park in Pennsylvania, not Paris or Milan. We didn't have people in London. *What on earth, I wondered, would David talk to my family about?* I could hear it in my head.

"You've raised a lovely daughter, Mrs. Griffith"

"It's Stanley, actually."

"Is Stanley your husband? Does he deserve the credit for your fine offspring?"

"No Stanley is my name. Maureen Stanley, married to Peter Stanley."

"Oh, my apologies Mrs. Stanley. I didn't realize you were remarried."

"Fourth one's the charm!"

My stomach started contracting painfully, the way the muscles spasm when you try to laugh after doing too many sit-ups.

I zipped my formal dress in a garment bag and tried to erase the coming party from my mind. I concentrated, instead, on the little details of preparation. Evening and day make-up were both packed, which in my case meant adding an eyeliner to the mascara, lipstick, and bronzer. I pulled on a pair of navy silk-blend pants and buttoned up a three quarter sleeved powdery blue shirt. The upstate relatives always made fun of my too-black wardrobe.

While I stacked my bags in the hallway, the doorbell rang. David was early. Only fifteen minutes early, but it immediately registered as a bad omen. I slipped on my shoes and tied a lovely paisley scarf around my hair to keep the curls in place and then answered the door, feeling very Grace Kelly. *He can wait*, I thought.

As soon as David came in the door, he spotted my bags and grabbed them to load into the car. I was a little embarrassed by his chivalry. I always brought all my bags to the hall at least fifteen minutes before I was actually ready to head out the door on any trip. Jonathan often accused me of expecting him to act the bellboy part. It was impossible to convince him that I just wanted everything in plain sight for a last minute check before leaving. When David instinctively loaded up the car, I wondered if maybe

Jonathan was right. Maybe I did expect him to valet my things around.

I was finished and ready to go when David came back into the apartment. Despite his two trips back and forth, hoisting all four of my bags for a two night excursion, I had not yet managed to take in his outfit. He looked gorgeous. He was gorgeous.

Tricia always joked how ridiculous it was that his name was David and he was a modern David. Both men and women had a tendency to stare at him unabashedly.

He wore a pair of dark brown pants, a light skin-tight tee almost the exact color of my button down, and a navy sports coat. His sandy blonde hair was gelled into a darker shade, but the platinum fuzz around the hair-line glistened against his red-gold skin. Yes, he looked gorgeous, but it was all wrong.

"I thought we were dressing for the reception after the church?"

"The tux is in the car," he answered holding the door open for me.

"Your truck's not far?" I hoped out loud.

You do not wear a tuxedo to a wedding unless you are in the bridal party or if you are James Bond, himself. David showing up in a tux would be like me wearing the same

dress as the maid of honor, maybe even the bride! I took deep, noticeable, breaths as he led me to a tiny, dark-green convertible.

"You ok?" David asked while he opened the passenger side door.

"Pretty car."

"Yeah, I love the roadster."

He ran his fingers gently over the sleek, curved metal.

"He rarely offers, but damn if I ever say no!"

David's eyes clouded over and his fingers curled up into a loose fist.

"I hate loving this car!"

David isn't comfortable with being rich, but he really doesn't know how to function in any other economic status. That Jaguar is probably the cheapest car his father ever owned, but it's distinctly a joy-rider for the rich and famous.

"Screw it." The calm returned. "Let's have a good time."

While I was directing David out of my neighborhood and toward the highway, I was wondering where on earth my things were. Where could he have stashed those things? I

considered the car's rear. It looked about three inches long and wide; it made me feel fat.

I was surprised when we finally checked in to find my four bags, my dress, his tux, and two of his own bags comfortably placed - not crunched - in a deceptively large trunk. I began to doubt my own perception in a good way. Maybe everything was going to work out fine. Two friends could surely share a weekend getaway surrounded by enormous maple trees that dripped with green leaves, shallow whispering creeks that ran along almost every road, and a canopy of blinding blue overhead. *Everything was gonna be great*, I decided. And everything was. For about five minutes.

When the clerk turned his back to fetch our room key, David popped the question.

"So, what are we telling your family?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Are we an item? Have we been dating?"

He flared his nostrils and pouted his lips in a display of mock sensuality.

"Yes, of course, we'll tell them that you've been the one on the side for a few months."

I liked playing this game; it was similar to the ones I play inside my head all the time.

"Haven't I been?"

His eyelids lowered; he wrapped an arm around my waist.

I tossed my head back onto his shoulder.

"Yes, darling, yes."

I was practically shouting.

The clerk handed over our keys and pointed us to our room.

"Seriously," he said, pointing a young man in a maroon get-up to our bags, "will they think we've been seeing each other for a while or will you tell them this is actually our first date?"

First date? We're on a date? Fuck! I thought. *Of course we're on a date and this is the start of the misinterpreted weekend.*

I saw it clearly in my mind. I was mistakenly cast for the Katharine Hepburn role in one of those classic screwball comedies. I was sure by then that Jonathan still thought we were coming to this together and he was waiting, as we rode the elevator, perched on one of the double beds trying desperately to uncork a bottle of champagne. Of course, something would prevent David and me from getting to the room to discover Jonathan. We could only be

confronted by the other man after hours of madcap near-misses.

We arrive at the bar as he goes to the bathroom. We take the elevator; he takes the stairs, and so on until the reception comes. Jonathan is busy making the rounds in the hall - he always got everywhere early, while I, as my mother says, was late for my own birth. He is busy shaking hands with aunts and uncles, congratulating my cousin and her new husband, reminding everyone that he's the man I've lived with for the last two years, loving the slack-jawed reactions, from the hard-wired Catholics.

He runs into everyone except me and David, and my mother. Yes, my mother must remain out of the loop as well. Because of course, she was certain that I would never find a date in time. I would show up and disgrace her. She would never stand for a spinster daughter, so she brings someone for me. Let's see Jonathan is Clark Cable; David is Cary Grant; mystery guy number three recruited by mother must be Jimmy Stewart.

I spent the hour before the ceremony peering out windows, through peep holes, and jumping at the sound of the telephone or a knock on the door. The latter being my mother, checking to see if we were ready to go.

"Where is he?" I wanted an immediate explanation, followed by an apology.

"Downstairs, dear." She looked amused by my kerchief.

"I knew it!" I was proud and angry. "How could you, Mom?"

She walked past me and I turned to see David heading straight for her.

"Hello, Maureen Stanley." She held out a limp wrist. "Holly's mother."

"Pleasure, Ms. Stanley." He kissed the top of her hand. "I'm David."

"Don't get all goo-goo eyed over Cary Grant, when you've left Jimmy Stewart waiting downstairs." I propped my hands on my waist indignantly.

"Come along, David." My mother gave David a flirty smile and then turned narrowed eyes on me. "Holly, your stepfather is waiting."

Chapter 9: The Wedding

We arrived at the church almost an hour before the ceremony began and hung around outside so that my mother could both spot all of the incoming guests, naming them before they even closed their car doors - "Cousin Sue, Aunt John, must be with the groom" - and so that she could chain smoke before the hour long imprisonment in the chapel.

Peter had driven the four of us over and went back to give a few more people a lift. He was always doing kind things like that and my mother never seemed to notice. We were all fond of Peter and dreaded the moment when Maureen Stanley might decide she wanted to be Maureen Griffith again. It's true that it was becoming less and less likely that my parents would get back together. My dad's wife Ginny was adorably dependent. She was nothing like my mother or the other mother-like women my dad had been married to.

Ginny cooked dinner every night and every night she managed to burn something, usually food, but sometimes the appliances or the furniture. She liked cutting my father's meat for him. She liked ironing his shirts and getting his ties dry-cleaned. She liked every small task she was capable of accomplishing. Ginny was small and pretty and

skittish. She was a bouncing sparrow who needed just an occasional flaky piece of croissant to be satisfied.

Dad always left his woman first. After a few months, Mom would find sudden flaws and faults with her husband and within the year, Dad would be back.

"Should we go inside? Get a seat?" David asked my mother and me.

"Yeah, sure. Let's go," I said.

I put my arm through David's, as Josephine and Tara, my mother's cousins, approached.

"Maureen," they said in turn.

"And Peter," Josephine added, craning her neck around.

"Getting Mary and John," I said, smiling through clenched teeth. "They had some car trouble."

"Oh, good. What a good man," Tara said. The wistfulness in her voice was audible.

"Yes, he really is," I said.

My mother, per usual, didn't say a word.

Josephine and Tara were infamously, yet quietly, rude to my mother. It took me years to realize that it was their own unhappiness at the root of their behavior.

"And Jonathan?" Josephine asked.

It was my turn in the fire, I suppose. With Peter in tow, my mother could not provide fodder for their thinly veiled stabs at her less-than-Catholic romantic life.

"We broke up, Cousin Joe." I squeezed David's thick upper arm and added, "this is my friend, David."

"Been friends long?" Tara asked David directly.

"Very good friends for a very long time," David said.

"Ok, let's get our seats," I said watching the horror grow on Josephine and Tara's faces.

We sat in the fifth pew on the right side of the church. Only a dozen or so guests had taken their seats and no one was within ear shot of the two of us.

"You could tell, huh?"

"We have those in my family as well. Who are they?"

"They belong to the most pious of my mother's family. Their lives thoroughly suck and so they make it their business to point out other people's flaws. My mom is pretty much their favorite target."

"Where are the husbands?"

"The bar at the inn, most likely. Joe's husband, Lou, is a professional philanderer and Jim, Tara's husband, is an alcoholic."

"That's sad."

"Yeah, you know, it is. I feel really bad for those ladies, but I used to hate them with a passion when I was a kid."

"I can't imagine you hating anyone."

"It was weird, I'll admit. It was that time in your life, commonly called the teenage years, when the only people you hate more than your parents are the people who are mean to them."

I sat there thinking about the times I was mean to Josephine and Tara, the windows of opportunity I opened in order to embarrass them.

"I've never been to a Catholic wedding before," David said, quite obviously trying to change the subject.

"Really?" I was surprised. It's funny because religion was barely a part of my life. My parents were both raised Catholic and both disillusioned. We were all taken through the major steps: baptism, communion, confirmation. But after that rite of passage at twelve years old, we never went to church except for someone else's baptism, communion, confirmation, or, as in this case, wedding.

"I'm Protestant."

"The church is pretty, though, isn't it?"

I watched as David appraised the bright stained-glass windows. His eyes lingered on the darkest of the panels, an

image of the crucifixion. The glass was divided into shard-like strips in alternating primary colors. Jesus was wrapped in slivers of white that looked like loose bandages. An abstract star-burst in yellow and white was above his head. There was very little red, which I thought was odd. It was common, in my observations, for Catholic art to pull you in with apparently beautiful images, but for your eye eventually to land upon something damaging, most often the blood of Christ.

"It's stunning, isn't it?" David asked, now watching my eyes on the glass.

"I don't know," I said. "It seems false somehow."

"Most beautiful things seem false sometimes."

David put his hand on my thigh and smiled with his eyes.

I knew he was talking about me. Everything in his body told me so, but I didn't know what he meant.

The ceremony was long and boring as usual. A visiting archbishop presided over the wedding. Instead of the normal, inane focus, on the sanctity of a marriage begun in the house of God, this guy had the nerve to talk economics. There was no talk of love or commitment, no readings from Corinthians. It was all about our obligation to give at least ten percent of our income to our local parish. As un-

practicing as I am, I was mortified that David was being subjected to this. My mortification had at least a little to do with the fact that David was worth, financially, more than every other person in the church combined. I felt that the bishop had somehow learned that David was in pew number five and was trying to sell him a bit of paradise while he was here.

Chapter 10: The Reception

If David had actually been my new boyfriend, the night would have been an absolute success. Aside from the perpetual scowls of Josephine and Tara, the family flocked around him. No one except my cousin Ted's girlfriend, Missy, even mentioned Jonathan.

"Whoa," Missy said. Her Jersey accent was almost as thick as the purple polish on her acrylic nails. "He is fine."

She looked David up and down as he walked away from our table.

"Not that Jonathan wasn't a cutie," she quickly added. "But I mean, damn Holly."

I heard about how *damn fine, awfully sweet*, and even *debonair* David was all night.

It's the kind of reception I would have dreamt of had I actually been dating David. Since I was there with him as a friend, all I could think of was how little everyone apparently thought of Jonathan.

I imagined about how hard it must have been each time my mother had to reintroduce my father. Was he better or worse than the interim husband? And was he better or worse according to whom? On what scale?

Peter was definitely more kind and generous than my dad. He courted my mother as if they were college sweethearts. But my father was more attractive.

David, on the other hand, was scoring points Jonathan never could have scored. Jonathan prefers small groups, one-on-one conversations. At events like these, he would normally pair up with one of the other guys his age and talk sports or comic books for the entire evening.

Unlike Jonathan, David was the bell of the ball. His saint-like reputation was solidified just after the plates of roast beef and chicken cordon bleu were cleared away.

Jenna and her new husband, Paul, were twirling around the otherwise empty dance floor when David leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Who's that?" he asked, nodding at an over-weight, pimply teenaged girl in a flowery frock that looked like a sixties sofa cover.

"Cousin Polly," I whispered.

"She looks so sad."

David kept his eyes on Polly and he looked even more sad than she did.

Polly was the only daughter of my mother's widower brother, Jack. His wife had died when Polly was only three years old. Jack and Polly have a really strong bond,

something I was envious only a few years ago. He taught her to play softball and soccer. He gave her a job in his small accounting practice when she was ten years old. He takes her to Disney world every Christmas. They're best friends, but sadly for Polly, her father seems to be her only friend. She has yet to grow into a young woman. Her hair is always pulled back in a messy bun. Even though she's almost seventeen, she wasn't wearing a scrap of make-up. Polly was definitely not blossoming into one of the Major girls. Her small green eyes were her only link.

"Do you mind?" David asked a moment later, nodding again at Polly. The DJ had invited other couples to join the bride and groom on the dance floor.

"Sure, go ahead," I said.

David gave my hand a little squeeze and then walked through the gathering couples over to Polly's table. I don't know what he said to her exactly, but her round freckled cheeks flushed. She looked briefly at her shoes and then stood.

David led her to the center of the dance floor. He put her left hand on his shoulder and clasped her right hand with his own and they danced. Everybody's eyes were on David and Polly. Uncle Jack seemed to be crying as he watched his daughter in the arms of a beautiful stranger.

David went out of his way to dance with all the women who were either obviously dateless or who came to the wedding with inattentive men. During the last hour, my cousin, the bride, actually asked to cut in on our third dance of the entire night.

She lightly tapped my shoulder, but looked only at David.

"You wouldn't skip the bride now, would you?"

And he spun her around the room - layers of white satin and lace swirling out around her, his tailored tux like a suit of armor - they looked every bit the bride and groom.

I was appalled, impressed, and confused by the entire show. Sure, David was just a friend. Sure, I was relieved that our non-date hadn't morphed into a real date. But nobody else knew that. As far as everyone else was concerned, he was my brand new boyfriend. It was shameful the way the women, single and not, threw themselves at him right in front of me.

For his part, David asked me repeatedly if I wanted to dance or if I needed a drink or if I wanted to take a walk around the small, candle-lit lake behind the reception hall. After an uninterrupted series of "no, I'm fine," from me, David embraced his adoring public.

I made my way for the fifth time to the bartender, who was largely becoming my closest friend, while my mother took her turn in David's arms.

"Martini, please."

I wanted a femme fatale drink. There was something film-noir-ish about my own mother being charmed by my date. I felt a sense of impending doom on both catastrophic and absurdist levels.

The bartender waited. I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or past me - something I'd been experiencing all evening. Over my shoulder, over my head, eyes gazing at the lovely David.

"Martini," I repeated. "Please."

"Yes, but what kind? Vodka? Gin? Do you want it dirty?"

Oh fuck, I thought. I don't know. I've never had a hardcore martini before. My drinks are usually pastel colored. *I want the classy one. What kind of martini would a classy girl get?*

"What do you think?" I had acquired a sudden, but sultry Southern drawl. I was playing someone. The language and lilt were familiar. Maggie from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* perhaps?

"Vodka." The bartender was in. "Very dirty. I'm sure."

I pressed my palms flat on the wood of the bar top. It was lacquered so heavily, I could make out a warped image of myself. I slipped my hands in opposite directions and leaned over the mahogany mirror.

"You, kind sir, are very good at your job."

As I watched him shake the vodka and ice in a clear pint glass, I imagined him inviting me out with the rest of the catering hall crew. There was surely some down-and-out local hole in the wall, which these hardworking service types frequented. I would sashay around in my ball gown with a group of gorgeous twenty-two-year old boys wearing low-slung Levis and v-neck Hanes t-shirts.

"If you want it extra dry, you do it like this."

Alex, the bartender, broke my reverie to wave a bottle of vermouth quickly around the martini glass, never using a drop of it. He added a wink and put the bottle back in its rack.

He put the triangular glass on a black cocktail napkin before me. Except for the navy blue toothpick stacked with green, pimento-stuffed-olives, it looked like it might be water. But it wasn't water. It was Vodka and I only just realized that I didn't know if I even liked Vodka. I tried to think of all the random drinks I'd had in my life. Did

any of them have vodka? I was pretty sure the Lemonades at McNally's did.

"What's in a daiquiri?" I asked in a childish, girly voice that I was immediately embarrassed by.

"Rum."

"Oh, and a margarita?" I couldn't avoid lifting the glass much longer, so I held it by the stem and swished it around like I'd seen David do earlier with his wine.

"Tequila."

"Oh." *Just take a fucking sip, you wimp!*

"Aren't you going to drink your drink?"

"I came over here more for the company than the beverages."

I could not believe the last line even came out of my mouth. He laughed, thankfully not taking me seriously at all.

"I bet you say that to all the men who hand over free booze."

This guy was perfect. I laughed with him and at me and absent-mindedly took a swig of my martini. Delicious. Of course, I was already pretty drunk which means I could barely taste a thing.

After about five more minutes of corny one-liners, Alex broke the ice. He asked who I was with for the wedding

and I spewed out the whole break up with Jonathan and the inadvertent date with David, laced with the pressures of a family of relationshipippers. He listened very attentively as I rambled. He nodded his head at the appropriate times, raised his eyebrows here, crossed his arms in disapproval there. When I paused to take another deep sip of my martini, he spoke.

"You know, I just meant if you were with the bride's side or the groom's."

We were old friends by the time David appeared, strumming his fingers on the lip of the bar top.

"Two champagnes!"

He was practically singing and it took him a couple of seconds and a double take to realize he was standing next to me.

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you."

I sucked an olive off the toothpick. He looked genuinely happy to see me, but there was no way he'd been looking all over for me. I'd been chatting up Alex for over a half hour. We were in one room - granted it was a large banquet room - but one room nonetheless. A quick eye-scan would suffice to locate your date.

"I'm sorry." I felt compelled to apologize anyway. We were on a date, at least in his opinion, and I had been

just seconds before he found me, flirting unabashedly with the very young bartender.

David gave me a small, warm, fatherly smile, as though those two words were all I needed to say. Then he paused and turned his eyes on Alex, who had not moved away, but formed an awkward triangle with David and me.

"Two champagnes, please."

"Sure, buddy."

It was obvious that Alex was not impressed by David's presence and I was very grateful for this.

"Holly? Another dirty one?"

My face grew warm and I was sure those horrific strawberry patches were breeding on my cheeks.

"Sure."

Alex made my drink first, placed it before me on a fresh napkin, and then addressed David in a quiet voice.

"Two champagnes coming up."

David tried to cajole me into returning to the festivities, but I had grown dependent on Alex's barroom psychology and couldn't bear to drag myself away before analyzing this latest encounter. I was still confused about whether or not David had a real crush on me or if he found my middle class world to be a fascinating distraction.

"He is definitely working a big crush," Alex said after David had left with his two champagnes in tow.

Alex was convinced that both of my instincts were true, something I'm pretty sure had never happened before.

"There is something refreshing about a group of people who aren't confined by hundred-year-old rules of decorum."

Alex's tone had changed. It seemed like he was talking near me, not necessarily to me. Like he was fleshing things out for himself.

"How so?"

Alex smoothed his jacket before answering.

"The parties he normally goes to are probably a lot more stuffy. I mean everyone dances and gets drunk, like here, but they all pretend to be doing someone else a favor by dancing and they all pretend to be sober. He's having fun."

Alex stacked a few draft beers onto a drink tray for a cocktail waitress.

"Besides," he continued, "he likes you and he wants to make a good impression."

"You're smart," I said. I wanted to kiss him.

"It's my job."

"Did you go to the bartenders' school of psychology?"

"Yale, actually."

"Yale?"

Turned out Alex was old money. His barroom psychobabble was actually the result of a four year, six-figure, stint at Yale. He was going to Stanford in the fall, but wanted to experience the "real world" before hopping to the next ivory tower.

I felt inadequate, again. People with a plan have always scared me. I've never had a path, a true passion, and I was beginning to get restless. I was twenty-eight years old with a stupid job and no boyfriend.

"I read three newspapers a day." I wanted to differentiate myself, be someone worth talking to.

"That's fabulous. I only read *The Wall Street Journal*."

Danger! Danger, Will Robinson. I was told in college that only Republicans read the *Journal*. My back grew very straight. If I was sure of anything, I was sure I could not be attracted to a Republican, even if I couldn't say why exactly.

"Why is that?"

"Well the *Times* is more my slant, but I'm not interested in being the choir that is preached to."

Damn. I'm sure at this point that I have zero powers of judgment. I'm also pretty sure that I was being fucked with at least a little bit.

"I bet David only reads the *Times*." Alex rolled his eyes.

I was smack in the middle of a pissing contest!

"It's been a pleasure." I raised my glass in the air, gulped down a nearly full glass of vodka, and sashayed away from Alex the Great to seek out the perfectly sculptured David.

Chapter 11: A Plan

At twelve-years-old you generally know what you want to do when you grow up. Although this future profession changes at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, ad infinitum, you know. That is, if you're not me, you know. I never knew. I lied, pretended, every year all through middle school and high school when career day rolled around.

Seventh Grade: Lawyer, because that's what Kelly wrote down.

Eighth Grade: Teacher, because Mrs. Kinsley had a well-known reputation for favoring the students who chose her career path.

Ninth Grade: Dallas Cowboy cheerleader, because ninth grade is the year in which girls try to be sexy.

Tenth Grade: Marine Biologist, because Randy Sieger said that would be a cool job.

Eleventh Grade: Police Officer, because the guys at that booth were so cute.

Twelfth Grade: Psychologist, because I wanted to figure out why I couldn't figure out what to be.

By the time college rolled around, I still didn't have a clue. I enrolled at Doverwood State University as an "undecided." It was a given that I would go to college. My

sister Debbie took a year off that turned into six. She wound up living all over the place, searching for who she was destined to become. She became a writer at the University of Atlanta. My brother Billy enrolled at Doverwood immediately after high-school and declared himself a Math-Education major.

I thought it would serve me well to take the Debbie-path, but my mother was sure that my sister had just been wasting time wandering around the country to inevitably "find herself" in college anyway.

In the middle of my second semester at Doverwood, I received a mass-mailed letter, disguised as a personal one, from the Dean of the Freshman College. The note advised that I should declare my major by April 15th and that if I was still having trouble narrowing things down, I should register for the campus-administered Myers-Briggs' Personality-Career assessment test. I took the test.

It asked all sorts of small-minded questions like how I keep my workspace or how I interact with groups. And even stranger questions that made me terribly self-conscious. I remember one asked if I thought it was important to explore and learn more about myself. What kind of self-involved person would say yes to that?

After the results were compiled, students were allowed to pick up their reports or get their reports interpreted by a career guidance counselor. I chose the latter.

"Ms. Griffith, it appears that you are an extrovert. Would you agree?"

"Sure," I answered. I definitely wasn't shy.

"And you value your intuition and your feelings about things?"

"Ok," I said. My intuition was saying this woman was a quack.

"And rather than judge people you try to perceive their motivations, yes?"

At that moment I was not seeking out the counselor's motivations. I was chock full of judgment.

"I suppose, but what does this have to do with picking a major?"

The guidance counselor looked pleased with herself. She flipped through the papers on her desk, shimmying her shoulders in a happy-dance.

"Ma'am?"

"One second, sweetie."

She settled on a piece of paper and scanned it with her index finger.

"Actress or Psychologist?" She asked this question just as she had the others, as though there were only two possibilities in the entire world for me.

"Actress or Psychologist what?"

"Well, which one?" She glanced back down at the paper.
"Or cartoonist?"

She looked back at me and said, "Hmm. Cartoonist or children's book author type thing?"

"Is this an intuition test?" I asked.

"We are here--" she sounded irritated, but at least more professional than previously "--to determine your career path."

"Right," I said. "Ok."

"Then." The word then stretched across the desk between us.

I had no idea what she was asking me. Actress, Psychologist, Cartoonist, what? Were these my options? Had I been whittled down to three potential career paths because I would fire Judy who had been with my mythical company for one year as opposed to Marla who had been around for fifteen years?

"What was your major?" I asked the counselor.

"What? Well, what, what does that have to do with it?"

"How did you decide? I mean what do you major in to get your job?"

"Holly, I don't really see the relevance here."

She was getting as uncomfortable as I was. That was a good thing.

"Did you take this test?"

"Holly, your results indicate that you should be an actress, psychologist, or children's book author."

"Huh?" Even in my complete state of unawareness, I thought those three things were pretty damn disparate.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Because your results match up with Carol Burnett and Meg Ryan and Carl Rogers and Dr. Seuss."

"Dr. Seuss? Dr. Seuss is a real person?"

"Theodore Geisel is his real name."

"The guy who wrote *Sister Carrie*?"

"Sure, I guess." She shoved my test results back into a mail envelope and thrust them across the desk from. "Be sure to declare your major by the fifteenth," she added, dismissively. We were apparently done.

I went back to my dorm room to read through the test results for myself. After several hours, I decided that the counselor was doing a better job than I had given her credit for.

Two actresses, one psychologist, one writer. I went with the math and the ego-boost on this one and declared myself a drama major a week later.

Chapter 12: Back to the Grind

"It was fucking awful," I explained to Trish, pausing to grab clumps of sticky, steamed rice with my chop-sticks. "We hardly even said a word to each other on the ride home."

Trish scooped up her pad thai noodles with a quick twirl of her sticks.

"It's going to be so weird when I see him again," I added.

"No it won't." She pushed her plate of spicy, peanut chicken and noodles toward me. "And you must eat this."

"Of course it will be."

I tried to mimic Trish's hand motion, but the noodles wriggled free from my grasp and flopped onto the table.

"Would you just use your fork, already?"

"No, I have to learn how." I shook my head vigorously and stabbed at the plate. I struggled for a long minute, but finally brought one dangling noodle to my lips.

It was fantastic. I was having the duck and was none too pleased. I wanted to order the peanut chicken, but I thought that was cheating somehow. If I was going to try new and exotic foods, I couldn't very well order a dish comprised of ingredients I'd eaten my entire life: peanuts,

chicken, red pepper, noodles. It sounded pot-luckish, not foreign. The duck, which I'd never had before, was dark and fatty and kind of chewy. It was drenched in purple, syrupy-sweet sauce. About five minutes in, I took to eating my rice doused with the bottle of soy sauce I'd requested.

Trish could see it was love at first bite and offered to share her enormous plate with me.

"David is totally used to rejection. Look at us. Best friends now."

Seeing I was not totally convinced, she shared the details of the demise of Trish and David.

"He was perfect. You know, on paper. Gorgeous, rich, debonair even. Smart, sweet, funny. But there was no chemistry. It just didn't click."

"But how did you come to the conclusion that you just didn't click?"

"Well the first and only time we had sex..."

"You slept with him?"

"A little bit."

"How do you sleep with someone a little bit?"

"Well, we were fooling around and it was awkward, but I thought, well, hell, not everyone's a rock star at their first show."

"He was a virgin?!"

"Oh, god, no. *Our* first show, but anyway." She stopped to take a sip of her iced tea, sweetened with coconut milk. The teas were my idea. She loved it. I hated it. Coconut milk in tea? What were they thinking?

"We finally got down to actual business. I mean we just started and he said in this false sultry voice..."

Trish started laughing so hard, iced tea trickled through her nose. Between her cackling, choking, and nose blowing, people at other tables turned to look at us. Trish had a full audience as she delivered her line.

"He said, *you like that baby, don't you?*"

A couple of women our age at a table catty-cornered from us, openly laughed. An older businessman to our left, sitting alone, stared in seeming confusion, as though he couldn't figure out what was so funny. A woman shot us dirty looks, glancing back and forth from us to her pre-school aged son.

"Well what happened?" I asked, ignoring the crowd.

"This." Trish spread her arms out, palms up, still cackling uncontrollably.

"This? You laughed?"

"Hysterics," she shrugged, "and then he laughed, too. Eventually, anyway. So he took me out for ice cream and we never talked about it again."

I'd always been impressed by Trish, but this was a new high. How on earth do you laugh a man out of bed and then get him to buy you ice cream?

"I don't know, Trish. We were completely silent. I mean even when he dropped me off. I don't even remember saying good-bye."

"He's been pining for you longer, but he'll get over it. That's what he does."

"What if he doesn't? He's your friend first. I'll be out with yesterday's trash or I'll get last minute invites when he's busy or sick or out of town or something."

"Holly."

"Then I'll get fired and you'll be friends with some girl who takes my job and wants to sleep with David and has her own place in the city."

"Holly."

"You'll call me once or twice, but then it will get boring, because I'm waiting tables at some chain restaurant in Hackensack and my schedule makes it impossible for me to hang out before two a.m. and -"

Trish slammed her hand on the table, rattling the silverware and spilling my nearly full iced tea.

"Enough!"

I realized that I hadn't even been looking at her or really even talking to her. I was staring at the ceiling, babbling.

"You need to take it easy. Take it light."

She tried to break the tension with a joke.

"Take it light. You know, *Holly-Go-Lightly!*"

Like I'd never heard that one before.

I was trying to go lightly, but I didn't know how. I was less concerned with David's reaction, than with my reaction to his reaction. I realized that I didn't know how to say no to a guy. I'd never had to develop a repertoire in this respect. It's easy to quietly rebuff a guy, when you can say "I have a boyfriend." Since it seemed I'd always had a boyfriend, this was my only excuse. How could I let David down gently without the aid of this excuse?

"Maybe I'll tell him I'm thinking of getting back together with Jonathan."

"Are you?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Trish could not get it through her head that I didn't want Jonathan back. I couldn't explain why I knew I didn't want him back, just like I couldn't figure out how to tell

David I wasn't interested in him. I only knew that somehow these things were related.

Chapter 13: A Rose by any Other Name

Fifth grade. Ten years old. Kelly was my best friend in the world and Chris was our second best. We liked her a lot, but it's always me and Kelly first. Chris was the girl that one of us, I can't remember which, became friends with that first time one of us, I can't remember which, was absent.

Kelly was the prettiest girl in class. I was pretty, too, and so was Chris, but no one was pretty like Kelly. At ten years old, Kelly already resembled the woman she was going to be. While the rest of us girls fell into two categories, shedding baby fat (Chris) or stick thin and completely undifferentiated from the boys (me), Kelly was lean and training-bra worthy.

We were an imaginative group. I credit this time in my life with inspiring the stage bug in me. I don't ever tell anyone about the Myers-Briggs assessment.

The three of us reenacted our favorite TV shows, movies, and books. We were the three sisters on the *Brady Bunch*. We were *Laverne & Shirley* and a special guest star. We took turns pratfalling as Jack Tripper, while the other two girls played Janet & Chrissy or Janet & Cindy or Janet

& Terri. Casting changes on television never bothered us. Being written out of life was another story.

Halfway through the school year, she arrived. Her name was Sabrina and she was almost as beautiful as Kelly. It was natural, I assume now, for the two of them to gravitate toward each other. By lunch time of Sabrina's first day, we were four.

We sat at the lunch table, poking at our rubbery spaghetti and realistic-looking meatballs, when Kelly dropped the bomb.

"We *must*," Kelly said, "play *Charlie's Angels*."

Sabrina said, "Of course, it's too good to be true."

Chrissy didn't speak. She was used to not speaking. Kelly and I always discussed and decided our lunch time play. I didn't speak, at first. There was a pit in my stomach that I couldn't quite trace. I felt like I just found out I was adopted, or worse, that my parents tried to put me up for adoption, but no one else would take me.

"Holly?" Kelly said my name like a question, a long question. She was trying to help me realize the new configuration, but I didn't know it yet.

"Sure, we can play *Charlie's Angels*."

"Great," Kelly said. "We've never had a Bosley before."

"You *must* have a Bosley," Sabrina answered. "That's the only way to play."

Yes, I was Bosley. It was obvious to everyone but me. It was fate, kismet. We had Kelly, Chris, and Sabrina. They were the three. I was the fourth. They giggled and gabbed, laying out the plans for the episode we would play.

I left school in a rage. The tears started slowly. I was steeled when my father pulled up in our wood paneled station wagon. I got in the car without a word. I did not kiss my dad. I did not answer how my day was. I did not look him in the eye. My throat was tight and my eyelids were twitchy, but I wouldn't cry. I couldn't cry, because I knew he wouldn't understand.

"I love you, chickpea," he said as he stopped the car in front of our house, the house he didn't live in again.

"You too, Dad." I bolted from the car.

I found my mom at the stove, blowing smoke from her Benson & Hedges' light cigarette into the fan vent above the range. She was concerned with second hand smoke, but not concerned enough to quit smoking.

"Why!?! " I screamed. "Why did you name me Holly?" I threw my bag on the checkered kitchen floor, watched it skid past my mother's trim ankles.

"Why not Sabrina? Or Jill? Why not Jill like Farrah's character? We could have had four angels!"

My mother never got flustered. It was so rare to see her furious or depressed or excited. Her reaction to other people's intensity usually looks like this: pursed thin, red lips suppressing a frown or a smile, you could never tell which. She tilted her head and surveyed me.

"Answer me! I'll never have friends with this name!" Why do little girls get fixated on such things? I was not the first to hate my name, though at that moment I felt like I was the only person who was ever labeled incorrectly.

"Holly is a beautiful name."

"Who else is named Holly? Name one person." The fear of originality in pre-teens is like a plague.

"Oh, sweetie." She crushed her cigarette butt into a green glass ashtray. "I don't know. You're named Holly and you're beautiful."

She poured me a glass of milk and set a small plate of oatmeal cookies on the kitchen table.

"Besides your name has a history. Everyone is named Jennifer or Mary or Kelly."

I gasped. Everyone was not named Kelly. Kelly was the only Kelly in school. Kelly was the only Kelly on *Angels*. There was no Holly anywhere.

"Sit down."

She was calm as usual. My tears slowed a bit. I remembered how she'd always fixed everything else before.

"Now, you know how we always say you were late for your birth?"

I nodded through a gulp of ice cold milk.

"Well you were supposed to arrive on December fifth."

"My birthday is the twenty-first."

"Yes. You were late. How late?"

Math? My mother was making me do math at that very moment. I pulled my small hands out before me and clenched my fists.

"Five, six," I said, extending a finger. "Seven." Another finger.

"No fingers, Holly." She covered both my hands with one of hers.

"Seventeen days?" I asked after a moment.

"Sixteen. Now sixteen is a long, long time, over two weeks, after nine months and I tried everything."

I'm the youngest child. I'd never seen my mother pregnant. I'd never imagined it before, her belly bulging

with me inside. Before that moment, I hadn't really understood that I came from inside her. I used to live beneath her skin.

"So on the twentieth, I was decorating the Christmas tree, stringing lights and stuff. The doctor said to keep moving, to startle you out, to get you going."

"The baby decides to come out?"

I had a choice. I chose when to arrive. This was an interesting development.

"Well, yes, kind of. The baby sort of instinctively knows when to leave the womb. That's why women are pregnant for pretty much the same length of time. The baby knows when they're ready. Like cookies that take themselves out of the oven, before they get burnt."

"It's like an oven? I could have been overcooked?"

"No, baby, you couldn't be overcooked." She ran her hand over my arm. "But I was reaching up, on a step stool, putting the angel on the top of the tree when my water broke, when you decide to come. I screamed for your father and we rushed to the hospital and in fifteen hours you were here, you were Holly of course."

"Why Holly?"

Holly wasn't the name of one of those beautiful countries-of-the-world porcelain dolls my mom puts on the

trees. It wasn't the name of a saint. It was a plant and not a real plant in the room with my mother. It was a plant in a song playing on the radio as they drove to the hospital. My namesake was the line, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly."

We looked it up in the dictionary that afternoon, something I did often for the following few years, hoping an addition had been made.

holly (hɒl'ɪ) n. an evergreen shrub of the genus Ilex, often with prickly green usu, dark green leaves and red berries.

"It's not even a proper noun." I groaned.

Chapter 14: The Big "D"

The thing about denial is that, while it is most often born in the unconscious, it tends to become a habit.

It was one month to the day that Jonathan had moved out. I got off the bus from work, one stop earlier than my usual stop, in front of Marzell's Fine Grocery on Park Avenue in Rutherford. I filled the little robin's egg blue basket with fresh picks of tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, bulbous heads of garlic, deep red onions, saturated part-skim mozzarella, little plastic cases of oregano and basil, and a large bag of limp, newly cut strips of lasagna pasta.

I went next door, to D.B.'s Spirits, and bought two bottles of that cheap Chianti. The one where the bottom half of the bottle is cased in wicker.

About halfway through my walk home, I made a final stop at Gino's Bakery and bought a large, flaky loaf of still-hot Italian bread.

I smiled, skipped a little, even caught myself singing silly songs during the last leg of my journey home. It was one of those rare days when domestic duties feel appealing, when a glass of wine and a home cooked meal is the stuff of life.

I shoved the apartment door open with my shoulder and shouted, "Veggie Lasagna for you, my dear."

No one answered. I felt like something was swimming inside me, rapidly, slipping around my stomach, jetting up to splash inside my head, wriggling through tight spaces in my chest. A parasitic bug of awareness.

I dropped the groceries on the pale yellow tile floor of my kitchen. The tomatoes and onions rolled, despite the sheer green plastic produce bags, under the table. The wine fell with a thud, thanks to the wicker wrapping. The bread cracked under the weight of other food. And then, of me.

I lay curled up on my kitchen floor for at least an hour, sobbing uncontrollably. I felt like I had just woken from a dream. I felt as though I had been my own stunt double.

I screamed a few times, but no one came knocking. The couple who lived upstairs was notorious for all out brawls and could not be bothered with a few high pitched whimpers. The neighbors on either side were tired of calling the police or checking in on, the couple from upstairs. *I could die from this pain, I thought, and no one would come.*

The rest of the evening was dedicated to catching up, a retroactive grieving session. I dressed myself in his clothes, an old torn tee-shirt with stains in the armpits,

a pair of too long, too wide gray sweatpants, a Boston cardinals baseball cap. I washed my face with his face wash - a harsh, manly smelling scrub that stung my already red skin. I watched the first twenty minutes of every love story movie I owned. Ones where they break up and it's for the best. Ones where they get back together and it's for the best. Ones where they only meet at the end and it's for the best. Everything is for the best. I needed an Indie film. Maybe I would write one. *He leaves. She's heartbroken. He's an asshole for doing this. Neither one of them is ever happy again.*

I rummaged through my Jonathan box for clues and comfort and to make everything worse.

Most girls have these boxes, at least one, but usually they are put together post-relationship. You don't love the one you loved anymore or he doesn't love you; however the story goes it's over and you can't bear, for the moment, to be bombarded with evidence of your previous life together. You throw some things away - large things that are difficult to store inconspicuously - but you keep enough to fill a box. Normally, it's a discarded shoe box. The Jonathan box was a well constructed, rather large, photo box.

The lid and container were decorated in pastel swirls of blue, pink, and green. Little nauseating sayings were scrawled in thin, black cursive: *We'll always have Paris* or *If you love something, let it go* and so on. This box was planned. There was nothing ambiguous about its purpose. Hallmark had learned to capitalize on yet another private, life event. This is the box the truly broken hearted go out to buy when he leaves, but I bought it before, way before.

The contents of the box were as disarming as the context. I placed the pieces of our past in piles on the sofa, the coffee table, and the floor. There were movie stubs, a common keepsake, because these are small and inconspicuous. But I had at least a hundred of them. It was difficult to call up an actual memory for each of the films. I couldn't remember seeing some of the movies at all, let alone in a theater. I decided to organize the tickets chronologically and concluded that ticket stubs were dated specifically for this purpose. Phantom arguments and relationship milestones could be corroborated by a little piece of perforated paper. It worked.

The movies mapped out our early time together. The first six months there was a film every week, beginning with date number one, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

"It was surprisingly good," I had said as we filed out of the theater and into the parking lot of Clifton Commons.

"I know," Jonathan said, "it really was."

He caught me looking at him suspiciously. He had talked up this film all three times he phoned before our first date. A child-like grin spread across his face. It turned out his friend Marcus, told him to take me. Marcus said he would learn a lot about me and would make himself look good in the process.

"A foreign language, action film," Jonathan explained, "A female lead with a sword. How could I lose?"

That was how Jonathan and I had begun. The charades that normally last weeks, if not months, at the start of all relationships was over for us in mere hours.

We went to the Candlewick Diner for tea and pie and spent the rest of the night defying first date rules. He told me how he was really close to his mom and how that freaked most girls out. I told him about my parents' multiple marriages. We talked about losing our virginity. He was seventeen. I was sixteen. We talked about how many partners we'd had, how many were one-night stands. We shared worst-date horror stories and then agreed that we were on the best first date of our lives.

Jonathan and I spent the next six months in the glow of that first date and adopted what we called "the-Marcus-approach" to dating. We saw a film every week and the only requirement was that someone else recommended we go see it. Every single ticket stub from those six months was stacked in the center of my coffee table.

As I flipped through the little pieces of paper in shades of gray, blue, and red, I wanted nothing more than those six months back again. I wanted to rewind and find myself in the Angelica with Jonathan's arm around my shoulders, watching Humphrey Bogart send Ingrid Bergman away.

Jonathan and I didn't only see movies. We went to the theater, too. When I told him about my pipedreams of Broadway, he insisted that I immerse myself in that world.

"That's how you learn," he would tell me all the time. "That's why I go to the conventions."

Jonathan's a computer programmer and his ambition is to create a video game that spawns a franchise. He wants the game to succeed on all platforms, Sony, Nintendo, X-box, PC, and Mac. He sees cartoon spin-offs and feature films, tee-shirts, lunchboxes, and action figures. "The important thing is to know what people want."

He was forever going to the sci-fi conventions to find out what the people wanted and he had an enormous binder of story and character ideas waiting to be digitally created.

I missed him so much. I could hardly believe that I got through an entire month without feeling this way, without feeling anything really. I was so astounded by my own detachment that I forgot not to answer the phone when it rang. It was ten o'clock at night, my throat was swollen and raspy from heaving sobs, and I was perpetually sniffing, but I lifted the receiver anyway.

"What the hell, Holly? What's wrong?" Emily shouted for the third time.

"Nothing," I finally squeaked out. But of course, something was very wrong and my best friend Emily was the one to talk to about it.

She coerced me into lunch plans on Saturday, still three days away. There was a time when Emily would've been on my front steps in fifteen minutes for lesser issues than the one at hand, but marriage, a house forty-five minutes west, and her own commute to Manhattan had changed things a bit. I would have to struggle through the next few days alone.

Remembering to breathe and to put a morsel of food in my mouth occasionally were major accomplishments those days.

Chapter 15: Confessions

At half past twelve, Emily was curled up on a Victorian-style, gold chaise lounge in Café Eutopia, reading a true crime book. She was rapt with horror and fascination - her mouth slightly open, her eyes squinting. A full minute had gone by before she noticed me standing in front of her. She looked up, returned to her book, looked up again, stole a quick glance at the large wrought iron clock on the wall, and then dog-eared her current page.

"Fashionable, but not quite late."

"I, I'm sorry, I can just wait at a table until one."

Emily smiled her wide, Colgate smile and tossed her book on a near-by table.

"Don't be a twit, Hol."

I was immediately grateful for Emily's kindness. She ignored the earnestness in my words and pretended that I was being sarcastic.

"I'm glad you're here. I'm starving. I was thinking I was going to have to eat twice." She nodded her head over at the waitress. "Couldn't bare to do it with Twiggy serving."

We moved to an over-stuffed baby-blue sofa and sat Indian-style facing each other.

"Tell me about it, sister," she said.

So I did. It took only a couple of minutes. I told her about the conversation, how he was gone before I had got back from my mom's, how I'd been doing ok for a month, and how I broke down for no reason three days ago. Emily was quiet for moment, chewing on her cheek and bobbing her head.

"So, now what?"

She leaned forward with her hands on her knees.

"I miss him," I snapped.

"I know, but why? What changed?"

"Well, I suppose I was in denial and now I'm not."

I was growing agitated. Emily was my best friend for fifteen years. We'd been through countless break ups together. She was usually the one who broke down, who needed support, and I was always there for her. This was the first time I could remember falling apart and she was being rather matter of fact about the whole thing.

"I'm sorry, Holly. I just. You're usually." She took a deep breath. "Do you want tea? I want tea."

Emily waved over the waitress and ordered us a round of unsweetened iced teas. Neither of us said a word for the five minutes we waited for our drinks. She kept her eyes

mostly focused on the floor, but I held my gaze steady on her.

After a deep sip on her straw, she spoke again.

"Is there someone else?"

My muscles relaxed a bit and I babbled an answer.

"I think so. He was spending all this time with the yoga instructor. More than he needed to, you know? And he stopped asking me to come. And he started meeting her before class and hanging out after class and, well, I don't think anything happened before he left, but I think maybe. Maybe, now."

"I meant you, Holly. Are you into anyone else?"

"Christ, Emily. Are you kidding me? We were together for four years. This is fucking crazy. Why would I be this fucked up, if someone was waiting in the wings?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Exactly? Exactly?! You. I. I can't believe this. I can't. I'm out of here."

I jumped off the sofa and lunged toward the door.

"Holly! Holly, come back here."

But I didn't turn back. I just walked out the door. I walked and walked, thinking about what she said, about the nerve it took to say such a thing. I walked around the block four times. I didn't know where to go. I hadn't been

to work since Wednesday; I couldn't bare another minute inside my apartment.

During lap number one, I ran our conversation over and over in my head, sometimes out loud, screaming all the other things I should have said to her before I left. I wished I'd had my cell phone with me so that I could call her and add a few choice words. *Is there somebody else?*

On my second time around, I thought about all the mean things I never said to her when the shoe was on the other foot. When she'd broken up with Gordon, did I tell her to jump back into the game? When Lou walked out on her, did I advise she go out on the prowl? What the hell made her say such a thing?

On lap number three, I seriously contemplated that last question. What did make her ask such a thing?

Half way through lap number four, I knew the answer.

I walked back into Café Eutopia at one o'clock. Emily was back on the chaise lounge, reading her book, but this time she looked up when she heard the front door open.

"Hey," she said, putting down her book. "You're right on time."

"One on the dot. Ready to order?"

"I'm starved."

We moved to a table on the back patio, ordered lemon chicken rice soups and Greek salads, and took turns averting our eyes.

"Why didn't you ever tell me before?" I asked her.

"Tell you what?"

"That I had a pattern. I never noticed it before."

I had a pattern. The guy always left me. I hadn't broken up with anyone since boyfriend number one, in the seventh grade. But they never left before I wanted them to, before I had another prospect on the horizon. This was the first time there was no other guy waiting in the wings.

"We all have patterns, Holly. None of us notice them or we wouldn't keep doing it."

I suppose she was right. It stops being a pattern when you identify it. You either beat it or it becomes a choice. But in this case, I accidentally broke my pattern. I didn't decide not to have a guy in the wings. I didn't know Jonathan was leaving.

"But I didn't push him out the door. It wasn't like that this time. We had a blast in Savannah a few months ago. He was working on his storyboards. I got promoted."

Emily continued to nod calmly. She didn't want to send me into a tailspin again. She has always been so damn

insightful and patient. It's not like she's perfect, but definitely closer to perfect than me.

Emily has this kind of ad-hoc spirituality. She believes that it is her responsibility to become who she is. Honestly, I have no idea what that means, but it helps her through everything. I mean everything.

She once cured herself of a stomach flu by taking deep breaths while washing dishes. She's told me the story a dozen times, something about being in the moment, by being absent. I've tried it, but it never works for me. I can't get my brain to shut up. I can't be, let alone become, but I trust her. I trust her because her life has always been a little harder than mine; her battles have always been a little more real. Yet, Emily who has much more game time with pain and rage and depression, bounces back like no one I know. I can wallow over a paper cut, never completely distraught, but never forgetting until the skin's totally healed.

So I knew - while I was jabbering about nice vacations, new patio furniture, and minor professional successes - Emily was being in the moment, my moment. Her silence, her head mostly down, the occasional eye contact, was almost devotional.

"You need a list," she finally said.

"A list," I said. "Ok. Of what?"

"I'm thinking," she continued, not looking at me, "about patterns. Like we said before. Patterns we all have. And whether or not you really broke yours."

"But I obviously did."

"Yes, you *obviously* did. But did you really?"

I was tired, so tired of not knowing. Why did I care that he left? Why would I want to be with a guy who didn't want to be with me? I'd never understood the process that brought people into that situation. That crap about not being able to choose who you love and that somehow that defined you, limited you. I never wanted to turn out like my father, waiting around for when my mother was ready to give it another go, trying on other wives until his true love wanted him back. It was crap to believe that there was one perfect someone that would make your life all better. There's just a series of anyones to help pass the time. At least, that's what I'd always believed. That's why the denial was easy. That's why the grieving was unacceptable.

Emily doesn't believe in soul mates either, but she does have greater faith in human connections. We made the list like she said we should and the conclusion was oddly insane and perfectly sound at once. Emily decided that I

was repeating the pattern. I did push Jonathan away and I did have someone waiting in the wings: Me.

It's a stupid revelation, really. *A woman in her late twenties discovers she actually exists.* That's the headline I kept running over in my head.

I had always thought I was quite independent, self-sufficient. The truth is I had always been somebody's girlfriend and, yet, never apparently been completely that. Always looking for something better, the next best thing. Shaping myself in their images.

Emily and I made lists, loads of lists. All the men were accounted for, all the way back to the boys. What was the attraction? Then, what was the distraction? What did I gain from each? Everything it turned out. All my habits, obsessions, quirks, hobbies could be traced back to one XY or another. It was horrifying. I felt like a ghost, a cloud, a billow of smoke. Emily, on the other hand, was methodical. She seemed excited as each addition to the list made another piece of me disappear.

"So, you've never even had lobster?" she asked. Her words were laced with giddiness.

"No." I thought I might cry. "I suppose I haven't."

It turns out I had decided that lobster was my least favorite food, because Morgan, a boyfriend from a thousand

years ago, said so. I had co-opted his language for a decade, "it's the cockroach of the sea," and yet I'd never even tried it.

After five hours, and two meals, at Café Eutopia, we were just curving the bend and reaching the all-powerful influence of Jonathan. Emily called her husband to let him know she'd be spending the night. We picked up traditional comfort food at the local Shop and Stop and went back to my place. Emily figured my apartment would hold clues that we no longer had access to with the other guys. She was right. It was dreadful.

Emily was disappointed by my sullenness. She said, I didn't get it. She said, I wasn't cogent. She said, I didn't recognize the opportunity I was being given.

"What?" I asked. "To scrap Gepetto and be a real boy?"

"To be Geppetto and a real boy."

Emily traced the webbed out list in her hand and continued speaking in a low, distant voice.

"You're on the verge, Holly, of actually being you."

I wanted very much to please Emily. She was all I actually had at that moment. I'd managed to isolate everyone else I could have turned to and she was so excited about this supposed opportunity I had. But take control of my own puppet strings? And do what?

I tried to get Emily to tell me what to do, but she said she had done as much as she should. She didn't want to be the new mirror in my life. I was ready to reflect my own image, she said, and this was something most people were never ready to do.

So there I was with this bastardized family tree of likes and dislikes, hobbies and habits, an encrypted blueprint of self. I went over the lists several times on Sunday, while eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner; in between reading piece of the *Times* and the *Record*; before and after staring into space. No moment of revelation appeared, as Emily hoped it would. There was no obvious step forward. So I decided to go backward. I created a catalog of do-overs. I would find out what it was like to live my life as a remake.

It's easier to work backward; our memories being as weak as they are, the immediate past seems more real, tangible. The gifts (as Emily called them) from Jonathan would be first.

Chapter 16: New

I was immediately different - not in an obvious way, but noticeable, in a vague, misty way. I had been altered just a touch, like the appearance of a new mole or a freckle, like a sunburn beneath the skin. People noticed. They asked seemingly innocuous questions with expectant looks on their faces. *How are you? What's new? What're you doing?* I could feel them looking, looking in, feeling the small shift.

"Earth to Holly," Trisha said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Sorry, I'm a bit distracted today."

"Tell me about it. I thought Jane was gonna claw you with those talons of hers."

"We're over-selling her."

"We over sell everyone."

"I know, but Jane seems all worshipping around Marcia. I thought it would be different with this client."

Jane had asked me, during a staff meeting that morning, to compile a list of software programs being used by conglomerate, full-service, women's apparel corporations. Companies with department store considerations. This didn't make sense. Marcia Keyes did

not own Macy's; she owned a counter at Macy's. After a long, quiet pause, I shared my opinion with Jane. A longer, much more uncomfortable pause followed. Trisha broke the silence with a forced, awkward laugh, and then the agenda just moved forward.

"Alright," Trisha said, "let me make a few calls and then we'll be off. Where to today?"

"Wherever. I don't mind."

"It's Monday."

"I know."

"And you don't care?"

"No."

"Ok, Maggie's it is."

Trisha loves Maggie's, a cozy spot for homey food and draft beer in an otherwise trend-heavy midtown. She'd have lunch there five times a week, if she could gather up the company. Mondays, however, had been the day of new food for me, but I hadn't thought about what I would have for lunch. I didn't devote an hour of my time on Sunday to citysearch.com trying to find some new exotic restaurant. It just didn't cross my mind. And when Trisha asked, I said the first thing that popped into my head.

Trisha asked if I was sure about our lunch spot about three more times during our walk over to Forty-seventh and

Madison. I said yes the first two times, but by the third time I had a real answer.

"I'm over it."

Trisha shrugged her shoulders and nodded. It was apparently a good enough answer. I've known Trisha for under a year. The Monday food adventures began shortly after I started working at Aster Andrews. She doesn't know that it's odd for me to break routine or, at least, to break a routine without a substitute in place. It's acceptable, in her opinion, for me to just be over it.

I thought it was kind of funny and a little bit sad. I mean, traditionally, it was normal for me not to be rattled at the end of a relationship and equally normal for me to give up "one of the three" only once I'd become obsessed with a new interest. I wonder how often we spend considerable amounts of time with people who have no idea who we are.

Chapter 17: A.C.D.C

I was making a power play, in Jane's opinion, when I passed on a business trip to Washington, D.C. She didn't come out and directly say this, but it was clear.

"I'd like you to come to the convention with me," she said. Her body was rigid as usual. Her back was always unnaturally straight, as though an imaginary brace were in place.

"When is it?" I asked.

"Why?"

"So I know if I can make it."

"If you can make it? This is a great opportunity. Technically, Trisha should be going with me. She's higher up, but I think you're ready."

She needlessly shuffled a pile of papers into a bright blue tabbed folder on her desk.

"So, when is it?"

I stood in front of her, instead of sitting.

I found that I was becoming rattled less often. In the past, I would have co-opted Jane's enthusiasm. I would have believed this was a great opportunity just because she said it was. Instead, I decided, it was just an opportunity and the real opportunity was to see D.C., not to go to an

emerging technologies conference. With my limited understanding of our company and my division, I still knew that this was a fishing expedition with a side goal of acquiring new jargon. Jane needed to be seen there. Aster Andrews needed to be seen there. I could take it or leave it.

"The conference is July Fourth weekend."

"I can't go. I'm going to Atlantic City."

"With who?"

"Just me."

"And you get really pissed off when you cancel on yourself?"

"I didn't use to."

"But you do now?"

Her eyes stretched open; her heavily mascared lashes reached up to her thin, brown eyebrows.

"I guess. Anyway, my room is booked and my plans are set. Actually, you approved my vacation day requests for that Thursday and Tuesday."

Jane was angry. Her teeth were gritted and her face was flush. She had the pretty kind of blushing. I thought about telling her this. Jane's the kind of woman who was almost always ready and willing to accept a compliment.

This, I thought, was the rare situation in which she was not.

"You're throwing away a fantastic professional opportunity in order to pump nickels next to some blue haired ladies."

"I'm sorry, Jane. I really am. I wish I could go, but the room is paid for and I can't afford to just throw that kind of cash away."

Jane gave the appearance of a retreat. Her back relaxed a bit. She smiled a slow, toothless smile and turned up the palms of her hands.

"Ok, I suppose I should be taking Trisha anyway."

She drummed her long, blood-red nails on her desk and then continued.

"This is for the best. It doesn't seem you're ready anyway."

I knew her game. I was surprised that I knew her game, but I did. She was baiting me. I'd seen her do it a dozen times with everyone from clients to the office manager to the guy who sells organic, vegan sandwiches from a cart in our building. The situation was reminiscent of the afternoon Jonathan left me. There were cues and expectations and again, I wasn't playing along, but this time I was conscious of it.

"Probably not. I'd just get in the way and be looking for excuses to go sightseeing."

So I knew the game, but I wasn't about to call her on it or cave in. I needed my job. I needed to not be manipulated.

It worked out kind of ok. Trisha was thrilled about the trip. She had no idea that I was asked first. She kept telling me what a great opportunity it was and how I would definitely be going the following year. I pretended that I was a little bit jealous and congratulated her. I was sure that Jane would never tell Trisha the truth, because it would mean admitting that she'd been turned down by me.

I was completely comfortable with the white lie, which used to be a really hard thing for me. I would be racked with guilt. I would confess or internally boil. I would ask for forgiveness or create my own penance. Now I felt that everyone knew exactly what they needed to know. It appeared that my genuine self was a little less genuine than I thought.

I was excited about going to Atlantic City. Jonathan's a gambling man. We made the two hour trip about once a month. He played craps, blackjack, and roulette; I pumped nickels into slot machines next to blue haired ladies. We

had player's cards for five of the major casinos and Jonathan's game play meant special offers from at least one of them every month; mine were a bit more sporadic.

When the Caesar's Palace offers came in, I knew I had to go. Fortune was shining down on me.

Jonathan hadn't come by to get his mail that day. Because he worked the late shift for a computer programming firm, he had been stopping by after the mail was delivered, but before I got home from work. I knew this because a couple of weeks after Jonathan moved out, Mr. Tetratino, the old Italian man next door, casually said he only saw Jonathan getting mail these days and was wondering what was keeping him so busy.

I tore Jonathan's invitation for a free two night stay in a suite into tiny pieces. My invitation was for thirty-percent off the normal rate, if I stayed at least three nights. It would be more than we ever spent on a room in A.C. Since it was only two hours away, Jonathan would never spend the night unless his room was comped.

I picked up the telephone receiver twice. I thought about inviting Trisha or Emily. It would be fun to pal around on the boardwalk, eating deliciously greasy cheese-steak sandwiches and funnel cakes dusted with powdered-sugar. We could hit the clubs; maybe take an afternoon trip

to Wildwood for silly ring toss games or a day of antiquing in Cape May. But both times I picked up the phone, I remember my mother saying that no one takes a vacation alone. It irked me. Why not? I wondered. Couldn't I eat unhealthy foods and curl my toes into the sand alone? Couldn't it still be fun?

I had never taken a vacation by myself. Granted, two hours down the Garden State Parkway in my own car, is hardly a vacation, but it just might be the right first step, I thought.

I called the eight hundred number and booked a suite for five nights. I logged onto my bank's website and transferred one thousand dollars from my savings to my checking account. I made a packing list of the outfits I would need to bring. I couldn't have been more attentive to detail, if I had been going to Paris.

Chapter 18: Casual Sex

In my quest to remain single, I had forgotten one important detail: sex, or lack thereof. I had never had a casual sexual encounter. Every man I'd ever slept with was either already, or soon to become, my boyfriend. I had been lucky enough, over the last ten years, to never truly become sexually frustrated. Sure there were moments, at any given time, that I was sleeping with someone I was hoping would soon leave, but at least I was sleeping with someone.

I'm skeptical of casual sex. I can understand the ease with which men do it. My experience tells me that most men are easily satisfied. Although there is always the possibility of exceeding their expectations, the most minimal effort and skill will undoubtedly give them pleasure.

A woman's body, my body, is more intricate. The points of pleasure, the places of sensitivity, are more esoteric. With each new man I became involved with there was always a period of adjustment, a tutorial phase during which he learned the mechanics of me. I was unsure that a casual, single night encounter could be as satisfying.

I thought about calling Jonathan or maybe another former boyfriend, and partaking in some ex-sex. We could

capitalize on the benefits of physical memory without the promises. Emily, I remembered, always had one last hurrah. However, I also remembered that promises - imagined or real - had a tendency to sneak back in. One of the two people involved was likely to misinterpret break-up sex as make-up sex.

With previous partners ruled out, I decided to go on the prowl for a one night stand. I hit a different local bar every weeknight for four days.

On Monday night, Seamus's was packed with potential hotties. Dozens of boys in tight, soiled softball pants, clinging white tee shirts or loose jerseys crowded the bar three deep, smacking each other with one hand, lifting pilsner glasses with the other. At least ten made direct eye contact with me, several offered sporadic, devilish grins, and two sent over drink. As beautiful and willing as a lot of them were, I could not follow through. So many young men gathered together, wearing the same clothes was daunting. They were like a pack of wolves and I was a fawn. I went home drunk and alone.

There were better odds at The Sitting Bull on Tuesday night, because Jake Stanton was there. Jake Stanton is an infamous whore and reportedly a natural talent in the sack. We spent an hour doing shots and flirting unabashedly until

Marcus walked through the door. Marcus is Jonathan's best friend. I became suddenly ashamed of myself, sure I was making a spectacle, laughing audibly at Jake's lame double entendres, slapping his knee with my hand. Marcus looked at me with raised eyebrows as he walked past toward the back poolroom. I followed him back there without a word to Jake.

"Hey, Marcus."

"Hey, Holl, how goes it?" He looked up briefly while gathering the balls into the plastic triangle. "Wanna shoot?"

"Nah, I'm heading out. Just thought I'd say hi and bye."

"Leaving with Jake?" he asked and then added under his breath, "How original."

The boys in town have a love hate relationship with Jake. They love the idea of sleeping with every woman they meet, hate the fact that it's always Jake and never them. I know now that I shouldn't have caved in like I did, but it was frightening enough to initiate a new sexual persona, never mind doing it in public.

"I'm not leaving with Jake, jackass. Why do you all think every woman who spends a little time with him is going to spread her legs?"

"Hey, don't take it so personally, Holly. You're single. You're an adult. Do what you please."

He turned his back to get his cue stick, chuckling at himself.

I wanted to be brave. I wanted to grab Jake by the arm and drag him back to my apartment, but I wasn't brave. The only thing I grabbed was my purse, pausing for a second to give Jake a fake invitation to join Marcus in the poolroom. This way Marcus would know I didn't leave with Jake.

I went to more bars on Wednesday and Thursday, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. I was full of regret and cheap wine. I made eye contact with no one except the young woman or man behind the bar. So on Friday, when David called to invite me to a conference in New Brunswick the next day, I immediately agreed.

"I thought you didn't want to get involved," Emily said. Her irritation was palpable even through the telephone.

"I have no intention of getting involved. I intend to get laid."

"He's boyfriend material. You said so yourself."

"I can still choose not make a boyfriend out of his material, can't I?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

That was a really good question. Could I? I assumed that I could.

"Of course, I can. Besides he's perfect. I already know that he can have sex and maintain a friendship. He did it with Trisha and they're best friends now."

"You're not Trisha."

"But he is David."

"It all sounds suspect to me. You're not talking about having drinks or catching a movie with some random guy. He's met your family. You're going to see his mother give a keynote lecture. It sounds like the start of something."

"He's my best shot at a one night stand, Emily. I want to have a one night stand, already. I'm almost thirty years old and I've never had a goddamn one night stand."

"He doesn't qualify. A one night stand mean no chance of seeing the guy again. It implies a complete lack of intimacy. You're going to meet his mom. Your mom already adores him. Just go back to the bar and find Jake. He's perfect for the job."

Emily had a lot of strong points, but she was missing the big picture and thoroughly getting on my nerves. First, she'd never even met David or Trisha and second, she didn't know how committed I was to staying single. Sure, the

complications were there, but I knew I could handle it. I was taking multiple steps to ensure success.

I gave myself two concrete opportunities to score. The first of the panels David wanted to see was at ten in the morning on Saturday. I suggested he drive into Jersey that night and crash at my place, so we could easily head out in the a.m. I also suggested we book a room at the conference center in case we got tipsy at the evening reception. He was amenable to both. He offered to pick up some old Hepburn movies and I promised delicious take-out. He was coming over at around eight, so I skipped out of work early to prep.

Chapter 19: Audrey not Kate

"So I was at the video store and I realized we forgot one major clarification," David said, setting his bags down in the den.

"What was that?"

"Hepburn," he continued, "is not as specific as it would seem."

"Aha."

I couldn't help smiling. He was damn cute. I wasn't sure I'd really ever noticed before. I mean yes, I knew he was classically, ridiculously handsome, but cute is another story altogether. Cute requires good looks and charm. Cute is more elusive. It's in the way the mind works and is reflected in the features. It's a precious balance between boy and man.

"So the question became: is she an Audrey girl or a Kate girl?"

"Good question."

I wanted to grab him by his sandy brown hair. It was kind of feathered back, really eighties, a horror-show look for probably every other man on the planet.

"And I thought, Audrey is very classy, so is Holly, and, alas, so is Kate."

"No winner here."

"All winners here."

David gestured toward me and then to himself.

"Let's make our plates, before the food gets cold," I said.

Why did he have to be cute? Why couldn't he just be hot and preferably obnoxious?

We moved into the kitchen and David continued to talk about the ways in which I resemble both Katharine and Audrey Hepburn. How exactly can a man who says these things not be attractive?

Physically he thought I was more Kate - the light hair and eyes, the classical features.

"Small, stunning, green eyes," he said, "fine, deep cheekbones."

He stood still, studying my face.

"Like you, she looked like you."

I was a moth; he was a flame.

"But," he went on, "Kate was a whip, harsh even. Her words could lacerate - I'm speaking of characters of course. Kate's characters always needed to learn to be soft. Audrey just was, even in real life."

"Soft? Soft's good?"

I was baiting him. Who the hell cares why you remind a man of a Hepburn, either Hepburn?

"Oh, yes. Audrey was like fine china. But the power was that she was this fragile work of art, knew she was this fragile work of art, and put herself into situations where she was likely to break."

"Are we talking characters?"

"Of course, Holly." The emphasis was on my name.

"I wanted to be her, you know. I wanted to be Holly Golightly-slash-Audrey Hepburn for a lot of years."

David came closer to me. He put his plate of cooling moo goo gai pan on the table. He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear and ran a finger down my jaw line.

"You might be," he said, "you might be, my huckleberry friend."

He tilted my head up with his finger beneath my chin. He leaned in closer. I could feel his breath above my lip. I wanted him to kiss me so bad. I wanted him to kiss me, make love to me, lift me up onto a fucking white horse and ride away. So I did what any girl in my particular situation should, I coughed. I fake coughed, of course, with amazing precision. We couldn't have sex this way. I was all in for hot, sticky, sweaty sex. The kind of sex you don't anticipate. The kind that you wake up from full of

elation and regret. Sex that would inevitably send us to our separate corners in the light of day. I did not sign up for romance.

"Shit. Let me get you some water," he said as the fake coughs spiraled into actual choking from a lack of steady breathing.

This was the first of several near-misses, the almost-romance of the evening was frustrating at the very least. We opened up my pull-out sofa, put the air conditioner on high, and created a fortress of pillows and blankets. We drank hot peppermint tea and watched *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

He paused the film at various intervals asking if I thought I was more or less like Miss Golightly. It took us over three hours to watch the two hour movie.

I've always enjoyed taking breaks during a movie to talk about it, or when alone, just to think about it. I'm fascinated by the minutia of film that we usually let slip by. The age of the DVD has heightened the pleasure of the pause. I can sit for minutes meditating on a freeze-frame close-up.

This is why I am not a huge fan of the movie theater experience and why I go absolutely crazy when I see a film

in the theater that I love and have to wait months to get my hands on the DVD.

Jonathan insisted that most of our movie experiences took place outside of our own home, because he found it irritating, how many times I wanted to stop the flow in order to discuss a plot point, analyze a character, or simply use the bathroom. Jonathan believed that movies were meant to be taken all in one dose. He didn't understand how someone like me could love stage drama and do what I did film, but I loved picking movies apart in action, discovering the story nuance by nuance. David, apparently, was the same.

This recognition was no small moment for me. In my quest for self, I had created a list (much shorter than the original list I made with Emily) that catalogued the handful of things about me that I thought I could take complete, personal credit for - which is probably untrue, but at least I couldn't trace these back to an ex-boyfriend.

There were a few sustaining quirks: my obsession with etymology, my need to sniff any new food or drink before I would put it in my mouth, and my piece-meal procedure for watching movies.

David stopped the film early on.

"Do you lose your keys a lot?"

"Lately, no, but damn if I didn't all the time as a kid and we didn't live in the best of neighborhoods. My mom started deducting the cost of changing the main front door lock out of my allowance, just to get me to be more careful."

"Fabulous." He beamed.

"Do men give you money for the powder room?" he asked immediately afterward.

"Not sure I've ever been to the powder room."

"Just keeps getting better."

"Do you sit in your window and strum your guitar?" He asked later on.

"Not exactly, but I do read the newspaper in that window seat over there."

When the movie was finally over, David propped himself sideways on a stack of pillows to face me.

"Now tell me about it. Why Holly Golightly?"

"Honestly, because her name was Holly. Initially, anyway. I had this whole thing growing up. I was sure I was named wrong, that somehow my true talent, my destiny was being hidden from me because I wasn't called the right thing."

"But Holly's a nice name."

"Yeah, nice name, nice girl. Can it get anymore pedestrian?"

"What did you want to be called?"

"For awhile I was pretty stuck on Sabrina. It's a whole thing. New girl, uber-pretty. I got booted from the angels. It was a harsh experience for a ten year old girl."

He pointed to the remaining video we had yet to watch. The other Hepburn film he'd brought was *Sabrina*.

"I've never seen it. I was afraid she'd be cooler than Golightly. But anyway, I was in college, still not recovered from my etymological nightmare, when one of my English professors called me Miss Golightly after I walked in a few minutes late for a seminar."

"You didn't know about *Breakfast at Tiffany's* until college?"

"Not the point. Anyway, he did it up, you know. The annoying Japanese stereotype: 'Miss-a Gorightry, I protest,' he said over and over. Everyone laughed. I had to ask the guy who sat next to me, what the hell he was talking about."

"How can you be obsessed about your name and not know about Holly Golightly? Did you grow up under a rock?"

He was playing with me, but this time I wasn't too keen on it. I was embarrassed that my mother didn't hand

over the Holly Golightly legacy when I came home crying all those years ago. For awhile, once I'd seen the film, I would lie and say it was my namesake.

"Kind of. My parents aren't movie people at all. It was small screen in my house. All sitcoms and dramas. We were experts on Fantasy Island, the Love Boat, the ups and downs of the lovely Brady children, but with movies I was on my own."

"Impossible."

David seemed intrigued. I flashed back to my cousin's wedding. I worried, again, that I was a novelty, me and my barely middle class world.

"You think this is funny?"

"Funny, no, not funny. Charming, perhaps, but not funny."

"I'm glad my stilted upbringing is charming you."

He opened his eyes a little wider and raised himself up on one arm, so that he hovered a bit above me.

"Stilted? Not at all. You had family tv time, so what if films didn't happen. I was reared by several eight-foot bookcases, a VCR, and a remote control."

I think he was reaching, trying to make me feel better. The haves have a tendency to make the have-nots feel like we're better off, as though the absence of money

automatically signifies the presence of love. I wasn't offended, though. There was a naivety in his response that I hadn't seen before in him. I think he believed what he said and I decided that was good enough for me.

By the time we put *Sabrina* in the DVD player, it was well past midnight and neither of us was awake before she left for Paris.

I dreamt that David and I were in Paris. We walked hand in hand along the Champs Elysees - actually, we were walking on the boulevard in Weehawken along the Hudson River, but in that way that only dreams can mutate reality, it was Paris. We spoke with French accents like actors in cheesy American films. With the Eiffel Tower/Empire State building in the background, he ran his finger along my jaw line and then his entire hand over my head.

"Come on, sleepy head. Rise and shine."

"Rise and shine," I repeated with sleepy eyes.

"Yes, rise and shine," David said, still stroking my hair. But we were no longer in Paris/New Jersey. Instead it was just New Jersey and we were back on my pull-out sofa.

"Oh, wow, good morning," I said, sitting upright too quickly. "Are we late? Did we oversleep? I forgot to set the alarm. I'm sorry."

"Not late. It's 7:30. I thought we'd have breakfast."

"Sure, that's fine. Let me shower."

I jumped out of the bed we were sharing, still dumbfounded as to how we wound up sharing a bed. I rushed into the bathroom and straight to the mirror to check my reflection. It was just as I suspected: bed-head, raccoon eyes, creased cheeks.

I was in the bathroom for over an hour. I showered, shaved, made up my face, and blow-dried my hair. The only thing I was not equipped to do in there was get dressed. I wrapped myself in a large, lime green bath-towel and tried to run quickly to my bedroom. The kitchen, however, is right off the bathroom and David was standing in wait with a cup of steaming hot coffee in his hand.

"You have gorgeous shoulders," he said without the slightest hint of self-consciousness.

"Oh, boy. Ok, I'll be right out."

I scurried past him, positive I was covered in those horrible strawberry splotches.

We ate bagels with cream cheese, drank hot, black coffee, and engaged in inane chatter, while pretending that we both weren't imagining the other naked. We took turns being distracted, responding to things said a few moments before, neither visibly flustered at the non sequitur conversation.

The tension lessened a bit once we got in the car, like a small blast of cool air from a store door opening on a sweltering afternoon. We had the road to watch now, an excuse to avoid eye contact.

Chapter 20: The Conference

Academic conferences are not nearly as interesting, or educational, as one would believe. David and I took turns picking the panels we would attend. There were two panels he wanted to attend from the get go. We missed the first one due to Jersey Shore traffic. The second, "Characters who Stand the Test of Time," was about the reappearance of eighteenth century literary characters in contemporary poetry. It was a complete mental pissing contest. The winner pulled the most obscure characters out of the past and deposited them, through the vaguest of means possible, into some otherwise unexplainable free verse. David, who actually studies things like this, was as bored as I was.

"So that was different," David said as we filed out of the small stadium style classroom.

"Not like most conferences?" I asked.

"Actually it was," he said. "We can just hang out until tonight's lecture, if you want."

I was relieved to hear him say that. It wasn't simply that the panel was boring; it was confusing. It made me feel stupid.

"We can just go find my mom," he said. "Maybe have lunch with her."

"No," I said a little too quickly, "I want to go to more panels."

"Which ones?" He asked.

I thumbed through the conference brochure, hoping that something vaguely familiar would pop out at me. I did major in English drama. I did take my fair share of lit courses. Why didn't any of this make sense to me?

"Um, how about this one?" I held the brochure up with my finger beneath the title, "The Shape of Things: The Text as Body, The Body as Text." Maybe it would be sexy, I thought.

We went to the panel and it was as confusing and non-linear as the first, but at least I wasn't in close quarters with his mother. I kept thinking about what Emily had said, *you're gonna meet his mom*, and I was determined to keep my *meeting* her to the most formal of circumstances. I would see her speech and that was that.

After the unsexy presentation which focused on the literal shapes of words on the page in Modernist Literature, David had an idea. We would attend more panels, but instead of hoping for something interesting to be presented, we would wager, for bragging rights, on which paper was least like the panel title. David won every time, because he could figure out what the papers would be

focusing on. But I didn't care, the afternoon was at least working out to be free of family time. Until at four o'clock when David said we should be going.

"But the lecture isn't until seven," I said.

"We have to meet her at the hotel," he said. "It's tradition."

Tradition. Tradition in my family went something like this. Mom always makes the potato salad. Billy always gets the beer. For David it was a family gathering in the nicest suite a university affiliated conference hotel had, before his mother gave a keynote address. Who were these people?

"She gets nervous right before. The only time she wasn't nervous, was the only time her lecture was ruined. Technology snafus and a flyer with the wrong auditorium on it. It was bad. So now, I think, even if she isn't nervous, not being nervous makes her nervous."

We spent the next two hours participating in a bizarre ritual.

"Ice, David. I need an ice pack," Leslie Prescott announced, when she opened the door to her suite.

"Hi, Mom." David kissed her on the cheek. "This is Holly."

"Hello, Holly," she said, presumably to me, but her eyes never left David and she did not move from the threshold.

"I'll get it," he said."

"No, let me." I jumped. "I'll go. You stay with your mom."

I was terrified of this tiny woman. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, one hundred pounds soaking wet. Her jet black hair fell in loose waves over the tapered white blazer she wore. Her face was stunning. A mini-replica of David's.

"I'll get the bucket of ice," I said.

David and his mother chuckled, as they both turned to look at me, finally.

"An ice pack, dear. I need an ice pack. For my eyes." She spread her fingers out and waved them in front of her face.

"Ok, I'm on it."

I fled the scene. Her eyes looked fine to me, but I was not about to argue the point. I returned a few minutes later with three ice packs, just in case.

Leslie Prescott practiced her opening joke about a dozen times. It began, "Normally I'd just get right into

the presentation, but as I was walking up to the podium, I suddenly realized ... blah blah blah."

She iced her non-puffy eyes every twenty minutes. She carried a flute of champagne around as she paced the room in silence, but never took a sip.

David was not ruffled. This was business as usual. I learned later that he had missed only one of his mother's addresses in the last ten years. Her quirky behavior and his attentive support were not as strange as they seemed, he explained. Everything was planned out, a repetition of conferences past. She didn't acknowledge me, because I wasn't part of the routine, he said, not because she didn't like me.

Dr. Prescott's lecture was a blur. I was disappointed that she didn't talk to me more. I was angry that she treated me like a piece of furniture, sometimes leaning on the back of the chair where I sat, talking over me, to David. When it was time to go, she said, "let's go, David," like I wasn't even there.

I admit that I didn't want to meet his mother, but I assumed if I was going to spend two hours in a hotel room with her, we would eventually meet.

I harped on these details while his little, genius mother held the packed auditorium in a thrall. They laughed

and sighed and clapped and hooted. She was a celebrity here.

The reception at the President's house was better. There was liquor. There was, actually, a full bar. We weren't there a full minute, when I spotted it.

"Vodka Martini," I said to the pretty sorority girl bartender, "extra dirty, extra olives."

"Still working the martinis," a voice whispered from behind me.

I knew I knew the voice, but I couldn't place it. I started to turn around, but a hand on my shoulder held me in place.

"Get your drink first," he said.

The bartender handed me my glass, a toothpick stacked with five olives rested against the side.

"Hey," Alex smiled like a little a boy in a candy store or a big boy in a porn shop.

"Hey," I said, smiling myself.

"Worked things out with David, I see." He pointed across the room with his chin.

"What are you doing here?"

"My sister. She's an undergrad here."

"Oh," I started to ask another question, but he cut me off.

"That's my cue," he said looking back where David had been. "But here," he added, slipping me a cocktail napkin.

I leave the second week of August. Have a drink with me? His name and phone number were wrapped in a smudgy black ink heart. I didn't have any pockets, so I shoved the napkin into my bra, watching Alex walk away.

"Who's that?" David asked.

"Alex," I said. "The bartender from Jenna's wedding."

"What's he doing here?"

"His sister goes here."

I drank a lot of martinis, at least six. I stopped counting at six. I got drunk a lot around David. But this drunk was different from the others. I was not drowning non-existent sorrows like we had at Divine and Moe's nor was I hoping to disappear as I had at the wedding. This time I was sexy-drunk, hot-girl drunk. For the first time, in a long time, there were, not one, but two incredibly attractive men, in the same room, both wanting to sleep with me.

David could not have been more attentive. My glass was always full, though I never made my way back to the bar, and periodically he would return with both a glass and small, clear glass plate bearing a couple of stalks of

sautéed asparagus or a few mini-quiche. I was full of finger-food, vodka, and pheromones.

"I can't take my eyes off you," David said as we stumbled into the door to our hotel room.

"Me neither," I slurred, though I wasn't looking at him. My unstable head bounced from shoulder to shoulder.

"You are so beautiful," he said, kissing my neck as he fumbled for the key.

"You, too." I threw my head back, in what was supposed to be a flirty gesture, but instead I wound up slamming the back of my skull against the wall. "Fuck!" I shouted.

"In a minute," he said in a very deep voice. I flashed back to my lunch with Trisha and imagined him whispering, "you like that baby, don't you?" But, to be honest, it wasn't funny anymore. I wanted him to do something to me and I wanted to like it and I didn't care what he said during.

David slid the card into the magnetic lock, pushed the door open, and then lifted me up by the waist. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and let him lay me down beneath him on the bed.

He kissed my face gently, my cheekbones, my temples, the tip of my nose, my chin. He moved to my neck, his tongue moved in slow circles down to my chest.

With my eyes closed, I yanked the buttons of my shirt open and then thrust my fingers into his hair.

"You feel so good," I said. My entire body was humming.

"You feel," he started to say, but then he pulled back away from me.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

I kept my eyes closed. Closed tightly. What the hell was what?

I opened one eye and looked at David. He was standing up.

"What the hell is that?" he asked again.

"What?" I asked back.

With both eyes opened now, I sat upright and looked down at my almost bare chest, expecting to find that a giant pimple or hairy mole had suddenly appeared. But my skin was clear; there was nothing wrong with my body. David wasn't looking at me. He was looking at what was pressed against my left breast.

"Holly?"

"Shit," I said. "I forgot about that."

He grabbed the folded cocktail napkin and studied the blurry heart, name, and phone number, before unfolding it.

"You picked someone up, tonight?"

"I didn't exactly pick someone up. He just. He just gave me the napkin and I—"

"Put it in your bra?"

He was furious. This wasn't going well.

I took the napkin from him and put it on the bedside table.

"Come here," I purred. "Forget about the note."

"That's it, forget about it. That's what you have to say?"

"What difference does it make? It's not like you're my boyfriend or anything."

"No, I guess not," he said.

David went to the closet and pulled down a spare blanket and pillow. I watched silently as he created a makeshift sleeping bag on the floor next to the bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked, once he was curled up in his blanket, but he didn't answer me.

I turned off the light and curled myself up on the bed.

"Remember when I said you were like Audrey?" he asked after a few minutes of unbearable silence.

I leaned over the edge of the bed.

"I remember," I said.

"I was wrong."

The following morning was worse than the trip back from the wedding. It wasn't quiet at all. David spoke to me with constant sarcasm.

"Don't forget your love letter," he said while I was packing up my stuff.

"Should we see if Alex wants to have breakfast with us?" he asked in the elevator.

He didn't even look at me when we pulled up in front of my house.

"I had a good time," I said.

"Yeah." He kept his hands on the steering wheel. "For a good time call—"

"I need my bag." I cut him off.

David hit a button to pop open the trunk. He kept the car running, his foot on the brake.

Chapter 21: Sisters

Trisha and Jane were nowhere to be found on Monday morning. Both of their offices were locked and dark. I knew Jane had been in the office earlier since she had left a bi, black binder with a memo on my desk chair.

Before I even bothered to read the note, I went to the reception area.

"Sandra, do you know where Jane is?"

Sandra squirmed in her seat and glanced up at me nervously.

"They left a half hour ago."

"They?" I asked

"Jane and Trisha," she said quickly.

"Where did they go?"

"They had a meeting or something. I don't know. I'm not sure. Jane said they'd be gone most of the day."

This was an odd turn of events. Jane and Trisha did not work on the same clients. There were two senior business development managers, Jane and Paul. Trisha worked with Paul. I worked with Jane.

"Was Paul with them?" I asked.

"No," she said as the telephone on her desk rang.

Sandra looked relieved.

"I've got to get this, Holly," she said.

I walked back to my desk and read the memo, already knowing what it would say, already furious.

In my year at Aster Andrews, I had only ever complained of one task: cold calling. I did not sign on to be a glorified telemarketer. I hated calling companies and asking to speak to their chief officers. I hated it because they almost never spoke to you. In most cases, it's as hard as trying to get the President of the United States on the phone.

On the few occasions you did get someone on the phone, it was through pretense. I had to use false intimacy, act as though the Chief Executive or Information Officer had been expecting my call. I could only imagine the riot act their assistants were read after my calls got through.

Once I did get an executive on the phone, I had to try to convince them to give Aster Andrews a sales pitch meeting. This meant convincing them that they needed our services, which is practically impossible since I don't exactly understand what it is our company does.

Of the hundreds of calls I made, I only managed to schedule two meetings. This took a toll on my self confidence. I spoke to Jane about it early on and she had surprisingly agreed that big money deals were rarely

achieved outside of a formal RFP (request for proposal).
Yet here was that ugly binder and the even uglier memo:

I will be out of the office most of the day. I have left work that should keep you busy. I would prefer that you compile that list I asked for a few weeks ago, but since you were resistant, I thought I'd give you an option.

Please use the script we devised earlier when making the calls.

When Jane put things in official writing, there was trouble lurking. Back in the early days, when she thought she was going to mold me into mini-Jane, she confided that documentation was the greatest weapon in corporate life. I found that philosophy working itself on me.

If I complained to anyone about the assignment, I would have to show the memo, which documents my *resistance* in doing another task just weeks earlier. I had to make the calls. The morning dragged on with me leaving message after message for men and women who had absolutely no interest in calling me back. I was startled when my phone actually rang at about eleven.

"Hi, baby-bug," my mom said.

"Hey, mom!" I had never been happier to hear from her.

"See you at one, right?" she asked.

I had completely forgotten that we had a lunch date. Mom and Aunt Lily were making their annual trip into the city for a matinee. I powered through fifteen more phone calls, all of which were unsuccessful and then decided to clean out and reorganize my desk for the next hour and a half.

I met my mom and aunt in the lobby brew pub at one o'clock. They were already seated at a bistro table near the window. My mother was nervously straightening a napkin on her lap. Aunt Lily was gazing at passers-by. It made me sad to watch them avoid each other. It was like this all the time. I would catch them not enjoying each other's company. I had to catch them, because unless my mother was drunk or the conversation at hand was especially prickly, they pretended to be the best of friends.

I'm the baby, for both of them. My Aunt's youngest is forty years old. I thought when the grandchildren started coming they would stop thinking of me as a child, but they didn't. Although at times it's infuriating, I was feeling particularly small at the moment and was looking forward to a condescending, yet well-intentioned lunch.

Aunt Lily spotted me first and waved me over to the table. They both stood up, took turns hugging me, and telling me how grown up I looked in my "business clothes."

"Look at my big girl," my mom said, smiling uncharacteristically at Aunt Lily.

Aunt Lily nodded in agreement and stroked my hair.

They ordered their white-wine spritzers. I ordered myself a pint. Then the interrogation began.

"How's Jonathan?" my mother asked.

"I don't know," I said. "How am I supposed to know?"

"You haven't seen him?"

"Mom, we broke up. He moved out, remember?"

"Well, I just thought. You know, these things are not always final."

"Maureen," Aunt Lily chimed in, "I don't think Holly wants to talk about it."

"I think Holly can decide for herself."

"I don't want to talk about him," I said.

Mom looked like she was going to cry. I might as well have said that I loved Aunt Lily more and wished she was my mother.

"It's just. I'm trying to put it behind me, Mom. That's all."

I reached across the table and gave her hand a squeeze. The tension left her face.

"What did you do this weekend?" Aunt Lily asked.

"I went to a conference." I winced as I spoke. "How 'bout you guys?"

"What kind of conference? For work?" my mother asked.

"No. An academic conference at Rutgers."

My mother and aunt waited for me to elaborate.

"With David."

"Uh-huh. I see," my mother said. "How did that go?" She asked, emphasizing the word "that."

"What was the conference about?" Aunt Lily asked.

"How's David?" Mom asked.

"Did you enjoy it?" Aunt Lily asked.

"Are you seeing a lot of him?" Mom asked.

"What show are you guys seeing again?" I asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from me.

"I love you, you're perfect, now change," my aunt said, turning to my mother. Aunt Lily's eyes were cold and still.

Despite Aunt Lily's glare, it was only a momentary reprieve. My mother asked about David again; my aunt asked about the conference. They were fighting through me. It was making me sad, not at all what I expected, or needed from this lunch.

"I'm thinking of visiting Debbie," I inserted into their ping-ponging questions.

"That's great," my mom said. "With who?"

"Just me," I said.

Aunt Lily smiled.

"I was thinking it's so nice how you and Aunt Lily have each other," I said, looking at my mom. "And here we are - Debbie and me - and we barely know each other."

I was trying to make them uncomfortable, to let them know I could see through their façade. I wanted them to feel guilty and it worked. What I didn't count on was that I felt guilty too. I had told the truth; I had a sister I barely knew.

I called Debbie as soon as I got back to the office, and we decided that I would fly down in August for her birthday.

Chapter 22: Cold Shoulders

Jane and Trisha didn't come back to the office on Monday. I didn't see Trisha until Tuesday morning when we were both waiting at the elevator bank.

"Hey," I said. "Where were you yesterday?"

"Don't, Holly," she said without looking at me.

"Don't what?" I asked.

Trisha shifted her eyes toward me, but did not turn her head.

"I can't talk to you right now," she said as the elevator pinged open.

I walked inside and held the door open, but she didn't follow.

A man in a crisp black suit motioned for Trisha to enter the elevator, but she stayed still.

"I'll wait for the next one," she said.

I stood in the lobby in front of the frosted double doors to our office. Trisha walked past me as though I weren't even there. I followed her into her office and closed the door behind me.

"What's wrong, Trisha? Did I do something wrong?"

I knew I hadn't done anything. What could I have done? And then I remembered the conference. Had Jane told Trisha

that she was playing second fiddle? I assumed that was it, but I was surprised that Trisha would even care about such a thing.

"Is this about D.C.?" I asked.

"This is about D.P.," she said.

"D.P.?"

"David Prescott."

"David? What?"

She sat at her desk and folded her hands together. She took a deep breath, rolled her eyes, and nodded her head.

"David Prescott, Holly. My best friend. He whom you see fit to fuck with."

"Trish," I laughed. "Come on."

She wasn't amused.

"Trish," I repeated without laughing. "Come on. You're the one who said he could handle it."

"I said he would get over the wedding thing. I didn't say you could keep fucking around with him and that he would be all right with it."

She turned on her computer and added, "I'm not all right with it and I don't want to talk about it."

I stayed in front of her desk for a couple of minutes, trying to think of something to say, hoping that she would say something, but nothing came.

This was our first fight. It's odd for grown-ups, non-related grown-ups, to have a fight. I considered apologizing, but I didn't think that was particularly fair. Trisha didn't know what I was going through and David's a big boy; he can take care of himself. It's none of her business, I reasoned, what went on between the two of us.

"Fine," I said. "Be that way." I spun on my heels and walked out of her office.

"Be that way?" Emily laughed into the phone.

"Well, it's been a long time since I had a friend who wouldn't talk to me."

"You can understand her point, though. Can't you?"

I didn't answer.

"He's her best friend. Wouldn't you be pissed off at someone if they treated me like that?"

"I didn't do anything wrong. If David wanted a fling with me and I wanted something more would anyone be calling him an asshole?"

"No one is calling you an asshole," Emily said.

No one was calling me an asshole, but I felt like one. I was doing everything wrong. I was even less myself as a single woman than before.

Work sucked. My love life sucked. My family was just as dysfunctional as ever. My friends didn't like me. My savings account was quickly dwindling. I had to seriously start thinking about moving. I could barely make ends meet. Something had to give, I thought. And on Wednesday it did.

I was working on meaningless task after meaningless task. Jane was no longer bringing me to client meetings. Trisha and Jane had closed the Marcia Keyes deal on Monday and Jane advised that she had brought me in before I was ready. Trisha was still avoiding me. I had taken to brown bagging it and going for solo walks on my lunch hour.

I couldn't believe it, when I checked my email and found a note from Marcia Keyes in my inbox. The message line read: Dinner?

She was disappointed that I wasn't at the closing deal and wanted to have dinner. Tonight. Could I make it at seven? Was I free? I was embarrassingly free.

I got to the door of Andizzio's at a quarter to seven. I didn't have much experience with the Lower East Side, so I left the office at five. It took me ridiculously long to get there, because I took the wrong train, twice. I peered through the floor to ceiling window, covering my eyes to stop the glare. The restaurant was a large, single room

with few obstructions. A long, copper bar ran the length of one side. Four person tables draped in white linens zig-zagged throughout the rest of the room. Only about half the room was filled with diners and Marcia was nowhere in sight. I heard footsteps clacking from behind me and spun away from the window, feeling like a peeping-tom. I watched Marcia walk right past me and into the restaurant. I followed her in.

After the hostess seated us at a "quiet table," Marcia handed me a thick, legal-sized, blue envelope.

"I'm offering you a job, Holly," she said. "Everything is in that packet. I'd like you to look it over and think about it and then get back to me."

I was completely confused.

"You're offering me a job?" I asked and started to open the envelope. "What kind of job?"

"It's all in there. Once you've looked it over, we can talk about it."

I peeled open the envelope and pulled a stack of papers out.

"Not now, dear," she said. "Now we're going to have a nice dinner. You can read it over in the next day or two. Get back to me Friday?"

"I'm going out of town tomorrow, until Tuesday."

"Then a week from today. Get back to me Wednesday."

Our waitress came over to take our orders. Marcia suggested we start with the lobster tails. I started to say I didn't like them, but backtracked and said I'd never had lobster before.

"It's your lucky night," she said.

It was difficult to sit through dinner. I was never sure if Marcia and I were just shooting the breeze or if I was being interviewed. Not to mention the fact that I was well aware that I had virtually no skills. Before working at Aster Andrews, I had spent a few years processing court orders for a probation office. At Aster Andrews, I had honed my ability to speak to strangers. I'm a reasonably strong speller, but Marcia couldn't have known that. And I collect random facts by reading the newspaper all the time. Why was she offering me a job?

The blue envelope peeked out of the top of my tote bag beneath my chair. I was dying to read it. I considered stealing a glance when Marcia excused herself to use the bathroom, but I was afraid she would catch me and I didn't want to look too eager.

We were at the restaurant until almost eleven o'clock. Marcia was really a pleasant woman, but I was getting tired

and worried that by the time I found my way back to midtown, my bus would no longer be running.

Marcia spotted me looking nervously at my watch.

"Do you have to be somewhere?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I was just. It's a habit. Always checking the time. You know, bus schedules and all."

"Don't you take the train?"

"From here, yeah. I need to get a bus home, though."

"You don't live in the city?"

I hated this question. Unless you were ridiculously rich and had a monster house in Deal or Hartford, everyone expected you to live in the city.

"No, I live in Jersey. Just past the tunnel."

I could see the look of horror growing on her face. I wondered when the last time Marcia Keyes had to get on a bus or even a train for that matter.

"There won't be any traffic now," I said, trying to convince her that my lot in life was not so bad. "It's just they stop running for the night around twelve or so."

Marcia offered her company car service. I had only used corporate car service once before and the experience was only slightly less humiliating than waiting all night for a bus at the terminal.

"Oh, I couldn't. That's too generous," I said.

I remembered the torment of directing the driver in the posh Lincoln Town car through the streets of Bergen County.

"I insist," Marcia said.

Even though I knew that the drivers for these services were compensated quite well, most of them made more money than me, I took forty dollars out of the ATM for a tip. I could have taken a regular cab home for that money, but I was sick of feeling out of place in those situations. I didn't want the driver to know that I wasn't supposed to be in his car.

Vita

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