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ANIMAL CRACKER



Cover by: Bradley Wind
Author photo by: Fydneý Zelinka

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ISBN: 1484107608
ISBN-13: 9781484107607

For Sydney and Jack
And in memory of Freddie
Part Bichon, part Cairn terrier, all parts loveable

13-783

ONE

Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened.

- Anatole France

chapter

ONE

I was sitting in my new boss's office at the Animal Protection Organization, a 12-site pet shelter operation, for our weekly supervisory meeting, surrounded by the entire contents of the Critter World catalogue. Pens shaped like goldfish littered his desk; a collection of mugs featuring a zoo's worth of animals awaited their morning coffee on his credenza.

"So tell me, Diane, what are your dreams? For your life I mean."

Hal leaned back in his chair and folded his arms behind his head.

I was twenty-five years old. I had more dreams than Don Quixote – yes, I'd been an English major – including saving every sad-eyed pup, paying off my student loans without selling my soul, and cuddling with a man-shaped specimen of the human species. I wasn't about to confess any of this to my new boss.

"Well, I..."

"Diane, my dream is for a world that has respect for every living creature, from the lowliest field mouse to the majestic elk on the plain." He

paused, knitting his eyebrows. "No, wait, not respect. Make that reverence. Yeah, reverence for all God's creatures. What do you say to that, Diane?"

"Hal, that's a dream I can really get behind."

"I knew we shared a vision the minute I met you. You have a passion and intelligence that fits right in here."

So far, I was killing it.

"Yeah," he went on. "More than I can say for some people."

He looked at me expectantly. A question seemed to be called for.

"Like, um, who?"

A satisfied smile played about his lips. I'd passed some sort of test.

"Your predecessor. Rebecca."

"What about her?"

His near-perfect face developed some unsightly lines as he scowled at the memory of the imperfect Rebecca.

"Let's just say she didn't exactly fit in here. Not like you."

I didn't want to know any more. At least not at that moment, and not from Hal. I made a mental note to ask someone else about Rebecca, after I'd been here longer and found someone I could trust. Whatever had become of her, it didn't sound good.

"Now, about this press release," he said, pointing to the document I'd handed him. "You need to blump it up."

Blump? I made a mental note to google it later. Conjectured definition - to expand upon. Origin: from the Latin *blumpere*, to swell.

As he smiled like Mr. Universe, the sound of dogs barked from Hal's well-tailored pocket. He reached in and withdrew his phone. I could hear squawking, then Hal.

"Joyce, we already discussed this, and I told you...."

More squawking, Hal drumming his hands on the table. After some eye-rolling and sputtering, he hung up.

"My wife. She's a Harvard professor, a biologist who's written extensively about the role of animals in our ecosystems. You may have heard of her. Joyce Carter?"

Hal was married to Joyce Carter? The Spider Woman?

Joyce Carter had been an obscure zoology professor specializing in arachnids of the American Southwest when she'd been tapped to host a

public television show called *Creepy- Crawlies and Friends*. Boston's Saturday morning TV screens are slithering with spiders and Joyce Carter.

"She's a very impressive woman," I kissed up.

"Got that right." He leaned towards me. "I respect women, Diane. And I like to see them reach their highest potential."

He paused. "You know, I'm a writer too."

His chest *blumped* up.

"You mean like articles on animal rights?"

"No, something else entirely. I'm working on a screenplay. Lots of folks gonna be mighty uncomfortable when this baby gets out there."

He was gonna blow the lid off the animal shelter world?

"What's it about?"

Again, he leaned forward and in a mock stage whisper informed me, "It's about some evil goings-on at that famous university in town. I can't tell you any more than that, except that those hoity snot-noses over there ain't gonna like it. Not one bit."

Hal's face was nearly flawless, piercing blue eyes, firm chin, all topped by wavy dark hair and arranged in perfect symmetry save for the lines etched up and down and across his forehead in a sort of plaid pattern. He wore his love of animals on his sleeve and around his neck. That day's tie, setting off his Brad Pitt-handsome face, featured raccoons scampering under a cascading waterfall, frolicking on an umbrella-decked beach, and, I'm not making this up, lobbing tennis balls, dressed in the formal whites of Wimbledon.

"I studied film in college," I told him. "I mean, not how to make them, but I took a course on contemporary European cinema, and I go to movies all the time."

Hal stared over my head and I almost turned around to see what creature he might have spied behind me. When he resumed speaking, his voiced had shifted into a sonorous tone, as if he were narrating a PBS wild-life special.

"My personal favorite is 'The 400 Blows.' That kid's bleak childhood, well, um, let's just say, the movie speaks to me in a very profound way." He wiped his eye, and I feared my new boss, whom I hardly knew, would erupt into full-fledged waterworks.

"Oh my God, that's one of my absolute favorites too. Well, everything Truffaut actually."

"I'm all for cinematic technique and what not, but y'know, there's nothing like a good story. Sometimes it can even change your life." His eyes misted.

"And I'm guessing there's one that changed yours?"

"Got that right. Late 50's, Saturday afternoon when the movies cost about a buck.

"So what was the movie?"

"None other than" – pregnant pause - 'Old Yeller.'"

"For some reason, I missed that one."

"Diane, it is just about the most pungent movie ever made." *Did he mean poignant?* "It's about a family and a dog that heals their hearts. You go out and rent it and, guaranteed, you'll see what I mean. 'Old Yeller' is why I'm sitting in this chair today."

"Well, Hal, I have a movie like that in my background, too. Did you ever see 'Homeward Bound?'

He nodded.

"Yeah, "Homeward Bound," you're right, that's another great one."

He looked at his watch, and, for emphasis, at the chimp clock over the door. I took the hint.

"See you later," I said, and returned to my office.

Back at my desk to work on the blump-up, having ascertained that there was no such word. So what exactly did he want? Longer? Bouncier? More hyperbolic? I rested my head on my desk for five minutes in an effort to psych myself for the task of turning perfect prose into something possibly less perfect.

And finally, after blumping and plumping, time to go. It had been a tough afternoon. I'd given Hal four versions of the release, each one of them progressively worse, until he'd proclaimed the fifth semi-literate one perfect.

I returned home to my apartment in the more raffish part of Cambridge, far from the upscale enclaves peopled with Harvard faculty, highly-paid consultants, doctors and lawyers. I climbed to the second floor of the two-family house whose landlord hadn't painted the exterior in ten years. When I arrived at the apartment, my roommate, Genie Halstead and her boyfriend, Donnie Wu, were sitting on the couch.

"Let me guess," said Donnie, as I walked in the door. "Bunnies fucking on polyester."

"Dogs peeing on fire hydrants," suggested Genie.

"Nope, today's tie featured raccoons at the beach."

"Tomorrow, the bunnies," asserted Donnie.

Genie returned to the kitchen, where she was stir-frying some veggies. We took turns cooking dinner. I loved the way Genie wanted to please Donnie with his favorite Chinese dishes, but sometimes I thought if I saw that wok one more time, I'd throw it out the window. I never said anything, though, since she was a decent enough cook. Besides, maybe she felt the same way about my Italian-influenced concoctions.

Donnie was a rising star in the editorial department at Boston's only remaining publishing company. He'd just completed work on the acquisition of a book called *Aphrodisiacs Around the World* – antlers with a side of garlic, anyone?

Genie toiled for a pittance where they got away with it because the calling was higher and the work intrinsically rewarding. In other words, journalism. She'd started out at *The Cambridge Connection* in features - first-generation American tot wins spelling bee sort of stuff – and had graduated to the crime beat, which meant break-ins at the baronial Colonial spreads of Harvard and MIT professors on Brattle Street and drug busts of suburban kids in Harvard Square. She yearned for a juicy career-making story that would catapult her into the big time at *Slate*.

Personally, I believed she was made for television news. She wasn't conventionally beautiful– her nose was a bit lopsided, and the right side of her mouth snaked higher than the left when she smiled- but her deep blue eyes, pale skin, and shampoo-commercial, perfectly straight chestnut hair lent her an off-center prettiness.

I'd have killed for that hair. My own dark curly locks had to be ironed into submission daily. Genie was genuinely unaware of her attractiveness. And online journalism was where she intended to make her mark.

Donnie and Genie had met about a year ago, and he felt like the brother I'd never had but often wished for. When my relationship with Andrew ended, he'd thoughtfully fixed me up on a couple of blind dates with colleagues. I probably should have given Steve Hatsopoulos a chance, but nobody could measure up at that point. Lately, I'd been manless and

grateful for whatever male companionship came my way - primarily Donnie's. Though I'll confess, sometimes being around Genie and Donnie could be painful. The way Donnie laughed at her jokes, the way she caressed the back of his neck without even thinking about it, only reminded me of what I'd recently had and lost.

As we dined on rice with bok choy, I recounted my endless rewrites of the press release, and the enigma that was my predecessor, Rebecca.

"He had an affair with her, and she dumped him," speculated Donnie.

"She was discovered running cockfights," Genie surmised.

"Probably nothing all that interesting," I said.

I crossed the room and opened the cage, and into my arms hopped Cleo, short for Cleoparrot. Donnie put a Peroni into my free hand. An aspiring beer connoisseur, he was working his way around the world with obscure imports; tonight it was Italy, in my honor.

"Movie time," he announced. "Also in your honor."

With a flourish, he inserted the DVD and the opening credits rolled. Oh my God, how could this be? On my TV appeared the seminal movie in Hal's life, none other than "Old Yeller."

"What?" I screamed. "Did you talk to Hal?"

"What does he have to do with this?" asked Donnie. "It's a dog movie. I thought you'd like it."

"Hal mentioned this movie today, that's all. Strange coincidence."

For some reason, I felt my cheeks go hot. Genie stared at me, eyebrows raised.

"I know he's hot for an old guy," she began, "but please don't tell me...."

"Shut up. He's like sixty, he's married, and he's, he's, he's a really bad writer."

"Thank God for that. Otherwise, I might be worried."

"No need. Let's just watch the movie."

Just as Hal had said, the film was sweetly tear-jerking. I smiled as I considered how pleased he'd be that I'd seen "his" movie.

chapter

TWO

The following Tuesday evening I headed out for my volunteer gig at our Dorchester shelter, where I'd found the job that may have just changed my life. Stepping from my car into the crisp evening air was especially sweet since I had a clear view of my favorite building in the world.

From its squat, 50's-era brick exterior, you might expect a gloomy government office, but what you found was a hospital-clean, elementary-school-cheery temporary home for abandoned and abused pets. Dogs to your left, cats to your right, housed in cages spacious enough for a short stroll. Photographs of pet owners cuddling their new companions papered the walls of the administrative office.

Some of the regulars had arrived before me. There was the cat lady, who wanted nothing to do with the dogs. And the sixteen-year-old surly teenager, there to fulfill a community service requirement at her school. She'd started out a snarling pit bull and was still no lap dog, but I'd place

her in the terrier family: friendly when it suited her, self-protective when she needed to be.

I was bathing and combing a mutt who appeared to be mostly collie. "Good girl," I murmured.

She looked frightened, so I tried to calm her with quiet talk. Sitting on a mat on the floor beside her, I smoothed the tangles out of her coat. After scoping out the area to make sure no one was within earshot, I told her, "You won't believe what I did last night. I spent an hour Facebook-stalking Andrew. And Alison too. So pathetic."

Dogs make great shrinks. No judgment, no co-payment.

I'd wound up at APO as a result of a broken heart. When Andrew had dumped me - can it really have been six months ago?— I'd found solace as a volunteer at APO's Dorchester shelter. In my brain's hard drive, click on Men I Have Loved, and Andrew would be listed first, and not just for alphabetical purposes. Next, click on Men Who Have Fucked Me Over, and he'd be there too.

Andrew, who'd professed his love through silly, impulsive gestures like writing "I love you" in M&M's circling a cream-cheesy bagel, or ordering tacky his and hers underwear imprinted with an arrow (his) and a bull's-eye (mine), placed you know where. Who sang me hilarious made-up songs accompanied by really bad guitar-playing.

Once we went to New York for his cousin's wedding and stayed at the Pierre. If that hadn't been special enough, Andrew had secured a dinner reservation at The River Café. Our window-side table looked out onto a glittering Manhattan skyline. I imagined the glamorous lives behind the twinkling lights in high-end apartment buildings, women with stylish wardrobes and perfectly coiffed hair, men in Italian suits and shoes polished to a shine. In fact, I saw couples just like that in that very restaurant.

As the maitre d' guided us to our seat, Andrew rested his hand on the curve of my back and whispered, "*Ca va, mon petit chou?*"

I felt like Katharine Hepburn being courted by Cary Grant, not that I ever heard Cary speak French. I vacillated between the mushroom and spinach ravioli and the Scottish salmon with baby Romanesco cauliflower, whatever that might be. I decided on the salmon, while Andrew opted for the branzino filet, and tried to appear dainty as I sipped my butternut squash soup. With a smile, Andrew reached out and pulled my spoon-

holding hand across the table towards his mouth. We were feeding him together, and omigod, it was sexy. Mmmm, this was good.

"Now my turn to try yours," I said. I executed the same maneuver on him, holding onto what I deemed the most masculine hand I'd ever seen. I brought a morsel to my lips, chewing as sensuously as I knew how.

"You're looking especially tasty tonight," he murmured, hand on my knee, lips on my neck.

I don't think it was just the setting, though that helped, but I couldn't remember ever feeling more aroused. I wanted to jump his bones at that very moment.

The waiter showed up with the dessert menu. By that time, his hand had crawled two thirds of the way up my thigh, headed for nirvana. Would he dare? Omigod, he would. I managed to stammer, "I think we'll pass on dessert." I felt I'd explode if we didn't get back to our room that very second.

The waiter returned with the credit card receipt. As Andrew signed, he said, "I once went to a wedding here."

"That must've been pretty spectacular," I said, but what was in my head was *He's thinking weddings? Like, ours? Yeah, I could go for a wedding here. To Andrew.* I completely discounted the fact that no way on earth could my parents could afford such a thing.

He took my hand. "It was more than spectacular," he said.

But just a couple months later, at dinner in Harvard Square, we'd bumped into Alison Cooke, who'd lived on my floor. Alison always looked like she'd just stepped out of a Ralph Lauren ad because—guess what—she had. Her parents were friends with the Laurens, and they'd gotten her a summertime modeling gig. Editor of the Tufts paper and graduating summa, she barely spoke to anyone unless there was something in it for her. Which meant she never, ever spoke to me.

But that didn't stop her from showing up at the same restaurant as Andrew and me with her own date, two couples waiting to be seated at the entrance. I caught her eying Andrew, and next thing I knew, she was suggesting we all dine together.

She'd flounced into her seat and introduced us to her bespectacled, blond MBA candidate date.

Alison asked, "Andrew, what do you do?"

I generally had trouble following the minutiae of Andrew's job in his family's real estate business, but Alison and her date Peter apparently found it fascinating. After that, Alison was all "Andrew" this and "Andrew" that, as in, "Andrew, you are a regular wheeler-dealer. But such a nice one."

I rested my hand on Andrew's leg, but he didn't squeeze it the way he usually did, instead leaning forward to continue his conversation with Alison.

And just like that, three weeks later I was minus one very cute, sweet, smart boyfriend.

At the time Andrew left me for Alison, I was employed as a lowly PR assistant by Boston's hottest ad agency, where you were supposed to feel like you were curing cancer when you were actually stuffing press kits announcing that Big Blow Bubble Gum had added watermelon and raspberry to its line of flavors. The job had been my big break, the sorcerer's stone that would turn my freshly minted Magna in English into cold, hard cash.

But one night, while ministering to abandoned pups at the shelter where I'd been volunteering in an attempt to recover from the break-up, I'd stumbled upon the organization's newsletter announcing a search for the job I'd been rehearsing for my entire life. I'd been the kid with two dogs, a cat, a trio of gerbils and, when I was eleven, a snake I'd cleverly dubbed Sneaky.

"Make animal rescue your life's work," the ad had proclaimed. Two interviews and zero dents in my student loan later and it was APO, here I come.

I'd called my parents on Staten Island to give them the news.

"Diane, wait," my mom answered. "Daddy just got back from the store. Greg! Would you turn the music down, it's Diane."

The Bee Gees blared in the background, my parents a case of musical arrested development.

"Greg, will you put that down and pick up the phone?" she yelled. Something dropped in the background. Then the extension picked up.

"Mom, Daddy, I have some news."

"What?" Mom answered. "Please tell me this isn't about Andrew. You're not still driving by his house, are you? You remember my friend Claire, the one with all the make-up and the weird homemade outfits? Anyway, she told me her Sara took off to Mozambique to dig wells or some other such nonsense and that was after a break-up too. Claire's worried sick..."

"No, Mom, listen. This is a *job*. I'm going to be Communications Director at an organization that rescues animals."

My dad said, "Animal rescue? What kind of job could they have for someone with your education, I mean, a job that will keep you? You can't always count on that, you know, things staying the same. Loyalty and all. Get this. There's a bunch of folks trying to get a Whole Foods here on the island. Can you imagine, a Whole Foods on Staten Island? What next? Tiffany's?"

Mom interjected, "You know Dad when it comes to his deli. He's always worried about finances."

This conversation was moving in a new, unnerving direction.

"Dad, is everything okay with the store?"

He sputtered. Mom interrupted. "The store is perfectly fine, and always will be. The folks who want real Italian will always stick with us, Whole Foods or no Whole Foods. Now tell us about the job. And Greg, keep a lid on it."

"Well, Daddy, the salary is about what I was making before, and I'm actually the boss of my own department."

"Oh, sweetie," my mother purred. "I am so proud of you, aren't you proud, Greg?"

"Yup. Just keep your eye on the competition."

"Well," my mother signed off. "Jigsaw is happy for you too, aren't you baby?" Jigsaw barked, and I wished I could reach through the telephone wires and rub his yellow coat.

And here I was at the shelter I visited several times a week, brushing, bathing, feeding and walking stray and rejected pups. When my little collie was sufficiently unmatted, I led her into the bathing room, guiding her into the tub. She whimpered a bit at first, but after a few minutes became acclimated to the water and my scrubbing. After rinsing her off, I towel dried her, then combed her out. You could find worse drugs than furry animals.

When I was done, the shelter's night manager, in his usual flannel shirt stretched tight over his expanding 40-something belly, came over to inspect.

"Woo hoo, Diane," he said. "She's ready for the Westminster Dog Show. Aren't you, beautiful?"

He bent down for a kiss on the face from my collie therapist.

"How's the job going?" he asked.

“Great.”

“I know it’s none of my business, but now that you actually work for the home office of APO, you’re still here volunteering an awful lot.”

“Is it, um, too much?” I panicked. “Am I in the way?”

He laughed. “Diane, you are our star volunteer. But it’s a little weird for someone like you to be spending so much time here.”

“What do you mean, someone like me?”

“You’re young. You’re pretty. You should be out with your friends, with a guy.”

“Yeah, well, a guy is why I’m here, actually.”

“Don’t misunderstand, it’s great to have you.”

“I know, get a life.”

And I was on my way there again Saturday when Genie appeared before me, toweling her hair, wearing nothing but a terry cloth robe.

“Where do you think you’re going, young lady?” she asked.

“What are you, my mother?”

“Hmmm, maybe I should call her and tell her that her eldest daughter is in need of an intervention.”

“She already thinks that.”

“Well, it’s not okay. What Andrew did sucks, but you need to move on. I’m glad you have your shelter, but you know what? It’s not working. Ditto your new job. All you do is wallow; you’re a regular little piglet.”

A lump rose in my throat. Genie started towards me, and I thought we might be headed for a hug, but she shifted to a tough love approach.

“Get out of your shelter clothes, put on something nice. We’re going to Italy,” she commanded.

“Can’t. I have a commitment. You do know the meaning of that term, do you not?”

“And you, the self-pity queen, have told me I don’t know how many times about the surfeit of volunteers on Saturdays.”

Her voice shifted from stern schoolmarm to kindly best friend. “Come on. It’ll be fun. You need fun. We’ll get some cheeeeeese.”

She’d made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. I tossed on a pair of black jeans, a gray t-shirt and some comfy sandals, and grabbed a canvas bag just in case I got sucked into making a purchase or three.

New York has Little Italy, and in Boston it's the North End. I spent second semester junior year in Florence. The aromas of cannoli baking in ovens, aged cheese from Parma, sausages spiced with fennel and basil, and accents from Italy's toe to the heel had reminded me of my *nonna*, who'd just died. The narrow North End streets wind, twist, and yes, smell like those in Florence.

In the pre-dumping days, the North End had been my all-time favorite hangout. Andrew's family in chi-chi suburban Weston hadn't ventured much beyond Boston's western suburbs, with the occasional foray into town for a museum visit or theatrical performance.

I'd been thrilled to introduce him to this special corner of town, and he'd been more than appreciative; he'd adopted it as his special place too, seeking out restaurants for us to try, new wine shops that offered Saturday afternoon tastings. He probably was just this minute promising Alison a divine dinner in some spot we'd discovered together.

"Knock, knock, anybody home?" Genie waved a hand in front of my face. "Where are you going in that head of yours, Diane? Someplace you shouldn't be. Look, Robiola."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me into a tiny *groceria*. She told the counterwoman, "Let's see, I'll take half a pound of that, a quarter of that, and another quarter of that," pointing at various cheeses. I drew a deep breath, and let the scents invade my nostrils and pores.

Genie's scheme was working, at least a little. We passed a gelateria featuring colorful tubs of Italian-style ice cream, and cafe style tables with wrought-iron chairs. Giovanni's, Ricardo's and Carmen's *Ristorante*, *Enoteca* and *Trattoria* tempt diners with specialties like stuffed calamari, fusilli in mushroom and cream sauce, zuppa de pesce. Widowed octogenarians in black chattered away in the language of Dante alongside working men in caps and yuppie couples from the South End.

After strolling around for an hour or so, we were headed back to the T with our purchases when I spotted a dingy doorway beneath a battered metal sign. You could barely make out the letters, *Animal Rescue Center*.

"Hey, let's check this out," I said.

"You're kidding."

"Professional curiosity. Come on."

"You can't rescue every last pet in Boston."

"Five minutes."

She groaned, crossed her arms.

“Five max.”

I rang the bell and waited. After a couple minutes, I tried again, and finally, a pony-tailed, flannel-shirted guy, I’d say in his late twenties, opened the door.

“Sorry, I was busy changing litter boxes. Interested in a cat? We got about a dozen.”

“Sure.” Genie was standing beside me, making a grim face.

He shuffled down a dark, urine-scented corridor. The walls probably hadn’t been painted since the Reagan presidency. The hallway ended in two small rooms. To the left, the most dispirited bunch of dogs lay in unnerving silence on beds of shredded newsprint. Just two water bowls were meant to be shared by the six of them, with one perilously close to empty. In the room opposite, the aforementioned dozen cats huddled together as if desperate for contact.

Without much energy or even feigned interest, the man opened the door to the cats’ enclosure, gestured inside and said, “Take your pick.”

No questions about my ability to care for a pet, no encouragement to neuter or spay, no information about shots – all components of the pet adoption process at APO.

As Genie cuddled a scrawny kitten, I told him, “I’ve never noticed this place before. Who runs it?”

“Me and my girlfriend,” he replied. “We take turns here. She works most days at a nursing home, so she checks in on these guys at night, and I work nights over at the TD Garden at the concession stands. We been rescuing pets for a couple years now. Ain’t that right, kitties?”

His eyes were half closed, his walk a lazy shuffle. I worried he might actually lapse into narcolepsy. He roused himself sufficiently to make a little kissing noise, and picked up a forlorn-looking little tabby, scratching it behind the ears.

“We live upstairs, so it’s real convenient.”

I asked where the animals came from.

“Folks in the neighborhood, they know about us. They find a stray dog or cat, or they’re movin’ away, they bring the animals to us. They know we’ll find ‘em a home eventually. People like you just come in off the street, lookin’ for a dog or cat, and we always got a few to choose from.”

I was tempted to adopt Genie's sad little kitten, but I had a better idea.

A few minutes after I arrived at work Monday morning, Betty Foster, Hal's assistant, came to see me.

"For the slide show at the gala," she boomed in The Voice of God, as she handed me a fat manila envelope.

When the film gets made featuring The Deity as a sixty-ish black woman, some Hollywood agent will clean up representing Betty in the role she seemed born to play. The goddess effect was intensified by her height of around six feet and her dancer's grace, all sinewy arms and legs.

Our fundraising department was organizing a 150th anniversary celebration honoring our current board chairman and his two predecessors at a lavish dinner at the Four Seasons in October. Betty's envelope held mostly pics of the three leaders, along with some winsome animal shots.

"Can you please tell me a little about these people?" I asked.

"Hold on to your hat. This one – she pointed to a guy sporting an enormous grey handlebar moustache – he's called Dinky. Hmmm, wonder why." She lifted her eyebrows just a little, to convey amusement.

"He looks like one of those barbershop quartet guys from the 1920's," I said. "Or maybe even the 1890's."

That God-like timbre erupted into a laugh straight from her belly. "He is from the 1890's. These WASPs, they hold the key to the fountain of youth. I think it's scotch."

I pulled out a recent snapshot of Hal snuggling with his black Lab and his shepherd mix. A picture of a younger Hal - Brad Pitt times ten - proffering a kitten to an adorable little girl. And hello, what was this? Hal and the plump, shaggy-haired Joyce, both in Bermuda shorts, cameras around necks, the Coliseum behind them. He couldn't have intended me to use those in the presentation. I set them aside.

"Uh uh uh," she admonished. "Those go right back in."

"Really? I thought this was about the board chairs."

"Also his majesty's fifteenth anniversary at APO. Back they go, trust me."

Later, as I was sifting through the photos, I caught a flash of pink in the doorway. It could only be Mary-Day, our Georgia peach fundraising director. She catapulted herself into the room like a blonde Scarlett O'Hara

on speed, pointing to her diamond-encrusted watch. She practically took up the whole room, despite her height of about five feet. I hoped I would have half as much energy in my fifties as she did.

"Diane, I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I need y'all's help with something. Do you mind?" I did not. Plus, I needed my daily Mary-Day sighting so I could report to my Genie, who'd grown up in Lily Pulitzer country, on the "Pink Index," a scale I'd invented to rate Mary-Day's wardrobe. I would tell Genie, "Monday's rose-colored scarf gets a five, the bow in Thursday's hair, definitely a ten, and Friday's suit, possibly a genuine Chanel, we have to give her fifty for that."

"I'm finalizing the copy for the gala invite," Mary-Day said now, "and I need to make sure it's as tight as it needs to be. I hope you don't mind. I always asked Rebecca."

Aha. My chance to learn more about the mysterious departure of the mysterious Rebecca.

"What about Rebecca?"

"Never mind about her." Her face pinked up now, matching her skirt. She pointed to a line of text. "What's a better word for stewardship? I can't find a thing in the thesaurus."

"Hmmm. Management? Preservation? Conservation, no wait, make that conservancy. Sustainment? Is that a word?"

"Darlin', you've given me more than I need."

Mary-Day's discomfort at the mention of Rebecca caused me to wonder anew.

"Mary-Day? What happened to Rebecca? Why did she leave?"

"Who the hell knows?" she said, blushing again and glancing at her watch. "Must fly." And out she flew.

Had Hal dismembered Rebecca and buried her in the basement? I guessed I'd have to wait a bit longer to find out.

An hour later, it was eleven o'clock, time for our weekly senior staff meeting, when Hal, Betty, Mary-Day, Gretchen, the vet who had oversight for all the shelters, and I met to discuss organizational planning and policy. We gathered at the designated time, all except for Hal.

"How was your weekend?" Betty asked Mary-Day.

"Super. My girlfriends and I went to tea at the Taj Saturday afternoon. You know, they serve those little sandwiches and scones with clotted

cream, and of course, the tea. Honestly, ladies, I felt as if I'd flown straight to Downton Abbey."

"We babysat the grandkids, so the kids could have a night off. Here, I'll show you the latest pictures," said Betty, passing around her phone we could see her six and eight-year-old granddaughters.

It got to be 11:15.

Gretchen said to Betty, "Any idea when? I have an appointment at one."

Betty replied, "That's a joke, right?"

"Then I'll be right back."

Gretchen returned a minute later, brocade bag in hand, from which she withdrew a pair of knitting needles holding a gorgeous swatch of purplish blue fabric. And off she went, needles clicking at a rate that would guarantee her a spot on the Olympic knitting team, were there such a thing.

"That is really beautiful, Gretchen," I complimented. "What's it going to be?"

She pulled from the bag a photo of a twisty cowl neckwarmer.

"Wow," I said. "I don't know how to knit, but I'd love something like that."

Gretchen smiled, her calm face a contrast with the ferocious movement of her hands.

"First, you have to learn." She paused to pick up a dropped stitch. "Actually, I almost don't care what it looks like. It's like Valium. Keeps me from wringing someone's neck."

She gave me a wink, her needles poking out like samurai swords. "Someone not in this room I mean."

We waited a while longer, and at 11:30, we all returned to our offices. I was busy following up on a press release with some phone calls when, at 12:30, I heard that familiar radio announcer voice calling "Staff meeting, now. Let's go."

We straggled back to the conference room.

"Where's Gretchen?" asked Hal.

"She had to leave for a one o'clock outside meeting," responded Betty.

"That doily woman thinks she can just take the cake. She knows these meetings are sacred."

He turned to me.

“Diane, just so’s you know, don’t schedule any meetings during Monday senior staff meeting. Got it?”

Wait, I wanted to say. The staff meeting was scheduled for 11:00. It’s now 12:30. *Were you absent from school the day they taught about the big hand and the little hand?*

Late meeting or not, here was an opportunity to make a bigger impact than changing the color of our logo. Hal sensed my excitement and joked, “I’d say Diane looks like the cat that swallowed the canary, but I might be accused of cruelty to animals. What’s up?”

I replayed the horror of my visit to the so-called shelter, painting what I prayed was a vivid picture of those poor animals’ plight. I’d managed to sneak in a couple of pictures so I passed around my phone for everyone to see. Then I played my trump card.

“I’d bet there are other places like this, probably all over the state. Couldn’t APO conduct an investigation and take them over? I mean, these animals are suffering, and it’s our job to ensure humane treatment. We could clean them up, and bring them under the APO umbrella. We’d be performing a great community service, we’d get great press, and it would help with fundraising. Plus, it would be a great way to grow the organization.”

The words rushed out in a verbal waterfall. I awaited the accolades.

Instead, dead silence. A look passed between Betty and Mary-Day, who jiggled her leg.

As if I had an IQ of 85, Hal said, “Slow down there, Diane. Let’s take this one step at a time. This place sounds pretty horrific. Let me make a few calls, look into it. Then we’ll decide where to go from there. Mary-Day, what you got?”

I’d been put in my place, and it was not at the head of the class. I kept my mouth shut for the rest of the meeting, and made a beeline for the bathroom when it was over, where I splashed cold water on my still-flushed face.

Despite feeling as if I’d been called to the principal’s office, I was trying to concentrate on work when Betty poked her head in the door and asked if she could talk for a minute. I nodded, and she closed the door behind her.

In deep, soothing tones, she advised, “Diane, I hope you’re not feeling bad about this morning. Those were all terrific suggestions, every one.

But with Hal, you have to go slowly. He needs lots of time to get used to new ideas, and he prefers to consider them one at a time. Seems to me you put a few pretty big items on the agenda there - investigating bad shelters, organizational growth, more fundraising. That's a lot to digest in one sitting, don't you think?'

I saw her point. Also, I could see that she was telling me I needed to be strategic where Hal was concerned. I wanted to be a good team player. It was just hard to get the image of those poor dogs and cats out of my head.

I was minding my own business in the lunchroom slurping a late lunch of Ramen noodles when Hal joined me, smiling broadly. Good. He wasn't mad at me. Just to be sure, a little sucking up seemed in order.

"You know," I said, "I was just thinking that I made the right move, coming here. I always wanted to find work that was meaningful, and, well, here I am. I just wanted to thank you for giving me the opportunity."

"We're a great outfit, and you're lucky to be here," he beamed, tapping the table with the large manila envelope he was holding. I smiled, and the tapping became more emphatic, now accompanied by loud tsk tsking. A command to inquire.

"What you got there, Hal?"

"Will you look at this?" he answered.

With alacrity, he pried open the clasp and pulled out a check.

"Bet you never eyeballed a number like that before, did ya?" he asked.

I peered closer. It was made out to him by a local bank in the amount of \$250,000. Had he sold his screenplay? Won the lottery?

"Okay, I'll bite. That's a lot of money."

"Yeah, and that's not all of it. This is just part of the loan for the addition Joyce and I are building on our house at the lake."

Framed color photographs of Hal's ultra-contemporary, 360-degree-views- of-the-water vacation home in New Hampshire, apparently about to give birth to an enormous new extension, adorned his office's walls. I had no idea why he was telling me this, but I got a sudden knot in my belly as I thought of my student and car loans, the sum of which, when I last added them up, equaled exactly the asking price for a used Bentley I saw advertised on ebay. My mind flashed on those unfortunate creatures stuck

in that crappy shelter. Okay, it was his hard-earned money and I guessed he could do what he wanted with it, but 250 big ones might be enough to take over that hellhole.

Now he was telling me, "Our little vacation bungalow is about to become our retirement dream home. Look at this."

He reached into the envelope again and withdrew a photocopy of an architect's rendering of his house, more than doubled in size, with wings added to the back and both sides.

"See, here's the in-law suite for when Joyce's father comes to visit. And this wing over here, that's for our twins Mark and Robin and we hope, some day, their families."

He verbally walked me through downtown Boston, stopping at every high-end home design store along the way.

"Joyce has always wanted a Poggenpohl kitchen, and now she's getting it. Those places near the public garden have the best furniture in Boston, Diane, you should check them out."

I have, just for fun, and their cheapest couch costs two months' salary. Why was he torturing me with stuff he knew I couldn't have? And, while I hadn't been in the workplace that long, I knew that he'd crossed some boss-employee boundary. The size of his loan, his house or for that matter, his dick were none of my business, and I really didn't want to know about any of it.

chapter

THREE

And then, the dogshit hit the fan. Literally.

Saturday night, around ten o'clock, our shelter director Gretchen and her boyfriend had just returned from dinner to their room at a picture-postcard inn on the Cape, where they'd gone for the weekend to celebrate her fortieth birthday. Gretchen and Hal were the two people at APO who were supposed to wear beepers at all times in case of an emergency. Guess who really wore theirs.

When hers sounded, the so reliable you could set your clock by her Gretchen immediately called the answering service, which asked her to call the overnight staff member in Dorchester, who tearfully informed her that a pipe had burst. Water, dog and cat feces, and God knows what other waste products had spilled all over the floors. The pets had been evacuated, but there was nowhere to plunk the animals—all twenty seven of them—except a couple of the shelter vans in the parking lot, where they were scrunched in, howling and meowing.

Gretchen carried the numbers of all the shelter managers across the state with her. She was sitting on the four-poster bed in their hotel room, motioning for her boyfriend to pack up all their stuff so they could get back to Boston pronto and attend to the crisis.

She called the plumber, who hightailed it over to the shelter, then woke the Dorchester shelter manager from sleep-deprived new-father slumber. They set up a phone chain to all the shelter managers within a fifty mile radius of Boston to ascertain which shelters contained enough space to temporarily accommodate the evacuated animals, and for them to speed over to Dorchester to pick them up. Gretchen hopped into her own car and headed the shelter where she oversaw the animals' removal. On the way, she paged Hal, who was, at that very moment, up at his vacation home, sipping cognac on the deck, watching the sailboats on the lake.

By the time she got all the animals safely transferred, it was four a.m. The plumber told her the reason for the pipe's bursting was deferred maintenance. A planned upgrade to the heating system had been axed from the budget by Hal. Gretchen didn't know the details, only that Hal advised her that, in his wise opinion, this repair could wait another year.

Gretchen returned home early Saturday morning to grab a quick snooze before returning to the water-soaked shelter. Around ten that night, Hal finally answered her page and called from the New Hampshire lake-front to tell her he'd be stopping by on Sunday to, as he put it, "support our fine Dorchester staff."

I knew for a fact he never showed up because I did. Ditto Mary-Day and, of course, Betty, after Gretchen called us all. We grabbed mops, towels, and sponges, and, as the plumbers installed fresh pipes, we scrubbed and scraped grime and shit until the place was hospital-clean. The smell might linger for a while, the plumber advised, but at least it was the hygienic animal shelter we were known for.

Monday morning, Hal arrived at work, a scowl across his handsome face as he checked his voice mail, and ordered Betty to call Gretchen into his office. Pale, haggard and barely awake, Gretchen dragged herself into Hal's office, surely expecting accolades for her Herculean efforts. Here's what she got instead, according to Betty, who heard the entire exchange.

"Gretchen. I have just received a complaint from a new adoptive owner in Springfield that someone neglected to tell her that her dog was

pregnant. What the dick is going on here, Gretchen? You know I don't like it when I get these kinds of calls."

Between wracking sobs, she practically screamed, "Are you kidding me? I look into every single complaint we receive and resolve every last one of them. Jesus, Hal, if you had bothered to show up in Dorchester on Sunday, you'd know that I am totally wiped out. I came back from my birthday celebration on the Cape, and was up all night cleaning out shit, dealing with the plumber, and getting all the animals relocated. What do you want from me, blood? Here, have some."

She was crying so hard she developed a nosebleed and offered him her stained tissue.

Hal turned lobster red.

"Don't you talk to me that way, young lady."

Gretchen jumped out of her seat.

"Do you know that the entire senior team joined me in the trenches Sunday? How dare you..."

Betty to the rescue.

"Gretchen, I need to see you right now," she commanded, flying into Hal's office and grabbing our enraged colleague by the elbow. The normally placid Gretchen was happy for the opportunity to de-escalate, and, after some kind words from Betty, slunk back to her office, where I caught her furiously knitting away.

Hal decided he'd done enough work for one day, and stalked out. When he returned Tuesday, he acted as if nothing, including a heroic animal rescue and cleanup by his staff, had ever happened. Betty asked if he'd like her to acknowledge our efforts with any kind of thank you and he replied, "Hell, they're only doing their jobs."

But the next day, Mary-Day and I found bouquets of flowers on our desks, with a note that read, "Thanks for your help. Hal." Gretchen and all the shelter staff who worked that weekend received restaurant gift certificates. We all marched into Betty's office to thank her.

Ta da, my debut— my first board meeting - had arrived, and I was in the midst of an anxiety attack. Act like the senior management you are, I urged myself. Not only was I no longer the vassal I'd been at the ad agency, I owned my own fiefdom. So why didn't I feel like the lady of the manor?

Dressing to impress might help. I requested Genie's assistance with outfit selection. We were standing before a closet designed for a leprechaun.

This was in fact okay since I possess a leprechaun-sized wardrobe. All my clothes have a story, and by the same author – her name is ebay.

Genie bit her lower lip, worrying her eyebrows as if pondering the secrets of black holes instead of which outfit in my wardrobe would be most likely to make our board of trustees - my boss's bosses - think they had the next Hilary Clinton on their team. Genie had a theory. Actually, Genie has many theories, but that day's had to do with the psychology of clothes.

"Dress for the job you want, not the one you have. Who will you be in the future? I pick Senior VP for Marketing at Microsoft."

"You sound like my dad. I want the job I have now. With more money."

"Then dress like money."

She thought she was Stephen Hawking at the moment. I gave myself over to her completely.

"Here, try this."

She was holding one of my fashion mistakes. It had looked great in the picture, but the rust-colored suit I'd viewed online had materialized with a two-sizes-too-small jacket and tiny skirt in an unspeakable tan shade that made me look like a hooker with hepatitis.

"This is a joke, right?" I said.

"I thought it fit you like a glove."

"Unless you want my money to come from guys yelling 'how much, baby' on a street corner, I think I'll pass. In fact, give me that."

I threw it in my bag of clothes designated for the battered women's shelter, where my ebay mistakes became someone else's help in getting a fresh start.

"Okay, this."

Of course. My other suit. A striped number with huge buttons on the cuffs, and a knee-length skirt. Classy with a bit of pizzazz.

About half an hour before the board meeting, I was chatting with Betty, whose office lay just outside Hal's, when I spied a plaid apparition, an eighty-ish dowager in head-to-toe Burberry – and I mean literally, from hat, to jacket, to boots - accompanied by a rat-sized yapping Yorkie in matching sweater, tethered to his owner by a leash of the same signature design. I thought even the Burberry people would've yelled "Stop!"

at the umbrella. As dowager and dog drew closer, I became nearly blinded by the woman's left bosom, upon which perched a gigantic, in fact nearly life-sized replica of the clamorous canine, wrought in enamel with precious stones for eyes, mouth and nostrils.

Hal hastened to the door, ushered her in.

"Hi there, Sis," he said, as she extended her hand for a wobbly shake. "You're looking wonderful today. And how is my favorite Yorkie? Hey there, Puddinface."

He stooped down for a cuddle and a lick.

"It's lovely to see you, Mr. Mason, as always," Sis replied.

As Hal rose from his crouch, he said "Diane, I'd like you to meet one of APO's most outstanding board members, Sis Reade. Sis, Diane Salvi is our new Communications Director."

Sis smiled, and we shook hands.

"May I..." I asked, gesturing at Puddinface.

"Of course, dear," replied Sis.

There's nothing sweeter than the feel of dog's tongue on my hand.

Hal took Sis's arm and they headed towards the two club chairs in the corner of his office.

"Now, Sis," I heard him say, "You must tell me all about your Vassar reunion. And of course I can't wait to see the latest pictures of your great-grandchildren."

And then it was show time, folks. I spotted Katelyn, Betty's administrative assistant who occasionally helped Mary-Day and me with small jobs, arranging packets in front of each chair in the board room, each lined up exactly perpendicular to the right arm of a chair. When she finished, she went to the head of the table and placed the gavel for the board chair exactly in the center of his folder. Katelyn, along with Betty, Mary-Day, Gretchen and I represented staff at the meetings, at which Katelyn took the minutes.

She intrigued me. She rarely initiated a conversation, and her voice was low and breathy, almost as if speaking cost her a great deal of effort. Katelyn might have been a poster child for Irish tourism, with her wavy strawberry blond locks, rounded cheeks, and smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Like Mary-Day, she favored lots of pink, hers of a less

brassy tone and frequently ruffled. She appeared to be around my age, but I suspected we shared little in common.

The board members, including Sis, strolled into our conference room, its walls practically the only vertical surfaces in the building not festooned with art depicting four-legged creatures, instead featuring a single gilt-framed reproduction of a Winslow Homer seascape.

Everyone grabbed a wrap sandwich from the sideboard at the back of the room, and took their places. Warren Talcott, the seventy-ish board chair and future gala honoree sat beside Hal at the head of the table. He banged the gavel and called the meeting to order.

"Welcome, welcome. It's always so good to see all of you here. Now let's get some housekeeping matters out of the way."

They approved the minutes of the previous meeting, took note of the passing of a former board member, and then Warren turned the meeting over to Hal, whose grin matched the Cheshire cat's on that day's tie.

"You all know what's coming, right?"

They chuckled and focused their attention on Hal.

"Okay, so this guy tells his driver, 'I want you to take these monkeys over to the zoo.' So a few hours go by, and the driver comes back, and the monkeys are still in the truck, but now they're all wearing sunglasses.

'I thought I told you to take these monkeys to the zoo,' says the boss. 'I did,' says the driver, 'but we had some time left over so I took them to the beach.'"

The board members laughed and so did I. Hal looked at me and smiled.

I glanced over at Katelyn to determine if she were writing down the joke for the minutes. She was.

Warren banged on his gavel.

"I have an important announcement. A commendation, actually. I believe you all received the email about the shelter flood. It could've been a disaster, but I want to recognize and thank Hal for handling it with his customary aplomb."

He nodded towards Hal and began the applause, joined by all the other board members.

Hal grinned broadly.

"All in the line of duty, my friends. Just doin' my job."

I was almost afraid to look at Gretchen. If I'd been in her place, I'd have wanted to strangle him. Not a single word of recognition for her, or the rest of us. At least not from him.

Betty raised her hand.

"Yes, thank you, Hal, well done. Thanks also should go to Gretchen, who, er, helped manage the process of getting the animals evacuated safely. And our newcomer Diane, who helped clean out the shelter."

"And you too, Betty," added Gretchen.

"Yes, everyone helped," said Hal, looking grumpy. "Let's move on, shall we?"

He paused and surveyed the table, to make sure that he was once again in control of the meeting.

"We have an important newcomer today," said Hal. "Her name's Diane Salvi, and she's our new Communications Director. Why don't we go around the room and introduce ourselves, and then I'll tell you a little more about her."

And this was how I met our three gala honorees. Warren was a retired lawyer, and I was convinced the others resulted from some top secret cloning experiment in the 1940's. Only their names differed: Jockey Leith (*Child equestrian? Family-owned underwear company?*), and Dinky Mulhouser. They were, respectively, a former real estate executive, and a private investor, in other words, a plain old rich guy playing with his money all day long.

"Good to see you, good to see you, Di," said Jockey.

Dinky gave a start; he'd appeared to have been napping, and now mumbled something unintelligible.

Every single one of the three sported a blue or yellow seersucker suit that I swear they wore to Sunday afternoon garden parties at Harvard back in the day. Did they call each other and coordinate outfits as I had with my best friends in high school?

"We've been lucky to find someone who is not only talented in her field, but also an animal-lover from way back. Right, Diane?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Diane could've made her mark in the corporate world, and in fact she comes to us from the private sector, where she worked for a pretty fancy ad agency. But I think a little birdie called to her one day, and sent her flying our way."

More chuckles.

"Diane, tell us a bit about yourself."

Whoa. Better get used to public speaking on the fly.

"I used to work at an ad agency, but it wasn't really very fulfilling."

Oops, what if someone on the board was in the ad business?

"I mean, it was fine, but I've always wanted to work around animals, and I was volunteering at your, I mean our Dorchester shelter and I saw the ad for this job, and it felt like fate. I majored in English at Tufts, and I've been in Boston since college. I'm originally from Staten Island, the borough no one knows about."

Some titters erupted at my one feeble attempt at humor.

A tall woman with a sleek silver haircut raised her hand.

"Frannie has the floor," noted Warren.

"Frannie Schwartz here," she said. "It's great to have you on board, and I know you have a lot to offer us. I'd love to hear from you some of your ideas and goals. What might we do that we haven't been, and how can we help you?" Her deep brown eyes homed intently on me.

I hadn't had tons of experience speaking in front of a group, but I was becoming less and less nervous as the meeting went on. I sat up straight, just as I had in fourth grade while waiting for the teacher to call on me.

"Where do I begin?" I said. "First of all, I'm not at all convinced we need to be sending out a hard copy newsletter. We have thousands of constituents, and printing and mailing costs are sky high. We're starting to gather email addresses so we can send it mostly electronically."

Warren chuckled. "My kids made me get email, but I loathe the thing. We have lots of older folks like me who can't stand that stuff. What about us?"

"Notice I said mostly. We'll still have print copies at the shelters and for those who want them by mail. But we can reduce lots of waste this way. And speaking of electronically, we absolutely have to be on Facebook. I'm in the process of starting a blog, and tweeting."

"Okay, you've lost me," sighed Warren. "I've heard of Facebook, but haven't a clue what a blog is. And tweeting? Like a bird? But you do whatever you can to promote us. We want to grow and become better known."

My brain flashed on the scrawny cats and mangy dogs in that sad little North End shelter. I was so tempted. Then I looked at Hal, shifting in his seat, and scowling in my direction. *Keep your mouth shut, Diane*, I told

myself. *There's no rush.* I didn't actually believe that; I felt like I --we at APO - had to address that situation yesterday. But I remembered Betty's admonition. Take it slowly.

Frannie smiled. "It sounds like you're on the right track. Let me know how I can help. I'm happy to be your sounding board."

"Thanks so much," I replied.

"Okay, then," said Warren. "Now, let's talk about the Pet Palace. Hal, things starting to turn around over there?"

"As you all know, the world's first and finest animal companion hotel is getting its sea legs. The evaluations that come in from our customers are outstanding. Here, I'll read you one."

He rummaged through some papers and drew out a sheet.

"Dear friends at the Pet Palace, I've looked for years and years for the perfect place to bring Freddie when I traveled, but I just couldn't find anything that met his needs. And then I found you. You paid attention to his strict walking schedule, his diet, even the way he likes to be massaged. We couldn't have asked for better care. He came home relaxed and happy. Just as I always stay at the St. Regis in New York, Freddie now has his favorite home away from home."

"But what about the finances?" asked Frannie. "Are we at least breaking even yet?"

"Excellent question, Frannie. We're getting closer. But we can't just wait around for it to start raining cats and dogs." Pause for laughter. "We must be pro-active. So, we're going to replace the manager. Things will turn around soon, I guarantee it."

"Good work, Hal," barked Jockey. Most of the rest nodded. Frannie was frowning.

After the meeting, Warren stopped by my office. Another guy who buys his ties from Critter World. When I complimented him on his school of fish, I swear, for the first time in my life, I heard a seventy-year-old man giggle.

"Aw, I wear this to get Hal's goat. Tee hee," he went.

"Ha ha ha" I responded.

"Hard to compete with Hal. He's got that Midwestern charm. We New Englanders could learn a thing or two from Harold I. Mason, Jr., that's for sure."

Insert giggle number three.

"I remember when we hired him, I thought, now here's a breath of fresh air, right off the Chicago lakefront. Now this 150th..."

He was blushing. Before me stood a 70-year-old man with the soul of a thirteen-year-old girl.

"I'll have to wear my monkey-suit I suppose, and buy my wife a new dress. This thing is going to set me back a pretty penny, that's for sure. And of course I'll be making a donation to APO."

"That's very generous of you. How long have you been on the board?"

"Let's see, it's been, oh about 20 years since my cousin Bunky got me involved, said it was a good bunch of men, no heavy lifting and no fundraising. But now, every time you look, someone's got their hand out."

He shook his head. "Oh well, it's a good cause. Though we now have a few," he hesitated, searching for the right euphemism, "newcomers on the board, not like the old days when you knew everyone. Like that Ruth woman, boy does she own a lot of cats. I dropped off some papers there one time and she invited me in for a cup of tea, and well, let's just say you knew instantly there were felines on the premises."

He pointed to his nose, accompanying the gesture with slightly hysterical laughter (his). Meek smile (mine).

"And then we have that Kilbourn gal, old George's daughter."

"Kilbourn?"

"Ah, she couldn't make it today. He was a fine fellow, George Kilbourn, my classmate at Middlesex and Harvard. Right after George died, she offered to take his place on the board, and we figured she'd be a chip off the old block, kind of fulfill her dad's legacy. Well," he shrugged, "let's just say what's-her-name Kilbourn has an unusual view of the world. No leather shoes, indeed."

He paused, rubbed his ear.

"Oh, by the way, Diane, Hal reminded me the other day that his fifteenth anniversary here is the same time as our 150th. Think we can incorporate this into the celebration? It would mean a lot to him."

I recalled Betty's admonition when I'd tried to remove the pictures of Hal from the gala slide show. 'Back it goes,' she'd said.

"Absolutely," I replied. "Already working on it." I pointed to the pile of photos of Hal on my desk.

“Good job, Diane. Keep it up,”

After Warren left, I went to see Katelyn. She was scribbling notes on a legal pad. Her phone rang, and she continued to write, as she searched for a file in a rack of color-coded folders, phone nestled between ear and shoulder. Where had her third hand come from?

She hung up, a shy grin on her face.

“Hi, Diane, what’s up?”

“I have to get out some press releases on the new shelter in Lunenberg. We need to...”

“I know, pull together a list of media contacts in the area. I just have to finish up this Excel thing for the finance department and then I’ll get to it.”

I peeked over her shoulder as she punched in combinations of keys I’d never seen before, at the pace of a driver in the Indy 500.

“Why can’t the guys in Finance do this?” I asked.

“Oh, I haven’t showed them how yet.”

Her phone rang.

“Aidan, what is it? Calm down now, nice and slow. Hold on.” She turned to me. “I have to take this call, I’ll let you know when I’m done. It’ll only be a minute.”

Her brow furrowed as she nodded and murmured, “Uh huh, stop crying, Aidan, I can’t understand you when you blubber, that’s it, nice and slow.”

I saw her shoulders rise in a sigh, as I wondered about Aidan, from the sound of it her son. Was there a Mr. Katelyn or was she on her own? I felt a momentary sense of relief that when I walked in the door of my home, the only creature I had to worry about was Cleo.

chapter

FOUR

I was leaving the office at five the next day when I discovered Betty attempting to jump-start Katelyn's car. Katelyn sat behind the wheel, wiping her face as she turned the ignition over and over. I knocked on the window.

"Katelyn, what is it, a dead battery?"

"I don't think so, Diane, Betty's jump-start isn't working. And I need to get home; the babysitter has a fit if I'm late. Plus, Aidan worries." Confirmation of Katelyn's motherhood.

"Do you have AAA, I mean, you can use my card if you don't."

"You are so sweet to offer. I do have AAA but I already called them and they said it would be an hour wait and I don't have that kind of time. I should be close to home by now, actually. Shit."

I'd never heard her swear before.

Betty jumped in. "I'll wait here till the tow truck comes."

"And I'll give you a ride," I offered.

Katelyn looked ready to cry. "You guys are so sweet," she said again.

“Just get home to Aidan,” ordered Betty in that voice. When Betty talks, you’d better listen.

“I’ll take the ride now, if it’s not too much trouble. God, I feel awful asking.”

“Honestly, Katelyn, it’s no big deal. Come on, get out and come with me.”

“God, what a pain,” I offered as she climbed into my trusty little Civic. “If my car died, I’d be in big trouble. The payments alone are killing me. Repair costs are not in the budget.”

She laughed ruefully.

“Mine either.”

She looked at her watch, shifted in her seat, pulled out her phone.

“Hi, Aidan. Listen, I’m going to be a little bit late.”

I heard whining on the other end.

“Just tell Mrs. Doherty I’ll be home real soon, okay.”

She continued to shift in her seat and looked at her watch again as she gave me directions.

“I’ll get you home as soon as I can,” I promised. “Have you always lived in South Boston?”

“I live right around the corner from where I grew up,” she said.

“Oh yeah? Do your parents still live here?”

Katelyn looked out the window, opening and closing her phone. “They died in a car accident when I was sixteen.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

She wore a tiny smile, and replied in a tiny voice, “It’s okay.”

“I guess you’ve been on your own for a while then,” I said.

“Well, not exactly. I got married pretty young. My husband, well,” she paused, as if about to say something, and changed her mind. At the next stop light, I glanced over at her. She was slumped in the seat, her sweater misbuttoned.

“I feel like the Spanish Inquisition,” I joked. “We can talk about this some other time.” She sighed. “I don’t mind. Really. We split about three years ago, when Aidan was three. I just couldn’t take it anymore, the lying about his work, and, um, some other stuff. And he couldn’t take Aidan bouncing off the walls.”

“Is Aidan, well, is he okay?”

“He’s wicked smart, Diane.” It came out *smaht*, like a true daughter of South Boston. “He started reading at four. He’s just got ADHD, so that makes things at our house a little crazy....” Her voice trailed off.

I’d never been to South Boston, but I’d heard it was the kind of place where, if the neighbors didn’t recognize your car and you parked too long, you might return to find a nail in the tire. There was the old Brahmin Boston inhabited by the likes of Warren and Dinky and Jockey, and there was this other old Boston, for which Harvard was a foreign country.

The narrow streets were lined with triple-decker homes, famous for multiple generations stacked in layers, Grandma and Grandpa on the bottom, Mom and Dad in the middle, next generation up top. We passed a few ramshackle bars with names like Rooney’s and Paddy O’s. Substitute Vito’s and Tony’s, and I was right back home on Staten Island.

When we arrived at her house, she started out the door, then hesitated.

“Diane, do you want to come for supper? It’s the least I can do.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m sure you have a busy night ahead, with Aidan and all.”

“If you don’t mind cheese ravioli out of a can, it’s no trouble. Seriously. I have to warn you though, the place might be a mess.”

She needed to repay the favor, and besides, I was hungry. She went up to relieve the babysitter, and I circled the block a couple of times before squeezing into a parking space two streets away.

Katelyn’s residence was as homely as most on the street, a white, aluminum-sided affair featuring a small tumbledown porch. The one elegant touch was the dark wood door, three doorbells in a neat vertical row to the right. Beneath the top one lay a thin strip of label-maker plastic that read “Morrissey.” Katelyn’s.

There are messes...and then there are messes. I hadn’t given a whole lot of thought to what the living room floor of a single mom with a hyperactive six-year-old might look like. But even compared to Genie’s bedroom – discarded articles of clothing piled up for weeks before she hauled them to the dry cleaners – Katelyn’s living room was a disaster. Toy trucks littered the floor, action figures could be spotted in every corner, and a turd-like pile of clay perched atop the television. But a peek into the small

kitchen revealed a space both tidy and spotless, exactly like Katelyn's work area at APO.

The tiny living room boasted an old-fashioned camelback sofa upholstered in a greenish tweed, abutted by twin tan wing chairs, one of which was smothered by a large patchwork crocheted afghan.

Katelyn gestured at the furniture. "My grandparents' old stuff, then my parents.'" She moved her hands to her hips and sighed. "And the mess," she muttered, clearly embarrassed.

"Hey, as long as you have a place to sit, who cares?" But I couldn't stop the decorator in me from a mental refurbishment. I'd take her trash-diving – I'd recently found a chipped vase that I'd convinced myself was genuine Ming dynasty - and help her select some fabrics and pillows that would turn dowdy into funky.

And then I stopped myself. Omigod, here was this stressed-out woman trying to make ends meet in a low-wage job while parenting a demanding little kid, and I was critiquing her décor? I gave myself a mental spanking.

From another room, I heard shrieks of "Ai-yeee, Ai-yeee" and what sounded like heavy objects being thrown against the wall. I was alarmed until Katelyn laughed.

"That's Aidan, pretending he's a Samurai. He watches too many Japanese cartoons."

"Well, if it keeps him busy," I ventured. I knew nothing about the interests of a six-year-old boy.

"Aidan, honey," she called, "we have a guest."

A tow-headed boy, skinny as a stork, appeared in the living room. "What happened to your car?" he asked.

Katelyn smiled at him. "It's not working, that's what happened to the car. I'll know more tomorrow. This is Diane, from work, who was nice enough to drive me home. And now, I have a question for you. What happened to this room?" She waved her arm to encompass the full scope of the disarray.

"Kevin was over."

"And when friends come over, what's supposed to happen before they leave?"

"After dinner."

"Now. Or no dinner."

"You're mean!" he yelled.

She beckoned me into the kitchen as I watched Aidan gather piles of action figures and toss them into some plastic bins in the corner of the room, which began to resemble the orderly surroundings one might expect of Katelyn.

As she opened a can of Chef Boyardee, the Italian in me inwardly cringed, but I sucked up my judgment, along with the gross ersatz Italian meal. Aidan sort-of joined us for dinner, constantly jumping out of his seat to run into his bedroom to grab an action figure, or demonstrate a feature of ancient swordplay with an imaginary weapon.

"Hey, lady, get up and fight," he exhorted, poking me with his very real finger as I attempted to down a forkful of glop.

"Aidan, let Diane eat, please."

"No!"

"Aidan, please, Diane's our guest."

"I don't care. She's Myimoto Musashi and we need to battle."

He poked me again, hard enough that I thought I might find a black and blue mark the next day. I was about to rise so I could play along, but Katelyn shook her head.

"Don't encourage him. Aidan, there's a time for everything, and this is dinner time, not battle time. Diane..."

The temperature in the room rose, as Aidan went red in the face.

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't care."

He stomped around the room in a rage.

Katelyn closed her eyes and breathed deeply. I counted ten seconds, when she opened them and rejoined us.

"Aidan, please go to your room, now."

"No, I said we need to battle, and we're gonna do it now."

I'm never having children.

"Aidan," I tried. "I can come and battle another time, okay?"

I looked to Katelyn for approval.

"Good idea, Diane. What do you think, Aidan?"

"I'm mad. Mad, mad, mad."

He stormed off to his room, where the banging and shouting resumed.

"Diane, I'm so sorry, I never should have invited you. It's just the way he is. He's really a good kid."

"Oh, Katelyn, I know. He's just having a bad night, that's all."

"I wish. I just hope he outgrows it. He's actually way better than he used to be."

And way worse was....hacking up the furniture?

"I like the way you closed your eyes and counted to ten. I'll have to remember that technique for when I have kids."

She laughed.

"You learn a lot having a kid like Aidan. What's that expression? If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger?"

"I guess. Anyway, it's funny, where you live reminds me of where I grew up."

"Really? I thought you were from Newton or Wellesley or someplace like that."

"Hardly. I grew up on Staten Island. It's kind of the Southie of New York actually. A lot like this – two-family houses, regular working stiffs."

"But you went to a fancy college, right?" Her face took on a wistful expression.

"Yeah, and let me tell you, Tufts was culture shock. I had friends who vacationed on islands I never heard of. Oh, and when I was a freshman, it was the year everyone was carrying Balenciaga bags. One girl on my floor had three! And they're like 3,000 dollars."

"Did she at least let you borrow one?"

"Nah, I wasn't interested. Well, maybe a little. But here's the funny thing. She was really nice. And my roommate Genie, she's from Greenwich, Connecticut, which is very ritzy, and she's great. Not snobby at all. There were people at my high school who thought they were all that, and they had no money at all."

"It's not about what you have, it's who you are. At least, I think so. I mean, our board members are all pretty wealthy, right? Some of them are weird." She started to giggle. "Wait here."

She tore into her bedroom. What could she be doing?

About two minutes later, she sashayed out in a striped shirt, striped socks on her legs, and another pair covering her hands. She'd crammed a stuffed dog into another sock, and safety-pinned another to her left breast.

"Hello, Mr. Mason, how are you today?" she drawled, a perfect caricature of Burberry-clad Sis Reade and Puddingface. She continued to mince about the room, stopping to pet her imaginary pooch.

"Such a good boy, what a good boy."

When I stopped laughing, I gasped out, "You have nailed her. Oh, my God, that was perfect."

She wore a sly little smile.

"You have to admit, weird."

Aidan padded into the room, clutching a stuffed cat. He rubbed his eyes.

"Mom, I think it's, um, you know, time," he said, looking at me, then back at Katelyn.

Katelyn glanced at her cell.

"I'll just be a minute," she said. "Go get ready."

As soon as he was out of earshot, she whispered, "He likes me to read to him, even though he's a great reader himself, but he's a little embarrassed about it."

"I need to get going anyway. Work tomorrow."

"Thanks again for the ride."

"And you for dinner. I had a good time."

"Liar."

"No, really."

And I wasn't lying. Katelyn was nothing like any of my current friends, but a lot like the kids I went to high school with, the ones who drank too much and married too young. Even though their lives had gone in another direction from mine, I'd known them forever, and we'd shared some great times back in the day.

Still, I thanked God for parents who encouraged my bookishness and odd interests (remember Sneaky my snake)? If it hadn't been for them, I might be chasing my own little Aidan around an apartment not unlike this one.

What if I Andrew and I had stayed together? Would we be married by now? With a kid on the way? No way was I ready for that.

chapter

FIVE

The next morning, I detected the unmistakable hoofbeats of Mary-Day stomping past my office towards Hal's. But would a racehorse wear hot pink suede shoes (Pink Index ranking – 20)? I looked up to note the firm set to her mouth, and found a sudden need to confer with Betty. I arrived at her desk just outside Hal's office as Mary-Day entered Hal's lair, in time to hear her tell him that our board member and dinner honoree Dinky's mother had died.

Hal continued to work on his computer as he responded, "Gee, that's too bad. Poor Dinky."

Mary-Day's voice rose a few decibels.

"Hal, you must send a note and attend the funeral. It's Thursday at St. Anne's."

Hal looked from the computer to Mary-Day.

"Why should I send a note? I didn't even know the woman."

Mary-Day's face turned as fuchsia as her footwear .

"Hal," she screeched, "we have been over this a million times. This is about common courtesy, and to someone who does a lot for YOUR

organization. YOU ARE THE PRESIDENT and he is a member of YOUR board. You write a note and go to the service to express your sympathy to DINKY!!!'

The louder her voice rose, the more she sounded like Dolly Parton. I half expected her to burst out warbling the theme to that old movie "Nine to Five." Hal returned to his computer with a smile designed to infuriate her further.

"Mary-Day, we are done with this discussion, do you understand me? For-e-ver," dragging out every syllable for emphasis.

Mary-Day slammed his door on her way out and stopped at Betty's desk where we were pretending not to listen.

"That asshole," she complained. "Last week, he refused to call a donor who gave \$10,000 to APO. Why should he get a boo-boo on his finger using the phone, or tax his little vocal chords?"

"Have a mint," suggested Betty, opening her candy store of a desk drawer, and tossing a silver-wrapped bon-bon in Mary-Day's direction.

I headed to the lunchroom for some late-morning mud. Who was this? Philosophy major/would-be rock star/poet judging from the milky pallor, height of around 5'6,' black geeky/cool rock star glasses, and a hair-line inching backwards. Andrew in everything but hair.

"Where's the sugar around here?" he asked as he poured some java into an APO mug featuring our logo and a trio of basset hounds.

"I obligingly opened the cabinet above the sink, inquiring "One envelope or two?"

He took three, saying "It's gotta taste like coffee ice cream."

"Hey, me too," I replied.

"So, I guess you work here?"

"Writer in residence. PR, brochures, stuff like that. You?"

"Actually, I write too. Working on a novel."

"Starving artist."

He laughed. "I manage to put food on the table."

"All legally, I hope."

He laughed again. His teeth resembled perfectly formed Chiclets.

"Since I left Colgate junior year, I've been lifeguarding, bartending, rewriting unintelligible Japanese appliance manuals."

"You sure have lots of variety in your day."

"You could look at it that way. I look at it as a bunch of checks."

I took a slug of coffee.

"So, what's your interest in APO?" I asked.

"My dad works here. I'm picking him up for lunch."

"Really? What department?"

"Actually, he's the big gun. You know, Hal?"

Nothing came out of my mouth.

"You look like you just swallowed a bug."

"I did, I did."

But of course he was Hal's son. He had his eyes, though the mouth definitely hailed from the Joyce side of the family.

Let's take inventory here. My boss's son appeared to be flirting with me. A boss about whom I was starting to harbor some serious doubts. Rule Number One in that great workplace manual in the sky: No dating the boss.* *Or his offspring.

"I'm Diane Salvi, the Communications Director."

"Mark Mason."

"Well, I guess I must go do some communicating," I said, giving him a cute little grin. Yikes, was I actually sorta, kinda interested in a man?

I texted Genie.

guy in lunchroom flirted with me, semi-adorkable. p.s. he's hal's son.

She texted back, *You finally show an interest in someone and that's who you pick???? Stay away.*

I let my imagination take a brief and unexpected stroll down romance lane, picturing Mark and me ambling along the Esplanade on a warm spring day, arms entwined. Dining in a candlelit North End Italian trattoria. I told my fantasies to take a hike, played a quick game of online Boggle, and probably would've played a few more had Betty not interrupted me to reschedule my next meeting with, who else, Mark's father.

I was working late that night, conferring with Mary-Day on our tribute gala, which I'd named *For Pets' Sake*.

"We're holding the cocktail reception and a silent auction from 6-7," she explained. "Here's the schedule for the evening. It has to run like clock-work."

"I've never even been to a charity event," I confessed. "I want to help, but I'm not sure...."

She laughed, her lipstick red with pink undertones, setting off her gleaming white teeth.

"It's all about inspiration. We want every guest to come away thinking that we're the best damn charity in Boston, so we create an ambiance, with visuals, decorations, food, stuff like that, and with words. I'll take care of the visuals, you'll handle the words. It all starts with the invitation. I'll be meeting with the graphic designer next week. Here's the basic text: date, time, place, honoree names. You need to write a blurb about APO that will make people want to whip out their checkbooks. And then, there are the speeches."

"I'm a speechwriter?"

"Relax. You'll interview the honorees, and turn their ramblings into coherent prose. Oh, and Hal will tell you he'll write his own, and the day of the dinner, he'll ask you to do it. And you'll sweat bullets to get it done, and later you'll learn that he flushed it down the toilet. Metaphorically speaking. My advice: write it now, just in case. And don't be bothered if he doesn't use it."

It was about six o'clock and we were reviewing the schedule for the gala evening when we heard Hal's unmistakable footsteps pass my door on route to Betty's office. We peeked out, and he was carrying a big plastic bag that reeked of the ocean. Was he setting up a fish tank in his office? And what was he doing at work past four o'clock?

We heard him talking to Betty, and, about ten minutes later, he was out the door. I looked out my window to see him getting into his car, just as Betty yelled, "Diane, Mary-Day, into my office. Immediately!"

Mary-Day tore down the hall and I caught up. We found Betty laughing hysterically and pointing at the plastic bag, which was twitching around on her desk.

"What the fuck?" asked Mary-Day.

Betty was laughing so hard she started to choke. I slapped her on the back; she waved her arms around, took a drink from the water glass on her desk.

"What is so goddamn funny?" asked Mary-Day.

"Mary-Day, remember when Charlie's brother died?"

She turned to me. "This was about four months ago, before you came. My husband's twin brother had brain cancer, was just 58 and about the nicest guy you could hope to meet. People on the board and staff were extra kind, lots sent cards or flowers, a few even made contributions in his memory to APO. From HIM? Nada. Good God, not so much as 'I'm sorry you lost your brother-in-law.' So, about an hour ago, he calls me from somewhere. He asks me how long I'll be here, and I tell him I'm working on his report to the board. He tells me he'll be here in ten minutes.

"I'm thinking, what's this idiot up to now? About an hour later, he shows up with this pleased-as-punch grin on his puss and this bag, which he plops onto my desk. Come on Diane, give it a poke."

I did, and, omigod, the bag sprang into action. I jumped back.

Another boom of laughter from Betty, who continued, "I'm thinking 'what the hell is this, a dog?' while he's just smiling away like a damned fool. Finally, he says, 'I thought you'd like these. Look inside.'"

Mary-Day said, "I don't believe this," and opened the bag to reveal... live lobsters, crawling around inside the bag on Betty's desk like something out of a horror movie.

"Betty, you're allergic, aren't you?" said Mary-Day.

"Yeah, and I just might consider this a murder attempt, since he goes on and on about his lobsters all the time, and he knows damn well they could kill me. Or he would if he ever paid attention to a single thing anyone else says. Anyway, here's the *piece de resistance*."

She picked up a card showing a dog under this 1950's style beauty parlor hairdryer on the cover and handed it to me. I opened it and the inside read 'Another bad hair day.'

"So when I ask him what's the occasion, he says, 'Charlie's brother.'

"I say, "You mean the fact that he died four months ago?"

"He says, 'These are really fresh. Now don't forget to cook 'em the humane way. You immerse them gently in warm water, so they fall asleep. Then, when they're napping quietly, you turn up the heat. They never feel a thing, and you got your lobster dinner, all's you need's a little melted butter.'

"I tell him my daughter and her family will enjoy them, since I'm allergic. So he goes, 'Oops. Forgot. Now don't forget to tell her, the humane way.'"

Mary-Day chimed in, "Did he learn about this in Martha Stewart? Here's a neat way to offer condolences. Wait a few months so they think you're a thoughtless jerk. Then, when they least expect it, present them with some live lobsters, ready for the pot. They're allergic to shellfish? No problem. It's the thought that counts!"

Betty was practically choking through that deep-throated laughter.

"You've got it exactly right, Mary-Day. That's exactly it."

Brad Pitt on the outside, Borat on the inside.

chapter

SIX

Most nights, I lay in bed, picturing those sad, unhealthy dogs at that sorry North End shelter. I had to do something, besides the obvious – telling Hal – which hadn't helped. I decided on another visit Saturday.

The same ponytailed guy answered the door. The stench of feces and urine assaulted my senses, not to mention my shoes.

"Yeah?" he asked.

I'd awakened him or else he was high on something. I remembered he worked nights, and prayed it was the former. He obviously didn't remember me, so I asked again if he had any animals available for adoption. He led me to the same back room, which was down to just three pathetically malnourished dogs. I was immediately drawn to the saddest little cocker spaniel, sound asleep, or so I thought.

"How about that one?" I asked.

"She ain't feelin' so good."

I entered the cage, and picked her up. Her breathing was labored, her eyes glassy and her nose warm.

"This dog is sick!"

"Yeah, don't think she'll last the night."

"How long has she been like this?"

"Near as I can tell, a week or two."

"How can you let this happen? This dog is your responsibility and you're letting her die."

"I know, it sucks. Man."

"Well, if you really cared, you'd have done something."

"Listen, I'm doin' my best"

"Well, apparently that isn't good enough, is it?"

He yawned. "Listen, I went to bed at two this morning. I'm not a vet, ya know."

"Well, why didn't you take her to one?"

"And who's gonna pay for that? You?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'll take her."

Maybe Hal had no genuine interest in rescuing animals in trouble, but I still did.

I picked up the dog, who weighed what I imagined a tiny Yorkie might, way less than a robust Cocker should. I hoped getting some nutrients into her would help. She peered up at me with the saddest eyes as I patted her head. I hustled to my car as carefully as I could, placing her on the seat beside me as I headed to our Roxbury shelter. I worried she might fall off the seat but she just lay there listlessly. I phoned ahead on my cell, asking the vet on call to be ready for an emergency admission.

Scrambling for a parking spot and none in sight, I double parked by the entrance, and walked as quickly as I could holding my precious cargo, who by then was overheated and wheezing. I saw devoted pet owners cuddling healthy-looking pets in for rabies shots or waiting to sign the paperwork for an adoption, and thought I just might throw up from sheer aggravation, knowing that my own little dog— yes, she was now mine — was suffering as a result of negligence. I was led into a treatment room, where the vet took her from me and settled her onto a cushion.

"She's dehydrated, poor thing," she said. "How long has she been sick?"

She gave me an accusatory look as she ordered an IV feed from an assistant, which she set up with the efficiency of a sushi master.

“And how did she get this way?” she inquired.

“She’s not even my dog, I found her at this really ratty shelter, and I just couldn’t leave her there.”

I started to cry.

The vet sighed.

“We’ll do what we can. You can sit with her if you want. I’ll be back in a few.”

The assistant found me a chair so I could sit close by the dog. I put my hand on her belly for comfort – hers and mine – and kept it there for a good hour, with the vet making periodic visits to check on her progress. I felt her breath under my hand, warming my palm and yes, my heart. A young woman appeared, announcing, “I’m the tech. The vet asked for a heartworm test. Would you mind holding her while I draw blood?”

The word heartworm was terrifying. And hold her was all I wanted to do. The technician placed a syringe on the dog’s leg. She was too weak even to whimper from the sting. I watched as her blood filled the tube.

Fifteen minutes later, the vet returned, a grim smile on her face.

“I’m afraid she has heartworm, and it’s beyond the earliest stage. But it’s also not end stage, so with medication, she has a chance. We’ll keep her for a while.”

We weren’t a full service hospital, but we had a few rooms at our shelters for short term stays.

“How long do you think she’ll need to be here?” I asked.

“That depends on her progress. We just have to wait and see.”

“Am I allowed to visit?”

“Of course. Come as often as you like.”

I knew where I’d be spending my evenings for the next few days.

“What is wrong with you?” Genie asked as I walk in the door. “You look like your lost your last friend.”

I burst into tears. She brought me Cleo, whom I hugged and kissed as I recounted for her this horror show.

“Have you reminded Hal about his promise to investigate?” she asked.

“Just once. He made the same promises, blah, blah, blah, but then, nada. But this time, I’m gonna be more forceful. I mean, he has more

resources and clout to do something about this than practically anyone in Massachusetts, and he's just sitting on his hands."

"Whoa. If you lose your job, you'll be in a position to do exactly nothing. You just started there and you've barely proven yourself. Tell him what happened, as vividly as you told me. I know, maybe you can tell him with someone else in the room so it's not all about you. You need a witness."

"I'll tell him in front of Betty. He actually listens to her. Maybe even a few tears?"

She drew herself up.

"Absolutely not. Women always think men are moved by tears, but they're not. They hate them. Especially bosses. You need to be strong and decisive, not weak and emotional. Promise me."

"Okay. But not even a single, tiny tear...?"

"No!" she snapped.

As usual, Genie was right. If I lost this job, I'd have to try something else. If forced to return to the ad world, I'd also have to stick my head in the oven. And starting a new career in this shaky economy, well, fat chance. Ditto about exhibiting strength. I wanted him to think I didn't fall apart easily, even if I knew better.

Monday morning, I snagged him as he arrived, buttonholing him at Betty's desk before he even took his coat off. I gave him my best sad puppy eyes during the narration, ending with "she's still alive, but barely. I left her there for treatment, but – *brainstorm* – Hal, you do such a great job with our policies, they said I could visit her any time."

"You did the right thing, Diane, taking to her our shelter. She'll get the best care possible, I promise you."

Betty jumped in. "But still, how awful that the dog got so sick. Can't we do something about this, Hal?"

His response: "The dog is in good hands. Now, Diane, and you too, Betty, don't dag me about this stuff."

Entered into the Harold I. Mason, Jr. personal dictionary. Dag: a cross between nag and rag. I was beginning to pick up the hang of this.

"But," I broke in, "what about the other dogs there, now and in the future? They're all being neglected, and they could all get just as sick."

“We can’t afford it right now. Plus, I know you set your priorities, probably every day you come into work, right?”

“I do, but this...”

“Well, this 150th is my priority right now, okay? Just give it a rest. If we can find the money, I’ll get to it, but first things first. Okay?” Then he smiled that sexy smile and told me some stupid camel joke.

I choked out a laugh that felt more like a sob, still thinking about that derelict North End shelter and that poor little puppy. I needed to do something, but what? For starters, have some chocolate to kick-start my endorphins.

The next two nights, I swung by the shelter where my dog, whom I’d named Perky in a burst of wishful thinking, was recovering. That might not actually be the best word to describe her state. She was no worse, but the medication wasn’t much help. The vet said they’d give it a couple more days, before switching her to something else, a new heartworm drug fresh on the market.

I spent an hour each night snuggling and reassuring her, even playing some Weezer to her, anything to keep her spirits up.

The weekend began with a drizzly Saturday, a perfect morning to spend in a darkened room, distracted by other people’s problems. I checked out Fandango, threw on some jeans, a Juicy sweatshirt that formerly lived in the closet of someone named Rachel, wolfed down a couple yogurts, and headed out the door.

My street’s a mere block long. I picked up speed as I rounded the corner past one Victorian -turned-apartment-house after another. I passed a gray-haired woman who might be the mother or the grandmother of the little girl smeared in chocolate. Two elderly black men were sitting on the porch of a small Victorian in need of a paint job. A trio of Asian graduate students stood in the middle of the road arguing about something smart people argue about, forgive the stereotyping. Oh, and look at this.

“Hi cutie,” I said, bending down for some much-needed instant love from a tiny Bichon. The residential streets turned industrial and academic. In the old factories that once manufactured candy and clothing, brilliant minds were cooking up gene therapies and robots that would make every

chore a breeze. The MIT buildings I passed were breeding geniuses who will develop memory chips for our brains, alongside others who might devise a way for us to instantly teleport ourselves to the home of a certain former classmate, where we can torture and maim said man-stealing betrayer.

I arrived at the Kendall Square Cinema, where, to reach the box office, I was forced to navigate a phalanx of volunteers for an environmental organization, requesting my membership in their "Say no to Coal" campaign. I happily signed my name, and found a ten in search of a cause in my wallet.

Once inside, I nabbed a giant popcorn, and took my seat in the theater alongside seven or eight other losers joining me in viewing a charming little foreign movie featuring attractive young people. Like Andrew. But since they were in Barcelona, I was able to let go of my dark thoughts and enjoy the scenery.

Back at work, Monday. Just before noon, Hal called me into his lair.

"Diane, I need to talk to you about something. I have a very important question for you," he began with a serious expression, then the beginnings of a conspiratorial grin.

"What do you think of our little Southern belle?"

I hesitated. Was there a right answer here, and did I want to give it?

"Mary-Day does a really good job, Hal. I like her." All true.

"Yeah, well she's a bell all right, ringing in my ear about this and that, like a bad case of, what's the thing called, oh yeah, tennitis."

Right. When you get a tennis ball stuck in your ear.

"Come on, Diane, doesn't she bug you? I'll tell you, if she wasn't firmly trenched in here..."

A dreamy look took over his face, as he imagined Mary-Day on her way out the door. For-e-ver. He was watching me expectantly.

"Diane, very few people are really trustworthy. I'm sure you realize that."

I nodded.

"Well, some people are less trustworthy than others, and there's something about that woman I just don't trust. You, on the other hand, I trust completely."

He gave me a wide view of those piano-key choppers. I knew I had to say something, but what the hell?

"Thanks, Hal, I hope I continue to earn your trust."

"Trust and admiration, Diane, trust and admiration. And because I trust you, I'm going to ask you to do me a little favor. Just keep your eyes and ears open, especially regarding our little Miss Georgia, and if you hear anything you think I should know about, you come and tell me, okay? Oh, and let's just keep this between us, shall we?"

What the hell? Like she says bad things about him? She does that to his face, 24-7. Fuck him for putting me in this position.

I slunk back to my desk and tried to concentrate on a blog post about nutrition for older dogs, but my brain was spinning in the wrong direction. What was keeping Hal so busy he couldn't investigate the animal cruelty his star staffer had exposed? And where was the money that Mary-Day raised going if not to rescue more dogs and cats?

Let's just pretend I was doing what Hal asked, gathering intelligence on Mary-Day. I knocked on her door and was temporarily blinded by the pink boa around her neck.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"For you, darlin,' all the time in the world. What's up?"

"I'm just curious about something. Hal seems to be, um, pretty busy, with the gala and all. I was wondering..."

She stopped me right there.

"All he's done for the gala is approve the invitation design, which took about five minutes."

"So what is he so busy with all day?"

"Getting his nails done."

"Seriously."

"I am serious. Have you ever noticed how shiny they are? He gets a regular 'man'-icure," she told me, making quotation fingers around the first syllable.

"But he's done a lot for this organization, right?"

"Maybe once, sure. But he's been pretty much retired since I've been here."

"What do you mean, retired? He's here every day."

"I'm speaking metaphorically, darlin.'" He collects a paycheck, but for all the work he does, he might as well just stay home and watch the soaps."

"I have another question. Does all the money you raise every year get allocated? I mean, is there ever any left over?"

"Some of it goes into the endowment, and we use a small percentage of the interest from that for operating expenses."

"How much is in our endowment anyway?"

"Twenty million and change." She saw my look of shock. "Actually fairly typical of a non-profit like ours. And no, we can't just raid it, honey. The board has to vote. It's a fairly big deal." Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Just wondering, huh? Come on, Diane. He's told you he can't afford more shelters, right?"

"Something like that. Is it, um, true?"

"Honey, I could raise a bazillion dollars, or maybe the board could vote on spending part of the endowment, but new shelters are just not going to happen. He's just too damn lazy."

I was a dog with a bone. "But why, I mean he's not that old."

"Thanks a lot. I have two years on his majesty. And damned if I know."

I remembered something that had been nagging at me for a while.

"What happened to, um, I think her name was Rebecca? My predecessor?"

This time, she bayed out a laugh.

"Ashram. In India"

"Wow. Like *Eat, Pray, Love*?"

"More like Hal, nervous breakdown, flee."

She saw the alarm on my face.

"Don't y'all worry, darlin.' She was a flighty little thing. She didn't have half the balls you do."

Before I had a chance to learn more, she glanced at her watch.

"Wish I could chit-chat all day, but speaking of raising more money, got a hot prospect coming in ten minutes, must prepare."

She paused for a minute, went rummaging in her bookshelves.

"Here, look at these. Maybe you'll learn something."

She pulled out a pile of annual reports going back thirty-plus years. I gathered them in my arms and brought them back to my office, thinking

that I wasn't nearly as ballsy as Mary-Day thought I was. Could there be an ashram –or maybe a convent – in my future?

On to the history lesson. First annual report APO pre-Hal. 1980. The cover was an acid green, with lower-case turquoise letters *a, p* and *o* dancing across the page with a pair of frolicking pups. Open to the President's Message, featuring a photo of a gentleman who looked like my high school chemistry teacher: black glasses, slicked back hair, totally out of sync with the intended grooviness of the psychedelic cover.

It was a slim volume, four pages. Some stats about adoptions from our two shelters in Boston and Worcester, a financial report detailing our annual budget of \$350,000, and a photo of eight guys in conservative suits. The board. I spotted Dinky and Richard, and a bunch of older men, presumably no longer with APO or anyone else for that matter. The next few years, pretty much the same, with a couple of changes of leadership and, with a new exec in 1990, third, fourth and fifth shelters added.

Enter Hal in '95. Two shelters added. By '97, we were up to eight. In 1998, we added hotlines for problems with your pet. And in 1999, we became the twelve-shelter organization we operated today, with an annual budget approaching \$10 million.

From 2000 on, pure status quo. The annual reports became glossier, the photos of Hal more numerous. But nothing much changed, except for the creation of the Pet Palace in 2008. Which was conceived as "a revenue stream that would enable APO to acquire additional shelters and rescue scores more animals in need" according the caption under the photo of a facility elegant enough for a seven-figure CEO. No wonder the board adored him. He'd apparently worked hard to grow the organization for five years. And then he just quit. Why? I popped into Betty's office.

"Betty," I said. "Remember the discussion at the board meeting about some financial problems at the Pet Palace?"

"Oh yeah, our gold mine. Around two years ago, Hal came up with an idea for a project that would bring in tons of revenue to subsidize our money-losers like the pet health hotline and our inner-city shelters. The Ritz for pets. So when a bunch of fancy-ass millionaires go on vacation, little Snoopy and Bitsy get to board in some high-end real estate with deluxe extras like sterling silver dog bowls, velvet-lined dog beds, and what not."

She shook her head, smiling ruefully at the memory.

I asked, "Did anyone do a market study? I mean, Boston isn't exactly LA or New York in the flashy spending department."

Betty threw up her hands. "Exactly! We all said the same thing."

"And Hal's response was...?"

"'You know what a consultant is? Someone who asks you the time and then steals your watch.' He goes rub-a-dub dub on that sixpack of his, and says 'I go with my gut.'"

"So what's the problem with the Pet Palace?"

"Hmmm, let's just say his tummy is in deep dog-do. What was supposed to be a moneymaker's draining our endowment faster than you can say pooper-scooper. Go see for yourself."

The T took me to Boston's tony Back Bay, where the Palace's rental was costing APO a small fortune. Down the street, those in the right income bracket could outfit themselves in the latest looks from Chanel and Burberry, after a styling at one of the block's numerous high-end salons.

An elegant brownstone housed the Pet Palace. I rang the bell and was greeted by the "concierge" aka receptionist. Hal had hired one of Boston's hot-shottest decorators to outfit what he called "the world's first and finest animal companion hotel."

The concierge telephoned the manager, who reminded me of women with daily salon appointments you saw in the Sunday New York Times real estate ads selling \$10 million aeries high above Park Avenue.

"Diane, so nice to meet you, finally. I've heard such lovely things about you from Mary-Day. Let me show you around."

She gestured towards the lobby, decorated in grayish-green sleek sectional furniture, which required thrice daily vacuuming to remove errant strands of pet hair.

We entered the "hotel" from the lobby through a gleaming wood door that would be right at home at the Four Seasons. The temporary tenants resided in double rooms or singles, each offering a cozy bed lined in expensive Frette fabric. For hungry or thirsty guests, only the best – Tiffany, of course – would do for water and food bowls. Classical music wafted through the air, and staff were expected to scurry around anticipating a guest's every

need, whether a tummy rub, a romp in the small backyard, or a walk in the nearby Public Garden.

The tariff for a night's stay at the Palace was a cool \$200, about five times the cost of a typical dog boarder, and didn't even include meals. We offered guests six choices daily, at \$25 each, the cost of an appetizer in the restaurant at the nearby Taj Hotel. *The Beacon Hill* consisted of grilled chicken and wheat bran, flavored with onions and soy sauce. *The Back Bay* was a fish filet mixed with string beans and rice. Vegetarian dogs and cats might consider *The Harvard Square*, a vegetable and cheese concoction. For an extra fee, guests could enjoy sessions with a "pet exercise physiologist" or a pet masseur at \$75 a pop. Upon departure, each visitor was presented with a "goodbye basket" filled with toiletries – shampoo, biscuits, even a miniature bottle of perfume called "Eau de Chien" or "Eau de Chat," depending.

"Are you okay, Diane?" asked the manager as I was leaving. She'd noticed my red face. "Where are all the dogs?" I asked.

"Well, um, we have four or five guests this week," she stammered.

"And what's the capacity?"

"Fifteen."

"And you have four or five?"

"Four actually, at this very moment. It's been a little slow getting this place going." This manager was on her way out, but clearly the place required more than a personnel change. I was angry enough to take the dog-shaped letter opener off the concierge's desk, stomp back to the office and insert it directly into Hal's jugular vein. I watched a dog nearly die last week so that APO could fund my boss's vanity project, which was bleeding money intended to rescue abandoned pets.

I stormed back to work and into Betty's office. "Betty, I'm just, well, frankly, appalled," I told her.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

An idea dawned.

"What if I really stepped up the marketing so we could make some real money over there. Then we could afford to bring on more shelters."

Betty sighed. "There's no way to make the hotel work, ever. The overhead's way too high and we'll never be able to charge enough to break even, let alone make a profit."

“What about the board? They seemed concerned at the last meeting. I mean, aren’t they supposed to be watching our finances?”

From behind, I heard the voice of Georgia, as Mary-Day bombed into Betty’s office. “The board are a bunch of wusses. ‘You have it under control, Hal. If Hal says he can turn it around, he surely will.’ That’s the party line, darlin.”

“I need chocolate. Now!” I said.

I tore out of the building and down the street to the indy chocolatier, where I popped three consecutive super-dark truffles. The fix worked; I could feel the endorphins flooding my brain, and I felt a tiny bit calmer.

If only I could fix HIM. I mean in the canine sense.

chapter

SEVEN

I doubted Mark knew much about the financial goings-on at his father's workplace. Yes, that Mark. Two weeks after that day in the lunch-room, when I'd whittled the mooning over him down to about an hour a day, my phone at work rang.

"Diane, hi, it's Mark Mason, remember me?"

"Hey, Mark, what's up?"

"I thought you might want to come with me to catch my friend's play. It might be really bad, but what the hell."

"I love bad plays; they're my favorite kind. Just how bad is this?"

"Won't know till I see it. But it might be halfway tolerable if you're there."

Boss's son? What boss?

"Well, when were you thinking of?"

"It opens this Saturday night, and I sort of promised I'd be there for him opening night. It starts at eight, so I could pick you up around 7:15 and we can eat after."

A guy who supported his friend the lousy playwright. Definitely had possibilities..

"Sounds good." I gave him my address and directions.

Thank God for texting, no overheard phone calls. I wrote to Genie: *son-of-a-boss called, going to see friend's play Saturday night. adorable phone technique.*

Back at me. *Happy for you. DO NOT TELL A SOUL AT WORK.*

My reply: *discreet as a cia operative.*

After sweating through the next couple of days, Saturday night arrived. Come 7:15, he was supposed to arrive, and he wasn't here yet. I paced, Cleo on my shoulder. 7:25. Now I was perspiring. I moved Cleo onto my lap for a comforting cuddle. Shit, I'd been stood up.

Finally, close to 7:30 the buzzer sounded. I rang him up, and he appeared at my door, smelling as clean as a soap commercial. His hair was still a little damp from the shower, and he was wearing a blue button-down shirt, black jeans, and black leather jacket – rocker meets preppy. I forgave him immediately.

"Hi, Diane. You look nice."

Thank you, Jennifer in Santa Barbara, for the black and white checked capris.

"Hey, who's this?" he asked, as he reached out and stroked Cleo, who stretched contentedly. If he wiped his hands, he was history. No wiping.

He led me to his car, an ancient Saab, where we did the first date thing on the way to the theater: friends, books, a little family stuff thrown in. After two excruciating hours, we went backstage to lie to his friend about how much we loved the play. Then Mark and I hit this little dive bar in Somerville, where we proceeded to critique the worst production we'd ever seen.

"Do you think the main character would've been more believable if he hadn't been holding a balloon the whole time?" I asked.

"I don't know, I think it was a good device to show his yearning for childhood. But that womb-tomb poem, Christ. Mom equals death? I mean, his mother's only crime was castrating his father."

"I read a book once about these castrati in Italy, little boys who were castrated so they could remain sopranos forever."

"Ouch. Let's change the subject."

He told me about his latest work assignment, putting into legitimate English the instructions for a Japanese-manufactured hair dryer.

"Pack open the wrapping by punctuating the baggage. Then, make sure no water is nearby. Inserting the plug into grounding outlet. Push button to ensure highness or lowness of heating and blowering."

"I'm picturing a Japanese guy in a cubicle," I said. "He's got his sake in one hand and a dictionary in the other."

"He wants to finish up quickly so he can go out with the other salarymen."

"Did you ever see the movie Tampoco?"

"One of the best food movies of all time," he replied.

We got back to my place around midnight. As we sat in his car outside my building, I hardly knew what either of us was saying. I was both distracted and ambivalent about his hand gently stroking my neck and my ear. I felt my face heat up as his fingers played around with my hair. Before I had time to decide kiss or no kiss, he leaned in, his lips on mine.

Andrew made a flickering cameo appearance on the movie screen in my brain. Mark had a slightly more assertive kissing style, but he also knew when to slow it down. He wasn't better or worse than Andrew, just different. I took a pair of scissors and tried to send my ex where he belonged, on the cutting room floor. He refused to leave.

And who should pop up next but Hal. I pulled away slightly. It was getting much too crowded in here.

"This was really fun," I said.

"Even the play?"

"When else would I have had the opportunity to see every Greek tragedy rolled into one?"

Wanting to leave open the option of another date, it was my turn to lean over for a brief lip-lock.

"Night," I said. He waited till I reached my door, where I turned, and gave him a little wave.

A little more than a week passed, and no word from Mark. Well, that's that, I thought. Genie and I had polished off a yummy batch of spaghetti with broccoli and walnuts, and were engaged in a fierce game of Scrabble.

“Gamboge,” she announced triumphantly.

“That is so not a word,” I challenged.

“It’s a color, learned it in art class.”

“Okay, have your gamboge. And I give you in return planace.”

“Definition, you liar.”

“Planace. An architectural detail on a Corinthian column.”

“I will give you a break and let you take those tiles back this minute before I consult the dictionary. And what the hell, will you stop checking your cell? It’s working, and he’s a guy. He will call you when he’s ready.”

I sighed, put down c, h, and o to spell chaos, earning a triple word score.

I continued to visit Perky at the shelter, where she’d become the favorite of the staff. She hadn’t responded to the initial round of treatment, so they were trying the new medication. She now recognized me when I came to visit. Her name remained a misnomer; she had limited energy, although she did perk up slightly upon my arrival, and was always ready with a lick.

Gimme Bad Shelter had become the name of a horror movie, and it had invaded my brain. I’d recruited Genie’s help in giving this film a happy – or at least happier – ending; cleaning up that North End pit was a two-person job, minimum.

Saturday morning, we headed out the door for our first mission. I had ‘borrowed’ some toys, shampoo, food and water bowls, and a dog brush from APO. Okay, I was a thief, but I felt totally justified, in that I was saving lives. Call me Mother Diane.

We took the T back to the North End, where parking was practically impossible. It was hard to resist all the cheeses and pastas calling my name from the shop windows, but I had a higher purpose. Instead, I stopped at a drug store and picked up a mop, floor cleaner, sponges and a box of trash bags.

“Here goes,” I told Genie as I rang the bell. Ponytail came to the door. He didn’t look glad to see me.

“Yeah...?” he asked warily.

“Remember that dog I took last week?” I asked. “She’s in the hospital. And it’s not looking good.”

“Listen, what do you want from me? I’m doin’ my best here.”

“You listen...” I started. Genie jumped in.

“We want to help. You know, get the place cleaned up a bit, bring a few things to make the animals happy.”

Was that a glimmer of humanity I spied? He almost smiled as he opened the door and led us back to the cages.

Genie poked me in the back and when I turned around she was holding her nose. I gave her a punch in the arm. Now she was all business.

“Is there someplace we can put the dogs while we clean out their area?” she asked.

He scratched his head. And scratched and scratched. Fleas?

“Just keep ‘em in the hallway, and I’ll watch ‘em while you do your stuff.”

We found a bucket and set to work. Poop and pee ran and dripped everywhere, and I wondered how often –if ever – he took the dogs out. While Genie scraped and then mopped the floor, I scrubbed the walls. After about an hour, the cage was redolent of Mr. Clean with a urine top note and a hint of feces.

The dogs returned home, slightly disoriented. They perked right up when I set out the new food and water bowls, and filled both, which they lapped up instantly. We then turned our ministrations to the cats. Have you ever smelled a litter box that hasn’t been cleaned for two months? The aroma was a bit more difficult to purge, but we’d done our best.

“Okay,” I said. “Here’s the deal. We’re leaving everything here, so you have no excuses. You keep this place clean, and the food and water bowls full or we call the authorities.”

I was totally bluffing of course, but who was to know?

“Relax, I’m on top of it,” he tried to assure us.

“And we’re coming back next week to check,” promised Genie.

After we’d left, she said “We need a reward. Take me to Monica’s. And it’s my treat.”

Tiny Monica’s is my favorite. They claim to be the only place in town still hand rolling pasta on the premises, and they sell these imported little bottles of spreadable cheese that practically melt on the tongue.

We picked up some hand-cut tomato fettucine, a hunk of Robiola and, across the street, a lovely bottle of Barolo and headed home for an Italian feast.

Three nights later and Genie, Donnie and I were hanging out, watching American Idol, when my phone rang.

"Diane, it's Mark. Listen, there's this dance troupe at BU that I've heard is pretty good. Are you free Saturday night?"

"That depends. Is your friend the choreographer?"

"I don't know a single dancer in the company. But I could try to meet one beforehand if you want so you can say I took you to another friend's crappy thing."

"Not necessary, but thanks anyway."

Saturday night, and this time, I expected him to be late. He came through, though it was only five minutes.

"Hi," he said, followed by a quick kiss on the lips. "You smell good."

I'd better. I'd spent another day at the North End shelter, which was starting to show a glimmer of improvement. But I still felt the need for a vigorous scrub-down and perfume dousing in the aftermath; the aroma remained pungent.

We headed over to BU in his car.

"How was your day?" he asked.

Should I or shouldn't I? Maybe he'd share my outrage. And maybe he had some influence with Hal.

The guardian of common sense had my back. As did Genie, who'd warned me repeatedly, "Do not mix business with pleasure."

"Nice. I had thought of going to the gym, but it was so beautiful out, I took a walk with a friend instead."

"Yeah, I had a run. That's one of the best things about living in Cambridge. You can run along the river. I have a little deck on the back of my house, so then I sat outside, did some work on a short story I'm writing, and read."

"Do you ever show anyone your work?"

"Only when I know them really, really well."

"I'd be happy to read sometime. I'm a pretty good editor."

"I'll let you know when I'm ready."

"So what are you reading?"

"I usually have a couple books going at once. Right now I'm reading this amazing Japanese novel called *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami. Do you know his work?"

"I've heard of him, but never read anything. What's it about?"

He laughed, scratched his head.

"It's hard to describe. It's like one of those Russian nesting dolls, with about five different stories going at once inside each other. Some are connected, and some aren't. It's kind of like a puzzle. I like to read stuff where the writer takes lots of risks with structure, and where the ideas drive the plot. It's a pretty ambitious piece of work, actually."

"I'm impressed."

Andrew had been a European history major. He could wax rhapsodic on the strategies of General DeGaulle, or the arranged marriages among the various royal families of France, England and Germany.

"Real life is so fascinating. Fiction just doesn't do it for me. Sorry," he'd once explained.

The new man in my life was now saying, "Hey" he said, "maybe we could pick a book and read it together. Not being in school, you don't get to talk about what you're reading with other people, and I always liked hearing other people's take on stuff."

"A bunch of my friends belong to book groups, and I've been thinking of joining one, actually."

"Well, you could start with our own book group of two."

"Sounds good to me."

We reached the auditorium, parked, and took our seats just as the lights were dimming.

After the performance, I told him, "I liked the way the dancers resembled cranes; they made me think of those origami birds. Very Japanese. Did you get that?"

"I try not to think about animals all that much, actually," he responded. "Hal and Joyce are always going on about their animal crap."

I tried not to remember that I always found people who referred to their parents by first name incredibly pretentious.

"Hey, those animals pay my rent."

"It's just that at our house, between the two of them, it's kind of all animals all the time. I'm a dog-lover too, but I don't need to talk about it constantly."

I pictured Joyce holed up in her study writing an article for *The Arachnid Times*, while Hal kicked back on the sofa watching *Animal Planet*.

We grappled in the car in front of my building again, with me a more enthusiastic participant this time.

"Diane, you are about the smartest woman I've ever dated," he said.

Okay, take me now.

"Can I come up?" he asked, as he ran his hand over the front of my sweater. My nipples stood up to say hello and thank you.

The rest of my body wanted to say, Turn off the car engine, and get mine going. My brain, which led to my actual lips, said, "Not tonight. See you soon, I hope."

I hopped from the car before body had time to overrule brain.

The next morning, a foundation executive came in for a tour orchestrated by Mary-Day, who'd submitted a proposal for a big chunk of change. Her feet were encased in a pair of hot pink and green plaid stilettos for the occasion. She and Hal had finished the tour with the exec and were saying their goodbyes as I walked past the entrance to grab some coffee in the lunchroom. Mary-Day stopped me.

"Diane, I'd like you to meet Rick McDonald, from the Batterbury Foundation. Rick, Diane is our Communications Director."

Rick reached out and we clasped hands..

Hal said, "Rick, I always enjoy meeting a fellow Illinoisan. Hey, I bet you'll love this one."

Mary-Day was shaking her head in Hal's direction, a clear signal to stop. He remained oblivious. She actually stomped her foot, which he also ignored.

"Get this. A woman goes to her boyfriend's parents' house for dinner. This is her first time meeting the family and she's very nervous. They all sit down and start to eat.

"The woman is beginning to feel a little discomfort. What with her nervousness and the broccoli casserole, she's starting to get really bad gas pains. She has no choice, she's gotta relieve herself, so lets out the teeniest little you-know-what."

"Hal, I think Rick needs to leave now," broke in Mary-Day.

"Soon as I finish my story. Anyway, it isn't loud, but everyone at the table hears. Before she even has a chance to be embarrassed, the boyfriend's father looks over at the dog and says, "Skippy!"

The woman thinks, This is great! and a big smile comes across her face. A couple of minutes later, she starts to feel the pain again. This time, she doesn't even hesitate, and she lets an even bigger one rip.

"The father looks and the dog and yells, 'Dammit Skippy!'"

And I was looking at the foundation guy, whose face was turning redder by the second. Ditto Mary-Day's.

"So again she thinks 'Yes!' A few minutes later she has to let another one rip. This time she doesn't even think about it. She lets rip a gas bomb that sounds like a train whistle blowing. So now the father looks at the dog and yells" – at this moment, Hal put his arm on his Illinois comrade's, and let rip with the punch line. "'Dammit Skippy, get away from her before she poops on you!'"

Hal was laughing too hard to notice that no one else was.

"Okay, then," said Rick. "You'll hear about the funding in about two months. Nice to meet you all."

"Rick, it was a pleasure to have the chance to share our work and our mission with you," Mary-Day said, "Please call me if you have any questions about our proposal."

"Okay, well, good bye."

As soon as he was out the door, Mary-Day grabbed Hal by the arm, and started to drag him towards his office, screeching,

"You're really gonna hear it this time, Hal."

"What? I told you I wouldn't swear, and I didn't. I said 'poop' in case you didn't notice. It was funny."

Then they were out of earshot, but I could guess the rest.

I needed to shake the feeling of dread that I'd gotten mixed up in something way too weird, which came over me whenever I interacted with Hal. A brisk walk was called for. As did some company; otherwise, my roiling emotions might overcome me. I stopped at Katelyn's desk and invited her to join me.

"Sure, Diane, that sounds nice. Just let me clear off my desk."

Papers were in seeming disarray, what looked like random piles everywhere, but about two minutes later, her desktop was practically clear, every piece of paper slotted neatly into a file folder as if by sleight of hand.

"Okay, ready," she said.

She shot me a conspiratorial look.

"Let's head over to Brattle," she said. "It's so pretty around there."

We headed away from Cambridge's more modest precincts into the zip code inhabited by the literati and the glitterati.

"I'll show you one of my favorite houses," she said. "And the street it's on, well, I just love it."

She led me down a small cul-de-sac off Brattle, which felt almost like a woodland retreat, with ancient trees forming a canopy of shade over the road. The houses were a bit smaller than those on the main drag, but no less charming. We strolled past a succession of sprawling colonials, a Victorian with an expansive porch, and Katelyn's pick, a rambling cape cod with ivy climbing up the sides, fronted by a garden strewn about with rocks, over which pink and white flowers curled.

"They're called phlox; I looked it up."

She smiled, then sighed.

"I know," I said. "I'd love to be able to live like this someday."

"Well, maybe you will. But me? Uh uh."

"You never know. Life's full of surprises."

"Not for people like me. At least, not the good kind."

I wanted to lift her out of her funk, and grabbed her arm.

"Come on, let's walk some more."

We were ambling up and down the side streets, chattering away, when she suddenly stopped and smiled at me.

"Diane, you seem a little, I don't know weird or happy or something lately. Come on, give."

I couldn't stop myself from grinning like I'd just aced a really hard test.

"I could just tell," she said. "You seem sort of different lately. Who is it?"

"Actually, I just met him. We've only gone out twice, but I really like him. But I haven't heard from him again, and it's been a week. I'm actually getting kind of nervous."

"I want details."

"Well, he's a painter and he plays the guitar, and he's tall and really hot." Mark in disguise.

"I bet he's smart like you. Did he go to a fancy college too?"

“Well, yeah, but he dropped out.” At least something I’d said was true. “And please, stop with all this other people being smart stuff. You’re plenty intelligent. You totally deserve your own smart guy.”

She blushed, and I knew instantly.

“Tell me, your turn, who, what, when?”

“Well, he’s really smart, too, actually. He has a good job and he’s so, what’s the word, encouraging. He’s really helped me with books and stuff. I told him he’s my college education.” She giggled and blushed some more.

“That’s great, Katelyn, I’m really glad for you.”

“Oh, Diane, Ed’s a really good person. He would never raise a finger on me. He respects me.”

She sounded almost surprised, as if she’d never dared to expect such a thing from a man.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying this, but I get the feeling you’ve been pretty hurt in the past.”

She gave a rueful chuckle.

“Billy, was, well, he was a bastard, let’s face it. We grew up together, and started going out in high school. I got pregnant at the prom. Pretty original, huh?”

“I lost mine at my senior prom too.” We shared a laugh.

“Well, you were luckier than me. My parents had died, and I was living with my aunt and uncle. His parents pretty much made him marry me, and he was mad about it, and he took it out on me. Another original story, huh?”

“What do you mean ‘took it out on you’? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want...”

She slowed, her eyes downcast.

“I mean he hit me. Not while I was pregnant, but right after. Aidan cried so much as a baby, it was like he just couldn’t stop. Billy went out drinking most nights and he’d come home and Aidan would be screaming his head off, and Billy would just totally lose it. He’d scream stuff like ‘Can’t you just make that frickin’ kid shut up?’ Well, I couldn’t make it stop so wham!”

She paused. “At least he never hit Aidan, even though he threatened to all the time. Finally, one night when Aidan was about three, he was screaming and shoving me and stuff and I was screaming back and I finally

did what I should've done all along which was threaten to call the cops. He said 'sure, call the cops, what are they gonna do?' So I did and they came, and gave him a warning, and as soon as they left, he beat the crap out of me.

"I may be dumb but I'm not that dumb. The next day when he was at work I took all my stuff and moved back with my aunt and uncle for a few months, then I found my own place."

"Do you ever see him, or worry that he'll come after you?"

"Nah, he has no interest in me anymore. He's gone through two more girls since me, and he does pretty much the same thing every time. But now he's got a gambling problem on top of everything else. God, did you ever hear of such a loser?"

In the news and the movies, yes. Among my personal acquaintances, luckily not. Another way I'd been more fortunate than Katelyn.

"Hey, the world's full of them. You hear stories of women who stick with these guys forever. You were smart enough to get out though, good for you."

"Yeah, thank God."

"Hey, now you found a good guy. He's lucky to have you."

"Well, I guess."

Please let this guy be the real deal.

I needed some lovin' but not necessarily the human kind, though I suspected that might be in the offing in the not too distant future. I was calling the shelter daily to check on Perky's progress and she had responded to the new medication, albeit not as quickly as they'd wished. They told me I might even be able to take her home – yes, of course I would adopt her for real, there'd never been any question – in a couple of weeks.

As soon as she saw me, she lived up her to name and perked up, just a little. I'd have loved a leap into my arms, but what I got was an amble over to me and a listless lick. But she still walked among us and appeared to be recovering.

chapter

EIGHT

I was in Betty's office when one of the guys from Finance appeared.

"I need Hal's signature on some papers for the bank," he told Betty, jerking his head in the direction of our boss's office. "They need to be in by today."

"He's out," said Betty.

"He told me he'd be in this morning," he whined.

"Home, sick, he says," explained Betty. She gestured helplessly around her desk. "How does he expect me to...?" Sigh.

"Someone has to go to his house. I guess I'll send Katelyn."

I was suddenly very curious to see where Hal lived. A trip to Mark's childhood home would be a sort of cheat sheet to his history, and maybe his character. But more important, it was a clue about Hal's lifestyle. Like, just how fancy was it?

"I'll go," I blurted.

Finance Guy scribbled a note on a post-it, slapped it on the sheaf of papers he was holding, inserted the whole packet into a manila envelope

he grabbed from the pile on Betty's desk and handed it to me. Meanwhile, Betty was dialing Hal.

"I know we're not supposed to call, but Gary says this is due at the bank today, and we didn't know you'd be sick." Pause, accompanied by grimace.

"Hal, I just don't have a choice. Yes, Diane's coming, she'll be there in about fifteen minutes." One more pause. "Okay, fine."

She hung up. "All you have to do is ring the bell, he'll come to the door and sign it, and mission accomplished."

I accepted.

Envelope in hand, I was on my way towards the same part of town where Katelyn and I had strolled. Here was one imposing colonial after another, interrupted by the occasional name-brand-architect-designed square box of a house, inhabited no doubt by a business school professor with a lucrative consulting gig on the side. Off Brattle, I dashed left, then right, then left again onto Hal's street, where the homes were less grandiose but still grand.

As I approached #74, Hal's house, a snappy royal blue BMW backed out of the driveway.

Behind the wheel perched Professor Joyce, a dumpy oxymoron in her flashy convertible. I had just enough time to register her scraggly gray bun held in place by those chopstick things when she put the pedal to the metal and tore down the street like a teenage boy out to get laid.

The house itself was pretty much what I expected, center entrance colonial, slate-colored with forest green shutters, the peeling paint on the steps leading to the front porch signaling the owner's concern for loftier pursuits than home maintenance.

Today's mail, too fat for the slot, sat in a pile on the porch. Internal debate: Was it invasive to pick it up and hand it to Hal? Rude not to? But curiosity – okay, make that nosiness – won out. I reached down for the pile, and sifted through it. Bills. A couple of obscure science periodicals addressed to Joyce. Whole Dog Journal, which I actually started to page through until I remembered why I was here. And then, at the bottom of the pile, what the hell? I didn't know anyone actually subscribed except dentists and hairdressers. Yes, Hal has sent in money so he could be up to speed on Brangelina. Hal had a subscription to *People*.

A screenwriter keeping up with all things Hollywood?

I took a deep breath as if about to dive into a pool and swim the length underwater. I rang the bell, which I heard echo inside, followed by loud barking.

He kept me waiting a full minute before appearing at the door garbed in this ratty grayish terry cloth robe with the word Hilton embroidered on the breast pocket. It was knotted too loosely at the waist, threatening to turn Hal into a subway flasher with the slightest errant move.

“Down,” he commanded the dogs, both golden retriever/lab mixes, before they even had a chance to jump up and greet me with a kiss. I bent down and petted, giving equal time to both.

“Come on in, Diane,” he beckoned.

I’d expected furnishings that you might find in the home of a moderately successful lawyer, what you saw in the Bloomingdale’s or Ethan Allen flyers that came folded into the Sunday papers. Add in some cute animal-themed tchotchkes strewn about, like in Hal’s office.

What I’d stumbled into was *Architecture Digest*. Marble-topped antique tables on claw-foot legs. Dark walnut wainscoting. Deep red silk wallpaper. Huge expanses of white silk sofa, two identical models facing each other flanking an enormous stone fireplace. The only evidence of the lord of the manor’s passion for pets was the pets themselves.

I followed him into the kitchen/family room combo where you could easily rustle up a restaurant-quality dinner for fifty— gigantic deep green granite countertops, shiny stainless steel everything else – and sat where he gestured, at a dark wood round table, big enough for a family of eight. The family room part featured a striped couch you could get lost in and a near theater-sized plasma TV screen.

“What you got there, Diane?”

“Well, I think Betty told you, it’s some papers for the bank. You just have to sign them. By the way, your house is really beautiful.”

“Thanks, Diane. It gives me lots of pleasure, this old place. Nothing like a comfortable home to make you feel good at the end of the day.”

I did some math. I knew he earned a lot but, even with a tenured Harvard professor wife with a PBS gig on the side, was it enough for a house in what was arguably the most expensive zip code in Massachusetts? That was only one of his two castles, counting the lake house?

"Sorry you're not feeling well."

"What? Oh yeah, that. Nothing serious. You won't catch it, I promise."

He rose, rooted around the drawers of a built-in desk that matched the wood trim of the table, found a pen.

"Okay, let's sign this baby so's you can get back to work."

"You have quite a video collection," I observed. A mini-store actually, a large section for old VHSs, a huge one housing DVDs.

"C'mere, I'll give you a look. You're gonna love this."

We rose, his bathrobe flapping. I did and I didn't want a little peek. Just out of curiosity.

"Oh, wow, you own *Amarcord*, one of my all-time favorites."

"It's yours. On loan, of course."

He reached up, pulled the CD box off the shelf, and handed it to me. As he did, his bathrobe flapped open, which he didn't realize, or, oh shit, did and chose to ignore. Couldn't be, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"Well, thanks Hal, this is really great, I'll bring it back soon. I'll get the papers, and then it's back to work. The gala is keeping me really busy, and I have so much to do. But it's for such a great cause, right? Okay, I'll just see myself out." The words spilled out of my mouth at the rate of a thousand a minute.

Now I was practically running out the door holding the manila envelope I'd come in with.

When I returned to the office, I handed the envelope to Betty, who thanked me profusely.

"Betty," I asked, "Have you ever been to Hal's house?"

"So you got a peek at the mansion, huh?"

"Well, that's not all I got a peek at. His, um, bathrobe flapped open." Betty let out a deep-throated roar.

"Don't tell me, I don't even want to know." She chuckled now. "Let's focus on the house, shall we?"

"I have to say, I was kind of surprised. I mean, the outside is pretty normal, what you might expect for a nonprofit exec and a Harvard professor. But the interior. What's the story on that?"

Betty leaned back, gave me the smile that made me like her more and more all the time.

“Joyce’s father’s a surgeon. On top of that, he owns half of St. Louis. But according to Hal, he’s a stingy old bastard. He gives them the occasional gift, but Hal wishes it were more. Much more. He and Joyce are basically livin’ large and hoping for a gigantic inheritance. Which might not even happen.”

“You mean like disinherited? What for?” As far as I could see, Joyce’s only transgression was being criminally unfashionable.

“Oh, they’d get something. But Dr. Ralph has a second wife who is, how shall I put this nicely, oh yeah, a gold digger. She’d go to the opening of a shoebox if it would get her picture in the paper. She throws their money at every charity in St. Louis.

“Betty,” I asked cautiously. “How do you know all this?”

She pointed to Hal’s adjacent office.

“Open door, open book. Open fly too, half the time.”

Something else occurred to me, and I knew Betty would have the answer.

“Here’s something else I don’t get. Joyce and Hal. They seem kind of mismatched.”

Betty grinned. “Ya think?” she said “How can I explain this? Hal’s a gold-digger too, and Joyce has plenty of moolah, or will some day.”

“But she’s really smart. What could she possibly see in him?”

“She’s smart but she’s also a total nerd. I’m guessing she didn’t have guys lining up to take her out. And here’s this guy with the movie-star looks and, ya gotta admit, some charm, paying her lots of attention.”

I guessed it made some sort of sense. I returned to my desk and typed in zillow.com, which told me Hal and Joyce lived in a house worth \$3.2 million. Add in the lake house and it wasn’t adding up. Unless they got more from Joyce’s dad than Betty thought they did. Otherwise, how could they afford it?

The following week, he was on vacation with his childhood buddy Joe. I wondered how Joyce felt about the fact that twice a year her husband met up with another guy in some Midwestern or southern one-horse town for an alleged blue-grass festival. I saw *Brokeback Mountain*.

Betty made all their reservations. She told me, right before he left on his latest jaunt, “He has that damn music on in his office all day long, drives me bananas, like listening to

reruns of the Beverly Hillbillies on the radio.”

He was away at one of those hootenannies when Warren called, so he asked for Mary-Day. She was on vacation, and Betty was at the dentist. I was last choice.

“Diane, it’s Warren,” followed by a giggle. This was the world’s happiest guy.

“Listen, I wanted to tell Hal this myself, but I understand he won’t be in all week, and I need to take care of this immediately. Margaret and I have decided to donate \$150,000 to APO. It’s in honor of the 150th, and well, Hal’s 15th too.”

“Warren, that’s terrific, so generous. Thank you so much.”

“Well, you’re welcome, Diane, it’s the least we can do for old APO. Oh, and for our Hal, too.”

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to hear about it.

“Yes, well I really wanted him to know about it right away. Could you do me a favor and call him and tell him? I’m selling some stock and I need to do this right away, and I want to be sure Hal knows about it before he finds out from some brokerage letter.”

“Of course. I’ll let him know immediately.”

“Well, now you get back to work, Diane. And thanks.”

No one knew Hal’s cell number, and Katelyn alone was privy to Hal’s number in Minnesota.

“I don’t know about this, Diane,” she said. “Hal doesn’t like people calling him on vacation. Are you sure this can’t wait?”

“Katelyn,” I explained, “this is the Board president, in other words, Hal’s boss. I’m sure he’ll want to know. Plus, Warren told me to call him,”

I wormed the number out of her, and left a message with the desk clerk about the gift. In the interest of total ass-covering, I faxed him a note at the motel with Warren’s number so he could call and thank him. Then I waited. No call back all week. I was thinking maybe he hadn’t received the fax, so I called the desk clerk again, who told me he’d picked it up Sunday night.

A week later, he was back at work, and before he even put down his briefcase he told Betty he needed to see me “ay-sap.”

“Diane,” he said, “I left word that my number in Minnesota was for emergencies only. Did Katelyn not tell you that?”

"Well, yes, I guess so. But this was a big gift, plus Warren made it clear that he wanted you to know about it right away.

"Diane. Did somebody die?"

"No."

"Did someone have a stroke or get hit by a truck?"

"No."

"Those are the definition of emergency. A contribution is not an emergency. Do I make myself clear?"

"Got it, Hal. Death and dismemberment, emergencies. Major gifts to APO, not. Won't happen again."

I picked up my pad, shrugged at Betty, and gave the finger to his door.

I hoped I'd seen the last of him for the day. No such luck. Later that afternoon, another asap call. When I arrived, Betty boomed "His highness awaits."

What now? My biggest fear: that Mark had told him about us.

But just as I was ready to go in, we heard him pick up the phone. Betty and I could see him through a crack in the door. Did I see what I thought I was seeing? Hal with his hands roving around in his pants? I looked at Betty.

"What's up with that?"

She tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a laugh.

"His favorite pastime," she said. "One of these days, I'm gonna up and tell him 'If you don't stop playing pocket pool where I can see you, I'm gonna use you as a pull toy.'"

She stopped for another peek.

"Crabs?" she went on. "Maybe Spider Lady's snared someone else in her web."

He finished his call, beckoned me in. I pleaded in my head, Tell me all about your screenplay. I'll listen to the entire plot of "Old Yeller." Anything but Mark.

His grin mimicked the one on the hyena on yesterday's tie.

"Diane, I know something about you that you don't think I know."

Now I had something new for my "to do" list. Hire a hit man to kill Mark.

"Hal, I never intended..." The rest stuck in my gullet.

"I know that you are..." *Dating my son. Put me out of my misery.*

"One very enterprising lady, and that's what I know. And I have the most exciting opportunity for you."

I wished I could jump up and do an Ellen DeGeneres mambo. I was so off the hook.

Nope, he reeled me back on the line faster than you could say "premature ejaculation."

"Well, actually for you, for me and for APO. I'm going to author a book about the role of animals in healing and health, and you're going to help me with it."

Amazon.com average: five stars. Sample review: *Co-authors Harold I. Mason, Jr. and Diane Salvi reveal the power of animal friends in living a fulfilling, healthy and longer life. Their thoughtful research and engaging anecdotes....*

My fall to earth was swift. I couldn't even get Hal to write the occasional piece for the newsletter. A whole book? But he had solved the problem of actually writing it.

"Interesting, Hal. Where do I fit in?"

"Okay, here's the deal. I have this old friend, Malcolm Rider." Hal and Mal. Could I please puke now?

"Mal's a seasoned writer, the best. He used to write features for the Associated Press, way back when. Now he's a freelancer. See, here's the concept. We get a bunch of experts - psychologists, vets, and so on. Each one writes a chapter on a different aspect of the theme, how pets enrich our lives, contribute to longevity, whatever. Then we find some stories, people who've adopted pets through APO. Then Mal puts all the contributions together and edits it. Then we hawk it to a few publishers, and voila! They get a great book, ready to go. All's they have to do is sell it. I of course maintain editorial control over the whole thing, since I'm the author."

Wait a minute, I'd thought these experts were the authors. Or Mal. I was confused.

"Okay, great, but now what's my role?"

"You, Diane, will have oversight for this entire project. I'll find the experts, so you don't have to concern yourself with that. You check in with Mal periodically to make sure he's on track. Then you shop it around, and get us a publisher."

Get us a publisher. Sure thing, Hal. Donnie talked all the time about the piles of unsolicited manuscripts lining the floors of his office, and those were just the ones that came through agents, which might have had a prayer of getting read. Direct to publisher was like straight to video – a flush down the publishing toilet.

“Yeah, I think we got ourselves a bestseller right here,” my boss went on, pointing to his temple. “Pets, mental health, aging, all the stuff that’s on the bestseller lists these days, this book’s got, all wrapped up in one neat little package. Can’t miss.”

Hal was a mental health expert, and I was the Prime Minister of Italy. Googling Mal Rider, I dug up a website that appeared to have been designed by a sixth-grader as a class project. Mal’s stock in trade was promotional literature for businesses like “Little Lil’s Lunch” catering company and “Norma’s Nails.” Hal’s book would be *Pets ‘n’ People*. Or maybe *Pooch Pals*.

Hal meandered giddily around the office the rest of the day, regaling us with a lifetime’s worth of lame riddles. The example to which Betty and I were treated during lunch: How do you spot a modern spider? He doesn’t have a web, he has a website.

As soon as he left the room, Betty cracked up.

“Aha! Spiders. I suddenly figured it out. I’d bet my next paycheck that Joyce has a new book contract. Mommy, I want a book too.”

We went back to my office and typed in “pets” on Amazon. Get this: *The Healing Power of Pets: Harnessing the Amazing Ability of Pets to Make and Keep People Happy and Healthy* by Dr. Marty Becker and Danielle Morton. And who was this Dr. Marty Becker? Only the veterinary contributor to *Good Morning America*. There was another, by a Johns Hopkins PhD, and dozens more in the same vein.

Betty smirked. “Why, these guys are blumping idiots. Hal’s book will leave them in the dust.”

She printed out the listings and left them in Hal’s mailbox with a post-it note: “Thought you’d be interested in seeing what’s already out there.”

chapter

NINE

"So, what's new at the zoo?" asked Donnie that night. I outlined Hal's plan to write, or more accurately, have written for him by a total moron, *The Joy of Pets*.

"Jesus," exclaimed Donnie. "Why would a bunch of experts participate and then be rewritten by some hack? Anyway, no publisher will even look at something without an agent unless you're a hostage victim or a celebrity with anorexia."

"The book he really should write is the dictionary of his own private language. *Masonite for Dummies*," I said.

"Masonite is a building material, Diane," said Donnie.

"Build this," I said. "Dag, drick, frimp, glip, joop, kitsy, plick, sluck and slup."

The next morning, it was Betty's turn to get called on the carpet.

"Betty," Hal told her. "I got your deeky little Amazon printouts. These books are total crap. Listen, just had a brainstorm, see if Oprah has a dog or cat, will ya? Talk about an inside track onto the show!"

Who wants to tell him Oprah doesn't have that show anymore? He clearly hasn't been studying his *People* hard enough. How about an appearance on the Dr. Phil episode titled, "Are you a clueless narcissist? We'll find out, right after the break."

I was tweeting on our Twitter account but I could barely concentrate, the yelling was so loud from way the hell at the end of the corridor. This time, it was Mary-Day taking his shit.

"You cannot do this, Hal. You are insane. This is THE WORST thing you've ever, ever done, I swear it. I will look bad, Diane will look like an idiot (*Diane and idiot in the same sentence?*) and you, Hal, will be a discredit to this fine organization. If y'all make me do this, I swear I'll just, I'll just, well you will live to regret that y'all ever messed with Mary-Day Russell."

She stomped out of his office and back to her own, where she slammed the door hard enough to rattle the pictures hanging in the hall.

About two minutes later, I peeked out my blinds and saw Hal step into his BMW convertible. Gone for the day, unfortunately not for good.

I tore down the hall towards Betty's office, passing Mary-Day's on the way. Her door was closed, but I heard her vainly attempting to whisper into the phone. I only caught a few words: "world's biggest asshole," and "carve up his penis like a pumpkin."

"Betty," I began. "What the hell just happened?"

"You're not gonna like this, Diane. We have to change the date of *For Pets' Sake*."

"But, but," I sputtered, "He can't do this, can he? Please, please, please tell me there's an excellent reason for this."

"He said it's a family event, Joyce's niece's wedding, and if he has to miss it, he can kiss his marriage goodbye. Good God, no loss there."

What this meant: Finding a new date that worked for the Gang of Three. Redoing the gala invitations, which had already gone to the printer. New press releases announcing the new date.

Mary-Day stormed in. "Do y'all realize what I have to do this afternoon? Find a hotel, then call Dinky, Jockey, and Warren with the new date. Oh and PS Hal, hotels get booked a year in advance. Not to mention that we've already paid for 5,000 invitations, and now we have to pay for new ones with the new date."

And then she did something as out of character as, I don't know, wearing yellow. She burst into tears.

"This is insane, just insane," she muttered through her sobs. "You want to know the worst part about this? He'll tell his little fairy tale about his niece's wedding, and everyone'll nod sympathetically, poor, poor Hal, how inconvenient for you, and everything'll just go right along, while we run around like lunatics fixing his fucking mess."

Betty reached into her desk drawer, and withdrew a tissue and a dark chocolate truffle. "From my emergency Hal attack kit," she said, patting Mary-Day on her pink silk shoulder. Mary-Day giggled and blew her nose, loudly, more Staten Island firefighter than Georgia debutante.

"Plus," Mary-Day continued, "Do you know what that madman is trying to do with APO's money? Why do I spend all day on the phone trying to entice Mr. Rich Guy to come to lunch at one of our shelters? Why am I holed up in my office writing proposal after proposal so foundations will give us money? I THOUGHT it was for the animals, but I guess I was just plumb wrong. It's so we can pay the friend of Bozo over here," she pointed in the direction of Hal's door with her middle finger, "to write some damn book that's been written about a dozen times already!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I guess I hadn't thought about the money part of this. How much are we talking about anyway?"

"Are y'all ready for this number?" asked Mary-Day. "One hundred big ones."

That's it. Call my Uncle Vinny and take out a contract on him. Too bad I had no Uncle Vinny. My only uncle, Steve, was a chiropractor.

"Now we know why the pipes burst at the shelter. He put off the repairs to pay for this, this nonsense! Plus, any more money I'll bring in this year's already allocated for shelter maintenance. So he tells me we'll just have to put off any more repairs. Get your mops ready, ladies. Another flood's on the way. Unless of course I can raise an additional \$100,000 over budget. He tells me his stupid book will bring in more money than I raise in any given year, and then we'll be able to fix up every single shelter to a fare-thee-well. The man is, he's, he's a fucking...."

She was so angry she couldn't find the word.

"Narcissistic megalomaniac?" supplied Betty.

“What about the Board?” I asked. “They won’t agree to pay Hal’s friend to write a book on speculation with money that’s allocated for the shelters? Will they?”

Mary-Day burst out laughing, but it was the hard, bitter laugh of someone who knew the score.

“If Hal Mason asked the Board to buy him a solid gold toilet, and to wipe his bottom for him while they were at it, they’d say ‘Sure, Hal, and how about a gold sink to match?’ He’d have to commit murder to get in trouble with the Board, and even then, he’d convince them it was justified. You just wait till tomorrow’s Board meeting. He’ll sweet-talk them into thinking that Harold I. Mason Jr. is the next J.K. Rowling.”

Betty considered.

“Listen to this. His buddy Joe called this morning, the one he goes to music festivals with, and he actually closed the door to talk to him. He never closes the door, except for his afternoon nap. Plus, when I asked him if he wanted me take care of plane reservations for the wedding, he said Joyce had it all taken care of. Right then, I knew he was lying. Good God, Joyce hasn’t made so much as a dinner reservation for them since I’ve worked at APO.”

“So you think he’s going someplace with Joe?”

“Don’t know. But I’d put money on no niece’s wedding.”

Somehow, I just knew the postponed gala and the book were connected. But how? It was definitely worth some investigating. But first, I offered to help Mary-Day.

“I’ll take care of getting the invitations reprinted.” I offered. “What else can I do?”

“Nothing, honey, but you’re sweet to ask” she replied. “I’ll just go and glue that damn phone to my ear for the rest of the afternoon. Those old trustees will be thanking Mary-Day Russell for changing the date by the time I’m done with them. I just wish I could think of some way to barbecue his little pork-butt.”

She unwrapped the truffle, threw the wrapper at the door to Hal’s office, and flounced out.

Betty pointed her forefinger, gunlike, at his door, and said, “Let’s just put him and everyone else out of their misery.”

chapter

TEN

By the end of the afternoon, Mary-Day had reached Dinky and Jockey and Warren. There had been some minor grousing , but, in a voice thick with Tupelo honey, she'd persuaded them it was really for the best. Jockey'd grumbled that he'd have to change a planned trip to London, and that his wife would "pitch a hissy fit" but he ultimately agreed to reschedule his vacation.

The hotel was another story. There simply wasn't one available during the time frame we needed . Mary-Day, Betty and I held a brainstorming session. The zoo? I suggested. Too cold in October. Then what about the Aquarium, indoors?

"Yes, yes, yes," shrieked Mary-Day. "Darlin,' you're brilliant."

She bounded out of the room to check with the Aquarium, and the Goddess was smiling because the Aquarium's huge conference center could accommodate 400 guests, and was miraculously free the week after the originally scheduled date.

Back she went to Jockey, Dinky and Warren.

All this excitement created a backlog on my desk, and I didn't leave the office until 7:30.

Donnie had picked up a little known Dutch beer. I grabbed the bottle right off the table and chugged like a frat boy. After I spilled my guts, along with almost an entire bottle of beer on the floor, Donnie asked about Hal's book.

"That's the least of my problems. What's the difference between murder and manslaughter?" I asked. "If someone gets, say, crushed between your car and his because you just didn't see him, how much time would you serve?"

"Well, I bet you could serve even less if he fell between the subway tracks because someone bumped into him by accident," he answered.

"Well, here's something fun to do," suggested Genie. "Let's find you something to wear to the gala."

The attire for the gala was black tie. Black tie was good. Black tie was the shopping excuse from heaven. I periodically spotted a dress online that would render me as adorable yet sophisticated as any of the faces at the Golden Globes. Alas, the only red carpet in my life was the bathmat next to the tub.

As they say at the awards shows, who should I wear? Black or color? Are sexy and classy mutually exclusive?

Mama ebay provided all the answers. Emporio Armani black slip dress, boring. Max Azria red sequined number, kind of sluttish. I was tempted by the deep yellow silk by Tracy Reese.

"You'll look like a banana," said Genie, peering over my shoulder.

"Says who? I think I'd look great in that color."

"That may be, but you wanna look classy, stick with black. Trust me."

I scrolled through some more ads.

"That's it!" yelled Genie.

Carrie (*Bradshaw?*) claimed it was a genuine Marc Jacobs in mint condition and just worn once. At \$180 it was beyond my usual range, but who cared? It was delectable: black, mid-calf length, mesh bodice showing a little skin, sleeveless for a little more skin. I clicked on *Buy it Now* and prayed that it would fit.

My phone rang.

"Diane, hi. It's Mark."

"Hey, Mark." Cool but still interested was what I was going for. Put your hands all over me was the subtext, which felt more than a little weird considering what I'd just been saying about his dad.

"Free Saturday night? There's a new Thai restaurant I want to try, and an Iranian film I'm dying to see."

"Sounds great."

"Good. I'll see you at 7:00."

He's not his father, I told myself over and over.

One would think things couldn't get worse. They got worse.

I was working on the gala slide show when the phone rang. It was the vet from our Roxbury shelter, where Perky resided. Or now, had resided.

"We just couldn't save her," consoled the vet. "She got the very best care up until the end. And she got something more important in her last days. Your love."

I burst into tears.

"If you want, you can come and say goodbye. And we can talk about how you want to handle her disposition."

"Disposition?" What a cold word that was in reference to a living, loving being.

"Burial or cremation."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

I told Betty I had a family emergency, and needed to leave immediately. I'd explain later.

When I arrived, they showed me into a small room, where Perky lay on a wicker dog bed. I reached out and caressed her no longer warm body, sobbing.

"I want to take her with me," I told the vet. "Cremation, please."

She said, "I'll give you a minute, and then you come into the other room and select a container."

She left me alone with the spaniel. I lay my head on her belly, sniffing, and gave her a final hug.

"Bye, sweetie," I said. "Good night."

I left her, and the assistant showed me a selection of vessels, many with depictions of plaintive dogs and cats or cast in the shapes of the

very pets they contained. I chose a simple wooden box for my short-lived friend.

It wasn't the first time I'd cried over a deceased animal, and it probably wouldn't be the last. At the moment of the little cocker spaniel's demise, Hal became a murderer.

chapter

ELEVEN

After a quick dinner the next night, I got into my car and headed back to the Roxbury shelter to pick up my almost-pet's ashes. The same assistant was there.

"I'll get her, I'll be right back," she said.

She returned a minute or two later with the box I'd selected. I welled up.

"I'm really sorry," she offered.

"Thanks."

I carried her out to the car. When I arrived home, I cleared off my dresser, moving a jewelry box onto my night table.

"I wish I had known you better," I whispered to the box. "But you're home now."

I wasn't too old to need some mothering. Maybe I never will be.

"Diane, hi," said Mom.

"Oh, Mom," I sobbed.

"Honey-girl, what is it?"

I relayed the story of Perky, leaving out Hal's role, or anything about Hal. No need to worry her about my work situation.

"I am so, so sorry. You know," she said, "when you were little, you were pretty good at distracting yourself when you experienced a disappointment."

"Mom, this isn't the same as not getting invited to Jessica Vitale's birthday party."

"I know, sweetie. But still, it's what you do. I know you need to mourn, but I think you should do it with some chocolate ice cream in your mouth. While you're on the way to the movies. The movies always helped."

I actually laughed.

"I'm ahead of you there, Mom. The ice cream part's already taken care of." I licked the chocolaty spoon.

"Actually, what the hell. Have some wine."

She went on to tell me some neighborhood gossip, and I felt a little better.

I was still feeling sad, though, and I had an idea for an even better distraction than ice cream and alcohol. Sex.

How weird was it that I was contemplating a romantic night with the son of a killer? I suspected that social climbing Hal would absolutely hate the idea of his son sleeping with his lowly employee. So this would be both solace sex and revenge sex, a thrilling combination.

I spent Saturday afternoon in preparation for my date with Mark. Shave legs and pits. Tweeze eyebrows. Omigod, was that an actual hair on my chin? It turned out to be something way worse, a blackhead, which I steamed over a pot of boiling water until my face resembled a fire ant. The color refused to fade and I found myself hoping he'd be his usual late self.

I'd decided not to tell Mark about Perky, or the shelter, or anything to do with Hal. I was going to become the world's best expert at compartmentalizing.

About two minutes before he was scheduled to arrive, I was ready for our *notte d'amore*, as my grandma or Fellini might say. He actually arrived on time for once, so I didn't have to engage in my usual mental gymnastics, trying to distinguish him from his perennially-late dad.

The movie was about an older man who hitchhiked all over Tehran, seeking someone to kill him, so he wouldn't need to do it himself. Just what I needed during my mourning period.

As we took our seats in the Thai restaurant near the theater, he asked, "So how did you feel about your first Iranian film?"

"I wouldn't make a steady diet of this sort of thing, a little too dark for my taste. But the cinematography was incredible; I loved those panoramic shots of the countryside as he was being driven around by all those people. And the feeling of, oh, desperation, there was so much humanity in it."

"Yeah, also free will. We all make choices every single day, but there are implications for other people in every single thing we decide."

"For example," I said. "If we agree to share dishes, and I choose the pad thai, and you hate pad thai, my choice affects you and me. I might have to choose something else, something I want less, to accommodate your desires."

He laughed. "Fortunately, I love pad thai. How about that and the red curry vegetables?"

We were enjoying our usual post-entertainment make-out session in the car and I was becoming increasingly turned on. No way was he leaving. Genie and Donnie were conveniently spending the weekend at Genie's parents' in Connecticut.

"Tonight, I think I'm gonna let you come up," I told him.

Once inside, we headed immediately to the couch. His kisses alternated between tender and intense. This guy really knew what he was doing.

Pretty soon, we were no longer vertical. I was sprawled on top of him, feeling the bulge in his jeans. What the hell, I started to rub up and down, arousing myself further. His hand found its way under my shirt, and I felt my bra loosen as he unhooked the clasp. His fingers massaged my right nipple, and I decided to go for it, sliding my hand between his legs.

"God, Diane," he murmured. "You're so nice, so nice and pretty."

I was jello, putty, every soft, malleable material you could think of.

"Can we go into the bedroom?" he asked.

"I think we must," is what I said. I grabbed his hand, and pushed him into my room and onto the bed. After a few more minutes, before I became

too worked up to stop, I excused myself for a quick clean-up trip to the bathroom, emerging in just my shirt and panties and holding a package of condoms.

“Hope you like this kind,” I said.

“Looks good to me,” he answered.

We rolled around some more, and let me just say that this man was the chess master of love. We finally fell asleep around 2:00.

chapter

TWELVE

We woke the next morning around 11:00 and fooled around some more. The second time was even better than the first, now that he knew that thing about my ears, and the amount of pressure, and I knew about the spot behind, well, you get the drift.

“Jeez, I’m starving,” he said. “Think you can make us some breakfast?”

He didn’t realize it, but he’d just stabbed me in the heart. I remembered my first time with Andrew. I’d awakened the next morning to the aroma of fresh coffee wafting in from the kitchen. Andrew had appeared bare-chested in jeans at the bedroom door.

“How’s about I make us some omelets?” he’d suggested.

He’d been an expert chef, mixing up eggs, goat cheese, tossing in some sun-dried tomatoes, and executing a perfect egg flip-over for restaurant-ready omelets.

I contemplated the fridge, and of course it contained all the ingredients for the same breakfast. I couldn’t.

"French toast okay?" I asked.

"Whatever."

While I whisked and dipped, Mark meandered around the apartment, eyeballing my books and cd's.

"Mark," I said. "I want to ask you something, and don't laugh."

"I only laugh at what's funny. Tell me not to and I won't."

"I, well, I really hope you won't tell your dad we're, you know."

"First of all, my dad wouldn't care, but if that's what you want, sure. Second, I don't tell my parents much of anything. They let me live my life, and I let him and Joyce live theirs."

"Still, promise me."

"Sure, whatever, if that's what you want."

He went home around two, leaving me to some errands and a novel.

Speaking of romance, I was learning more about Katelyn's, and what I heard made me consider an intervention.

"How's Ed?" I asked during one of our walks, which had become a twice-weekly event..

"Um, he's fine, Diane, really good. I fixed him a real nice dinner the other night, and I don't mean out of a can. Aidan was at our neighbor's so we could get some privacy."

"Does he ever take you out, or do you mostly stay in?"

She reddened, confirming my ugly suspicion.

"Katelyn," I asked, "Is Ed married?"

"Well, kind of. He and his wife are in the process of separating. They were, um, just waiting for their youngest kid to graduate, and now they can, separate that is. So then we can be together."

"Sure, I mean, I hope so. You're sure about this, Katelyn?"

"Diane, he really is a great guy. He has never ever hit me. Plus, he thinks I'm smart and he teaches me so much. We actually listened to an opera over dinner. I mean, me, listening to opera? I never in a million years....Well, anyway, he's..." she groped for the right word. "Admirable," she finished.

Admirable? What the hell? I was ready to go to her house and find this Ed, and I would say, "You so much as lie to this woman, and I will tie your nasty little prick to my tailpipe and hit the Mass Pike doing 80."

Well, at least I knew Mark wasn't married. For our next date, at my suggestion we headed to my favorite haunt, the North End. The restaurant, Maurizio, was teeny tiny, with diners seated practically on top of each other, but still very romantic. Plus, there's nothing for me like fabulous Italian cuisine to get me thinking of sex. Freud would probably have a field day.

How could I resist the ricotta and chive gnocchi in a mascarpone cream sage sauce with julienne zucchini and imported pecorino? By the time dinner was over, fueled by *troppo di vino*, I'd recounted for Mark all the details of my Italian sojourn, including the romance with the engineering student who lived with his mother, who, in stereotypical fashion, admonished me to "mangia, mangia, American girls too skinny."

He offered his own travelogue of India, where he'd gone after dropping out of college. We agreed that Paris was the most beautiful city in the world, and we shared our mutual desire to see the temples of Myanmar, now that the political turmoil seemed to be over.

I swayed on his arm all the way back to his place, and was relieved to discover that, unlike lots of guys his age, his bathroom was reasonably sanitary.

Our second sexual encounter turned out even sexier than the first. We knew how we fit together, so the anticipation of another bout rendered us both a little crazy. And Mark attended to my every gesture and moan, making sure I was as fulfilled as he.

But for our next date, he hauled me off to see some performance artist doing "creative" things with sports equipment, dancing around the stage, hockey stick between his legs, tennis racquet sticking out of his shirt. If this was art, I was a philistine and proud of it.

It was a nice summer night, so we decided to walk back to my place. A perfect opportunity for a little investigation into the mystery that was Hal.

"What was it like growing up in Harvard Square?" I began.

"I hardly did," he responded.

"What do you mean?"

"How long a walk are you up for?" he asked.

"I've got the right shoes."

We meandered past my own neighborhood and into adjacent Somerville, where the homes were bit more untended and the inhabitants were

those who mowed the lawns and fixed the sinks of the Harvard professors across the city line. We stopped in front of a two-family house in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint, with a crumbling porch railing and two shutters missing.

"This, Diane, is my childhood home."

"What? But what about the house off Brattle?"

"My parents just moved there eight years ago. I was already out of the house by then."

"So you never got to live there?"

"We moved there when I was in college, and then, after I left Colgate to pursue my own interests – *code for flunked out?* - I hung out there for a few months until I got my own apartment. But to tell the truth, I really loved this old place. There were lots of young faculty families like ours, so Robin and I had tons of friends on the block. Plus, there were always lots of parties. Rob and I used to do stuff like pass hors d'oeuvres. They even let us tend bar when we were, like, fifteen, which we thought was pretty cool."

"Illegal but fun."

"Plus, my dad always hoped Robin and I would go to Harvard. Not just the prestige, but free tuition for faculty brats who could cut it. He was pretty pissed that neither Robin nor I made it."

"I take it you were a good student."

"But not good enough for Haaaavard, apparently." He paused. "Yeah, well... anyway, I remember this one party, when Joyce got tenure. Getting tenure at Harvard was a huge deal. Usually, my parents, mostly Hal, made the food for the parties. Joyce totally hates to cook. But this time, they actually hired a caterer, though Robin and I still tended bar. There were a few department chairs, the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, even the provost came. Everyone was making a huge fuss over Joyce. But it was kind of sad for my dad." This is the first time I'd heard him refer to Hal as anything but Hal.

"Why would he be sad?"

"Well, let's face it, I mean, I know you think APO is great and all, and I guess it is, but it's not exactly Harvard. Here she is at the pinnacle of her profession, that's like the entire academic world. And he's just running this dog-and-cat place. He had a really hard time that night. Everyone's

congratulating him about HER. I remember, at one point, he just slunk into a corner and sat by himself and no one even noticed. Sad, huh?"

"Wait, when was this?"

"About ten years ago. Two years before we moved."

I suddenly understood. The annual reports showing his early, ambitious years, and then, exactly ten years ago, status quo at APO. When he "retired," as Mary-Day put it. Apparently, he'd realized he couldn't compete with her, so he'd just stopped trying.

The mystery that was Hal was starting to come into focus, at least the psychological aspects. The financial picture remained frustratingly murky. I was determined to keep digging.

chapter

THIRTEEN

We were gathered at the next Board meeting. Hal started the performance with, as always, a shining smile. That's right, show them the expensive dental work they've paid for.

"I have a very exciting announcement today. Something that is going to put APO on the national map."

"Like the Pet Palace?" asked Warren, all innocence. Our board chair was a true believer. Our board chair was a fool.

"Exactly," replied Hal. "Now, you know and I know that one of the best ways to bring in oceans of money (I spied Mary-Day squirming in her seat) is to sell something people want. And lots of nonprofits are coming up with unusual, dare I say it, commercial approaches to bringing in revenue.

"Now, close your eyes and dream outside the box with me. Imagine a book that touches the heart. That reaches anyone who ever stroked the soft fur of a dog. Anyone who has ever been comforted by the warm presence of a beloved pet."

I surveyed the room. All Board member eyes were closed, though I noticed Frannie Schwartz peeking a little. Mine, Betty's and Mary-Day's were wide open, rolling in unison at Handsome Christian Anderson spinning his fairy tale.

"Picture a bookstore window. There's a brand new book on display. It's got the cutest little dog in the world on the cover. Could anyone simply walk by that bookstore without stepping inside and asking 'How much is that doggy in the window?'"

They all opened their eyes so they could laugh at the wittiest man in Boston. They were eating the kibble he was feeding them out of his hand as he described this certain best seller, guaranteed to raise a fortune for APO. He told them that, as the author, he wanted a mere sixty percent. All the rest all would go to their favorite charity.

Did anyone on the board even know that bookstores were a dying breed? And was there a dissenting voice in the house when he requested a vote to authorize payment for what he called his researcher/collaborator, i.e. Mal?

After the meeting, Warren dropped by my office for a giggle.

"Our man is some kind of genius, I always knew it, don't you think, Diane? A book about the healing power of pets. It can't miss, it really can't. I read every damn one of those James Herriot books. Best sellers, every one. Loved the PBS series, too. Margaret and I watched every Sunday night, for years. We even took a trip up to Yorkshire, we were that interested."

Right Warren, Hal is Steven King and you're Clarence Darrow.

"Hal's book will have the same appeal. I know he's too busy to do all the writing, what with running the place and all, so having this other fellow help will get it done faster, and then it's money in the bank for APO. Maybe with a bigger endowment we could start to take on some more projects, add a few new shelters."

I pounced. "More shelters would be wonderful. Maybe we can find some substandard ones around town and take them over."

"Great idea, Diane. By the way, do you remember my....oh, never mind."

He was about to ask whether I ever called Hal on vacation as he'd asked me to. I heard blame and annoyance.

I called all right, Mr. Giggles, and got my ass kicked all the way to the State House. The only book I was interested in now was the one I wished someone would throw at Hal.

The next morning, Betty called me into her office.

"Diane," she grinned. "Your troubles are over."

"Hal has been kidnapped by aliens, and is at this very moment on a spaceship headed for Alpha Centauri."

"You don't have to worry about the book anymore. It's all taken care of."

"He found his experts."

"That idea lasted about ten seconds. Nope. I'm just sitting here last night, 5:45, getting ready to leave, and the phone rings."

"A clambake for your birthday?"

"He just doesn't wanna go home, is what. Good God, I think all he does is pick up takeout every night and bring it to Her Highness's feet before he bends down and kisses them."

"So come on, why am I off the hook with the book?"

She paused to torture me.

"He shows up at six o'clock and plops down in his comfy chair behind his he-man desk, folds his arms behind his head and spews out a load of you-know-what. 'Ready, Betty?' His favorite poem, five times a week.

'Okay,' he says, 'Here's what's what and how. We're gonna call it *For Pets' Sake*.'

"Like the gala," I said.

"He ignores me, explains that he'll go through the chapter titles, and give a brief summary of the content of each one and I'm supposed to take notes.

"He says, 'Chapter One. A Brief History of Pets. You know, Cro-Magnon Man keeping dogs in the caves, that sort of thing.

"Chapter Two. The Psychology of Pet Ownership. What owning a pet does for people's emotional well being. Quotations from Freud, maybe Dr. Spock, other notable psychiatrists.'

"I'm thinking, 'Freud? And hello, last time I looked, Dr. Spock was a pediatrician. He's making it up as he goes along. I say nothing.

"Then he goes, 'Okay, here's one of my favorites, this'll really get the critics, set this book apart from the rest. Chapter Three. Ready? 'Pets in Literature.'

"When I still don't react he says, 'Betty? Did you get that?'

'Yeah, I got it Hal. Very clever.' I don't have it in me to fight with him, I just want to go home.

"And on it goes, for an hour. More crap than I've ever heard from one human being in my life. When he's done, he's got this smug grin on his puss. You'd think he'd discovered a cure for cancer.

"Well, Betty, I did it,' he says. 'Pretty neat, huh?'

"Did what? Oh, I get it. He just **WROTE THE ENTIRE BOOK**. Now his idiot buddy Mal just has to come up with a few paragraphs and voila! Harold I. Mason, Jr. is a best-selling author."

A little later that day, he asked me to call a few publishers to gauge their interest. Mostly I reached college interns who all told me the same thing, to have an agent send in a proposal and sample chapters.

"Diane, how you doing with getting us a publisher?" he asked. "I know a fair amount about the publishing biz, what with Joyce's books and whatnot. I don't see why it's taking so blopping long. It's not like you're so busy, ya know."

"Hal, I've spoken to a bunch of publishers and they all say they don't look at anything that doesn't come through an agent."

"You're not listening, Diane. I told you, we're going to just blump (*secondary meaning: bypass?*) the agent for this one. This will sell itself. So what you need to be working on is the A-list publishers, you know, the Random Houses, the Simon and Schusters. Frankly, you're wimping out on me, and I don't like it. Not one bit. Let's have a little, oh, assertiveness. And professionalism. Got it?"

And then I noticed what I initially thought was some grime on his left palm. As I endeavored to gain a better view, I saw that it wasn't dirt at all. A tattoo? No, too smudgy. I let my pen roll towards him across the table in the hope that he'd reach for it. He bit. And I saw the words "Call Warren" etched in blue ink, traversing his lifeline. My boss, the man who signs my paycheck, who makes \$175,000 a year, was a fifth grader cheating on a social studies test.

Perhaps I would do well to assert myself with these publishers who lack vision by hiring a sound truck and driving by their offices with a bullhorn, blasting "Buy Hal Mason's book, surefire bestseller." The professionalism part

would come in when I hopped out of the truck and planted myself in front of the publishing honcho's desk, Hal's name inked on my forehead.

A few days later, when I'd exhausted every publisher in New York and moved on to The Dixie Press in Johnson, Alabama, population 200, he called me in.

"Diane, I figured out why you're having some trouble finding a publisher. The book lacks one crucial ingredient – illustrations. You have to beep out an artist, someone top-drawer, and get them to do some pictures. You know, the kind that will tug at the heart, make every pet owner sit up and beg for this book."

He made doggie-paws out of his hands and panted like a golden retriever after a good jog on a summer's day.

"Beep beep" says Diane to the artist. This guy is married to a Harvard professor?

I went home and sat Genie down.

"Remember you were complaining the other day that you hadn't painted in a while, and you wanted to get back into it?"

"No way. He's your boss, leave me out of it."

"Just wait," I replied. "Don't make any plans for tomorrow night."

I called Mal first thing in the morning.

"Mal, Hal asked me to touch base with you to see how the book's coming."

"It's great, just wonderful. Hal and all of you at APO do a bang-up job over there. Lots of good material to work with. Matter of fact, I have about half the book written, and the rest, well, it should just about write itself. If you want, I can drop off what I've got so far and you can take a look at it over the next couple of days. I've made some suggestions at the end of each chapter for art work. I should be finished with the rest of the book in the next couple of weeks."

"Sure, Mal, I'd love to read what you've got so far. Can you possibly drop it off this afternoon?"

"Sure, honey, glad to. See you around four, then."

Mal showed up at the office sporting what appeared to be a muskrat on his head. I was tempted to reach out and pet it, expecting it to leap up and do whatever it is muskrats do. Build a dam?

Completing the *soigné* look were black glasses held together by a sliver of masking tape that he had cleverly rendered inconspicuous by coloring it in with black magic marker.

He passed the manila envelope holding our evening's entertainment from his sweaty hand to mine. I hadn't expected *War and Peace* but something with a bit more heft than, oh, a comic book, had seemed reasonable. You could finish this in a couple of sessions on the toilet, easy.

I was the first one home. I prepared a quick dinner of tuna sandwiches, and we polished off a couple of beers, wolfing down the food as fast as we could so we could begin the reading.

"It's my boss, so I get to start," I announced. I selected a random chapter.

Chapter Four
Michael's Magic

See Rover Run. Go Dog Go. Kids and pets. A story as old as, well, Old Yeller. It doesn't take a scientific study to show how much pets mean to their young masters. Simply stroll on a summer Sunday and watch little Freddie frisking with Fido. Since man first tamed the more docile among the wolves, humans have had rich relationships with the canine kingdom.

Anecdotes abound. One story taken from the files of the Animal Protection Organization in Boston, Massachusetts illustrates this principle.

Little Michael's parents divorced when he was five, and his dad departed for parts unknown. The boy was devastated and depressed. He told a social worker "I have no reason to get out of bed." This compassionate caregiver hit upon a plan to raise Michael's morale. After clearing it with Mother, she told Michael she had a surprise on Saturday.*

The social worker picked up Michael and Mom and drove them to the Animal Protection Organization shelter near his home. She took his hand and led him into the sparkling, state-of-the-art center. "What's this pretty place?" Michael wondered. He soon found out.

"Cool, puppies," he purred, spirits soaring as they entered the adoption wing. "You can pick one out a pet for your very own," exclaimed Mom. Michael smiled, for the first time in many months.

In mere minutes, Michael spotted Magic, part cocker spaniel, part beagle, and all parts lovable. Magic took to Michael like a duck to water, and vice versa.

Today, Michael and Magic are a "dynamic duo."

"I'd take Magic to school if they'd let me," murmurs Michael. Magic sleeps on Michael's bed every night, and has indeed given Michael a reason to get out of it every day.

Thus the power and yes, "magic" of pet ownership for children.

**Name changed for privacy*

Suggested artwork: drawing of little black boy sleeping contentedly in bed with dog curled up next to him."

"My, my," said Donnie. "Magic makes many memorable, merry moments for Michael. And Mal makes Hal happy to have homey havens for cute critters."

"Alas, abundant alliteration always annoys," chimed in Genie.

"Now, now," I added. "No mocking Mal. Meanies!"

Ms. Eugenia Halstead was our next performer.

"Ahem," she began. She had selected for her audience the chapter titled *The Mind of the Dog*, which starred a Lassie-like hero who saved his master from a fire.

"Could you draw that?" I ask Genie.

"I don't recall agreeing to any such thing. In fact, I believe my response was 'no fucking way,' or words to that effect."

"Come on, after all I do for you?"

"Such as?"

"I'll think of something."

"Okay, what the hell. Do you want it *a la* Renoir, or would you prefer something more Picasso-esque?"

"Don't waste your talent on anything fancy. And remember, the text's the thing. We must not overshadow this exquisite verbiage, or we shall be toast."

By the end of the weekend she'd whipped up a couple of good-enough illustrations -an animal rescue, an old lady chirping along with her parakeet.

"You can always sell the art work on etsy if the book doesn't make it," suggested Donnie.

chapter

FOURTEEN

Back at work, I was madly sending out press releases and crafting speeches for some of the gala honorees. Dinky and Jockey maintained offices in an old building downtown, where I went to interview them so I could capture their thoughts on this momentous occasion. Plus I thought I might engage in a bit of sleuthing in the matter of Hal.

Both former Board chairs rented space in the same building, at 385 Congress Street in the heart of the financial district. I didn't venture into that part of town often, and I invariably got lost in the rabbit warren of narrow streets and tall buildings. 385 Congress was a mere eleven stories high, its tenants squeezed into one-person offices that housed accountants, solo practitioner attorneys, insurance salesmen.

Retirement may be fine for the Jews, the Italians, and the blacks, but the Boston Brahmins, poor things, were forbidden by law. Into their nineties they must rise every morning at seven, eat a high-fiber breakfast, and take the train downtown. Waiting for them was Millie or Doris, the efficient,

bespectacled, gray-haired secretary who managed their schedules for their charitable board meetings, their conferences with their money managers, and their lunch dates with the other guys with exactly the same schedule and the same Millie or Doris. I'd have bet a week's salary that every single one of their offices boasted the identical Windsor chair inscribed with the word *Veritas*, the Harvard motto, as Jockey's and Dinky's.

First stop, Jockey's office. Not a single equestrian reference in the décor. In fact, there was no decor to speak of, save the aforementioned chair, a couple of prints depicting the alma mater, and a photograph of him and his wife Puff and the rest of the blond clan at the recent wedding of the Leith daughter, Cross (I swear to God).

With Jockey's current height of about 6'2", I guess he'd been close to 6'4" in his prime. Now I got the nickname, ha ha. He stooped to shake my hand as I was shepherded into his office by his Millie/Doris person.

"Well, now, Dee Dee, take a seat, take a seat." *No one had ever called me any such thing in my life.* "What would you like to know about old Jockey Leith?"

How about what's up with those names?

Aloud, I said, "You can start by telling me how you got involved with APO, what being part of this organization means to you, that sort of thing."

"Let's see, Dee." *Now we were good buddies.* "My friend from Eliot House invited me to join." *Ah yes, the Harvard connection.* "I knew it was a grand old organization, did the most wonderful things for animals. People too."

"That's great, Jockey. But what inspires you the most about APO?"

I wanted passion. Or at least mild interest.

"Hmmm." He stopped to think. "Well, now, Dee, we have Springer Spaniels at home, so I guess you could just say I'm a dog fella."

"What's special to you about APO?" I persisted.

"Hal does a fine job. Nope, you don't find too many like him. He's an idea man, you know, the book and all. We're lucky to have our Hal leading the charge."

"Speaking of Hal," I ventured, "he's quite a guy. And his wife is pretty impressive, too. I guess they're one of Boston's power couples."

"They do get around. In fact, Puff and I met up with them once at the Four Seasons in Maui. Fantastic spot, if you ever get a chance."

Did I look like a bank robber?

“Well, I guess there’s some money to be made in this non-profit sector,” I said aloud.”

“Guess, so, Dee. Hal’s worth every penny, I’ll give him that.”

I was getting exactly nowhere with this approach, except perhaps more indication of Hal’s free-spending ways. To Jockey Leith, APO was the Church of Hal Mason, and he enjoyed being part of the congregation.

Jockey was no longer a thoroughbred, and it was time for the pasture. Boston’s new movers and shakers hadn’t inherited their money, they’d actually earned it, inventing gene therapies that cure diseases, devices that make heart surgery more efficient, software programs used by businesses all over the world. We needed some new, sharper money on the Board. Sharp enough to cut through Hal’s bullshit.

I couldn’t wait to get back to the office and download my idea onto Betty and Mary-Day. First, though, up two stories to Dinky’s office. Change a few details - Dinky’s family was mostly redheads - and you got the same guy, same story.

chapter

FIFTEEN

I saw Mark that night, with Genie and Donnie tagging along. We'd seen a delightful romantic comedy with Drew Barrymore, at least I'd thought so. After, the four of us hung out at the apartment, drinking a Belgian import.

"Hey, this is a real fine brew," Mark told Donnie. "How'd you find it?"

"There's this amazing place in Somerville. They have a blog and they do tastings."

"We're actually saving up for a trip to this beer festival in Brussels," Genie added.

"Cool," said Mark. "You hear about wine tours, but not beer."

Genie groaned. "Don't get him started." Donnie gave her a friendly punch on the arm.

"It's true, I think beer can be every bit as sophisticated as wine. You just have to develop your palate."

"I have to admit I'm more of a wine guy, but who knows? Maybe you'll convert me."

He smiled at Donnie, who looked pleased.

"So, my friends," Mark went on. "That movie?"

"I hate this word, but I have to admit, it was adorable," said Genie.

"Not bad for a chick flick," added Donnie. "Better than most of the genre, actually."

Mark got this mirthless smile on his face. "What a piece of crap," he said. "No wit, no style." He took a long sip.

"Well, I liked it," said Genie. "And I'm a woman of great wit and style."

"Yeah, it wasn't bad," said Donnie. "And I'm a metrosexual of great wit and style."

"Jeez," persisted Mark. "The writing was pedestrian at best. Come on, you gotta get that." Another sip, before he leaned forward and spoke again. "And I suppose you think what HBO offers is art. It's mostly mindless pap, dressed up in fancy camera work and slightly above-average writing."

I caught Donnie giving Genie a look before asking, "What about Mad Men? Crap too?"

"Now that is all style. But where's the beef? No substance."

"I think you're wrong about that," answered Donnie. "This is a case where the form creates the substance. All that moody, brooding look and feel is what it's about. I think it's quite brilliant, actually."

"I disagree. Totally superficial."

Genie yawned. Donnie put his arm around her and asked, "Tired?"

"Yeah, think I'll hit the sack."

"This was fun, let's do it again," said Mark. "Night."

"Night," said Genie and Donnie in unison.

"Bedtime for us too, right?" Mark said, leaning in to lick my earlobe. I moaned just a little, reminding myself that Mark maintained a higher-than-average cultural aesthetic. I could learn a few things from him, and still enjoy my guilty pleasures when he wasn't around.

The next day, as I was watching Betty prepare some documents for Hal to sign, something occurred to me out of the blue.

"Betty, what does the 'I' in Hal's name stand for? Please tell me his parents were prophetic and it's idiot or maybe incompetent."

“You could guess all day and you’d never get it. It’s – are you ready? – just plain ‘I.’ As in, totally phony middle initial. ‘Betty,’ he says, ‘I noticed everyone around here has a middle initial. Don’t you think it would be kind of cute if my initials spelled out HIM?’

“Sure, Hal,” I said. ‘What’s the ‘I’ gonna stand for?’

“I don’t know, just plain I, I guess. It stands for me, right in the middle of Harold and Mason.’

“He thinks he’s positively adorable at this moment. But it kind of fits, you know? He is the center of the universe.”

“Wait,” I say. “What about the Jr.? Shouldn’t there be a Harold I. Mason, Sr. for him to be Jr.?”

Mary-Day had wandered in. “The Jr. is as genuine as a Louis Vuitton bag on a New York sidewalk.”

“What are you girls gabbing about?” Hal appeared as if out of nowhere. “Come on, share the joke.”

Betty responded. “We were talking about an old episode of ‘The Office.’

“Betcha you’re all glad you don’t have a Michael Scott for a boss, huh gals?”

“We sure as hell don’t have THAT guy,” said Mary-Day.

We headed back to our offices, Mary-Day saying, “God, talk about needing to have his ego stroked. He must have a penis the size of a pencil.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “If someone were to get some publicity for him personally...”

“Get him the star treatment, and he’s licking your paw.”

“And we could raise more money.”

“I see where this is going. More money, more shelters, including that one you told us about. Well, good luck, darlin’.”

Back in my office, I dialed the *Boston Globe*.

“I’d like to speak to Kate Greenberg,” a features writer listed in my media guide, I said on reaching the operator.

“She’s no longer here, but I’ll put you through to her replacement.”

The phone rang and rang, and finally picked up.

“Alison Cooke-Davison speaking.”

“Where’s Kate? I mean, who is this again?”

I sounded like a moron. I hung up immediately, and Facebooked Genie.

remember i told you about my idea to get a story about b in the globe? you're not gonna believe who the new features editor is.

Omigod. Alison Cooke.

correction. cooke-davison.

Andrew married her? That sucks. But you gotta rise above it. Be professional. While you're at it, kill her for me, would you?"

Genie had her own issues with Alison, mainly that she'd beaten her out for editor of the Tufts newspaper, and now held a much better job in journalism.

I waited two hours so Alison wouldn't remember my voice before taking a deep breath and dialing the *Globe* again. She picked up after two rings.

"Alison Cooke-Davison." I winced.

"Alison, hi, it's, um, Diane Salvi. Do you believe it?" Warm and friendly Diane from down the hall here, you bitch.

"Oh, Diane, hi." Wary. She thought it concerned Andrew.

"Believe it or not, this is a business call," I told Alison. "I'm the Communications Director for the Animal Protection Organization."

"I don't know them. Tell me about it." That snort, pretending she'd never heard of us.

I described the biggest, best, blah, blah, blah shelter agency, more blah, blah, blah.

"Anyway," I ended, "National Pet Rescue Week is coming up. My boss is a national leader in the field, and he'd be a great interview in the Sunday Magazine."

"I'm thinking." I heard typing.

"I just viewed your website, and you seem like a pretty good place. Look, I can't promise you anything, but I'll talk to my editor and get back to you. And how's your friend, oh, you know, Jenny?" God, what a bitch.

"Genie's great; I'll tell her you asked for her."

Maybe Alison had a guilty conscience. In any case, a victory for me. By the time I hung up, I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

I emailed her a disgustingly effusive thank-you note, did everything short of promising her my first-born. This would be a signal event in the history of APO, and a career-making triumph for its PR flack.

I didn't want to tell Hal about the story until it was official. I went back to work when my phone rang. HIM.

"Diane, can I see you for a minute?

What now?

"Grab your coat. We're going out to lunch."

Would I be allowed some wine? Between the encounter with Alison and the idea of sitting across from Hal for a full hour, I felt a sudden need to get very, very drunk.

We strolled over to Harvard Square, Hal offering a tour of luminaries' homes en route. This Victorian was inhabited by the chair of the Harvard history department; that modern structure was the residence of a well-known art historian and her surgeon wife. And what great parties they all gave!

"Here we are," he announced, as we stepped onto a tiny path linking Brattle and Mt. Auburn Streets, arriving at The Harvest, one of the Square's tonier eateries.

"After you," Hal said, as we entered the airy dining room, smiling and waving at several diners, whom he identified as Joyce's colleagues on the faculty.

He opened his menu and leaned back, while I almost fell out of my seat when I saw the prices. Compared to my occasional sushi splurge at \$6.95, this was the Ritz. Ahi tuna nicoise sounded yummy, but \$19? My parents had always taught me to order the cheapest thing on the menu as a guest. With the least expensive entrée the eggs benedict at \$16, I figured I'd better stick to the appetizers. I folded the menu.

"Okay, now, let's see. How's about we split the seafood sampler?"

Huh? Thirty bucks for a few oysters and shrimp?

"Um, I'm not really that hungry. I don't usually eat a very big lunch."

"Well, here's your chance. Big lunch, and then you don't need to eat much dinner. So, okay, we split the sampler, trust me, it's great, plus shellfish have no nerves, so they feel no pain when you crack 'em open."

The waiter arrived. "We'll start with the sampler, and then I'll have the lobster sandwich. Diane?"

I ordered my appetizer, after which Hal gossiped some more about our fellow diners.

The seafood platter arrived, and I loved my first ever taste of scallop ceviche, along with the shrimp, oysters, and crab claw. As we tucked into our main courses, I discovered the real reason we we had come.

So, Diane, how's your love life?" he asked. Choppers appeared in full view.

Shit. He hadn't.

"Um, it's fine, Hal."

"Just fine, Diane? From what I hear, it's more than fine."

"Hal, God, I don't know what to say."

"Just say you met the greatest guy, that's what you say."

"Well, yeah, I have, I guess. But Hal, I'm, well, I'm a really private person, and I try to keep my personal life separate from work."

"Mighty funny way of doing that, Diane, dating your boss's son."

"I guess. Anyway, how about we both try to be cool about this, okay?"

"Hey, when am I not cool? But Diane, there is one thing you ought to know about Mark. I agree, he's brilliant, and funny and handsome (*when had I said that?*), but he's got a vulnerable side. A very vulnerable side. I would not like to see him hurt. Get it?"

Omigod, I would have to marry the guy if I wanted to keep my job. I should've listened to Genie. I should always listen to Genie.

"Um, yeah, sure, um, I have to use the rest room, so I'll be back in a few, okay?"

I dug my phone from the bottom of my purse, and texted Genie.

hey,

Mark told Hal about us, and now Hal's bribing me with expensive lunch. Please help me kill them both.

When I returned to the table, he wasn't there, in the restroom himself. A couple minutes later, the waiter arrived with the check. I sneaked a peek. Whoa! Eighty bucks for lunch? And that was without the tip.

I wondered who was paying, him or APO, and how frequently he dined in this style. My mind flashed again on the shelter that he'd told me we couldn't afford to fix. Something wasn't adding up.

I was starting to have a hard time separating Mark from his father, and I was becoming increasingly struck by their similarities. On the plus side for both: Hot looks. Film buff. Great in bed (I'm making a leap here). Negatives: Inconsiderate (*ibid* lateness). Untrustworthy. Pompous.

Back home that night, I picked up the phone.

"Mark, I thought we had an agreement."

"What do you mean?"

"That you wouldn't tell your parents."

"Why, what did Hal say?"

"Never mind, I'm really annoyed. Why did you tell him about us when I expressly asked you not to?"

"Lighten up, Diane. He told me I seemed unusually cheerful, and was I seeing someone, and, I don't know, he kind of wormed it out of me."

"Well, it makes things awkward for me."

"He likes you, Diane, I think we have his approval. You definitely have mine. Forgive me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Want me to come over now and let you forgive me in person?"

I was picturing Alison and Andrew, dancing at their Ralph Lauren wedding, strolling hand in hand down Newbury Street. I forgave Mark. In person.

chapter

SIXTEEN

I continued to visit my shabby shelter (Mal had clearly invaded my brain) on Saturdays. I drew up an agreement for prospective pet owners similar to the one we used at APO. Ponytail, aka Bart, agreed to make people sign them. The shelter wasn't even close to APO's standards of sanitation, but it was about thirty percent better than before. And when I arrived, the water bowls were always full. Progress.

Hal wasn't the only member of the Mason family making me a little nuts these days. Mark had been pushing my buttons of late, and I didn't mean the ones that made me cry out "don't stop, oh yeah, mmmm, mmmm," though he still pushed those too.

I was supposed to meet him at a restaurant for dinner one night, and he showed up nearly half an hour late, muttering, "Sorry, babe, God, I'm starved." He drew me toward him for a sweet kiss. But I wasn't buying.

"Mark, you left me waiting here doing nothing, when I could've been doing a million other things, laundry, errands, reading a book for God's sake."

His reply: "Sorry. But you have to admit, you are kind of uptight sometimes. You could stand to loosen up a little."

"What the hell is uptight about not wanting to miss something because you can't check the time? Listen, I just want you to respect me enough to show up when you said you would."

"Okay, sure. Hey, you look really great tonight. Come on, let's kiss and make up."

We locked lips for a few seconds, which felt pretty nice, then proceeded to dinner, where he got me laughing with his latest translation assignment, and I forgot to be mad at him.

Until it happened again. This time, we missed a movie, and it was a one-time showing of an Italian film I'd really want to see at the Museum of Fine Arts, one that would never see a commercial run. I'd actually started yelling at him on the street. He tried to gain my forgiveness, but I wasn't in the mood. I turned my back on him, and headed home, stepping briskly in an attempt let off steam. As I marched, I flashed on Andrew. He'd never have left me hanging around on a street corner, that was for sure.

When I arrived home, I was happy to join Genie and Donnie in watching a particularly gross episode of *Survivor*. Even though he wasn't around to appreciate my spite, I was kind of watching just to get Mark, who was too highly evolved to partake of such commercial entertainment.

After a couple of Corona Lights and a few scenes of televised mean-spiritedness, I felt slightly better.

chapter

SEVENTEEN

The following weekend, Mark having been forgiven, and I took a jaunt up to Newburyport for the day, about an hour away on the North Shore. If you're looking for a classic New England village for which the word quaint was invented, look no further. Ocean setting, check. Brick sidewalks, ditto. Charming shops selling local pottery and other handicrafts. Restaurants boasting authentic local favorites like lobster rolls and clam chowder.

It was one of those late summer days, the air starting to turn crisp, and you needed a light sweater for evening, a perfect day for a romantic getaway.

We reached Newburyport around eleven, and discovered a little upscale takeout place, where we selected three kinds of imported cheese and a crusty loaf. A small park overlooking the harbor further down the block was the perfect spot for a picnic.

We took turns spreading the buttery, aromatic cheeses on bread so fresh you could smell the yeast. We were hanging all over each other, touching and laughing, enjoying the passing crowds and the view of sailboats gliding along the Atlantic.

After lunch, we wandered along the waterfront, riffing on our favorite boat names.

"What's the story on *Miss Stake*?" I wondered.

"Used to be called *My Lovely Wife* and he changed the name after she dumped him for his business partner," Mark hypothesized.

"Oh, I like this one," I say, pointing to *Hound Dog*."

"Elvis impersonator," Mark guessed.

Towards dinnertime, we headed back into town, where we spied – a movie theater! And the right kind too, an art house, showing a French film we'd both wanted to see. We checked the show times and crafted a plan to catch the eight o'clock screening.

Dinner was at a casual seafood joint on the water, where we shared a giant order of fried clams and a couple of lobster rolls. As we were eating, his cell went off. Don't take it, please don't take it, I said to myself. He took it.

"No shit," he said. "That is fantastic. Um, what time?" I kept on waiting for him to hold up an, "I'll just be a second" finger. Nope.

"Which departure date is cheaper, Saturday or Sunday?" he asked. "Mmm hmm. And the return?" Pause. "Okay, book it. Thanks, dude."

"And that was?" I asked.

"Oh, I have a buddy, works for Voyagertrips.com. I'm always trying to find a good deal to LA, where my sister lives. So he calls me when something really great comes up. I never even have to go online."

"Good friend to have," I offered. Hmmm, maybe he could get me a near-freebie back to Italy one of these days. Or Mark and me to Asia.

At 7:40, the waiter still hadn't brought the check and Mark was in no hurry.

"You know I hate to sit in the front row," I said, motioning over the waiter.

"Can't you relax for once? We're sort of on vacation."

By the time we'd paid for our dinner and arrived at the theater, the lights had dimmed and, exactly as I'd predicted, no seats remained except in the stiff neck section near the screen.

Looking to find two seats together, I spotted in the very back row a couple making out like a pair of horny teenagers. I was about to point them out to Mark when the female half came up for air and I saw that it was Katelyn.

What the hell was Katelyn doing in Newburyport? Then I remembered what she'd told me about Ed, short for "educator," and awarded him points for giving her lessons in cinema. Maybe she and I could see a movie together sometime.

I was about to try to catch her attention and wave hello, but something held me back, mainly, the fact that Ed was still married and the desire to respect her privacy.

Yet something was nagging at me, like a dog gnawing at a scrap of rawhide. I fidgeted in my seat through the first twenty minutes of the film, when I couldn't stand it any more.

After having scrambled over five irritated filmgoers near the front to take our seats, I decided a trip to the rest room was imperative so I could gain a better view of Ed. Back across the angry seatmates and up the aisle, where, at the rear of the theater, in the far right hand corner, Katelyn and her beau now faced the screen. My heart sank like the anchor keeping *Miss Stake* in place in the harbor when I discovered the identity of her companion. The handsome face, the wavy dark hair, the glow-in-the-dark teeth. All that was missing was the corny tie.

How could he? Toy with vulnerable Katelyn. Abuse his power. Be in the same theater with Mark and me.

Omigod, I had to get his son out of here before the film ended and we found ourselves at the exit together.

I perched on the toilet for about ten minutes, trying to figure out what to do. When I arrived back at our row, rather than disturb my erstwhile seatmates again, I motioned for Mark to join me, pointing a finger at the back of my throat in the international gesture for "vomit." He quickly gathered our sweaters as I murmured yet another apology to the annoyed moviegoers, and we raced up the aisle, me on the left blocking his view of Katelyn and Hal, holding my sweater over my head to obscure my face like a criminal on a perp walk. We emerged onto the street, breathless.

"What is it, babe?" he asked, his arm around my shoulder.

"Feels like food poisoning, it's pretty bad." I threw in a little gag.

"I'll take you home. Do you want to wait here while I get the car?"

"Yeah, sure."

For good measure, I asked him to stop by the side of the road halfway back to Cambridge, so I could pretend to barf again, and I was positive he was convinced.

He parked and shepherded me upstairs. Genie and Donnie were out for the evening.

I shrugged into an ancient flannel nightgown, a high-necked job that screamed “virgin,” and prostrated myself on the bed in mock intestinal distress. Mark rubbed my back for five nice minutes, which I wished could go on all night. But my role tonight was salmonella victim and I suddenly bolted upright and went for the toilet, slamming the door behind me. I put my head down, forcing the blood to rush up and redden my face, and emerged with the command, “I think you’d better go; I just need to lie down and be alone.”

“Sure, honey,” he said brushing my hair from my forehead. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Feel better, now.”

I looked out the window to ensure that he was safely on his way home, and rooted around the seat cushions for the remote in search of a decent movie on TV. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. I loved Bridget. Sometimes I thought I was Bridget, minus the extra poundage and the cigarette addiction.

I kept jumping up and looking out the window, hoping Genie and Donnie would be home soon.

They were surprised to find me alone when they arrived around ten.

“God, you look like hell, Diane, what is going on?” Genie said.

I blurted out the sordid tale, explaining that what upset me the most was worry over Katelyn, who struck me as more fragile than ever.

“Is this sexual harassment?” I wondered.

We decided that I should confer with the person who knew Hal the best.

Monday morning, I cornered Betty in the lunchroom and asked her to join me for lunch in Harvard Square. She peered at me over her reading glasses, her eyes squinting slightly.

“Everything okay?”

“Not really, but I’ll explain at lunch.”

I was forced to pass Katelyn's desk to collect Betty at noon, and I had a hard time looking at her. My inner thug was dying to come out and beat the crap out of Hal with a tire iron.

Betty and I rode the T two short stops to the Square.

Her first words as we seated ourselves in the crowded croissant place were "Okay, Diane, spill it."

I replayed the near-encounter in Newburyport as quickly as I could. She was supposed to join my revenge fantasies, helping me plan a way to roast his buns to a crisp in a pizza oven.

Instead, she sighed.

"Katelyn is an adult. I agree, he's a no-good cheating bastard, among other things, but she's gotta figure out his sorry ass on her own. I don't think it's any of our business, frankly."

"Betty," I cried. "You can't mean that. This guy is having an affair with a subordinate under our noses, and you're telling me there's nothing we can do? Think. Hal. And Katelyn. She has enough crap in her life without this."

"Diane, you are so young. These things go on in offices all over the world, every single day. Ain't nothing we can do except sit back and wait till it blows over. We can't be Katelyn's parents, or, good God, Hal's for that matter."

"But what about sexual harassment. Don't we have a policy?"

She snorted.

"Right. Like all the other policies we don't have. I'll see that we put one in place pronto, but I don't know that it'll be much help retroactively. In any case, you don't know if he's promised her anything in exchange for sexual favors, but it doesn't sound like it."

I took it in another direction, thinking of Katelyn's hopes for a future with her "Ed."

"Is there any possibility that he and Joyce really are on the verge of splitting?"

"Are you kidding me?" Betty asked. "Joyce has him by the balls six ways from Sunday. That man's going no place without the rich wife."

She shook her head. "That poor girl, getting mixed up with the likes of him. He's like Joyce's spiders, and now he's caught a defenseless little fly in his sorry old web."

“The worst of it is, Katelyn thinks he’s gonna ditch his wife and marry her. You mean to tell me we can’t do a single thing?”

‘Fraid, not. Remember, folks don’t take kindly to others butting into their love lives. I’m talking about Katelyn as much as Hal.”

As I opened my mouth to object, she cut me off.

“Think about it.” she said. “If you caught another friend’s boyfriend fooling around on the side, are you sure you’d automatically tell her?”

Maybe Betty was right. If I caught Donnie cheating on Genie – a ludicrous thought – I knew I’d tell her. At least I liked to think I would. I was really trying not to be judgmental, but it was hard. In the end, Katelyn’s love life was none of my business.

chapter

EIGHTEEN

I invited Katelyn out to lunch the next day, my treat. We headed to the sushi bar down the street. I eased into the subject.

“How’s Aidan doing these days? Still reading like crazy?”

“Y’know it’s really weird, having a kid who’s smarter than you are, and he’s only six. I worry that he’ll get to high school and he’ll be really embarrassed about his ignorant mom.” She sighed.

“Come off it, Katelyn, you are anything but ignorant. You’re the most efficient person I’ve ever met, and you’re great with numbers. You just don’t have much formal education, that’s all.”

“I guess.”

“Well, Aidan got his brains from someone, and from what you’ve told me, I kind of doubt they come from Billy.”

She laughed.

“Actually, Diane, I have a plan. I haven’t told anyone else yet.”

She was grinning broadly.

I was slightly wary, and prayed that she didn't tell me about some phony togetherness scheme Hal had been spinning.

"I'm trying to go to college. God, me and college, do you believe it?"

"Of course I believe it, why wouldn't I? That's so great. Details, come on."

"I'm taking a course at UMass Boston, and I've applied to get a degree at night. And I think I might actually qualify for a scholarship. Maybe even a full one! At least, that's what they tell me."

"Katelyn, I 'm really happy for you. Do you know what you want to study?"

"Well, it may be ridiculous, but I think I might want to be an accountant. I mean, like you said, I really am good with numbers, and I think I'm pretty well-organized. It's probably dumb to think I could do it, but maybe. Anyway, I wanna try."

"What about Aidan? Hey, maybe I could babysit sometimes."

"Well, it's great to know if I get stuck sometimes, but my downstairs neighbor has already been watching him. She's already kind of used to him and his, um, behaviors. I figure it'll take me years to finish, if I do one course a semester and then one in the summer, but ya know, what's the rush?" Her voice became firm. "I just want to do it."

"Wow, Katelyn. Does Ed know?"

"I haven't even told him yet. I know he'll be supportive, but I don't want to tell till it's definitely, positively for real."

"How's it going with Ed anyway?" I asked.

"Really well."

"Katelyn, don't get mad, but, um, I had a friend who was involved with a married man, and he kept telling her he was going to leave his wife, and, I hate to tell you, but it never happened."

"Diane, you really don't know anything about this. He is this close to getting free, and I would really appreciate it if you would just stay out of it."

"I'm sorry, I know it's not my business. I just don't want to see you get hurt, that's all."

"Listen, I think if I can take care of a tough kid like Aidan, I'm certainly capable of taking care of myself."

Maybe she'd meet a nice young man in college and she could tell Hal to take a hike off a cliff.

I suddenly came up with a brainstorm. Two actually.

"I guess Hal has some big family thing coming up, huh? His niece's wedding? I wonder where it is."

She reddened slightly.

"No idea. I just know it's out of town, I think maybe California, anyway, somewhere pretty far."

"Have you ever met his wife?"

Was this mean? I didn't wish to hurt her, but I rationalized my line of inquiry by convincing myself that maybe, by reminding Katelyn of Hal's marriage, she'd realize her mistake and break it off before she got really, really hurt. Why in the world I thought I possessed that power over her, I had no idea. I hadn't done a great job managing my own love life; who was I to play God with someone else's?

"Nope. All I know about her is what everyone else knows. She's a genius and she's on TV. Hey. Let's go back a different way for a change."

I'd gotten nowhere. I just knew that the gala date change and the *faux* wedding had to be related to the irregularities in Hal's finances. But if Katelyn had any inkling, she wasn't telling. Not yet anyway. I'd have to figure out some way to get her to trust me more.

On to Part B of the brainstorm. The nice part.

"Katelyn, what are you doing Saturday? I have a secret project, and you might be able to help me."

"What is it? Not that I can help, I have Aidan."

"Remember that awful shelter I told everyone about? The one I wanted us to take over and clean up?"

"Yes," she said, wary.

"Well, I've been visiting and working on it on my own. It's not exactly spotless, but it's a lot better than it was, and I'm even getting them to use some of the adoption forms we use here. You could come with me and help Saturday. And bring Aidan; he might even enjoy it."

"You know, he gets very restless on Saturdays. This might be good. At least worth a try."

We agreed to meet there the next Saturday.

And just when I hoped life might get boring, Hal went on the rampage against the board, Betty, and me.

At the next board meeting, Warren, blushing and giggling, proclaimed, "We're ending this Board meeting with a special announcement. I have it on good authority that, one week from tomorrow marks Hal's fifteenth year with APO. And what marvelous years they've been. From a mere five shelters to twelve, the state's only hotline," and on and on, *ad nauseum*, extolling the alleged virtues of one Harold I. Mason, Jr.

Warren went on, "Hal, I have the privilege of informing you that the Board has voted to..."

Hal was looking modestly down at his nails, grinning like a beauty contest finalist, certain that Warren was about to say, "recognize your outstanding contributions to APO with a well-deserved, all-expenses paid vacation for two to Paris, France."

Instead, what came out was "recognize your outstanding contributions to APO by naming our newest and most state-of-the-art shelter in your honor. Our Roxbury shelter will hereafter be known as the Harold I. Mason, Jr. Animal Shelter." And then he shouted "Bravo!" Everyone followed suit and shouted, "Bravo!" like the audience at *La Traviata*.

Hal got this shocked expression on his face, like he'd just been jolted by 1000 volts of electrical current. He recovered quickly enough that most people mistook his expression for surprised gratitude.

A few well-timed tears escaped from his eyes.

"Thank you all. I'm speechless, this is really too much, please forgive me for not saying anything more than thank you so much. I'm really and truly overcome."

As soon as the meeting ended, he called me, Betty and Mary-Day into his office.

"Okay, which one of you had their heads up their butts?"

Betty said, "What do you mean, Hal?"

He gritted his teeth.

"You all know exactly what I mean. Betty, or should I say Judas?"

"Hal, I honestly don't know what you're talking about. But so nice about the shelter, wasn't it?"

I said, "I can write a press release about it."

Which reminded me, I hadn't heard from Alison yet. I had my excuse to make a follow-up call.

Mary-Day added "And maybe we can get some donors to add their names to some of the spaces in the building."

His expression changed, turning dreamy as he pictured his name linked with the Burberry-clad dowager Sis Reade's, his name in the paper. We'd defused the situation. Well, partly.

"Yeah, well, Diane, stick around, would ya?"

Mary-Day and Betty departed, leaving me in my least favorite position, alone with Hal.

"So, how's it going, Diane?"

I pretended I didn't know what he meant by "it."

"Well, the gala's coming along great and I'm working on the newsletter..."

"I mean, with my son, Diane? You being good to my boy?" He winked.

"I sure hope so. I'd never, ever hurt anyone intentionally, Hal."

"I hope that's true, Diane. I don't like to see people get hurt, especially members of my family."

"Well, no one does Hal. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"You be careful, Diane."

"Right. See you later."

He picked up the phone before I was even out of the room. I heard, "Well, we can just go to Paris anyway. No, not the Georges V, Joyce, that's out of the question. Hey, listen, I tried, okay? Not now, Joyce. Anyway, there's still the book. *For Pet's Sake* by Harold I. Mason, Jr. Knock their socks off. Blow 'em clean out of the H2O."

I was already having a shitty day. May as well complete the job and head straight to hell.

"Alison, it's Diane. Just calling to follow up on our conversation about the interview with Hal."

"Your timing is perfect. I have some good news."

"We got the interview?"

"Well, yes, but not exactly as you'd envisioned. I came up with this idea for a story on non-profit leadership in Boston. The sector's having a rough time in this economy, and I think showing how leaders are, well,

leading, would make a good story. We're featuring five CEOs, and your Harold will be one."

"Alison, that's terrific; thank you so much. He'll be a great interview, I promise."

I gulped. This would require careful scripting. No poop jokes. Maybe I could find some amusing animal tales online for him to tell.

We set up a time for her to come and interview him the following week.

When I arrived home that night, I was greeted with a squawked, "Diane home," from Cleo. The best welcome in the world.

chapter

NINETEEN

Saturday morning, I made off for the North End shelter, where Katelyn and a fidgety Aidan were waiting for me at the entrance.

"This place is creepy, even on the outside," said Katelyn.

"Just follow my lead."

I knocked and Bart came to the door. At least I was pretty sure it was Bart. He'd cut off his ponytail, and appeared semi-human. The place stank.

"I brought some friends," I said, introducing Katelyn and Aidan. Also some leashes. We were going to walk these babies.

Aidan rushed over to the cat cage, and picked up a scrawny tabby. The cat stretched out against his cheek, purring.

"Okay, team," I said. "Let's get to work. We need to wash the floors, fill the bowls. Aidan, I know it's gross, but could you help clean out the litter boxes?"

"In a minute," he replied. He had that cat stuck to his cheek.

"Bart, I'm not so happy this week. You've let things go in the cleanliness department." I saw little clods of turd in the hallway, as if they'd stuck

to his feet in the cages and he'd transported them throughout the building. The litter boxes smelled overdue for an emptying.

"Hey, I've been busy."

"Exactly how long does a haircut take? By the way, very nice."

He mumbled a thanks, but again I caught a glimpse of a shy smile.

"Could you please show Aidan how to clean out the cat boxes?"

He shuffled down the hall, where I heard him explaining how to scoop out the poop, dump it, and replace the litter.

Katelyn and I took turns scrubbing the walls and walking the dogs. Three hours later, we'd finished up, time to go. I decided on the spur of the moment to treat Katelyn and Aidan to some good North End pizza. But as we were leaving, we ran into a roadblock.

Aidan said, "Mom, I want this one," as he held the tabby on his shoulder.

"We're here as volunteers, Aidan, that's all."

"Mom, pleeeeeease," he whined.

She looked at me and shrugged, but she couldn't help smiling.

"I'll tell you what. Let's both think about it for a couple of weeks, and if you still feel the same, we can go back."

"But Harry Potter won't be there anymore in two weeks. Someone else will have taken him."

"Tell you what," I said. "Let's continue this discussion over lunch."

I turned to Bart. "Can you put the cat Aidan was playing with on reserve for a few days?"

"Yeah, I guess."

We headed down Hanover Street to and over to Prince, to Pizzeria Regina, arguably the best pizzeria in Boston. As soon as we arrived, Aidan headed for the bathroom. Katelyn pounced.

"I can't believe this, he was so calm and focused today."

"Do you think you might really get him the cat?"

"Never in a million years would I have imagined myself with a pet, but if it's good for Aidan..." Aidan bounced back to the table.

"I will take care of him, Mom, honest. I already know how to clean out a litter box, and he doesn't even need to be walked, and feeding him is easy, and I really, really, really need him"

Katelyn sighed.

“What if you get tired of him, or you just don’t feel like cleaning one day? What then?”

“You can dock my allowance.”

She chuckled.

“He must mean business. He has a fit when I dock his allowance.” She turned to her son.

“Okay, but you have to pay for the litter box. I’ll take care of the food. Aidan, you’re very lucky I work where I do. We have a pay-what-you-can afford clinic, and for shots and vet care, I get an employee discount. And I guess we can do it all today. Why not?”

“Thanks, Mom.”

He looked at me for a minute, and turned to give Katelyn a little peck on the cheek.

The waiter brought our pizza. Aidan had wanted plain, but I’d talked him into trying a slice of cheese and arugula, which he didn’t like, but Katelyn couldn’t get enough of.

We went back to collect Harry, and headed for the nearest APO shelter in Dorchester, where we got him examined –he was about three years old and underweight, but otherwise healthy – and injected with the necessary inoculations. Then it was back to their apartment, with a stop at the pet store for supplies on the way. When I left, Aidan was playing his video game, Harry on his lap.

Saturday night, Mark told me he’d be picking me up at 7:15 for an experimental theater piece. At 8:00 the doorbell rang, so sadly, we were too late to catch the much-anticipated all-lesbian performance of *Death of a Saleswoman*.

“Mark, I thought you really wanted to see this,” I said.

“Hey, it’s one night out of my life. I miss it, so what? As long as I’m with you, babe.”

“I? I? What about me? What if I really wanted to see this?”

“Yeah, right, Diane.”

“But what if?”

“Only one night out of your life too.”

And this was the guy whose sensitive soul I was supposed to worry about?

"Mark, I'm sorry, but that's really inconsiderate."

"Jesus, Diane, you sure are uptight tonight. C'mon, let's find a movie."

He put his arm around me. I threw it off.

"Babe, what's the deal?"

He dug his iPhone out of his pocket.

He was more interested in his new toy than in my wounded feelings.

"New?" I asked. I hoped he heard the sneer in my voice.

"Yeah, Hal always wants me to have the latest. Just gave me the newest iPad too, really cool."

He hit the movie app. I watched over his shoulder, and saw something that just might lift me from my pissed-off mood.

"Hey, what about *I Love You Man*?" Who I loved was Paul Rudd, clueless and sweet.

Who I got was Mark, who opined, "That's a joke, right?"

"C'mon, it'll be a riot."

"A riot? Since when do we do "riot" movies?"

"Oh, right, we are above the riot and the morons who laugh and, I know, people who like entertainment."

"Damn right."

Oh my God, he sounded just like you-know-who. The moron who would slit my throat when he learned what I'd done. What I was about to do.

"Okay, Mark, I've had enough. You disrespect me by showing up late all the time..."

"Punctuality is vastly overrated."

"Not to me. But of course you don't care what I think. We always do what you want to do, and whenever I suggest something just a little bit more mainstream, you totally dismiss it, without even considering that it might be fun for ME."

"I'm just trying to help you be your best."

"Like I'm some ignorant twit who needs a, a teacher?"

Omigod, this was the conversation I wished Katelyn would have with Hal. He and Mark were the same guy. Did that make me Katelyn? Well, not exactly, I'd escaped. If only she would do the same.

"Mark, this conversation is o-ver. Oh and by the way, so are we."

"Wait, Diane. Come on, I never thought you were stupid. Don't be that way."

Why he even would want to be with a so-called tight-ass like me I had no idea.

"Please leave."

"We have something good together. You know it. We're, like, soul mates. And let's not forget the sex. Pretty great, huh?"

And then I got it. This was all about the sex. Not for him. For me. Plus he was my rebound guy. The first I'd been interested in since Andrew. But where Andrew had been considerate and kind, Mark was thoughtless and dismissive, in no way an acceptable replacement. I'd been a total idiot, deluding myself out of loneliness.

As soon as he'd gone, I scooped out five or six healthy spoonfuls of chocolate frozen yogurt, unearthed the remote from its hiding place under the cushions, and clicked On Demand. *Jerry Maguire*, perfect broken-hearted fare. I'd initiated the break-up, but I still felt sad, knowing I faced lots of lonely Saturday nights ahead of me, while Andrew and Alison were ensconced in a magazine-worthy condo in some neighborhood that would make mine look like a slum. Plus, ugh, Hal. Would he fire me for jilting his son, or just continue to torture me? Genie and Donnie arrived home just as Renee was telling Tom "You had me at hello."

"What are you doing home so early? Where's Mark?" asked Genie.

As I laid out the scene, I started to sniffle.

Donnie said, "Diane, I know you're not supposed to do this, but can I just say one thing?"

"Sure, whatever you want."

"Mark is an asshole."

"Donnie!" yelled Genie.

"No, it's okay, he's right actually." I was finished sniffing. "He goes right into my 'what was I thinking?' file."

Donnie asked, "Hey, Genie, you got one of those?"

As if on cue, we both yelled, "Omigod, Jordan."

Donnie again. "Who the hell's Jordan and why don't I know about him?"

I asked, "Where is Jordan today?"

"Selling dope on the streets of Marrakesh," Genie answered.

"Motivational speaker. Ten steps to being the perfect asshole."

“Wall Street arbitrageur.”

“Yes, exactly! Whatever that is.”

“Seriously,” said Genie.

I spent Sunday in a movie mania, seeing two back-to-back films, one French, one indy-American, gobbling popcorn and chocolate. By marathon's end, I actually felt a bit nauseous, the physical ache a distraction from my heartache.

Part of me was relieved, since I'd known deep down that Mark was not a keeper. The other part, well, sadness mixed with loneliness. It would take a while to get over him, though not as long as it had taken to recover from Andrew.

I headed out a little early Monday morning, so I could be observed industriously at work at my desk when Hal arrived, just in case it was the one day he chose to arrive before eleven.

He arrived at ten, bad sign, and sure enough, ordered me into his interrogation chamber immediately.

“Diane, Diane, what are we going to do about this situation?”

“Um, what situation would that be, Hal?”

“Don't be funny with me, Diane. You know exactly what I'm talking about.”

“Listen, Hal. Mark is a really great guy. I mean, really, a really, really terrific person.”

And suddenly I had an inspiration

“I realized I wasn't good enough for him.”

I sat back, triumphant, certain that I had aced this particular pop quiz.

“You got that right. Jeez, Diane, I told you not to hurt my boy. What in the world were you thinking?”

That my love life was my own business and none of yours? Another brainstorm; I was cooking today.

“I was thinking that Mark really needed to be with someone his equal in, um, intelligence and, um, class. And I know where he gets it.”

He couldn't help himself; his mouth turned upward in a tiny grin. I gave myself an A+.

"That's mighty kind of you, Diane. You're not totally stupid, I'll give you that. But I don't know what I'm going to do with Mark. He's moping around, and feeling low about himself, and I blame you. He didn't need this, I didn't need this, and APO didn't need this.

APO? Hub? Then he repeated what I said to his son not so long ago.

"Please leave."

I slunk back to my desk. Betty noticed and followed me.

"I know, you heard every word. What an idiot I am. And for what? The son's as arrogant and inconsiderate as the dad."

"Well, I guess you've learned you shouldn't go messing around with your boss's son. Especially when the boss is you-know-who. Nothing you can do about it now. Don't worry, it'll all blow over soon enough and he'll find something else to bother us all about."

That didn't make me feel a whole lot better.

I tried to avoid Hal as best I could for the rest of the day, since mainly I wanted to take his baboon tie, wrap it around his baboon neck and slowly, tortuously tighten it as his face went red and he slowly, deliciously expired. His crime: poisoning the gene pool.

chapter

TWENTY

Actually, he was guilty of far worse. Two days later, I was in the bathroom, and heard someone come in, enter the next stall, and begin to sob, quietly at first, then more emphatically. A peek under the divider at the weeper's shoes revealed her identity.

"Katelyn?" I asked softly. My solicitousness touched a nerve, as her whimpering turned into full-fledged waterworks.

"Come on out, sweetie," I urged.

"Oh, Diane," she cried, emerging from the sanctuary of the toilet stall. "He broke up with me. I'm such an idiot. I am a total, complete moron. He said he loved me, and I believed him. I am so, so, so stupid."

Now I knew why she hadn't been at work the day before. Betty had said she'd called in sick, and I'd been too self-absorbed to call her to see what was wrong. Some friend I was.

Now she was practically hysterical. I put my arms around her and hugged her tightly, as she cried and cried some more. Eventually, the sobbing abated enough for her to hear me invite her out for a drink after work. She

nodded gratefully, snuffling and blowing her nose, then splashing warm water on her ruddy cheeks.

"That's so sweet, but I have to get home to Aidan."

Omigod, now who's the moron? She couldn't just decide to go out for a drink on the spur of the moment like my childless single friends and me.

"Hey, you have mascara all over, come on, let's clean you up," I offered, taking a bit of toilet paper to her blackened eyes. "Let's take a walk; no one will miss us if we're out for half an hour."

She breathed deeply, trying to collect herself sufficiently to return to her desk. I caught her peering around the corner, checking to see if Hal were around. I heard her tell Betty she was running out to do some errands. We changed into sneakers, and started on our short around-the-block route.

"What happened, Katelyn?"

"Oh, Diane, y'know how I told you Ed said he was gonna leave his wife for me? Well, now he tells me that he can't. Or won't. He didn't really say much, just that we're over."

"And he told you this when, yesterday?"

"No, the day before. I just couldn't come in yesterday. I was too depressed."

She scrunched up her face like a little kid. "Well, I guess I have nothing to lose at this point. Here's the thing. It's about Ed."

We walked in silence for a minute or two.

"Okay, here goes. Ed's name wasn't really Ed. It was Hal."

I was no actress. I went for stunned silence.

"Diane? Do you get it?"

"I don't know what to say. You and Hal? I never would have guessed."

"Yeah, well, actually, neither would I. We were working late one night, and he took some wine out of his desk, and he said all these nice things, about how pretty I was, and how intelligent, and one thing led to another. The thing is, no one had ever said that kind of stuff to me before, and it felt so nice to feel, what's the word, valued."

"Then we started meeting at motels after work, going to foreign movies, stuff like that. It wasn't just about sex, see, he really did help with my education. Just like you."

Hal and I team-teaching Katelyn. Right. She continued.

"This went on for about five or six months. Then we had a huge fight, and he dumped me." She pulled out a shred of toilet paper, blew her nose. "And I kinda blame you, actually."

"Me? What did I have to do with it?"

"Well, it was about the shelter. I told him I wandered by it when I was visiting a friend in the North End, so I went in, and it was pretty bad, and I asked why we couldn't take it over. And he said, 'first Diane, now you, what is it with you women, always dagging me about something.' I told him I agreed with you, and then we had a huge fight, and he told me we were done."

"I am so sorry, really," I lied. "You know it's not my fault, don't you? I mean, it's him."

"You're right, it's not your fault. Maybe I shouldn't have told him."

But maybe I really did own some culpability. Perhaps my little speech about my not being good enough for Mark had resonated a little too well with Hal, and he'd decided he needed to dine out a little higher on the food chain.

Katelyn continued. "But after what we did and what I saw, how could I not tell him? Plus, then he said he was tired of the whole thing with me anyway." She sniffed again.

"I said, 'You mean 'cause I don't teach at Harvard?' and he said, 'You said that, Katelyn, not me,' and he got this mean little smirk on his face. He's right, I am stupid, stupid, stupid."

"First, you stood up for a principle. And you are so not stupid. You are intelligent and ambitious and you are gonna fulfill dreams you haven't even dreamt yet. How many people work a full time job and have a challenging kid and go to college at night? I seriously doubt I could do everything you're doing. And you do an excellent job at work. Plus, you're really cute."

I managed to coax a small smile out of her.

"I really do wanna make something of myself. Having a man like him, I don't know, made me feel special."

"He may have appreciated your talents, but he was never straight with you. And also, he..."

She interrupted. "Then he tells me he hopes that we can stay friends, and keep working together. Like I'm just gonna sit outside his office every

day and type up his stuff and pretend none of this ever happened? Now I don't know what to do." She started to whimper. "I'll have to get another job, but it's not easy without my degree, and with Aidan and all. But there is absolutely no way I'm sitting at the desk and looking at HIM every day, I don't care if I have to go on welfare."

"This is so not fair. You have to quit because of HIM? It should be the other way around."

"Well, I definitely can't stay and work with him."

"You could take him to court. Sexual harassment."

She hesitated. "I thought about that, but I'm not sure what he did qualifies. I mean, he didn't promise me a promotion or anything like that. Plus, I don't have time for a legal battle. I just want to get the hell out of here."

"I might be able to help. I mean, I can definitely help you with your resume and cover letter and stuff."

And then there was Betty. As soon as we returned to work, I dragged her into my office and closed the door.

"Are you aware of what that, that reptile has done?" I began. Actually, reptile was an insult to the memory of my beloved Sneaky. Only a human would sink so low. I wanted to scream, but managed to keep my voice relatively low.

"He just ditched Katelyn, and then suggested she continue to work here as if nothing had happened between them."

"I figured out what happened when neither of them showed up yesterday, and she called in sick, obviously crying. Good God, that bastard."

"Is there anything you can do to help?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Half an hour later, Katelyn came into my office.

"I told Betty I was quitting for personal reasons. I didn't want to get into why, I just said I had to leave. She told me about an opening in the Springfield shelter, but I don't know a soul in that area. I can't just move out there. So I quit."

"Was that such a good idea? I mean, how will you manage?"

"Betty said she'd fill out the paperwork so I could collect unemployment."

It wasn't enough. Not nearly. I felt completely powerless.

We held a small send-off in the conference room on Friday afternoon, with a gooey chocolate cake from a local bakery. The headquarters staff had taken up a collection, and Betty had purchased a gift card. Towards the end of the gathering, I drew her aside so I could give her my own gift privately.

“Oh, Diane, I love it,” she gushed as she unwrapped the Longchamps nylon bag. She’d been carrying her schoolbooks around in a ratty old tote, and had admired mine, which still looked practically new four years after I’d bought it.

She gave me a big hug as she rubbed a mascara-stained tear into her cheek. “I’ll always be grateful to you Diane, you were so nice to me,” she said

“Wait a minute, what’s with the past tense?” I teased. “Come on, we’ll still keep in touch, won’t we? Promise, now.”

“Um, sure, I guess so.”

Maybe she knew something I didn’t. She was an expert in limitations, a subject they never taught us at Tufts, where the sky was the limit. Who’d really received the better education?

I helped her pack up her few possessions – pictures of Aidan, a mug, a small rubber plant – and threw in some office supplies; a stapler, paper clips, a couple of boxes of pens. I carried the box out to her car.

“Remember, this isn’t goodbye,” I said, throwing my arms around her for a hug.

She squeezed back. “Take care, Diane.”

She gently pushed me away, got into her car, and with a little wave, she was off.

I hoped she’d be okay. I wasn’t at all sure.

The following Monday was the day of the *Boston Globe* interview, the day Alison Cooke-Davison would cross the threshold of my workplace, chic in Ralph Lauren, large but tasteful rock on her left hand.

I’d announced my coup about the article to the board at last week’s meeting and they had all applauded. I expected Alison at eleven, and I’d asked Hal to be here by ten so we could do a dry run. I’d provided him with some talking points, but he hadn’t bothered to review them with me, and I had no idea if he’d even looked at them.

The chimp clock said ten-fifteen and he wasn't here, wasn't picking up his phone at home, and I was roaming the corridors, searching for a gun.

"Diane," said Betty, "do you actually believe he'll miss an opportunity to get his name all over the papers?"

"I don't know what to think, except that he'd better be in a fatal accident if he's not here by eleven."

And now it was 10:55. I caught sight of Alison coming up the walkway behind a guy with a tripod. She overtook him, and I my face nearly went up in flames when I saw her from head to toe. She'd gained weight, and all in one place. The Alison I'd known had been a menace on both the squash and tennis courts. She must've gotten knocked up almost as soon as she and Andrew had become a couple.

"Diane, it's great to see you," she said, leaning forward for a hug. I found us stomach-to-stomach. I swear, I felt Andrew's child-to-be stir, and it was all I could do to keep from wailing like an infant myself.

"Great to see you too," I told Alison. "You look terrific."

"I look fat. I'm just five months, and we're just starting to tell people."

"So happy for you."

I'd rather walk over hot coals than suck up to Alison, but I was in this far, had to see the interview through.

"Listen," I said, "Hal's had a family emergency, but he'll be here any minute. Why don't I show you around now, and I'll ask his assistant to call me when he arrives. "

She glanced at her watch.

"Sure, I wanted to see the place anyway, it'll add texture to the interview."

I made sure my phone was on so Betty could reach me when, not if, Hal showed. I refused to even consider the possibility that he wouldn't.

As we meandered over to the shelter side of the building, I filled her on Hal's glorious history of building this organization (true enough) and his continued outstanding leadership (a lie worthy of Pinocchio).

"Oh, how cute!" she exclaimed as we entered puppyland. "And it's so clean; I wouldn't have expected that. How many adoptions a year do you handle?"

Good, time to stall. I threw her every statistic and anecdote I could think of until she glanced at her watch again.

“Well, better go back and meet the real subject of this story. He sounds like a pretty terrific guy.”

“Oh, he is, Alison.” I managed to choke out when what really wanted to come up was breakfast.

I tried to keep the pace at an amble as we made our way back to Hal’s office, but Alison, ever the athlete, moved like a pregnant track star. It was now 11:40.

“Betty, we’re back to interview Hal. Alison has to be at her last interview at twelve-thirty, and she’s running late.”

Betty made a face that told me we’d lost this battle.

“Alison, I’m so sorry, Hal had a family emergency and he can’t make it today. Can we possibly reschedule?”

Alison got this pained expression on her face.

“I’m on deadline, one more interview and I start writing, so I guess Hal just can’t be part of the story. Please give him my sympathies.”

Then she was all business, putting her notes into her briefcase, asking the photographer to bring the car around.

“Nice to see you again, Diane,” she said. No hug this time, just a brisk handshake, and she was out the door.

Before I had a chance to say a word, Betty came from behind her desk and put her arm around me. I burst into tears.

“How could he do this to me?” I said “And to APO. What is wrong with him?”

Betty laughed. “Good God, more than you can imagine. Listen, let’s go out to lunch today. My treat.”

I blew my nose, nodded, and ran downstairs to the shelter. I found a lonely looking yellow lab I figured could use a snuggle as much as I could.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” I told her. “Hal will get his, won’t he girl?” She gazed at me and I just knew she was thinking, “that asshole.”

chapter

TWENTY-ONE

Around noon, I was gathering my jacket and purse for lunch when I heard Hal pass my door. My phone rang two minutes later, Betty telling me Hal wanted to see me immediately. Up came the morning's bagel.

I slunk into his office and was forced to grab the chair back or else I'd have fainted from the shock. Gone were the criss-crossing forehead lines that gave his face character, saved him from being too pretty. While he was supposed to be giving an interview that would catapult APO into the big-time of Boston philanthropy, our CEO was off getting Botox'ed.

"Diane," he sneered, "Where the hell did that reporter go? Why isn't she still here?"

"She had to leave to interview someone else."

"Well, why couldn't you keep her here, Diane? You weren't doing your job, were you?"

I gritted my teeth. Utterly helpless, I had all I could do not to reach out and strangle him.

"Hal, she needed to be on time for her next appointment, and she, well, she refused to wait. I told her over and over the story wouldn't be complete without you, but she just wouldn't listen."

"What do you mean, without me? We'll just reschedule is all."

"Sorry, Hal, no can do. I begged and pleaded, but she said her boss would never agree to shift the deadline."

"Diane, you are not tops in my book at this moment. Get out."

On my way out, I motioned to Betty to follow, and we left for lunch at the nearby Indian place.

Betty said, "He's ready for his screen test."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to make it a mug shot. Criminal irresponsibility. He made me look like an idiot to a reporter at the *Globe* and she'll never consider another story about APO again. I swear to God, Betty, I'm gonna tell him off."

"Diane, cool down. Screaming and yelling will get you exactly no place, except maybe out of a job."

"Well, maybe I don't need to work here anymore. I just can't stand another minute of HIM."

"Well, that's up to you."

And I knew I couldn't leave. APO had too many positives for me to jump ship, and most of them walked on four legs. If I abandoned them, well, I wouldn't.

I didn't exactly miss Mark, but I experienced sudden jabs of loneliness. Back to sharing my evenings with Genie and Donnie, during which I sometimes felt fifth-wheelish.

Mary-Day was keeping me plenty busy, thank God, planning *For Pets' Sake*, the gala. She and I were kicking around some décor ideas.

"And for the table centerpieces, I think maybe a single amaryllis on each table, surrounded by...Diane, why are y'all looking at me like that? Come on, darlin,' out with it!"

My younger sister Nicole and I had thrown our parents a wild 25th anniversary party last summer. We'd transformed our scraggly little backyard into a stage set, with a centerpiece at each table representing a milestone in their marriage. My favorite was the 3-D model of their Bermuda honeymoon hotel that Nicole and I had constructed from wood

scraps, with a mock-up of their boudoir sporting a sign proclaiming "Diane's conception site." Barbie and Ken had lain naked in the tiny doll's bed.

I told Mary-Day about the centerpieces and asked if she thought we could try something like that.

"Plus, maybe we can auction them off, and raise more money."

Her reaction, well, imagine a fifty-something woman in a Chanel suit jumping up and down like a kid with a new bike.

"Diane, you're a natural born fundraiser. We'll display, I know, little dog beds containing pet supplies. We'll go right out at lunchtime and get stuff to make a prototype. Just you watch, this'll be the most talked-about gala in town."

We went out to the pet supply store and purchased a wicker bed designed for a toy poodle, an armload of colorful squeaky toys, a stuffed mouse for the cat in your life, and a couple of bags of biscuits. Next stop, the party shop for ribbons and rolls of colored Mylar. We spent an hour arranging the doggie treats in the bed and wrapping the entire package, basket and all, in the Mylar, tying it all up in a glittery gold bow. In lieu of table numbers, we'd place placards bearing the names of our shelters, our honorees, the year of our founding.

Hal took one glimpse of the centerpieces, stroked his chin, and, next thing you know, we were playing an imaginary game of strip poker and he'd just lost a hand, because he was pulling his tie off. He grabbed the basket, removed the gold bow that I'd so painstakingly tied, and replaced it with his kitty-cat tie.

"What do you think, ladies?"

"We'll consider it," said Mary-Day.

He walked around the table, studying his handiwork from every angle.

"Yeah, I got enough ties for every one of these babies," he offered before returning to his office.

"Enough for us to string you up by the balls?" asked Mary-Day as soon as he was out of earshot.

When I got home that evening, a little later than usual, Genie and Donnie were lounging on the couch, hanging all over each and laughing.

"Congratulations," said Donnie. "You're practically the first to know. We're getting married."

"Married, married, married," Genie shrieked.

I ran over and we hugged like long-lost relatives. I was thrilled for them, and, I'll confess, jealous. My current social status: 1) totally single 2) after one short-lived relationship 3) which ended badly and which 4) followed being ditched by the love of my life. I must be up for Genie and Donnie, though, so couldn't let my mixed emotions show.

"Hey, don't I get a hug from our maid of honor?" asked Donnie.

"Hey bro," I said as we squeezed.

"Diane, you know you'll find your Donnie some day," consoled Genie.

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure. At this rate, I'll end up married at least three times like Madonna."

"No you won't. Only twice, I guarantee you."

They'd called all the parents, Donnie's up in Lowell and Genie's in Connecticut. Genie offered to treat us all to dinner, so I changed into jeans and we walked over to the nearby Helmand, an Afghani restaurant, prettier than it had the right to be given prices even I could afford and where I received my next surprise of this very interesting day.

"Here's the thing," Genie began. "We've decided to get married next June, when our lease is up. It doesn't make economic sense for us to pay rent on two apartments."

Shit. I'd need to find another roommate.

"So we were wondering how you'd feel if Donnie moved in with us."

"God, I'm so relieved, I thought you were going to move out and I'd have to find another roommate. I mean, I know I will after you get married, but this would be major fun."

"And a rent reduction for you."

Maybe I could pay down my loan faster, or even consider a real vacation. I usually took mine on Staten Island, where I rested up, while Mom cooked my favorite dishes, and, in the time-honored tradition, did my laundry.

"Let's talk about the wedding."

"My parents' in Greenwich, you're my own personal Martha Stewart, and Chinese food," Genie said. "With décor by Diane."

Hey, like my parents' anniversary party and the gala. This I could get excited about.

chapter

TWENTY-TWO

I called Katelyn every day, then every other day. I emailed her too. Then I started texting. I had an ulterior motive. Of course I wanted to see her, make sure she was okay. But let's face it, she'd had Hal's ear, among other body parts. I just couldn't figure out how he could afford those two huge homes on his and Joyce's salaries, and I had a secret wish that I'd find him involved in some kind of skullduggery.

Maybe Katelyn knew something about his finances that even Betty didn't. I could picture him bragging about some financial wheeling and dealing to impress her. Come on, Katelyn, pick up!

She didn't respond for ages, and just when I was ready to go to her house to check up on her, she texted me back.

"Need some space, hope ur ok, later katelyn.

At least I knew she was alive. Not at all sure she was all right. And no help with my investigation.

Genie became very interested in the fake nuptials.

"Where do you think he's actually going?"

“Well, he goes to these bluegrass festivals with his friend all the time.”

“No. It has to be the opposite of all the time. Something he’s never done before. The gala is a very big deal, so it would have to be something really unusual to make him change the date.”

“All I know is he’s one narcissistic dude, so it’s probably something that will make him look or feel good.”

“Or get money. He loves money, right? What if it’s something criminal? Oh. My. God. I just had a great idea. This could be it!”

“What “it?” I asked.

“My story, dummy. Maybe I can get the goods on Hal. You’d get rid of him, and I’d score a headline and maybe a better job. Okay, now here’s what we have to do.” She grabbed her tablet. “You have to try to find out where he’s going. He could be up to just about anything. You find out where, and I’ll go too. Thank God for frequent flier miles.”

Genie had a zillion, thanks to years of family trips to exotic locales.

I told her she needed to find something “Board-proof” that he couldn’t talk his way out of. Probably nothing more than one of those bluegrass festivals. But what could be so out-of-the-ordinary about this one that would necessitate changing the date of APO’s biggest event ever?

I casually asked Betty about the date of Hal’s departure for his “niece’s wedding,” wiggling quotation marks with my fingers. Eyes rolling, she told me he was leaving Boston on October 14th, a Friday, and would return the following Tuesday. Just enough time to hear some pickin’ and fiddlin.’ Or engage in some other kind of fiddling around. Now I just had to find out his exact travel plans so Genie could reserve a seat on the same flights.

I checked out bluegrass festivals online, though I seriously doubted that banjos figured in his plans. I located a few during the dates in question. But I still didn’t know which one. I needed the flight information.

I tried the obvious – his desk calendar, wandering into his office while Betty was off at a doctor’s appointment and Hal was just plain out, fresh newsletter copy in my hand for his review in case he caught me.

I found mostly white space, as his real calendar was maintained by Betty, and had no entries for those dates other than the words that covered about 50% of the pages: “Hal off.”

I nearly gave up, when I recalled Hal's system for remembering important information, other than writing on his hand. Hal had perfected the art of the post-it. I found one on his phone, about a dozen on his blotter, and another ten or so on the conference table where he entertained visitors.

I had to work quickly to read them all, not easy – Hal's handwriting could easily pass for a doctor's.

Look for numbers and letters, I told myself. Several of the notes appeared to be weird mnemonics: "Lk fr J&L" read one. "GT BS," said another. Go to barber shop? Get the bird supplies? (In addition to the two dogs, they owned a pair of canaries).

After attempting to decipher seven or eight scrawled jottings on assorted sized yellow and orange bits of paper, I struck pay dirt. 10-14 –AA #1121 Den. Rt 10-18 AA #1136."

aa.com told me that on October 14th, American Airlines flight 1121 departed from Boston for Denver with a return scheduled for the following Tuesday, the 18th. Add code breaker to my resume.

I texted Genie but she didn't reply, probably too busy. I practically ran home at the end of the day. When I arrived, Genie and Donnie were in the kitchen, stir-frying some vegetables and tofu. Our entire apartment smelled like a Chinese restaurant.

As I set the table, I updated them on the dates and the flight information. Genie checked her calendar, even though it usually remained blank. She basically reinvented her job every day, going wherever the news of Cambridge took her. She pulled up the Voyagertrips website, found the flight. They had a few seats left.

"This is the most fun I've had since I don't know when," she giggled, provoking an icy glare from Donnie. "Okay, since last night at 11:06," she amended.

Next, the hotel, in case wherever she followed Hal to was full. We decided on the ever-popular Skyview Motel, which boasted a pool, cable TV and "a hearty he-man all-American breakfast in our lovely attached diner," reserving a room.

"Okay, I need a kit," ordered Genie. "Binoculars. Ipad. Notebook. Pens."

"Flashlight," Donnie added. "Extra batteries."

Back to Genie. "Warm clothes, thanks a lot Hal, you couldn't plan your rendezvous for Miami?"

We added to the list a small backpack for carrying supplies to the site, and duct tape because, "you never know who or what you'll need to tape up," said Genie. "Oh, and some string, ditto."

This captured Donnie's attention.

"Oh, come on," he said, "You're really not going to be tying anyone up."

"Who knows? A mysterious trip? Possible criminality?"

"I know journalists put themselves into danger all the time, and it's part of your work, but..."

"Donnie, do you think the husbands of reporters who go to trouble spots all over the world tell them NOT TO DO THEIR JOBS?"

"Well, I guess I'm just used to having you in Cambridge, that's all. Of course I want you to go after your story. When you said ropes and stuff, I just got a little worried, that's all."

"Well, don't. I mean not too much."

"God, Katelyn would so love this," I said.

"Uh uh uh," scolded Genie. "No one outside this room must know, and I mean no one. Not Betty, or the Southern belle, or Katelyn."

She went on, "We must be scrupulous about this. For all you know, Katelyn's still carrying a torch for Hal, and if she tells him, it's all over, and so's your job."

She chewed a fingernail. "I admit I'm a little nervous. Oh my God, I just had an idea. You should come with me. You know, help me scope him out."

I shrieked.

"Are you crazy? "

"Yes. I guess that I am."

"Absolutely no way. Assuming we could get me there on a different plane or in disguise or something, what if I get caught? Chasing my boss on a trip so I can stab him in the back? Word gets out and I'm unhireable. Forget it."

"We'll be really, really careful. Anyway, why shouldn't you get to be in on the fun?"

"How do you know this'll be fun? I might be forced to listen to hillbilly music for three days and I'll come back with a chewing tobacco habit."

"Come on. This is our last chance for an adventure together before I get married."

"Give me a minute," I said.

I headed into my bedroom, where I went through all my closets and drawers. I emerged with half my wardrobe in my arms, and, the *piece de resistance*, a long blonde wig I'd inherited from a college play for which I'd helped design the sets.

"Watch me gain a little weight and get a new hairdo," I said. "And remember, I haven't said yes yet."

I piled on the layers. First came a plain gray t-shirt. Next, a Back Street Boys sweatshirt.

"I can't believe I still have this," I muttered.

On top of that, a bulky fisherman sweater, and last, an oversized navy blue sweatshirt. I pulled out a pair of heavyweight gray sweatpants. Genie and Donnie watched in wonderment.

"Well, may as well play along," Genie said as she got out her makeup kit, and started to pat and brush all over my face.

"What the hell are you doing with green eye-shadow?" I asked.

"Genie and I play hooker games when you're not around," smirked Donnie.

She glared at him.

"Left over from middle school," was her terse reply.

She finished me off with the wig, then stood back to appraise her handiwork.

"Okay, Diane, time to look."

Donnie was laughing hysterically.

We all trooped into my bedroom and I found I looked like a woman who sorta kinda resembled me, wearing too many clothes and a wig.

I slumped onto the couch.

"Now I really want to go too," I whined.

"Oh my God, I just had an idea," grinned Genie. "The Garment District."

"Yes!" we high-fived each other.

The Garment District was a used clothes outlet that, at its low end, sold junky items by the pound, and, higher up, real vintage. We could absolutely find something there. We had half an hour until they closed at eight.

You walked into the place and were assaulted by walls the hottest pink on the color wheel. Complementary purple columns rose from the purple floor, holding up the purple ceiling, a life-sized plaster silver horse raring up near the entrance. Behind the cashier's desk stood a woman about my age, a pink and black Mohawk rising from a closely cropped scalp dyed in a black and brown leopard pattern. Further back was the clothes-by-the-pound area, the floor covered with people's cast-offs too sorry for donation to charity.

We headed upstairs to the regular clothes section, and started rifling through the racks. I wasn't sure how we'd do any better than we'd done with my stuff, when I saw Genie approach a salesman. No Mohawk, just a close cut, multiple facial piercings, and enough of a swivel in the hip to alert you to the fact he wanted to make clear his sexual orientation.

"Can you help us? We need a disguise for her," she said, gesturing in my direction.

He studied me.

"What's the goal? Glam? Cutie-pie?"

"I am, um, following someone and I want to look absolutely nothing like myself."

"Come with me."

He swished past the vintage, and the 80's and 90's section and into... Men's?

"You're petite and you would make an adorable teenage boy. Here," he said, grabbing a black and gray farmer's cap. I tucked up my hair and put it on. It was a start.

"Okay, let's see," he mused, perusing the racks, rejecting, then selecting assorted bits of menswear.

"Okay, done," he said, handing me an AC/DC t-shirt, a suit jacket, and a pair of jeans that might contain two of me.

"No woman in her right mind would wear these," he said.

I was tailing my boss to Colorado dressed as a hip-hop teenager. I guess I qualified as not in my right mind.

"Oh, you'll need this," he said, handing me a metal studded belt.

I emerged from the dressing room five minutes later. Before I could look in the mirror, the guy handed me a pair of wraparound shades.

"Get yourself a pair of black sneakers, and you're set," he said.

Omigod, he'd nailed it. I could easily pass for a slightly built teenage boy, maybe one with unusually delicate features, but still, nothing like myself, especially with the hat and sunglasses.

Genie reached for her phone, took about a million pictures.

"For your match.com profile," she laughed.

We got back home, grabbed a couple of beers, showed Donnie our haul.

"You know this is totally insane," I said.

"But you're coming, right?" was Genie's reply.

"Okay, so I'm insane. I can't miss this, I just can't."

"Okay, here are the ground rules," ordered Genie. "No physical contact between us. You are present as witness and strategist, since you're familiar with our prey and his habits. Make sure you keep your phone charged."

Genie went back online, and secured second plane and motel reservations. I thought I might lose tonight's stir-fry as I contemplated what I was about to do, but it was the nausea of dread mingled with excitement.

The first person I ran into the next morning was Hal, as we were getting our first coffee of the day.

"Hi, Hal, how's it going?"

"Oh, yeah, Diane, lots on my plate for sure."

"Well, don't stress too much, everything's under control here. Just enjoy the wedding." It was Friday, and Genie, Hal and I were leaving for Denver the following Friday. "Time to get to work."

"That's right, Diane. Let's get busy. Now you have a good weekend, okay?"

It was only 9:30, but pouring his coffee constituted the day's output, and the weekend was already in full swing for him.

I returned to my desk, where I toiled on our honorees' speeches. The new invitations to the gala had gone out and we expected a full house, winning funds and friends for APO.

I'd been worried about Katelyn since she'd left and refused my entreaties to get together. But her silence led me to wonder if she were in some kind of trouble. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't check it out. I decided to pay a surprise visit on the weekend.

chapter

TWENTY-THREE

Saturday morning arrived, and I was as fidgety as a kid with ADHD who'd forgotten to take her Ritalin. Genie had gotten back into painting since our little book-illustration adventure, and was at work on a landscape, Cambridge seen from her bedroom window, and Donnie was immersed in a manuscript he hoped to acquire. I flung a scarf around my neck against the early fall chill, and yelled "going out for a while, back in a couple of hours."

"Wait, I'll come with you," Genie said, stepping away from her easel. "I could use a break."

Shit. Genie would've have had a fit if she knew I was seeing Katelyn. Not that I had any intention of revealing a thing about The Plan.

"Y'know what, I kind of need to be alone for a while. I'm anxious, and I think I just need to walk or see a movie by myself or something, do you mind?"

When I arrived at Katelyn's house, I gave the bell a less than fully committed ring, a quick jab with my index finger. Part of me hoped she wouldn't answer and I could go home, knowing I'd tried.

My little poke of the bell was enough to be heard, however, and she quickly came to the window.

"Who's there?" she called down.

"It's me, Diane. Katelyn, can I come up? Please?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I've been worried about you."

"I don't know, Diane, let me think."

She retreated from the window, leaving me to wait and wonder. After about five minutes, while I paced outside, she appeared at the door, her hair unkempt, her sweater lopsided, her jeans stained with what I guessed was cranberry juice.

"Why are you here, Diane?"

"Katelyn, you can't just disappear from people's lives like that. We're friends, remember? Can't we at least visit?"

She paused, her brow furrowed.

"I just don't know, Diane. God, I don't know what to do." She started to cry.

"Katelyn, it's just me. Come on, we'll just hang for a while, okay?"

"All right, come on up. The place is a mess, though."

"Where's Aidan?" I asked.

"He's at a play date."

I checked out the room. The disarray was even more pronounced than on my last visit. So not like Katelyn.

"How are you doing, Katelyn? Really?"

"Not so hot," she replied. "I haven't been able to get a regular day-time job, so I'm waitressing at this awful place near my house. The guys all get drunk and make kissy noises at me; it's so gross. Plus, I have to work at night, which means I hardly ever get to see Aidan, who is, well let's just say, he's not taking it well. It's really hard to keep babysitters."

"I wish I could help you find a better job."

"I know, Diane, thanks."

We talked for a while about her class at UMass, and I updated her on the latest at APO, steering clear of the elephant in the room. After about half an hour of gossip, I considered us comfortable enough to cut to the chase. I started by telling her about my ill-advised intimacy with our boss's spawn.

"Well, I don't know about Mark, but Hal was, what's the word, fascinating. And he did treat me okay, right up until, you know."

She paused. "Actually, that's not really true, he got sarcastic and mean near the end. God, I am so pathetic."

"Katelyn, he is a user, and he totally manipulated you. He may have been charming and fascinating, but come on, lying to you and dumping you?"

"I know," she admitted. "He figured he could get to me because I was easy. A poor little single mom, with a kid like Aidan. Who else was gonna go out with me? Plus," she added with a little laugh, "Where would I find the time to meet anyone, let alone date them?"

"Katelyn, lots of nice, decent guys will go out with you. Maybe you'll meet someone in one of your classes."

"Well, maybe." She didn't believe a word of it.

"You're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for. Look at all you've accomplished. You work full time, take care of Aidan who's a handful, and you're going to school. You know what? I think you're going to be more than fine."

She smiled faintly. "Diane, you always make me feel so competent. Still, it's really tough. I am so stressed, and I guess kind of depressed."

She needed some good news. We were kindred spirits in our mutual abhorrence of HIM, and I felt closer to her than ever. So what the hell?

"Ya know, Katelyn, there is something we could do to get Hal." Too bad, Genie, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and if ever there were a scorned woman, it was Katelyn.

She perked up instantly. "What? What is it?"

I hesitated, picturing Genie and how she trusted me. God, I'd already lied to her about visiting Katelyn. But Katelyn had way more cause to despise Hal than either of us did. Katelyn had slept with him, for God's sake, and suffered the consequences. She deserved to know.

I took a deep breath and dove in, laying out the plan for her, as she listened gravely. When I concluded my recitation, she smiled, a grin of gleeful, wicked complicity.

"This is unbelievable, you're even smarter than I thought. Wow, he's going to Denver for some reason, maybe a music festival but maybe not. I never heard anything about a niece of Joyce's, so yeah, that's probably bogus."

Now I could turn my attention to digging up some dirt on Hal's assets.

"Katelyn, there's something I've been trying to figure out and I thought you might be able to help."

Her eyebrows rose, and she glanced towards the wine bottle on the coffee table. "If I can."

"Have you ever been to Hal's house?"

"Which one? He took me to New Hampshire one Saturday when Joyce was away and my neighbor had taken Aidan to the beach. Jeez, Diane, it was like something out of a movie. It's got all this glass on all sides, and lake views, and I could tell the furniture was really expensive."

"But not the Cambridge one?"

"Uh uh. I always wanted to walk by just to see it, but I was afraid I'd bump into Joyce or even him."

"Well, it's pretty amazing, and worth, like, three million or even more. I know what he makes, and I have an idea about Joyce too, and with both houses, well, it just doesn't add up."

"I know they get some help from Joyce's dad. Apparently, she has to live the high life, and he helps. And that's all I know."

She hesitated for a split second before saying, "Listen, I have to pick up Aidan now. He's just down the street, so I can walk you out."

I wasn't giving up. "Katelyn, are you sure you don't know something else? I mean about his finances."

"Diane, I told you everything I know. What else do you want from me?" She sounded testy, and I didn't want to wreck our friendship by pushing too hard. At least, not right then.

When we got downstairs, she asked which way I was headed. Aidan's friend lived in the opposite direction, she told me, so she walked the other way. On a hunch, I glanced back and she was looking my way at the same time. We gave each other a little wave, and I proceeded towards home.

As soon as I walked in, I figured I'd fess up.

"Hey," called Genie when I walked in the door. Guilty, guilty, guilty. "Where ya been?"

"Someplace very interesting," I began. "Now, promise you'll listen to the whole story without interrupting."

"Uh, oh, this sounds bad. Spill it."

"Well," I began. "You know I've been worried about Katelyn."

"You saw her and you told. What if she sees him and tells him? I am really, really pissed, Diane."

"I did tell her. Genie, the man used her and made her lose her job, for God's sake. She deserved to know. Plus, I think she's hiding something. She acted very strangely, kind of secretive and nervous."

"She's nervous and that means you have to tell her? Shit. Do you realize she could decide she can't live without him and she calls him and he sweet talks her and the next thing you know, she spills her guts? I mean, you wouldn't exactly be immune to the charms of a certain former boyfriend, would you?"

"That was a low blow. Fuck you."

I stormed into my room, put on some Weezer, buried myself under the covers, and drifted off into a fitful nap.

chapter

TWENTY-FOUR

After profusely apologizing for her insensitivity, Genie propelled herself into high investigative-reporter gear.

“No way is some little two-bit music festival enough for him to screw up everyone’s plans at APO. Likewise a romantic tryst. No, it’s gotta be something much bigger.”

She researched Denver attractions. Besides the usual cultural and touristy stuff, she discovered the Denver Firefighter’s Museum, the U.S. Mint and the Coors Brewery. Not likely. The Denver Zoo? Could he have scheduled a job interview? That would explain the sneaking around, though he could’ve scheduled that for a different date. Still, she kept it on her list of possibilities.

She moved on to special events in Denver during the appointed time. In addition to the bluegrass festival, the city offered something called Denver Christkindl Market at the Cherry Creek Shopping Center, when *German culture comes to the shopping center with more than 30 vendors serving gingerbread, smoked sausage, roasted nuts, beer and hot spiced wine.*” Nope, not that.

And another - MileHighLights at Bandimere. *Held at Bandimere Speedway, MileHighLights shines with hundreds of light displays, many of them animated. Dozens of multi-story displays will glow with more than 2 million lights using over 12 million watts of power.* We went to the website.

"Hey, maybe we could actually find some time to go to this," I suggested.

"Diane, this is not a vacation," scolded Genie. "Is Hal into electricity or big-time Christmas decorations or anything?" she asked.

"Not that I know of."

"Omigod, this might be it."

"What,what?" I asked.

"The Starz Denver International Film Festival – *dozens of filmmakers introduce a slate of new movies.*"

This was it! I was convinced. Hal loved movies. They were his number two hobby, after self-promotion.

Genie mused. "Isn't he working on a script?"

He was going to a film festival to pitch his screenplay. Had to be.

I ran down to the shelter part of the building for some solace. I had time for just a quick cuddle, and I chose a lonely dachshund-beagle.

"There's a good boy, such a good boy," I told him. He rolled over for a tummy rub. Little did he know, it probably helped me more than him.

If Katelyn wouldn't tell me what she knew about Hal's finances, I'd just have to find out for myself.

Around 6:30 that night, Betty poked her head into my office.

"Working late tonight?"

"Yeah, I have some catching up to do. Look at all this stuff," I said, pointing to the piles of paper on my desk.

"Well, don't stay too late. 'Night."

I did get a little work done, and when I was positive everyone was gone, I headed for Hal's office.

I attempted to open the filing cabinet. Top drawer, locked. Where would he hide a key?

Most people kept keys in their top desk drawers. Hal not being most people, it wasn't there. I opened drawer after drawer. Nothing. I returned

to the cabinet, and duh, located the key, stuck in the keyhole of the bottom drawer.

I opened it, and it was empty, so I started back up top. The top drawer abounded with home décor and travel magazines, along with catalogues from high-end furniture stores. Number two, a jumble of computer games and a Smithsonian-worthy collection of animal-themed pens.

And in drawer number three, actual files. Medical records and zoology articles. I pulled them out for a better view. I found nothing that might be financial records.

My bladder needed immediate emptying. As I walked towards the ladies' room, I heard voices. Loud, happy ones, one male, one female. The front door opened, and I heard a familiar voice say, "This is where it all happens."

A tinkling female voice responded, "Wow, I'm impressed. Let's go see your office, Mr. President."

I had no time to hide, and, omigod, here they were.

"Diane, what are you doing here?"

Get the sympathy vote.

"Well, you know with planning for the gala, some of my regular work's been piling up, so I'm just, you know, burning the midnight oil, catching up." The laugh accompanying my lie sounded like that of a lunatic.

His friend, about thirty I'd guess, wore a leopard-print shawl knotted around her waist, cinching her silky black dress close to her hips. She stood off to the side, twisting her thick brown hair in her hands, shifting from one stiletto-heeled foot to the other until I worried that she might topple over.

"Uh, Diane, this is Melissa. She's uh, a vet student, and wants to see the shelter."

Vet student my ass.

"Oh, Melissa, it's nice to meet you. The shelter is that-a-away. You're so lucky to have Hal show you around, he does the best tours. Come on," and I motioned them towards the shelter entrance, at the opposite end of the hall from Hal's office.

Melissa started to follow, peeking back at Hal, who stood immobile. He could not, could not, could not go into his office. I couldn't exactly tell him that his files had jumped out of the drawer and onto his desk.

"Hal?" she said

"Yeah, sure, coming."

He got out his key to the shelter door, and struggled for a minute, while I worried that maybe he had the wrong one, with the right one in his office. Finally, the door gave, and off they went.

I tore down the hall, back to his office. No time for the bathroom. I felt a little bit of pee dribble down my leg.

I stuffed everything back, probably out of order, and I was just closing the file drawer when I heard footsteps. I fisted the key in my hand, and was walking out of Betty's office right outside Hal's as he approached me.

"Diane, what were you doing in there?"

"I, um, well, I thought I'd left my mug on Betty's desk. I'm gonna make myself some coffee, keep me up while I finish up this work."

"Well, uh, Melissa is still in the shelter, studying our methods of animal care. I thought I'd just, well, see how you're doing."

Omigod, he was scared of me, that I'd tell about Melissa. He should only have known that he should be very, very afraid.

Melissa came tottering through the shelter door.

"Hal," she slurred. "Quite a place you've got here. Now how's about you show me your private little office?"

"Another time, we really need to get going. Diane." He nodded in my direction.

Melissa reached out to shake my hand, the one holding the key. I gave her a little wave with my left, and headed to the copier, where I photocopied a page out of Cat Fancy just to appear busy.

I returned the key to its place in the file drawer, and played Lexulous Blitz online for ten minutes in case they came back, then headed home. Genie could tell from my expression that my espionage had yielded nothing.

The next morning, he came in early, around ten, and popped his head into my office.

"Hey, you look really nice today, Diane. New hairdo?"

"Nope, Hal, same old. Did you have a nice evening?"

"Oh, evening, sure, fine, always happy to show off the place to others in the field."

"Right. Well, if you'll excuse me, I still have a lot to do."

"Well, keep up the good work, Diane."

More of the same, throughout the day. He still wanted to pretend that Melissa was a vet-to-be, but he was hedging his bets in case I had grown suspicious.

Then Betty came to see me.

"Something weird is going on with that man," she said.

"What else is new?"

"He seems kind of frantic. He keeps searching through his filing cabinet and pacing. It's quite bizarre."

He knew. But who cared? I had Melissa on him. And with any luck, a whole lot more.

"Hmmm. I have no idea," I responded.

"Well, why would you?"

I must have been blushing; her eyes narrowed, and she said, "Diane, we haven't had a good chat in a while. How's about we go out to lunch today?"

I hesitated just long enough to confirm her suspicions that something was up. At my suggestion, we took the T to Charles Street across the river in Boston, to a little Greek joint, where I was pretty sure no one from APO could possibly spot us. Betty ordered a Greek salad and I requested the spinach pie.

"Okay, Diane, we're friends, right," she began. "And you know I am the tightest-lipped person you've ever met, correct?"

I did know this.

"Well," she continued, "I'm also pretty perceptive, and I can tell there's something funny going on. Frankly, Diane, I'm concerned about you. Are you okay?"

I tried to suppress a smile.

"So it's something funny," Betty noted. "Funny is good."

"Betty, I hardly even know where to begin. This is probably the craziest thing you've ever heard. You must swear you will not tell a living soul. Not Gretchen, not even Mary-Day. Swear to me."

"I just told you, I am the most trustworthy person you've ever met."

"Okay, here goes. First, you know, don't you, how deeply I care about APO." She nodded.

"I really want us to be the very best."

"I know you do, Diane. You're a hard worker."

"Well, seeing those substandard shelters, with those animals living in such squalid conditions, made me literally sick. I have been asking Hal, and asking him, to do something about it, and he keeps promising to look into it, and he does not one fucking thing. Then he takes APO's money, which we could've used to take over those shelters, and gives it to his pitiful friend to write – and I use the term loosely- some vanity book that's already been done ten times by real authorities. Just so he can get his name on the cover.

"Plus, he makes all of us look like idiots every single day by not doing what he's supposed to do and then blaming us. But this isn't about me, it really isn't. He does this to every single one of us, but most of all it's the organization. As far as I'm concerned, he's stealing APO's money every two weeks when he cashes his big fat paycheck."

I paused to take a bite of my spanakopita.

Betty said, "Good God, I wish I were your age again. You're so full of idealism and good heartedness, and I'm all jaded and old."

"Well, I have a plan to find out stuff about our boss that even you don't know."

"I already know way more about that man than I care to,"

"Genie, my roommate's, a reporter for the *Cambridge Connection*, but she's pretty ambitious, and she wants a bigger job. So, um, we're following him to Colorado." I laid out the full plan, my getup and all.

Her eyes widened, alternately displaying surprise, glee and finally dismay when I told her about Genie's and my upcoming adventure in sleuthing.

"I hardly know what to say. Except this: If you girls were my daughters, I'd lock the door and throw away the key. This is really, really dangerous, and you could get hurt.

"Don't worry, we'll be careful."

And then she high fived me.

Back at work, and my phone rang as soon as I reached my desk. HIM.
"Diane, I need to see you, aysap."

Yuck. What now?

He gave me a big grin, gestured to the armchair in the corner, sat himself down in its twin.

“Diane, I’ve come up with a new idea, and since you’ve become somewhat familiar with the publishing business, what with my book and all, you might be able to help. I am, uh, thinking about writing another book.”

And by writing you mean dictating a few ideas to someone else and having them write it?

Turned out, that was exactly what he meant.

“You’re a terrific writer, Diane. Maybe even better than Mal.” *No comment.*

“You know, memoirs of tough childhoods are all the rage now.” *For once he was right about something.* “And mine was the toughest.”

Where did this come from? I’d never heard about anything more than a bland Midwestern boyhood.

“See, my dad was a cop. A beat cop, actually. People in the neighborhood loved him. And then he came home.”

Was that an actual tear on his cheek?

“Yeah, a hero to the neighborhood, a brutus —*like in the Popeye cartoons?*— to his family. It was like he didn’t get enough action on the streets, and he wanted to play cop 24-7. So he’d come home and for any little thing, like say a piece of gum on the floor, he’d beat the crap out of me and my brother. I got a million stories.” Another tear. God, this guy was good. I was gaining a better idea as to how he had the board so charmed.

“I’ve spent my whole life trying to, well, get past my lousy childhood. But, hey, I’m getting older, and I think it would be chaotic to get it off my chest.” *Yeah, there’s lots of chaos in that old chest of yours.*

“Maybe even help some other poor slob who went through the same thing.” He sighed.

“So here’s where you come in. You can be my ghostwriter. I dictate the stories to you, and you turn them into a book. We split the profits 80-20. I think this might be even bigger than the pet book. You could get rich.”

Oh, I got it. He was playing the sympathy card. Poor little Hal. Anything he did was excusable because of his Dickensian childhood. Plus, he was buying my silence. It was pretty obvious that I’d been snooping around in his office. And now it was clear that he was indeed hiding something. Otherwise, why try to butter me up, entice me with the promise of riches?

If saying yes would make him think I'd keep my mouth shut, well, I had to.

"Hal, that is a great idea. How about we get started right after your niece's wedding? Maybe you can, I don't know, write up some notes on the plane, and give them to me when you get back and then I can start to write. I agree, you're really onto something with this."

I hoped I didn't sound phony. My goal was to shut him up so I could get back to my desk. Aysap.

"Diane, you totally get it. And I think maybe now you get me a little more, too." Sad smile. Too bad he hadn't gone into showbiz. He could've hauled in some real money.

"I do, Hal. Thanks for sharing. Now, if you'll excuse me..." I rose from the chair, and returned to my office.

Meanwhile, I'd called Katelyn a couple of times to try to get together. I just knew she was hiding something, and whatever it was might be helpful for the Colorado trip. Why wasn't she calling back? I considered another ambush.

Fate led me into Hal's office for a final snoop for clues to help us prepare for Denver.

Press release for his review in hand, I walked purposefully up to his desk while he was out and quickly reviewed the rainbow of sticky notes. And voila – could K, Southie, 4 Mon, Gal mean anything but Katelyn, South Boston, Monday at 4:00? Gal could represent Galway, or Gallagher's or some other Irish pub, plentiful in Katelyn's part of town.

Diane, you're a genius, I thought. Then, Diane, you are in deep dog-do. Hal was meeting Katelyn at a pub at four o'clock that very day. It was now 2:45. I had an hour and fifteen minutes to stop the meeting.

How could I have been so foolish as to trust Katelyn so absolutely? She was in a fragile state, and, in a vulnerable moment, must have called Hal to warn him. Or maybe he'd called her. But why? Did he suspect the plot, and think he could wheedle it out of a still-besotted Katelyn?

I needed to think fast. Could I get Genie to spy on them, just to see what happened? I quickly dismissed that tactic – what would her seeing them together, even eavesdropping, accomplish? I needed to do more, much more. It was imperative to head off this meeting right now.

I bent over, head between my legs, and stood that way for a few seconds, allowing the blood to rush into every vein and corpuscle in my face.

Back upright, I consulted a mirror. I could be mistaken for a scarlet fever victim.

Feigning listlessness, I teetered down to Betty's office. She wasn't there, but Mary-Day was, leaving something on Betty's desk.

"Diane, what's wrong, you look awful. Let me feel your forehead."

I waved her back. "Not too close, I am really sick. I think I'm gonna puke again, uh oh, gotta run to the bathroom, and then I'm outta here."

For verisimilitude, I rushed straight to the ladies' room, going so far as to pretend to puke inside the stall in case anyone happened in. This tactic was becoming a habit. But good thing anyway, since Mary-Day had followed me.

"Diane, you're not walking home by yourself. I'm driving you, now not another word."

Good. Time was tight, and she'd save me the fifteen - minute walk to get home and pick up my car.

I leaned against the car door in apparent intestinal agony all the way to my apartment. Of course she wanted to come up and tuck me into bed, but I refused her help with a wan smile and a lie that my roommate was home. Genie and Donnie were, of course, at work.

I waited a good three minutes to be sure Mary-Day had left, then raced back downstairs and jumped into my car. Of course, I had no idea what I would do or say when I arrived at Gal- whatever and found Hal and Katelyn together.

Fortunately, I had my cell, which I hoped was charged up. Whew, plenty of juice. First call, Katelyn, whom I'd programmed in. No answer. I left her a message to call me immediately, but I wasn't too optimistic. Next, an attempt to get the full name of the pub from information."

"I have a Gallagher's on Blue Hill Avenue, another Gallagher's on Walker Street, and a Galway Pub on Smith Street."

"Well, do you know which of those is in South Boston?" I asked. Dumb question. These days, the operator was someone in Idaho who thought Worcester was pronounced War-Chester.

Here I was, careering towards South Boston, and possibly towards my death, or at least a serious collision, with my cell phone balanced precariously between my left ear and my shoulder. At the same time, I was rooting around in my purse with my right hand for a pen and scrap of paper to take

down the numbers and addresses of the pubs and trying with my left hand to keep the car off the sidewalk. Now was not the time to remember I'd been too cheap to buy one of those headpieces.

At last, I summoned up the sense to pull over so I could write down the numbers and addresses without killing myself in the process. I sneaked a panicked glance at my phone. 3:25. I wasn't that far from South Boston, but I had no idea which pub they'd gone to, and where it was located in relation to Katelyn's house, the only part of Southie I was remotely familiar with.

First call, one of the Gallagher's.

"Are you anywhere near Myrtle Street?" I inquired breathlessly.

"Hold on," the guy who answered replied. I heard him shout an order for two Harp ales to the bartender. Then I heard lots of clattering of glassware and china, but where the hell was the human voice on the phone? I decided he'd forgotten about me and started to yell as loudly as I could, not caring what the passersby thought about the lunatic in the parked car screaming into her cell phone.

"Lady, calm down," I heard after a minute of shouting myself hoarse. "You want the other Gallagher's."

I gave him the intersection where I had parked, and he provided directions. Thank God, barring a traffic jam, I could probably make it in the twenty-five minutes I now had left.

Then I remembered, wait, maybe they're not at Gallagher's. Where the hell's The Galway? Fuck it, I'll be careful, I thought as I executed the unsafe maneuver known as drive and dial. I called The Galway and learned that, miraculously, it was down the block from Gallagher's. The one towards which I was now headed.

The time was now 3:50 and I still had to find a parking spot. I suddenly remembered Hal's penchant for lateness. No way could he be on time, which meant I'd be able to waylay Katelyn before he even arrived.

I spotted Gallagher's, ahead on the right, with The Galway a few doors down, and nary a parking spot in sight. I rolled down the window, and called to a guy on the sidewalk.

"Where can I park around here?" I inquired.

He scratched his head. "Street, mostly."

"But where?" I persisted. "I don't see anything."

“Keep drivin’” came his advice. And then I saw HIM. He checked out the street, searching for Katelyn, then ducked into Gallagher’s. No sign of Katelyn yet.

For the first time in his entire life, he had to be prompt. I took a chance, and called back to the guy who’d given me directions. He looked like a nice enough man, around sixty, in parka and jeans.

“Listen,” I said. “I have sort of a personal emergency. Do you think you could park my car for me? Here - I waved a \$20 bill at him. – Please?”

“Are you okay, lady?” he inquired.

“I will be if you do me this huge favor. Look, just, oh shit, what, what, what, I know, leave the keys and a note with the bartender at The Galway telling me where you put the car.”

I hoped I was as good a judge of character as I thought. He pondered my offer for a minute, then reached out for the twenty.

“Sure, I’ll do it. Bartender, The Galway, got it.”

I almost kissed him, but that would have made an already bizarre situation even weirder. I jumped from the driver’s seat, and taking a deep breath, headed towards the bar, turning this way and that in a vain search for Katelyn.

I peered in the front window, and, to my horror, discovered my worst nightmare, Katelyn and Hal seated together at a small table in the center of the room. It had never occurred to me that she’d be there waiting for him. Now what?

Luckily, she was facing in my direction, but of course she wasn’t looking my way, because she was focused on Hal. Her mouth was twisting and turning and getting into all sorts of contortions, her hands flying this way and that. It felt like watching a silent movie, but with no subtitles. I could only deduce her import from nonverbal cues alone. Not too hard – she was angry. Very angry. Enough to let him know his staff was plotting against him?

Desperate to stop her, I did the only thing I could think of, which was to find a penny in my purse and throw it against the window. I ducked immediately, then popped up, hoping Katelyn would spot me. Nope. Try again. This time, I reappeared just as she was seeking the source of the sound. She got this startled look on her face and I ducked again fast before Hal could turn around and see me. After what felt like the world’s longest

crouch, I stretched up slowly, and gestured for her to come out, then moved down the block out of sight and waited.

About five agonizing minutes later, she emerged.

"Diane," she hissed, "what the hell are you doing here? I had to tell him I saw a long-lost friend outside."

"Katelyn, I know it's none of my business, but..."

She stopped me cold. "You've got that right. You didn't trust me, did you?"

"Katelyn, you haven't returned my phone calls, and I had no idea why you'd be seeing him, and I just got scared." Appealing to her sense of justice, an eye for an eye, I implored "I thought you wanted this plan to go down as much as I did."

"I did and I still do. I just had to confront Hal, and to let him know how deeply he hurt me, and believe it or not, I finally worked up the guts to do it. I called him, and of course he didn't want to see me at all. He said, 'Katelyn, this is over, totally and completely o-ver, do you not understand me?' like I'm some kind of idiot. But he eventually agreed."

"So this is totally personal?" I inquired

"Yes, it is. Wha'd ya think?"

"All I know is, he has a way with women, and the next thing you know, he'll be sweet-talking you and you'll have a weak moment, and voila! I'm out of a job and APO's still stuck with HIM. Now tell me the truth, did you feel any kind of flutter when you saw him?"

"I really and truly hate his guts, Diane, and I want him to suffer. There's no way he could get to me, honest."

I hoped she was telling the truth. I peeked back to see Hal shifting in his seat.

"Wait for me at my house," she advised. "Now go, get out of here."

She re-entered the restaurant, and I lingered long enough to observe her fluffing her hair before resuming her tirade, more calmly now. I hoped I could rely on her to keep our shenanigans to herself.

I stopped in at The Galway down the block, holding my breath, hoping that neither my man-in-the-street nor the bartender were just waiting to get their hands on a car to fence, even an aged Civic carrying too many miles. Giving a stranger the keys to my hard-earned vehicle may have been the stupidest thing I'd done yet, but someone was smiling on me. The

bartender eyed me as if I were an escaped mental patient, but he quietly handed me the keys and a grocery receipt on the back of which appeared the alleged location of my wheels. Mercifully, I found them exactly where the guy had said they'd be.

I left the car and walked briskly towards Katelyn's, just a couple of blocks away. I waited on her front steps a good ten minutes, sweating from both the stress and the exertions of my walk. When she finally appeared, she was running, and she looked, amazingly, happy.

She came up and threw her arms around me.

"Diane, I did it. I am so proud of myself. I told him off, maybe not as, what's the word, forcefully as I'd like, but good enough."

"That's great, Katelyn, And I hope you won't be insulted, but I have to ask..."

"Nope, I didn't say a thing, though he did say something about how everyone at APO loves him, including his entire staff. Plus how he's this great nonprofit leader in Boston, and I was real tempted to say, 'That's what you think,' but I didn't, honest to God, Diane."

"Good for you."

I had my chance. I needed to find out where all his money was coming from, and I still had a strong suspicion that Katelyn knew. But I had to start subtly, otherwise she'd probably rebuff me again.

"Listen, I'm really thirsty. Do you have time for a cup of tea?"

"I would love to make you a cup of tea. Come on up." Still in an exuberant mood. Good.

We went upstairs and I plopped into one of her shabby armchairs. Katelyn went into the kitchen, and emerged, not with tea, but a bottle of wine that looked cheap, which she poured into a couple of chipped coffee mugs.

Giggling, she said, "Hey, I'm up for something a little stronger than tea, how about you?"

She was holding a mug full of disinhibition, a gift to me that I hoped would loosen her tongue and her conscience and whatever else was making her hold onto the information I just knew she had about Hal's finances.

As we drank, I filled her in on the latest doings in the offices - Mary-Day's outfits and outbursts, a particularly heartwarming adoption, Hal's newest word coinage. I asked how Aidan was doing, which may have been a mistake.

"He's still struggling with my new job, still misbehaving in school." She sighed. "If that guy hadn't messed me up, I'd still have a regular day-time job, and Aidan wouldn't be having these problems." Another sigh. And an opportunity.

"Yeah, well, that guy needs to be taken down, that's for sure. The thing is, I'm worried that we won't find anything in Colorado. Maybe it really is his niece's wedding. Or something totally innocent. He's gotta be guilty of something else, don't you think?"

She blushed, started to say something, then stopped to take a big gulp of wine.

"What were you about to say?"

"Nothing. Well, maybe something." She laughed.

"I'm waiting."

"Hold on," she said.

She stood, went into her bedroom, returning a moment later carrying a handful of large manila envelopes.

"God, I hardly know where to begin." She sighed before continuing, taking another swig.

"Y'know how I processed all the check requests from Hal at APO?" Making sure all the bills got paid constituted a large portion of Katelyn's job.

"Yeah?" I said, cautiously.

"You might like to take a look at some of them. I copied them before I left."

She reached into the first envelope and withdrew a fat wad of invoices paper-clipped together. I moved over to the couch so I could view them over her shoulder.

The first was a request for payment to the Apple Store for both a desktop and an Ipad. Then a different invoice for the most up-to-date printer. All for a grand total of \$4000. And all to be shipped to Hal's home address. My eyes widened.

"He bought this stuff on the company for his own personal use?" I gasped.

She laughed. "This is nothing,' Diane. Wait'll you see."

She flipped to the next page. A month later, another iPad. And guess where it was sent - to Mark! No birthday, no occasion, just like that. I

hadn't thought anything about it at the time. Now I knew, holy shit, that the money that Mary-Day raised went towards jazzy electronics for my boss and my boyfriend.

The next invoices, and, yup, another iPad and then one more still at \$699 a pop. One for each of the Masons.

"Okay," she went on, biting her lip in concentration. "I've grouped these by category. There are a few more in the electronics section; let's see, oh, here they are."

She pulled out two receipts from Best Buy, each for the cost of a gigantic plasma TV with all the bells and whistles, Hal's, or more accurately, APO's, for a mere \$7400.

How did he pay for all this?

"President's Discretionary Fund, with its own checkbook and credit card."

She showed me a few more trifles – a digital camera, a couple of iPhones, a DVD player – all adding up to something in the neighborhood of \$30,000 including the computers, spent over a period of eight months. Extrapolating from that number, one would arrive at an annual figure of \$45,000.

Now I knew. The man wasn't merely a lazy, inconsiderate, philandering asshole. Hal was a flat-out thief.

I was reeling, but now Katelyn went into high gear.

"Okay, now the meals." What meals? She withdrew another sheaf of paper-clipped invoices. I read. "L'Espalier - \$250. Lumiere - \$285. Rialto - \$190. Rialto again - \$429. \$429? How could anyone spend that much on dinner for two?

"Top of the wine list," replied Katelyn to my astonished query.

The restaurant tabs totaled in the neighborhood of \$5,000. Could this possibly have been Hal courting APO donors, in other words, legitimate business expenses?

"No way," answered Katelyn. "I handled those too, and believe me, he and Mary-Day did not go these types of restaurants. No, these were all just for him and his wife. And one was me," she added sheepishly.

I thought for a moment. "What you're showing me is evidence that Hal has stolen about \$50,000 a year from APO, am I right?"

"Well, that doesn't include the trips. You know, all his traveling. That's probably another \$20,000 at least."

"Katelyn, we have to do something about this. If Mary-Day knew she would just die. His personal stuff comes to maybe ten percent of what she raises all year for APO. And Betty. But maybe Betty knows already."

"Uh uh. No one knows." She paused. "Well, as long as I'm being totally honest, come with me." She poured herself some more wine.

We stood, and I followed her into the bedroom, where I found myself gazing on the most gorgeous flat-screen monitor, flanked by a pair of sleek speakers, and a really cool color printer, perched on a handsome teakwood computer desk.

"Yeah, he bought me one too. Do you think I'm a terrible person, Diane? Oh my God, I'm as bad as he is." Her lip trembled again, and then she totally lost it, her shoulders heaving as she wept.

I found myself, like the day in the bathroom when she told me she'd been dumped by the heartless "Ed," enfolding her in my arms, allowing her to cry it out.

"Katelyn, I can't say you didn't do anything wrong, but he seduced you and took advantage of you, and he messed with your head. Plus you lost your job because of him."

"That's true. I guess I need to give the stuff back, huh?"

"Katelyn, let's just say this was payback for what he put you through. It'll be our little secret."

Like her, I knew accepting Hal's gifts, which weren't even his to give, was wrong, but at this point, a used computer wasn't worth that much, and anyway, where would we send it? Katelyn certainly couldn't afford to pay APO back; it would cost her a month's salary.

My brain was churning. Genie! The trip to Denver! The newspaper story! We had this guy by the balls every which way.

Then, I recalled with dismay Mary-Day's remark upon discovering Hal's commitment to spend \$100,000 of our hard-earned revenue to pay Mal to write his dumb book. Something about Hal having to commit murder and even then, the Board probably letting him off the hook. Even with an embarrassing piece in the *Cambridge Connection* –hardly big-time journalism – would the Board back him up? Probably, I told myself. We still needed to find him guilty of something really, really monstrous. And a trip to a bluegrass festival sure wasn't it. Ditto an affair with Joe. Not even embezzlement, probably. Shit. I wish I knew.

She was still blubbing.

"I am a horrible person, and a stupid one besides. Oh, Diane, I feel so awful. I've never done anything like this in my life, I really haven't."

"Look," I said, "he caught you where you were vulnerable, giving you gifts and making you feel special, so he could feel like a big shot. But hey, we all make mistakes. Especially where romance is concerned."

I told her about Andrew, just to make her feel better, and threw in some Mark stories.

"Come on," I offered, let's get these dishes cleaned up. I'll wash, you dry."

We spent the next hour in gossipy girl-talk about men in general, but nothing else in particular. It was fun, and lightened both our moods.

I had one last question.

"Katelyn," I ventured. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She looked pensive, then smiled. "Well, I don't know exactly, except that the whole thing made me really nervous. Plus the fact that I sort of participated. But I'm glad you came and wormed it out of me. I just couldn't keep this bottled up inside. I thought maybe you could do something to stop it, and then I could stop feeling so guilty about my part in things."

Then she turned back to Hal.

"God, I still feel so stupid when I think about how I acted with him, all ga-ga over his intelligence and his position, when I was just a little toy to him. Not to mention having me help him steal. I am so ashamed, and ya know, I realized that him making me feel stupid and guilty makes me really, really furious at him. I mean, who wouldn't be mad at someone who made a complete fool of them? I'm not sure I can trust any man ever again."

"Katelyn, every woman in the world has some guy they'd like to stuff in a closet and forget they ever knew."

"Well, I've had two. I'm staying away from men for a long time, that's for sure. So do you think you can get Hal for his stealing?"

"Mary-Day says he'd have to shoot someone before they'd fire him."

She gritted her teeth, and I saw a potential tiger behind the kittenish façade.

"I hate him so much. Sometimes I even have nightmares about him. And sometimes I just feel like I wanna kill him. Take one of his dopey old

ties, wrap it around his neck, and pull it tight. Just picture it, he squirms and his face gets all red like when he's mad, and, poof, he's a dead dog."

We both chortled at the image of Hal, strangled by one of his own ridiculous ties.

"Can I borrow the receipts?" I asked. "I'll give them to Genie for copying, and then I'll get them back to you."

She giggled, and took another swig of wine from the mug.

"Just take 'em. I hated having them in the house anyway, they made me feel like a criminal."

I arrived home to find Genie and Donnie scarfing down beers and speculating on her forthcoming trip.

"Ta da!" I called. "Got the goods."

I explained about the embezzlement, as I pulled the papers from my bag.

"Oh my God, this guy really is a crook," exulted Genie as she pored over the receipts. "Diane, do you really think the Board would just look the other way if my paper published this? This, the embezzlement is the story. Whatever the hell he's doing in Colorado can't be nearly as bad. I mean, changing the date of your gala to go to a bluegrass festival is hardly a big news story, ditto being outed if he's having an affair with his friend."

"Are you saying you don't think we should go?"

"Of course not. But, I mean, this guy is a goddamn embezzler. He's screwed no matter what, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that's probably true, except that the Board keeps finding ways to give him more and more money. It's hard to believe, but he'd probably find a way to convince them he's earned every last computer and trip. If that happened, and we didn't check out every other possibility, it would be a missed opportunity. I mean, something's up; otherwise, why all the secrecy? You absolutely must write the story, but I'm hoping we'll find something else on him."

I slept restlessly, picturing Hal lazing on the Riviera, sipping Margaritas, courtesy of APO.

chapter

TWENTY-FIVE

Just to complicate my life further, the next night Mark called me. He told me how much he missed me, and started to croon this Dylan number, “Emotionally Yours” into the phone, and for one tiny second I remembered how funny and sexy he could be, before telling him no thanks.

Then an idea popped into my crazy little head. He might be able to help with the investigation. He cooperated by giving me just the opening I needed to do one more insane thing.

“You’re sure now?” he asked.

“You know, maybe not.”

“We’ll go out tomorrow night. Anything you want. Even a dopey movie.”

“How about dinner in Harvard Square?”

“You got it. Pick you up at 7:30?”

“See you then.”

I filled Genie and Donnie in on my plan. Genie was gleeful about the potential outcome, not so happy about the risk I’d be taking. Donnie wanted to commit me to McLean’s psychiatric hospital immediately.

Mark picked me up at 7:40, a record mere ten minutes late. I feared that I might be vulnerable to his charms, but the truth was, seeing him made me a little nauseous, remembering that I actually once liked this guy, and also guilty for what I was about to do to him.

It was a balmy fall night, and we strolled over to Casablanca, one of my favorite splurge restaurants, hand in hand. I figured I may as well get a good meal out of this caper. We chatted about nothing in particular during dinner. The only topic off limits was, of course, my job.

The waiter brought us our coffee. I held the pills in my hand. They were just some mild sleep aids Genie had given me. Enough for a good snooze, not nearly enough to kill. I kept waiting for him to look away, or get up to use the restroom. He was determined to stay put. Why are guys such camels?

Enough waiting.

"I'm stuffed," I said. "Let's walk off some of this dinner. We should probably use the restrooms before we leave."

"Good idea," he said uncharacteristically solicitous of my wants, and rose.

"After you," I said, flourishing my hand in chivalry. He took the bait, and headed towards the restroom, as I slipped the pills into his coffee.

He cooperatively downed his spiked drink when he returned. As we left the restaurant, I steered us in the direction of Hal's house. I prayed he'd fall asleep before I had to feel like a total reprobate and kiss him or worse.

"You know, you showed me where you grew up, but I've never seen your family's house in the square."

"We can walk by, it's not far."

I was sweating, and hoped my pounding heart wasn't a signal of a heart attack to come. We reached his street, hung a right, and we'd arrived at the site of my next misadventure. He stopped in front of the entrance. I couldn't tell from where we stood if any cars were parked in the driveway. Only a few lights lit up the house, enough for burglars to think someone might be home. I pretended interest in the landscaping bordering the driveway. Only one car, and I knew they had two. Good.

"This is it."

"It's lovely. Is it as nice on the inside?"

"You tell me." He took out his key.

I feigned awe at the splendor of the interior I'd already seen before. Mark yawned.

"I don't know why I'm so tired all of a sudden."

"Well, let's just sit and relax. I know, why don't we watch a movie?"

We sank into the soft cushions of the couch facing the TV.

"What are you in the mood for?" I asked.

"You pick something. I think I'll close my eyes for a minute."

And just like that, he was out. Snoring no less.

I had to work fast. Fearing a murder rap, I'd given him a relatively small dose, just a little more than Genie took when she had the occasional restless night.

Where would Hal keep a file cabinet? I took inventory of the first floor: kitchen/family room that we were in, dining room, and aha, office. With spider knick-knacks everywhere, I'm guessing gifted to the room's inhabitant by all and sundry for every occasion. Would he stash secret papers in Joyce's office? Unlikely.

I tiptoed upstairs. If Mark awoke, I could just tell him I was giving myself a house tour.

If I had more time, I'd register appreciation for their decorator's good taste, but I didn't have the luxury. Master bedroom, plus three more, nothing that looked like an office. The only thing resembling a desk or filing cabinets had been in Joyce's office. I started opening doors at random. Linen closet. Cedar closet for winter clothes during the off-season. Stairway.

Which turned out to be a stairway to heaven – Hal's lair. How did I know? It was practically a clone of his office at APO, replete with animalia of all persuasions and media. I ran downstairs to check on Mark. He seemed to hear me, and stirred.

I tore back upstairs. Must be fast, fast, fast. Where would he keep personal financial info? Then, duh, I got it. Little sticky pieces of yellow and orange paper everywhere. Good thing I was now an expert decoder. Nothing much made sense, or seemed related to finance. Until this.

Stuck right on the rim of his computer were the codes I'd been seeking: Citib2020, land2468, BofA1111, Chair1359. I might have overlooked these had I not been the owner of a Bank of America account that asked for a second password after you logged in and identified your "security image" – like a landscape or a chair. I had hit the mother lode, Hal's bank account passwords.

I grabbed a fresh post-it and scribbled down the passwords, checking three times to make sure they were correct. If I were really lucky, he'd have left his computer on so I could check that I was right. I wasn't that lucky.

I heard footsteps. I met Mark at the bottom of the stairs.

"What's going on?"

"Oops." I said with a giggle. "You caught me. I was giving myself a house tour. This is some place." I touched his arm, lightly. "You fell asleep. I bet you're coming down with something."

"I don't know, I feel kinda weird."

"I think you should get home. Come on, I'll walk you."

I found his jacket downstairs and helped him on with it. We walked – or more accurately, crept - to his apartment, which was about equidistant between the Square and my place.

"Can't come up tonight, babe," he slurred. "I'm think I sick."

"That's okay. Feel better." I gave him a little wave, as he went into his building. "Bye, now."

I raced home, turned on my computer immediately. Genie and Donnie were lounging around, watching a movie.

"Tell me you didn't kill him," cried Genie.

"Nah, just knocked him out, not that long actually. Look what I have. Passwords!"

First, we hit Citizens Bank. We typed in the login password and... nothing. We tried twice more before I realized it wasn't Citizen's, it was Citibank. After the initial login, up popped a landscape. We typed in password number two, and sure enough, we raced through security faster than you could say mother's maiden name.

I drew a deep breath. This was apparently just a checking account. We found his mortgage payments on both homes, deducted monthly, the total close to \$200,000 annually. Hal's annual salary of \$175,000 would have netted him take-home pay of \$115,000. We figured that Joyce's was about the same. Which meant, after they paid for housing, they could barely afford to eat. There had to be another source.

Here we go. A deposit transferred from Bank of America to the Citizens checking account in the amount of \$50,000. And another for \$75K three months later. And who in the world was ML? There were monthly deposits from this individual for \$900, \$1200, \$1150, similar amounts.

"Maybe he's blackmailing someone," opined Genie.

"Maybe there'll be some clues in the Bank of America account."

We closed out Citibank and moved on to B of A. Yup, this was the savings account. We scrolled right to the bottom. Are you ready? He had \$225,000 sitting in a savings account.

"I was going to say he's too stupid to invest it in mutual funds, but maybe he's the smartest one of all, since everyone's lost their shirts."

"But where does the money come from?" I wondered. And then I knew. The big deposits all featured the same code, PDF. President's Discretionary Fund. Somehow, Hal had diverted the money that was supposed to be used for special projects for APO into his own personal savings account, and from there, into the hands of some very lucky home sellers in Cambridge and New Hampshire.

I hit print, and handed everything over into Genie's waiting hands, keeping copies for myself.

The next morning, I dragged Betty into my office and closed the door.

"What are you up to now, Diane? More detective work? What's that in your hand?"

"You are not going to believe this. It's records from Hal's bank accounts."

"Give me that."

She stared at the papers, as if she expected the numbers to jump off the paper and boogie across the room.

"Where did you get this?"

I told her the story of my meeting with Katelyn and my Mark exploit/exploitation.

"Good God, this is unbelievable," said Betty. "I feel somehow responsible. If only I'd known. I had no idea. I'm sure our CFO didn't either, and certainly not the board. Even they might get riled up about this."

"About what?" inquired a new voice at the door.

"Mary-Day, hi," said Betty.

"Okay, gals, everyone else around here has their heads up their asses, but not Mary-Day Russell. I am one smart Southern cookie, and I just know something's in the air. Out with it, ladies." She crossed her arms and waited.

Betty and I looked at each other. Betty shrugged.

“Mary-Day,” she said, stern as a schoolteacher. “You must swear never to tell a soul. Not even your husband, and if you reveal this to Hal I will personally broadcast to the entire board that you are having an affair with HIM.”

When we’d finished cracking up, Mary-Day refolded her arms across her chest, and, toe tapping against the carpet, commanded, “This has got to be too, too juicy. Out with it ladies, and I’m silent as a lamb.”

Between us, Betty and I got out the whole story. Mary-Day the Type A drama queen was bouncing up and down, covering her eyes in mock horror and pounding her fists together. When she realized that she’d been excluded, she got very pissed off.

“Why didn’t y’all let me in on the fun? I could’ve helped. Hell, I’d love to have helped. You didn’t trust me.”

“I didn’t tell Betty about Colorado or the embezzlement either until she guessed, just like you.”

“Still, I deserved to know, since I’m the president and founder of the I Hate Hal Club. You know that’s the truth, don’t you, Betty?”

“Mary-Day, that’s exactly the reason we didn’t tell you. Come on, let’s say he insults a donor or something, and you start screaming at him. You really think you wouldn’t blurt something out?”

I added, “If he finds out, he’ll just fire us, and that won’t do anyone any good. We must let this story unfold the right way, in the paper.”

“Well, maybe you’re right. I will be the soul of discretion, I give you my word.”

And now, only a week to go till Denver. If I survived.

chapter

TWENTY-SIX

Mark called me twice after my little escapade. I told him I'd given our relationship a great deal of thought and that, while I'd wanted to give him a second chance, it still wasn't working for me. But even though I'd gotten the goods to nail Hal, I still felt tremendous guilt. I'd used another person, played with his emotions, for my own aims. I was a terrible person.

When I came home from work after the second call, I found a half-dozen roses wrapped in florist's paper, atop which sat a bar of my favorite ultra-dark chocolate bark with almonds. No card, but I knew exactly who had sent the gifts.

"Jesus, what the hell?" I said to Genie. "I guess I should at least thank him to be polite."

"You are too goddam well-bred," she laughed. "You are not, repeat not required to thank a former boyfriend you want nothing to do with for some lousy flowers." She eyed me warily. "Please tell me you're not...."

"Not a chance. He's still an asshole. But you must admit, it was sweet."

Genie broke off a piece of chocolate, popped it into her mouth. "Which is more than I can say for this chocolate. Bleccch."

The next day, the one before our departure for Denver, I was in the lunchroom heating up some leftovers, when who walked in – Mark!

"Hey, Diane, what's up?"

I had to nip this in the bud.

"Mark, flowers are..."

"Just listen, Diane. Come on, we were good together, weren't we? Weren't we?"

"It wasn't good for me, okay? Now, please, leave me alone."

I turned before he had a chance to say anything else, and marched back to my office. I heard him pass by on his way to Hal's office. A few minutes later, I peeked out and saw him and Hal get into Hal's car. Good, out of my sight, and, I hoped, my life. For – e – ver.

As soon as they'd left, my phone rang. Betty. "Get in here immediately," she commanded.

Her first words were "Do I look like Dear Abby?"

"What?" I replied.

"Your former boyfriend was just asking me about you."

"Oh my God. Like what?"

"Like, what are your regular hours here. And what time did I think you would be in tomorrow."

"God, he's stalking me, Betty. He's been calling, sending me flowers, today he shows up here. What can I do?"

"I assure you he's harmless. He can hardly tie his shoes without Daddy. Anyway, I told him not to bother to come looking for you tomorrow because you were taking a vacation. He asked where you were going, and I told him for all I knew you were jumping a plane to Timbuktu. I hope that was okay."

"Thanks, Betty. I just hope this doesn't turn into something totally creepy."

Genie had the plane tickets and her battle kit. Our flight to Denver on October 14 was scheduled for 7:00 a.m., arriving in Denver at 9:00 with the time change, which meant we had to be at the airport by 5:00. We'd refined the plan. If Genie happened to get up close and personal with Hal,

she'd say she was an artist bound for Denver for a couple of job interviews as an art teacher.

Finally, Friday morning, October 14. I jumped out of bed, turned on the coffee maker, and retrieved from the fridge a bag containing a couple of fat blueberry muffins. Then I crept in to wake Genie and Donnie, who were already stirring. Genie's clothes, a pair of jeans and a black ribbed turtleneck, were draped over a chair in her and Donnie's room. Her suitcase contained similarly unremarkable togs, along with long underwear and ski mittens. We had only some guesses as to what Hal was up to, and she'd be ready for just about anything.

Genie opened her eyes and smiled at me.

"Let the games begin," she said.

My costume lay on the chair beside my bed. I hopped into the baggy jeans, cinching them at the waist so they wouldn't fall down, revealing flowered underwear that would tell the world I was either a woman or a cross-dresser. Next came the rock band t-shirt and suit jacket, up went my hair into a ponytail secured with bobby pins, cap on top. Last, and most important, the shades.

Genie inspected, came at me with an eyeliner pencil.

"What the hell?" I said, as I felt her messing around on my upper lip.

"Take a look." She held up a mirror. She'd given me just the tiniest suggestion of a moustache.

"Absolutely not," I said.

"It's a guarantee he won't recognize you now," she giggled. Since I needed every assurance I could get, I went along. She pulled on her travel outfit and we scarfed down coffee and muffins.

We'd decided to travel to the airport separately so Hal couldn't spot us arriving together. I was taking a cab and Genie was leaving a few minutes later, with Donnie dropping her off.

"See you at the airport," I said. My stomach felt as if I'd just ingested a gardenful of butterflies.

My cab arrived promptly at four-thirty. I stumbled into it in the pitch dark early morning, tossing my carry-on suitcase in ahead of me.

Ours was practically the only car on the road at that hour. Except one car that seemed to be headed in exactly the same direction. After a few minutes, I turned around, and it was still behind us. Could Hal have

somehow figured everything out and now he was tailing me instead of the reverse? I casually turned around, as if surveying the entire landscape, but I didn't recognize the vehicle, and it was too dark to get a good look at its inhabitant.

Until we stopped under a street lamp. I dug in my purse for a mirror, and was able to identify my follower – Mark. Damn. I prayed that to him I was just a dark blob with a suitcase exiting my building and who he hoped would turn out to be Diane.

I took a deep breath, and spoke words to the cabby I'd never heard outside an old movie: "See that car behind us? You get an extra \$20 if you lose him."

He nodded. And sure enough, as we got to the exit to the Massachusetts Turnpike, he bore right as if to take it, with Mark right behind. At the last second, he swerved left, off the exit ramp. I high-fived the glass separating us. He nodded.

We reached the airport with plenty of time to spare. I arrived first, and took my place in the check-in line.

I spotted Hal ahead of me. Good. That meant there was no chance he'd overhear the clerk say my name when I reached the head of the line. He was carrying a pretty big suitcase. Big enough for \$500,000 in unmarked bills from a drug deal? To stuff a dismembered body into?

I kept glancing behind me, searching for Genie. She finally arrived about ten minutes after I did. Our eyes met briefly, and I tilted my head in Hal's direction. She nodded.

After checking in, receiving some mighty strange looks from the clerk as I gave my very feminine name, I headed for the gate. I hoped I wouldn't be subjected to any special scrutiny at security, since, if my clothing or headgear became dislodged, I'd be in big trouble. I made sure Hal was way ahead of me.

Genie grabbed a seat in the waiting area across from me, and pulled out some chick-lit book that she'd picked up the day before. I had my own reading material, so I dove in and tried to forget that my boss, whom I trusted was unaware of my presence, was pacing around the waiting area. I glanced over at Genie, who looked up briefly from her reading, widened her eyes, and promptly dove onto the floor. What the hell? I considered going over to check on her, definitely a no-no in our plan. After two minutes, she

sat up. The scarf that she'd worn around her neck was now firmly covering her entire scalp, with just a few tendrils emerging near her face. And like me, she now wore sunglasses.

And then I saw. Mark. Taking a vacation, Betty had told him, and he'd somehow figured out which airline I'd be at, and followed me. But how? And then I remembered. His friend at Voyagertrips. Had to be.

I sought out the ladies room, before remembering my new gender, and veered right to Men's. I conducted a once-over in the mirror. I was sure the guy washing his hands a few basins down wondered why I was sketching in a few pencil marks on my upper lip, but my moustache needed refreshing. Satisfied that the real Diane was well hidden, I returned to the waiting area.

Mark was wandering up and down the aisles, presumably looking for me. He walked right past me, and nearly tripped on my suitcase, muttering "sorry," and continuing on without a second glance.

And it would be no surprise that, as Mark was making his rounds, the next member of our little gang emerged from the Men's room. Hal headed straight for the waiting area. Mark had his back to Hal, until he turned the corner to check out the next row. They came this close to having their eyes meet, except Hal stood in handsome profile gazing out the window. At the same moment I noticed him, apparently so did Mark, who turned abruptly, dug around in his backpack, and pulled out the *disguise du jour*, a cap, which he pulled low over his face, and, yes, sunglasses.

To recap. I was following and hiding from Hal, in cap and sunglasses, among other things. Genie was following Hal and hiding from Mark, in scarf and sunglasses. Mark was following me in cap and sunglasses, hiding from Hal.

We were in a fucking French farce. I detest French farce.

They finally called our flight, and I proceeded to the gate. Genie and I sat a couple of rows apart, as planned, with Hal a few rows behind us. And then came Mark. Could he be that desperate to still be looking for me? Luckily he sat near the front of the plane, well hidden from his father, unlikely as Hal would be to head in that direction to use the facilities. Still, Mark craned his neck around in nervous little twitches, as if searching for me and hiding from Hal both. I found myself in the odd position of hoping that Mark would be safe from discovery. Please let us ALL be safe.

About half an hour after takeoff, I made a foray to the bathroom just before first class. I spotted Hal on my way, engrossed in Grisham. I saw other passengers eying me curiously as I passed. Was it obvious that I was in costume or did I just look like one of those jerks who wore sunglasses indoors?

As I waited with a few other people near the rest rooms for the little 'vacant' sign to appear, a new arrival showed up on the line. He was around my age, but I didn't get a good view of his face, which was looking downwards into a book. A guy who took reading material to wait in line for the toilet, my kind of guy. He lifted the book, and omigod, it was the very same as the one I was reading, *Room* by Emma Donoghue. We were fated.

I followed my natural inclination to flirt. I looked at him and smiled... and got nothing back.

"How do you like the book?" I asked, lowering my voice as much as I could. I think I sounded like a pre-pubescent Justin Bieber.

"She's an amazing writer," he said.

"What I really love is the absolutely consistency of the world and the characters she's created," I replied, smiling widely. No response.

"So what brings you Denver?" I tried again.

"Business. Listen, you seem like a nice guy, and you have good taste in books, but I, um, don't go that way."

My face went hot and I turned to the rustling sound behind me. Hal. Had he heard my voice? Genie would kill me if I screwed up the whole plan before we even arrived in Denver. But I didn't think he'd heard a thing, so I figured I was safe. At least for the time being.

Miraculously, both bathrooms became vacant at once and Book Guy and I escaped into privacy without another glance.

We finally arrived in Denver. Genie and I followed Hal to baggage claim. Mark lurked around the periphery, probably having been told that Hal would be in Alabama at a bluegrass festival, not Colorado doing who-knew-what. He had to wonder what his dad was up to.

Hal checked his watch every ten seconds, swiveled his head all over the place and paced around like a caged tiger. As soon as his bag appeared, he grabbed it and started practically running through the airport, but not towards the exit. Genie and I followed as quickly as we could without

looking conspicuous and I thought, shit, we might lose him. I turned back briefly, just enough time to catch Mark following at a distance.

But eventually, as all three of us approached Gate 12 doing our Kanye West impersonations in our indoor shades, Hal slowed down and waved at someone. This other guy, about the same age, with a huge paunch and sporting a very large cowboy hat, came up to him and they did this back-slapping not-quite-hug routine, so I figured that was his friend Joe. No *Brokeback* embrace, just a couple of high school buddies who hadn't seen each other in a while.

Joe looked at his watch, and then at the departure sign at the gate, which said "Flight 32 Melrose, 10:30 a.m." It was now about ten. While they were standing around, I went up to the desk to see if I could get a ticket, figuring that if they weren't going to Melrose I just wouldn't use it. I felt a bump from someone behind me, and I knew it was Genie, accidentally on purpose. We could see the tiny plane from the waiting area; it looked to be a 15-seater. Mark paced near the restrooms, scoping out the impossibly small plane, eying the airport presumably for a sign of me, and finally he left the area. Thank God.

Hal and Joe didn't move from the boarding area, so I figured out we really were bound for Melrose, Colorado. That let out the film festival theory. Also the job search and brewery tour. Skiing was a possibility – some of our fellow travelers checked skis along with their luggage – but they didn't have any, and besides, they could go skiing any old time. What was so special about Melrose in October? What?

About twenty minutes later, they called the flight and we all trooped on, with about five people between Hal and Joe and me and Genie in the line. But then our cover almost got blown, since the plane had only two rows of two seats side by side. I took a window seat, figuring that Genie would try to sit as far away from me as possible. But then Joe assumed the window seat in the row directly across. I saw Genie pushing and shoving to get next to Joe, which left Hal, if he wanted to sit near Joe, right next to me. Genie gave me a quick "I'm sorry, couldn't help it" shrug, and put her finger over her lip, a message for me to keep my mouth shut. Did she think I was a moron?

Hal assumed his seat beside me, and I saw the woman across the aisle in the row in front of us turn around, registering disappointment as the seat beside her remained empty. You're welcome to him when I'm done

with him, I thought. He gave me a small nod, and knitted his eyebrows in perplexity. I nodded back.

Did he recognize me? Shut your eyes and your trap, Diane, and keep them that way for the duration.

"Listen," he said, trying not to look at me. "Just so's ya know, I saw you on that last flight and I don't swing that way either."

I closed my eyes and pretended to go to sleep.

Joe was a friendly guy, or maybe on the make. I heard him chatting up Genie. They were talking about nothing much in particular – the weather, the scenery, when my bladder suddenly became in urgent need of emptying. I started to say "Excuse me" as I crawled over Hal, then hid my mistake with a cough. He gave me plenty of room.

I returned to my seat to find Genie, who'd by now removed her sunglasses and scarf, in animated conversation with Joe and Hal. I'd missed something important.

"Well, it's a pretty new company, so we don't have much of a clientele yet. That's what I'm hoping to change with this trip," Genie was saying.

What the hell?

Joe laughed. "I'm betting you're a mighty fine travel agent, Sarah, and you'll get your customers in no time. You gals just start getting into the sport, and you'll love it as much as we do, right Hal?"

They were engaged in some obscure sport that only happened in Colorado in October, and that warranted its own travel agency?

"You betcha," answered my unsuspecting boss. "But we're not even sure that they can accommodate someone else on this outing." He leaned across the aisle to make sure Genie now known as Sarah heard.

"You usually need reservations for where we're going. And it's a pretty rigorous trip. Right, Joe?"

"You got it, pal. You got your snowmobiling over rugged terrain, and your hanging around waiting in the freezing cold, and by God, there's nothing like it, you'll see."

This sounded pretty unpleasant. As unobtrusively as I could, I turned my head to catch a glimpse of Genie. She looked thrilled. She was either a damn good actress, or was on some kind of reporter's high. I tried to signal with my eyes, "Give me a hint. Say something."

She got it, even though she couldn't even see my eyes, obscured as they were behind a pair of cheap shades. And then, so did I.

"I can't wait. And I'm sure my customers at Huntress Tours will be so excited. You wouldn't believe how many women I know who are just dying to go hunting."

Omigod. This couldn't be happening. The word hunting may just have been the most electrifying I'd ever heard. Harold I. Mason, Jr., the world's greatest protector of animals, the man who proclaimed daily his love and respect for every last creature on earth, was a hunter. Hal is a hunter! I wanted to scream all the way to Cambridge.

We had him by the balls and the dick and every other part of his genitalia. Hell, we had him by the goddamn throat. He was dead venison as far as his career at APO was concerned.

I tried to catch Genie's eye to signal "I get it," but she was steadfastly avoiding any glances in my direction. We both needed to remain totally cool, when what we really wanted to do was dance in the aisle.

The plane soon landed. Genie told the guys she'd wait for them downstairs at baggage claim after she hit the ladies' room. I followed behind as if I had all the time in the world.

"What are you doing in here? You're a guy, remember?"

"Oh my God, I totally forgot."

"Now go, get out of here."

"I'm not leaving this bathroom until you tell me what's going on."

"First, you tell me what the hell Mark was doing on that plane."

"He must've called his Voyagertrips buddy and gotten my flight information. He followed me to the airport from home, but I got my cab to lose him."

"Well, he's gone now, and omigod, we are gonna screw this guy over but good, and I am getting a career-making story, do you believe this?" She was more excited than the day she and Donnie became engaged.

"Okay, now here's what you have to do. You need to find a place to stay. We're going to a place called Melrose Lodge. It's strictly for hunters, so there's no way someone like you, whoever you are, would stay there. Now go" she ordered, "and keep your phone charged up and on. I'll call when I can and let you know what's up."

"You're sure you wanna go through with this?" I asked. "I mean, God, killing Bambi?"

"Actually, Tigger is more like it. We're going after cougar."

My mouth hung open, but she didn't give me time to respond.

"If you don't leave right this second, I'm gonna be killing more than just a big cat. Now go."

My too-big pants and I shuffled out of the bathroom, and I caught a few of my fellow women giving me funny looks.

"There he is," I heard a familiar voice call out behind me. Hal and Joe went up to this weather-beaten guy, Joe shouting, "Hey, Chet."

Just as I was passing, I heard Chet say, "Howdy, fellas, great to see you again. Welcome back to Melrose."

I pretended to tie my shoelace, and I heard them asking if they could accommodate an observer, a woman who runs a woman hunters' travel agency.

Chet scratched his head.

"Don't get many lady hunters around here. Just a few from time to time. But we get observers all the time, and we'd love a little female companionship, hey boys?" he said with a leer.

I found an information desk, and made a reservation at a motel called the Buckaroo and caught a cab.

chapter

TWENTY-SEVEN

I'd never been west of Pennsylvania, believe it or not. It really was gorgeous here. Snowcapped peaks, tall pines, pure Americana. I arrived at the Buckaroo, a slightly rundown motel like about a dozen others we passed on the road from the airport, and checked in. The desk clerk handed me the key to what turned out to be one of the dreariest motel rooms I'd ever set foot in. I wasn't that fussy about where I stayed, but this place, my prison for the next few days, was thoroughly depressing. Brown fabric must be cheap, because the curtains, carpeting and bedspread were all the color of, how else to say it, shit. Some tiny yellow and white daisies were sprinkled about the spread and matching curtains, but that was about it for cheeriness.

By now I thought I'd faint from hunger. The motel boasted a little café cum bar, where I ordered a bowl of oatmeal. And I suddenly realized hey, I'm a tourist! The downtown area wasn't far from the motel, so I figured I'd get out and poke around a bit. Just then my cell rang.

"Sweetie, how are you? I'm calling my fiancé," she told Hal and Joe. "Honey, I can't talk long. I'm at the lodge in the office of the expedition

leader, and I'm about to sign up for the hunt, which should take another half hour or so. I met the nicest men, and they're with me right now. Then I need to get some more appropriate clothes, and then I'll call you when I get back to the lodge in a couple of hours."

"Call me when you get in, my darling loved one," I said.

"I will, sweetie-pie," she answered.

I thought about calling Katelyn, but realized that might not be such a great idea. I really did trust her, but I had to be scrupulous here. I assumed she had Hal's cell phone number, and the merest chance of her getting second thoughts and calling him, and this whole plot was history.

Melrose was spectacular, surrounded by white-topped mountains, blue, blue sky, and fresh, bracing air. No building stood higher than two or three stories, many painted in Victorian turquoise and pink and yellow. I strolled around the town, which was rife with mom-and-pop style shops selling everything from kitschy souvenirs like snow globes featuring deer in the woods and potholders depicting gun-toting hunters, to the latest in cold-weather outerwear.

But the Bloomingdale's of Melrose was this store called Big Bob's Adventure Center, practically a Wild West theme park, with a gigantic wooden sign out front featuring a winking Big Bob in a cowboy hat, a rifle over one shoulder and a deer head with antlers in his other hand. Welcome to hunt country.

You walked into the store, and the first thing you saw was the gun department. Rows upon rows of rifles, shotguns, and ammunition. This was creeping me out, so I found a salesman to direct me to the hunting apparel department. Orange hats, vests, windbreakers, even shoes, constituted the biggest fashion statement at Bloomies West. Or maybe I'd buy a red plaid hunting cap, complete with ear flaps, and start a new trend.

I was wandering around when my phone rang again, Genie from her room at Melrose Lodge.

"Tell," I commanded.

"Well, first of all, Hal and Joe have been here many, many times. We got to the lodge, which is all wood-paneled and adorned with deer heads, animal skin rugs on the floor and stuff. There's a little outbuilding next to the lodge and that's the office, where Hal and Joe filled out some paperwork

and I registered for the trip. I had to sign all these waivers about accidents, and I won't sue if I get wounded, comforting stuff like that.

"Oh, yeah, there's a sign in the office that reads *Our Motto is Catch a Deer Not a Cold*. I took a picture. We got back in the truck after filling out the paperwork and Chet brought us back into town to the game warden's. Joe and Hal filled out more forms and got their licenses.

"They told me it's going to be plenty cold on the hunt, and to make sure I have enough warm clothes. Also, I'll need something orange so that other hunters can see me. This scared the shit out of me. Anyway, they dropped me in town to buy some gear."

"Big Bob's?"

"You went too?"

"I opened an account. Keep going."

"Dinner is at six and it's formal attire."

"This I've gotta see." A thought suddenly occurred. "Hey, I really could."

"Oh no you don't. Way too dangerous."

"I didn't come all this way to be stuck in the world's ugliest motel."

"Diane, don't be stupid."

"Listen, just keep your phone on and the volume up so you can be sure to hear it ring."

"Don't mess this up for me, or for yourself."

"Don't worry. Gotta go shopping."

But first, I needed a rest. The clock said 1:00 p.m. but my body said 3:00, plus I'd been up since the middle of the night. I sent the alarm on my phone for two hours later, and dozed intermittently.

I awoke totally disoriented. Where was I? I felt slightly nauseous with fear and excitement when I remembered. I pulled on my disguise, headed out again towards town.

Melrose boasted dozens of ski stores. I stopped into one that sold used equipment, figuring it for the cheapest. I'd never need these items again. Too bad ebay didn't provide an instant delivery service.

All I really needed were a ski mask, which I found in a sale bin, and some black ski pants, not on sale and setting me back \$90.

It was only two-thirty, and I feared that if I returned to the room I'd fall asleep again. I meandered a bit, found a sweet little coffee shop, filled

with hunters, or so I surmised from the flapped caps and plaid jackets. The booths were full, so I found a spot at the counter, and fixed my hat low just in case.

I was sipping my coffee, thinking about what a crazy day I was having, when I felt a tap on my shoulder, and a too-familiar voice saying, "Hey, I know you. You were on my flight from Boston. Howdy."

Why was he talking like a cowboy?

I pondered the possible responses to the question posed by my ex-boyfriend seated on the stool to my left. How about "Go crawl back under the rock you came from?" I guessed he'd taken the next flight to Melrose from Denver. But why? He must've seen Hal get on the flight, which was fully booked, and bought a ticket for the next one out.

I needed to think at the speed of Mach 5, or however fast Mach could go. I pointed to my throat, rasped out "laryngitis," throwing in a southern accent for good measure.

"Jeez, that sucks. So what are you doing in Colorado?"

I suppressed a smile he might recognize, pointed to my throat again, held up a wait-a-minute finger, and searched for a pen. I scrawled "thinking about moving" on my napkin, pushed it in his direction.

He sighed. "Maybe I should too." He offered a rueful smile. "I followed a girl here. Well, to Colorado I mean."

I couldn't help wanting to know something more about this "girl," from Mark's perspective at least.

"Talk to me," I wrote.

"Here's the weird thing. She's not even that great looking." *What?* "But, I don't know, she sort of got to me. We had this great chemistry, if you get my meaning. Plus, there was something sort of, um, unformed about her. Like, she was smart and everything, went to a good school, but, um, her tastes were, well, in the toilet. I mean come on, Paul Rudd movies?"

I gripped my spoon to prevent myself from raising it over my head and bringing it down hard on his crotch. I nodded with what I hoped look like sympathy.

"My dad says I'm a born teacher. So I wanted to teach her stuff. But she was such a stubborn bitch. Yeah, actually a total bitch."

I grabbed the napkin back, wrote "Why did you follow her?"

"Like I said, she got under my skin."

I wrote again. "Did you find her?"

"Nah, I guess she missed her flight. But here's the weird thing. My dad was on the same flight she planned to take from Boston to Denver, even though he's supposed to be someplace else. Then he came here. So I guess I'm playing detective." He took a sip of his coffee. "Actually, really, really weird."

He rubbed his head. "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, actually. I just didn't want to go back home."

I couldn't believe he hadn't recognized me yet. With all his "teacher" stuff, had Mark ever really looked at me? Me, the way I really was? My coffee was finished, and so was I. If I stayed too long, I'd be bound to make a mistake.

I whispered, "Well, good luck, gotta go," slapped down my payment for the coffee, and left. I'd gone about two blocks when I heard someone running up behind me. Mark, carrying my bag of ski togs. Damn. In my haste to get away from him, I'd left it in the coffee shop. He handed it to me, and said "Which way you headed?"

My brain had slowed down to Minus Mach 10. I pointed.

"Hey, my place is that way too. You staying at the Buckaroo? The visitor's bureau at the airport seems to love that place."

I nodded and resumed my usual brisk pace, when he said, as he had so many times before during our walks, "Hey, slow down, what's the rush?"

He had an odd look on his face, and I worried that he'd recognized my gait. I crossed my arms, jiggled my body, hoping to convey that I was moving quickly because of the cold. His features relaxed, said, "Yeah, this place makes Boston look like Miami."

We arrived at the Buckaroo together. I pointed to the office, moved my hand in a "writing" gesture so he'd think I had some paperwork to fill out, and he finally took the hint: Get lost.

I had about an hour until it was time to leave for the hunting lodge. Once again, I was starved. I found a brochure on the nightstand for Tony's Tomatoes. Did I detect the alliterative handiwork of Mal? No matter. I would not starve.

About half an hour later, they delivered the worst pizza I'd ever eaten. Still, my belly was full, so I could focus on whatever came next.

At 5:15, I dressed for my evening's entertainment: ski pants, a couple of sweatshirts, black jacket, and, for that jewel thief look, ski mask. Maybe I could heist a few baubles as long as I was dressed for it.

I called the cab, making sure he took credit cards, since I had no idea how long I'd be, and I would ask him to wait in case I needed to make a speedy retreat. This time, I went down the stairway nearest my room and away from the office, in an effort to evade Mark. The cab got me to Melrose Lodge a few minutes before six. Once again, the cab driver eyed me oddly, Maybe someday I'll actually take a taxi dressed as.... myself.

A long driveway led up to the lodge. In a leap of faith, just like that time near Katelyn's when I gave a stranger my car keys, I handed the guy my credit card so he wouldn't leave, and asked him to wait out of sight outside the entrance.

I avoided the front walk leading up to the lodge, a reddish log cabin affair with, hallelujah, windows on the first floor, and crawled across the lawn and up to the side of the building. The lodge kindly accommodated with a nice fat bush in front of one of the windows, so if anyone arrived, I'd be hidden. I peeked in the window and I saw the room Genie had described; a dining hall adorned with the remains of every animal you could imagine, of course the requisite deer heads with antlers, along with bearskin and tigerskin rugs, and even a zebra skin wall hanging, representing someone's success in Africa. I felt sick at the sight of it.

In addition to Genie, chatting with Joe in a corner, I spotted seven men, all at least in their eighties, with a couple appearing even older. They wore hats; some boxlike little fezzes, others high furry ones. They also wore different colored belted tunics, narrow pants and boots. Oh, and a bunch sported enormous handlebar moustaches, the ends teased into points and greased to a shine.

I was thinking, it's some kind of all-male costume ball. But why were they all so old? Was it a hunting lodge AND a nursing home?

Just then one of the old guys approached the window. I ducked down as he opened it wide, which I wondered about, with temperatures in the thirties, max. No sign of Hal. I heard Joe say, "Hey, Prince Baranov, Count Terchevsky, looks like we got some female companionship this week, boys.'

The guys were leering at each other and her, saying "Da, da," and jabbering in Russian, and I worried that she would be raped in her sleep by a Cossack. Genie had wandered into the pages of *War and Peace*.

And now, Hal strolled in, dressed in a tuxedo. A waiter came around and handed out glasses, and poured everyone what I guessed was vodka. As soon as Hal appeared, they held up their glasses and shouted "*Za Vas!*" followed by "To Hal!"

Then they fell all over him, and he was the royalty. I couldn't really hear what they were saying, too many people speaking at once, but they evidently knew him and were very glad to see him.

Then Hal said, "Welcome once again to Melrose Lodge, my own little bit of heaven on earth" like he owned the place, and then I figured it out. He did. The monthly deposits from ML. It wasn't a person, it was Melrose Lodge.

They sat down to dinner at two tables set with gold-trimmed sparkling white china and ornate curlicued sterling flatware. Joe sat at one table with a bunch of Russians, Genie at another with Hal and the rest. I couldn't make out too much, but they seemed to be spending a lot of time talking about other hunts they'd participated in together, shifting between English and Russian. Plus Hal was regaling them with stupid animal jokes, which they found absolutely hilarious. 'Hal, you are so funny,' 'Hal, you're such a cutup,' and on and on. He was totally in his element. They fucking worshipped this guy. I couldn't make out the food on their plates, but I was guessing Venison a la Russe.

My feet were freezing, and I worried about frostbite, but no way would I leave till the show was over. After dinner, Chet brought out a boom box. He put on this Russian music, and, I swear to God, they all got up and started to do this Russian folk dance.

They were actually pretty spry, considering that they were really, really old. They joined in clapping and yelling 'Hey' at various intervals. This one guy actually got down and did that kicking thing from a crouching position. He was incredible, at least he was until he fell and had trouble getting up. They all ran over and picked him up, so that dance ended.

Then they lined up some chairs, and put on some different music and they did a chair dance, where they moved their arms, and slapped their knees and their heels in time to the music, all while seated. Who knew you could dance and sit at the same time?

Hal was gettin' down with the best of them. After two dances, I guessed they were pretty beat, and they all returned to their tables, except

you know who. They put on one last song, and he did this amazing solo dance, clapping and yelling 'hey' and kicking, and they all rose and clapped as he danced, and started chanting "Hal, Hal, Hal."

Then Chet, the expedition leader, stood and read the schedule for the next few days, who would be hunting when. Hal and Joe would go first the next day, and then they would be in threes for the few days after that. Then everyone downed one last vodka and left for bed, including Genie. I saw her look towards the window, but I didn't think she saw me. .

I ran back to the cab, mercifully still there. I called her instantly, but she didn't pick up. But a few minutes later, my phone rang. She sounded breathless.

"This has to be quick, I'm outside and it's like the frozen steppes out here."

"Are you kidding, I've been outside for the past hour and a half, and I just may have frostbite."

"You saw?"

"Everything. Who the hell are these guys?"

"I assume you got that they're Russians? But not just any Russians. Prince Baranov and Count Monomakhoff are Russian nobility. These guys come from all over the country, but mainly New York, to hunt every year. But one needed surgery their regular week, so they were forced to change the date of the hunt, and then your gala. The three oldest ones were actually born in Russia before the revolution and came over as babies, and the others were born here.

"They spent most of their time gossiping about people who weren't here, like Prince Molosov's grandson who married Princess Tenicheff's granddaughter."

"God, Genie, I'm actually sort of speechless. I have never seen anything this...this bizarre in my life."

"Ditto. Gotta go now, I have to get up at 4:00 for the hunt. I'll call you if I can."

What I wouldn't give for a healthy swig of vodka right about now.

Back at the Buckaroo, I paid the cabby and peeked into the bar on the way to my room, only to drop to the floor quick. God. How stupid could I be to forget? There was Mark, telling his troubles to the pretty bartender.

She was nodding, laughing, tossing her hair flirtatiously. I knelt down into a crouch, leaned in a little more so I could hear.

"I just love those indy movies too," she was saying. "Lars and the Real Girl. My kind of flick." Her eyes danced, as Mark took a swig of his drink.

"I could teach you a whole course on cinema," he said.

"Well, come on professor, start teaching."

He would be over the moon. Till she realized what a pompous jerk he was.

I crept out the door and down to my room. If anyone thinks I slept even a little that night, they'd be very much mistaken. I tried, but, my neurons firing away, I finally gave up around two. It suddenly dawned on me, around dawn actually, that Genie was already with Hal, gathering evidence.

chapter

TWENTY-EIGHT

I rose in a state of excitement. It was in the 30's down here, and I sympathized with Genie, up in the mountains freezing her butt off. This had better turn out to be worth it.

I didn't dare leave my room with Mark possibly lurking, and ordered in muffins and coffee, keeping myself busy with my book, trying to concentrate. Around 2:00, my phone rang. I took a deep breath, checked out caller ID. Genie.

"I'm at the hospital. I may have a broken ankle; I'm waiting for my x-ray results."

"Oh, Genie, God, that's awful."

"Hey, could've been way worse."

"You're sure you're okay?"

"It hurts like hell, actually."

"I'll be right there."

"No!"

But I wasn't listening anymore. I was desperate to get out of that motel. I packed up my suitcase, got back in costume and called a cab to the hospital.

Genie lay in bed in a curtained "unit" in the emergency ward. She appeared wan and tired, her left foot resting on a pillow. I touched it lightly, and felt the swelling.

"Ouch."

"So did you get the goods?"

"Oh. My. God. You. Will. Not. Fucking. Believe. This."

"That bad? Or should I say good?" I grinned like an idiot.

"Just listen. I woke up at 3:45, and I jumped out of bed and into my hunting outfit. Don't worry, I took plenty of pictures for when you need a good laugh.

"Chet and Hal and Joe were outside at Chet's truck right at four and there was another guy with another truck, and a trailer holding two snowmobiles hitched to the back of one of the trucks. We ate breakfast in the dining room, with nary a Russian in sight; they were still asleep. Everyone ordered steak and eggs, and when I tried to order just some plain eggs, they told me I'd never make it through the day on just that, so I got the steak too."

I moved to lift her sweater.

"I want to see the hairs on your chest."

"Oh, I forgot about the dogs. There were three dogs called blue ticks that look a lot like labs, in a crate on the other truck."

"You're hunting with hounds?" I screeched.

"Oh, yeah," said Genie. "I am now guaranteed certified as the only graduate of Tufts University to have participated in a cougar hunt."

She continued. "I rode in the truck carrying the snowmobiles with Chet's assistant, and Joe and Hal rode with Chet and the dogs. We got to the edge of the forest and the snowmobiles came off the truck. I figured with my cover as a travel agent I should take some pictures, so I took out my camera and started snapping away at the scenery, which really is gorgeous. Great big sky, cedar and pine trees surrounded by snowcapped mountains. Hal suddenly got really nervous.

"What do you think you're doing?" he practically screamed at me.

"I explained, and he said he hates having his picture taken, so I promised not to take any of him. I figured I could catch him off guard later."

"No pictures?" I wailed.

"Don't you worry your doily little self, I got plenty. Anyway, Chet took off in a snowmobile to look for tracks, leaving the rest of us to wait at the trucks. He was gone for about an hour, while we stood around freezing our asses off; it must have been in the teens up there.

"As we're waiting, Hal starts chatting me up. He asks me where I live, and about my family, and stuff like that and I suddenly realize he's flirting with me. In fact, at one point, he put his hand on my arm. If I didn't know he was such a turd, I'd have been flattered. The guy is seriously hot."

"Don't tell me..." I began.

"He's a creep, I get it. But I wanted to get as much out of him as I could so I flirted back. Then he starts asking about my fiancé, like how he feels about the hunting. So I tell him he's an accountant and not really into it, and told him sometimes I wished he were a little more rugged. So he tells me I need a strong masculine man. I think I actually manage to blush as I tell him he might be right. I practically batted my eyes at the guy. And don't puke, but I actually touched his arm right back.

"Slut."

"Anyway, Chet came back and we boarded the snowmobiles. I rode with Hal, and Chet and Joe rode in the other one, and Chet's assistant stayed behind.

The snowmobile was kind of wobbly, and I constantly worried about falling off. But not to worry, He-man Hal put his arm around me to protect me. I just kept smiling at him as if he were saving my life. A sled was attached to the back of Chet and Joe's snowmobile, and the dog crate sat on top of that.

"When we arrived at the tracks, Chet opened the crate and took out one of the dogs, and walked down the track a ways and unleashed him. The dog took off and followed the scent of the cougar down the track. Then Chet let out the other two dogs who took off after the first. The theory is that the dogs run around after the cougar until he runs up a tree, and then the hunters shoot him. Except that didn't happen that time. "So the dogs went back in the crate, and we ate the lunch that Chet packed for us. Hal and Joe and Chet swapped stories about other hunts they've been on; sometimes they go in for deer and elk and moose.

"I can't believe it," I said.

"After lunch, I rode with Joe in the snowmobile with the dog sled attached and Hal rode up ahead with Chet. The terrain was a little rougher this time, and the damn snowmobile was threatening to tip over any minute. We were going over a particularly bumpy patch, up a steep incline, when all of a sudden we hit a rock, and the next thing I know the snowmobile's on its side, and so am I. I landed with my foot twisted under my leg, which is how I broke it."

"Wait, you don't know that it's broken yet. Wait till you get the x-rays back."

"Yeah, well anyway, that's not the worst part. The crate holding the dogs toppled off the sled too. So we're sitting in the snow with a snowmobile on its side, a box full of howling 80-pound beasts, and me with a throbbing ankle. Chet gave me some ice from the cooler, and some ibuprophen. I was sitting there feeling helpless, and Hal started to glare at me like it's my fault as the three of them righted first the snowmobile, then the sled and finally the box of dogs.

"I apologized, and gave him a thousand-watt grin, and he smiled right back, and said, are you ready, 'that's okay honey.' Yes, your boss dished up some honey."

"Yuck."

"But it was all worth it, because pretty soon we arrived at the point where new tracks started. When the dogs got out of the box this time, they went nuts. Hal and Joe grabbed their rifles and ran, and I hobbled along behind, and by the time I caught up, everyone was looking at a cougar up a tree, the dogs were howling like crazy, and Hal was aiming his rifle directly at the animal's chest.

"Fortunately, no one was paying me the slightest attention, so I managed to get out my camera, and, I can't believe it, I got some real live shots of Hal shooting the cougar out of the tree."

"You got pictures?" I shouted.

"I got fucking video. I'll show you in a minute. So anyway, Hal shot this cougar squarely in the chest, and it fell out of the tree. He's got this shit-eating grin on his face, and I join in the backslapping, and the high-fiving. Everyone's totally stoked.

"Chet says to me, 'So, girly, how'd you like your first cougar hunt?'

"I say, 'Fantastic. Next time, I'll even get me a license.'

"Hal looks at me like he knows I'm totally full of shit and I experience a moment of panic when I think he's on to me. Joe asks me to get out my camera, and Hal glares at him and says, 'No pictures, remember?'

"Joe laughs and says, 'Well, I don't mind, here, take one of me with this guy' so I get a shot of Joe kneeling in the snow behind the bloody cat. But what they don't realize is that I've got my wide-angle lens on the camera, so Hal's in the shot too, a little off to the side. How's that for evidence?"

"Omigod, Genie, this guy is so outta there. And you got this great career-making story."

"Now comes the grisly part. Chet gets out this long sharp knife, and right before our eyes, he skins the cougar. I was mostly focused on my ankle, which by now was killing me. So I'm sitting there in the freezing cold, watching Chet take the skin off this dead animal. Then Hal and Joe grab a couple of knives and help him cut up the meat, and I come up with a new motto for Chet's business: Slay 'em, flay 'em, fillet 'em."

"Ewww, cat meat," I said. "Tell me you didn't."

"I'll tell you in a minute. As we're sitting there, I'm fawning all over Hal, telling him what an expert marksman he is, how clean his shot was, even though I'm feeling fairly nauseous. Then this animal comes by, and it is the cutest thing. It sort of looks like a hybrid of a cat and a fox. I point and ask if anyone knows what it is.

"'That, little lady, is a lynx', says Chet. 'Don't see too many of 'em these days.'

"Hal smiles at me, and says "Never got me one of those before. They are practically impossible to snag". And he stands up and points his rifle at the lynx. Chet goes, 'Hal, you can't" but it's too late, Hal has followed the lynx a few feet and taken him down. Then he gives me a giant grin, and I realize he's done it to impress me, so I give him a little thumbs up.

"Chet jumps up and grabs Hal and drags him a few feet away, so while they're gone I take a picture of the lynx, which appears to be quite dead. I can't hear the conversation very well, but I can see that Chet is really agitated, and that Hal is trying to pacify him. He even puts his arm on Chet's. I did not get jealous."

"So," I asked, "what's the big deal with the lynx?"

"Guess," she replied.

"Oh, no. Endangered?"

"You got it. Looked it up as soon as I was alone."

"Oh, no, Genie." My throat closed up.

"I'm afraid so. I felt awful, and totally powerless."

"I can't believe he killed an endangered animal."

"Look at this way. Maybe that cougar and that lynx died so we could get the story out, and ta-da, save more animals when Hal's no longer running APO.

"I guess. Still..."

"I know. It's horrible. Anyway, we hightailed it out of there pretty quickly after that, and we just left the lynx there."

"We have to tell the Colorado authorities about this."

"I'm all over it. I'll call them after the article comes out. It'll be just one of many charges against him."

"So who ate the cougar?"

"No one did, actually. We brought it to the game warden, who takes the pelt, which still has the tail and feet and head attached, to a taxidermist for mounting as a trophy or making a rug out of. Chet keeps some of the meat for himself – 'mighty good eatin', tastes like veal' he says – and gives the rest to the game warden."

"Did Hal get paid for the cougar?" I asked hopefully. Hal making money from killing for sport would be too much to ask for, although I guess he did indirectly from his lodge ownership.

"No, he was just glad to get rid of it. I did ask him, though, since he doesn't use the meat or keep the pelt, what he gets out of the hunt.

"He claps me on the shoulder and says, 'Sarah, it's about being in the great outdoors, you and the sky and the crisp Colorado air, right Joe?' and I'm thinking hell, you could go snowshoeing or skiing for that.

"'Got that right, man,' says Joe. Then they do a bunch of backslapping and I'm glad I have this. Hand me my phone."

I reached over to the nightstand, and gave her her phone. She clicked, and I heard this muffled sound. It was clearly Hal's voice, extolling the virtues of killing animals just for the thrill of it.

The doctor, probably a med student judging from his age, came in.

"You got yourself a sprain, but it's not broken. Try to keep the weight off, ice it, and keep

it elevated as much as possible. And you must use crutches for at least a week."

He bandaged it, ordered some crutches from an aide, and we were good to go. Straight to the airport. By luck, with Genie's sad condition, we were able to work the sob story angle enough to get on the first plane out of town. We sat separately, just in case, me still in disguise, but it turned out that neither Hal, Joe, nor Mark was on the flight. When I passed her en route to the bathroom, I saw her typing furiously away on her laptop.

As she hobbled off the plane, she said "I am, so, so stupid."

"What are you talking about? Everything went perfectly."

"Denver, you idiot. When you said Denver, I took it totally at face value. He had a ticket for Denver, so I assumed he was staying in Denver. I should have figured out he could be going anywhere from here."

"Well, it didn't matter in the end."

"Yeah, well next time it might. I learned a big lesson, that's for sure."

Genie couldn't wait to get to her computer and start writing. Just a few more days of HIM and then he was HIStory.

chapter

TWENTY-NINE

Genie felt so wiped out she slept through her alarm Monday morning. She called me at ten to tell me she'd just arrived at work. The Cambridge Connection came out on Thursdays, with a deadline of 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Her story would appear in ten days, a week after the gala.

The stars aligned. Gala this Thursday night, with lots of fundraising, including extra money from an auction, which we could use for more shelters. A week later, after all the donations had come in, the big reveal.

Genie had already written most of the story – the background about Hal at APO, the embezzlement - before the Colorado trip, so by Tuesday afternoon, she had completed her article. She had a week of burglaries and spelling bees to cover before publication of her magnum opus.

Monday and Tuesday for me consisted of, in addition to last-minute gala preparation, reporting to Betty and Mary-Day on the hunt, and Prince Hal and the Russians. Then we rehashed it over and over for two whole days. And we shared our anxiety about Thursday, Hal's return to work.

Wednesday afternoon, the day before the gala, we called the airport to make sure that Hal's flight had landed on time. Yes. Everything was going according to plan.

And then I got Genie's phone call.

"Take a walk, I need you to be able to talk."

"Uh oh, this doesn't sound good."

"Right this second," she commanded.

I grabbed my jacket, headed out the door, and called her back when I'd distanced myself a full two blocks from the office.

"What the hell?"

"The story's coming out tomorrow."

"WHAT?" A couple of elderly woman looked my way, alarmed. "It's supposed to be next week. The gala is tomorrow night. It's our big money-maker. Oh shit, Mary-Day is gonna die."

"I begged and begged my boss to hold it for a week, and he told me he had no choice, he'd done all the fact-checking, he had his story, and the time had to be now."

"Tell him about all the animals who won't get saved if we don't wait till after all the fundraising is over."

"Don't you think I tried that? He won't budge."

"I'd better tell Mary-Day and Betty immediately so they can prepare. God, this is bad. I can't even imagine what will happen tomorrow night."

I tore back to the office, and practically grabbed both Betty and Mary-Day by their respective collars and dragged them into my office.

"Better sit down, even you, Mary-Day," I told them.

"This sounds bad," she replied, and she plopped into a chair, fingers drumming on my desk.

"There's no easy way to say this. The story is coming out in tomorrow's *Cambridge Connection*."

"WHAT?" they both yelled in unison.

From Mary-Day, "No, not possible."

Betty asked, "But why, I thought it was coming out next week."

"It was supposed to be," I explained, "But, Genie, well, she's a fast writer and she'd written most of it before the trip, and her boss wants it out immediately."

"We'll cancel the gala," said Mary-Day. "I'll make up something."

"Wait," said Betty. "We've taken everyone's money, which we'd have to give back, plus we'd be out the hotel costs. And the musicians, and the flowers...I just don't know."

"Can we keep him from coming?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? How?" asked Betty.

"Maybe I should call the honorees and alert them. That would be the responsible thing," said Mary-Day.

"But how would we even know about this? If you told them before the paper came out, they'd know it was an inside job."

"Hmmm, that's true," she replied. "You know what I think? We just have to let this unfold the way it was meant to. Those donors love me, and they love APO. We are about much more than one Harold I. Mason phony Junior, and Diane and I will mount a damage control plan that will make us stronger than ever, right, darlin'?"

"Absolutely," I replied, though I wasn't feeling that confident.

That night, I told Genie "You need a good Italian meal and I need something to do."

After stuffing ourselves with pasta, tomatoes, and peppers, we crashed on the couch with *Sex and the City* reruns. I heated up some hot chocolate, grabbed some chocolate chip cookies and we watched and snacked, as I wondered why they hardly ever showed the women's job problems. As Carrie might ask, "Is dating the new work?"

Genie and I turned in around ten, leaving Donnie to clean up.

I drove to work the next morning, garment bag containing my perfect black Mark Jacobs dress lying flat on the back seat for changing into later. Around ten, I was hanging around Betty's desk when the phone rang.

"You won't be coming in today? What a shame, we've missed you," she said with a wide grin and a thumbs-up. "How was your niece's wedding?" Pause. "Well, I'm glad you had a good time. I understand, I'm sure you have lots to do. We'll see you at the Aquarium around five." Pause. "Yes, I know it starts at six, but Mary-Day asked you and the honorees to be early for pictures, remember?" Another pause. "Okay then, bye."

"I'm guessing nails done, Botox refreshed," she said.

Betty, Mary-Day and a few others left the office around two to set up at the Aquarium. I would wait behind until the Cambridge Connection landed on our doorstep or on my computer screen, whichever came first.

I hit refresh for the ten trillionth time, and finally it appeared, Genie's story, with a gigantic headline.

"Nonprofit Leader an Embezzler and a Fraud." Byline Eugenia Halstead.

Harold I. Mason, Jr., President of the Animal Protection Organization, Massachusetts's largest pet shelter operator, has been discovered to have embezzled nearly \$1 million from the nonprofit over the past five years. Mason, an outspoken animal rights advocate, has also been revealed as an ardent hunter.

Invoices collected since the year 2012 for computers, dinners at Boston's most expensive eateries, and European and Caribbean vacations for Mason and his wife, Harvard professor Joyce Carter, provide evidence of intent to defraud the organization. In addition, Mason diverted agency funds for the purchase of two homes, in Harvard Square and New Hampshire.

Mason bypassed the organization's system of checks on expenditures with his own discretionary fund. Expenditures included a state-of-the-art plasma television costing \$3700. Other purchases include computers for family members, several DVD players, additional televisions, and a home stereo system costing \$22,000.

Next to the listing appeared a box, in which all of Hal's illegitimate expenses over the five-year period were totaled by category, adding up to \$240,000 and change. Also pictured was the Cambridge manse, with a caption indicating its currently assessed value of 3.2 million.

Mason has led the Animal Protection Organization for the past fifteen years. On a recent hunting trip to Colorado, Mason was spotted shooting a cougar from a tree, as well as an endangered lynx. On the pleasures of hunting, he was heard to remark: "It's just man and nature, and sometimes man wins and sometimes nature wins. It's the age-old battle, my skill and instincts versus that old cat's. I like the challenge, nothing like it on God's green earth."

Adjacent to the above paragraph was the *coup de grace*, Genie's photograph of Hal aiming his rifle at the cougar in the tree. Nothing like it on God's green earth.

She'd also written a detailed eyewitness account of the hunt. The article went on to talk about APO's history and mission, content provided by the organization's savvy Communications Director who wanted the

organization to look good despite its no-good so-called leader. I printed out a few copies for Betty and Mary-Day, my phone at my ear as I called Genie.

"You did it!" I shrieked. "This is so amazing."

"Hell, yeah, and thanks to you. Good luck tonight."

"Major weirdness in store, that's for sure."

After quickly changing into my new Marc Jacobs dress, I was as runway ready as Anne Hathaway. The grayish black set off my olive complexion, my curls hovered near the sexy fabric that revealed my shoulders, and the slightly full skirt created just the right amount of festive flair.

Genie owned a collection of antique bags from her great-grandmother. I'd selected a beaded clutch from the 1930's, barely large enough to hold a wad of tissues, a lipstick, and a key. They didn't have to worry about cell phones in those days. I squished mine in as best I could.

I arrived at the hotel as Mary-Day and Betty were finishing up the preparations – putting out the program books and chocolate favors for all the guests.

"Diane, your centerpieces, well, they're just spectacular," said Mary-Day admiringly, pointing to the wrapped baskets of pet supplies.

"They are, if I do say so myself," I said, just as Betty appeared, hand out.

"Give," she said, and didn't wait, just grabbed the article from my hand, eyes widening as she read aloud.

"This, well, it's just incredible. I wonder how many of our guests will have read it. I can guarantee he won't have. He never reads the *Connection*."

Mary-Day said, "Forget about the usual no-shows. We might actually have to set a few extra places for rubber-neckers. We're done setting up. I can check my voice mail." She dialed, waited.

"Oh my God, twenty-one messages."

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

"Ignore them."

She grinned and returned the phone to her purse.

And here we were enjoying cocktails in the Aquarium lobby, which could double as the set for *March of the Penguins*. The little critters lazed around the pool near the entrance, frolicked in the water. Hal had yet to make his entrance.

The guests wrinkled their noses at the arctic bird stench as they entered. You jerk, I was thinking, if you hadn't had to fly off to Colorado and kill something we'd be sitting pretty at the Four Seasons.

The room was buzzing, people flitting from one group to another, seizing each other, whispering in ears. Mary-Day was the most popular person in the room. People kept snatching her, wanting to know what was going on. Her standard response, as she handed everyone a second or third glass of wine from the tray of a passing waiter, was "I had no idea. I knew nothing about this, still don't."

She found a second to grab me. "Offer everyone a drink. Even if they have one, replace it with a fresh one. I want this place to feel like a frat house on a Saturday night."

Cocktails had been called for six, with the intention of going in to dinner at seven. It was now 6:45, and no sign of Hal.

"He must know. Maybe Joyce saw it and told him about it," I told Betty.

"No way does Joyce read the *Connection*, unless there's a story about a local spider infestation. He's just being his late old self. You'll see."

With no Hal, Mary-Day went ahead and told the photographer to take the photos of the honorees, who seemed mostly clueless, except for Dinky.

"Mary-Day, something funny's going on. Why isn't Hal here? And people are talking about some article in the *Connection*."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see," she said evasively. "Come on, guys, say cheese."

And then, 6:55, the red sea parted. Moses held up his arms in a double wave like he'd just captured the gold for executing a triple back flip dive at the Olympics, forgive the mixed metaphor.

Betty whispered in my ear, "Tell the band to play *Hail to the Chief*."

Standing by his side, gray bun held together with silvery chopsticks marking the special occasion, in a royal blue sack patterned with oversized flowers, Mrs. Hal.

Mary-Day flicked the lights, hit a glass with a knife, and silenced the room.

"Everyone in to dinner now, please."

No one budged. They were all staring at HIM. He headed towards a group huddled together, who looked up at his approach.

"Ron, Sue, how good to see you," he said.

He extended his hand towards Sue, who moved her glass from left to right to avoid shaking. She nodded, unsmiling.

The same scenario repeated itself a couple more times, as Mary-Day, Betty and I proceeded from group to group, nudging people into the conference center turned banquet hall.

"Ooh, look, stuff for the animals," we heard over and over, as everyone noticed the pet supply centerpieces, whimsical and at the same time elegant thanks to Mary-Day and me. The continuous slide show featuring our honorees and Hal played on the screen behind the podium.

The guests behaved like a group of unruly kindergartners, nearly impossible to silence. Finally, Mary-Day took the podium.

A mere five words. "Ladies and gentlemen, Hal Mason."

He strode up to the podium, grinning like a beauty contestant. He'd refused to allow me to write a thing for him.

"Great to see all of you this evening, and thank you for coming to honor our friends in the animal kingdom, which includes humans as well. I'm speaking of the three men we pay tribute to tonight, Warren Talcott, Dinky Mulhouser, and Jockey Leith.

"Of course, I'm going to start with a story."

He smiled, more tentatively now, and looked for an answering smile from the audience. They might as well have been made of stone. He cleared his throat.

"Two buddies were out for a Saturday stroll with their dogs. One had a Doberman Pinscher and the other had a Chihuahua. As they sauntered down the street, the guy with the Doberman said to his friend, 'Let's go over to that bar and get something to drink.

"The guy with the Chihuahua said, 'We can't go in there. We've got dogs with us.'

"The one with the Doberman said, 'Just follow my lead.' They walked over to the bar and the guy with the Doberman put on a pair of dark glasses and started to walk in. The bouncer at the door said, 'Sorry, Mac, no pets allowed.'

"The man with the Doberman said, 'You don't understand. This is my Seeing-Eye dog.'

"The bouncer said, 'A Doberman Pinscher?'

"The man said, 'Yes, they're using them now. They're very good.

"The bouncer said, 'OK, come on in.'

"The buddy with the Chihuahua figured what the heck, so he put on a pair of dark glasses and started to walk in.

"Once again the bouncer said, 'Sorry, pal, no pets allowed.'

"The man with the Chihuahua said, 'You don't understand. This is my Seeing-Eye dog.'

"The bouncer said, 'A Chihuahua?'

"The man with the Chihuahua said, 'A Chihuahua? They gave me a Chihuahua?'"

Instead of the expected laugh riot, he was greeted with stares. His hands trembled, his face ashen, he continued with his planned remarks.

"My friends, we are all here tonight to pay tribute to three great men who have dedicated themselves to helping me make APO an organization to be proud of. There are others we're honoring tonight as well, even though they're not here with us.

"I'm talking about our friends in the animal kingdom. While we take care of mostly dogs and cats at APO, we get the occasional smaller pet. I submit to you that every gerbil, every hamster, every goldfish is as deserving of our love and respect as the human being sitting right next to you at your table.

"All living creatures merit our consideration, our reverence." He was barely audible above the buzzing and had to raise his voice to be heard.

"They are our neighbors, and sometimes our companions. We do not harm them, and we do not dominate them. We care deeply about all our fellow creatures."

"Even cougars, Hal?" someone yelled, followed by another voice, "Cougars and deer and lynx exempted, Hal?"

A third person held up the *Connection*, shouting, "Hypocrite! Hypocrite!" The room erupted in boos, amid more cries of "Phony," "Hypocrite" and even, "Asshole."

He looked shell-shocked. I saw Joyce motioning towards him, removing her purse from

under her seat. She didn't know exactly what had gone wrong, but she wanted out, and fast. Hal stumbled back to his table, where Mary-Day was waiting with the *Connection*.

"Maybe you'd better go now," she said, handing him the paper. He glanced down, read enough to know what was what, grabbed Joyce and exited to a chorus of boos.

I was standing near the exit door, towards which he was practically running. He stopped, grabbed my arm and dragged me into the hallway. Joyce was grabbing his other arm, trying to extricate him.

"You!" he hissed. "It was you, wasn't it?"

I wanted to scream at him, tell him, yes, I was behind this, and recite a list itemizing his crimes. Taking advantage of Katelyn. Spending APO's money on his stupid vanity book. Spending more of APO's money on his fancy homes, electronics, vacations, money that could have, should have been spent taking care of the animals that, in the end, he didn't give two shits about. He deserved everything he was going to get, I wanted to tell him.

For once in my life, I exercised restraint. I merely smiled, enigmatic as the Mona Lisa, and gave a small nod.

"You little bitch," he growled, as Joyce dragged him away.

Hal had been the designated emcee for the night. Mary-Day stepped up to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen. This is most unexpected. I am so sorry for this disruption. I want to remind you of one thing. We are here to honor three distinguished and dedicated leaders, and to raise funds to help APO rescue abandoned and abused pets. Nothing, I repeat, nothing changes that. APO is a fiscally solid organization that has done good work for 150 years, and will continue to do good work for another 150. Many of you have been to our shelters and seen your charitable donations in action. If you haven't, I encourage you to call me and arrange a visit. You'll fall in love with our animals, and with what we do for them, and for the families who take them under their wings. That's who we're really here for tonight."

Mild applause, followed by the clinking of silver against china as people ate dinner, chattering away about this most confounding turn of events.

As soon as dessert was served, Mary-Day returned to the podium to present the awards to the three honorees. They read my speeches word for word, and each ended with an added thought, in Jockey's case, "We will survive this, and emerge stronger than ever," greeted by stronger applause.

To raise extra money, we'd planned a live auction. Our auctioneer, a local DJ who frequently donated his services to charity, was hawking a trip to Tuscany, a dinner in your home prepared by a local restaurateur, a set of golf clubs. Before he took the podium, Mary-Day returned.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began. "I can't pretend this organization hasn't experienced a, well, a setback today. But that's all it is. Before we begin our auction, I want to remind you of some very special friends."

She clicked, and up popped a picture of the world's saddest-eyed beagle. "Benny was abused and abandoned by his owner. No wonder he looks so sad."

Click. New picture, Benny in the embrace of little identical twin girls.

"Here's Benny in his new home. See how happy he looks now."

She ran through a few more slides, telling the story of each pet rescue with a heart-tugging picture.

"We're proud of our mission at the Animal Protection Organization—to find loving homes for abused and abandoned pets. And we perform that mission really well. Because of you. You and your generous donations. Thank you so much, on behalf of all our animal friends. And please remember them when you bid."

We netted double what we'd budgeted for the auction.

And then it was over. At least the dinner, but not the whole story.

chapter

THIRTY

The next morning, I was busy fielding unwanted phone calls. When I needed the press to cover an event, they were nowhere to be found. But supply them with a whiff of scandal, and they turned into vultures circling the carrion.

The *Worcester Telegram*, the *Springfield Republican*, and the papers in the smaller towns where we operated shelters all wanted the straight skinny. I told them all that APO was a solid organization that would survive the challenge. And of course, Katelyn called. She sounded exultant.

“Diane, I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“Well, believe it, and be proud. Katelyn, do you realize you put the wheels in motion with your receipts? You are a genuine, whistle-blowing heroine.”

She giggled. “Yeah, I guess I am. Like the woman who ratted out Enron, huh?”

“You got it.”

“What do you think’s gonna happen to him? Do you think he’ll wind up in jail?”

"Not sure, but he's sure as hell out on his ass from APO. Listen, it's totally crazy around here right now, I'd better go, but I'll call you later."

I found a few minutes to call Genie. Her boss thought she was the greatest, and was talking about a big promotion with a fat raise attached. She was updating her resume.

Right after I hung up from her, the phone rang. I swallowed when I saw the familiar number on my screen, and picked up.

"Hi, Mom," I said. "Is Daddy there too?"

"I'm here too," he answered.

"We wanted to hear all about your gala, sweetie," said Mom. "Was it a big success?" "Were they pleased with you?" asked Dad.

I wasn't sure if they'd be proud of my exposing a malefactor or horrified by my shenanigans in the wilds of Colorado. Probably both.

"Mom, Dad, I have a very long story for you. How about if I come home next weekend and tell you all about it?"

"We can't wait to hear all about it, right Greg?" said Mom.

Don't be so sure, I thought.

And then, taking a deep breath, I called Alison. Time for some damage control. She answered on the first ring.

"Alison Cooke-Davison."

"Alison, it's Diane Salvi. How are you doing? Your due date's pretty soon, right?"

I heard a sigh.

"Sorry, Diane. I'm just exhausted, that's all. Can't wait for this to be over. Guess it's a good thing I didn't interview your boss after all."

"Well, that's why I'm calling. Like any organization, APO is bigger than just one guy. As you saw, we are a really terrific organization, and we'll be stronger and more effective than ever. An article about an organization that survives, and even thrives, in the wake of a scandal would make great copy, don't you think?"

"Not sure. Boss is giving me a hard time. I have no control over my job these days." She snorted. "Or anything else."

"Look, my phone's been ringing off the hook all day and I want to give you the story, to make up for before."

"You know, I was pretty impressed with what I saw, and I still have my notes. Tell you what. Why don't I come by tomorrow, and you'll give me an update, and we'll see if my editor bites."

Unsurprisingly, Betty had received a call from Warren first thing in the morning after the gala. "No," she'd told him, "I didn't know anything about it. Well, I really couldn't say, but it does look like there's pretty good evidence for all of it. No, he's not here, and I don't know if he'll be in today. Yes, I'll call everyone and set it up. Your office, noon. I agree, it's very upsetting. I'll get back to you and let you know who's coming."

She hung up and smiled at Mary-Day and me.

"Emergency Board meeting. He wants everyone at noon, his office. And we're not invited, no staff."

Noon found the three of us in the lunchroom, gorging on potato chips and soda, feeding our nervous energy, which could power Chernobyl. Mary-Day was bouncing up and down per usual.

"Okay, ladies, now I'm Warren. Ahem."

She tried on a giggle, and shifted from South to North, tinkling belle to lock jawed Brahmin.

"Let's call this meeting to order. I think poor Hal has been underpaid all these years. Let's just give him the raise he deserves and be done with it. What do you think, Jockey?"

Betty played along.

"Well, that's a splendid idea, Warren. Hal's a fine fellow, and he wouldn't have done what he did if he hadn't needed the money."

We started to worry. What if following Hal to Colorado, exposing the embezzlement, Genie's article, even his public humiliation, had all been for nothing. He might have the Board so snowed that they would do nothing at all, and we'd find ourselves with Hal still at the helm tomorrow, and us in the unemployment line.

Five o'clock finally rolled around, and I was preparing to leave when Mary-Day swung by.

"My office. Now," she ordered. She was grinning like an Oscar winner.

"You talked to Warren," I guessed.

"Now," was all she said.

I fixed myself another strong cup of coffee, and followed my friends down the hall.

"Frannie Schwartz just called me," began Mary-Day. "She said she's always liked me, and never did care much for Hal. She gave me the full rundown on the meeting of the board. Are y'all ready?"

"Come on, talk fast, Mary-Day. I know you can do it," I told her.

"Well, it went pretty much as we predicted. Warren started by defending Hal. He got a little bit of feeble backing from Jockey and some of the old guard. They dismissed the *Connection* as a pretty small-potatoes local rag, no offense to your roommate, Diane. They just wanted to sweep it under the rug and hope it would all blow over.

"The defense of Hal lasted for a few hours; they started at noon and continued till just a few minutes ago. They took things a little more seriously when Frannie pointed out their responsibility as fiscal agents for the organization. I don't think even Warren was prepared to cough up his share of the million to get Hal off the hook.

"Finally, they held a vote on whether or not to press charges. Warren and Jockey's were the only 'no' votes. So, ladies, it looks like Hal might just wind up in the slammer yet."

"He's gonna be mighty popular over at Suffolk County Jail," said Betty.

Alison showed up for her interview the next afternoon, about a couple of grapefruits worth of baby flesh bigger.

I'd arranged for her to interview Betty and Mary-Day, with more of a focus on our future than the past. They shared our financials indicating our fiscal soundness, and outlined plans to revitalize the board.

The time had come for a quick reminder tour – she'd already seen the place on her earlier visit.

"Diane, I have to say, I've been really impressed by your commitment to your work."

"Well, you too."

"Yeah, sure. I wish...."

"Is your job okay? I mean, I hope you don't mind my asking."

"Frankly. I'm having kind of a rough pregnancy, and Andrew's not around much. He's been traveling a lot for work. He says he'll cut back after the baby comes, but I don't know...."

Her eyes turned wet, and then she recovered herself, turned all business.

"I like what I see here, and actually, this is the story, about no organization being about a single individual. Just to warn you, I'll probably write about the inadvisability of any leader staying too long, like your Hal. But you're a really good place, and I'll write about that too."

I thanked her profusely. She really wasn't so bad. We'd never be friends, but I could use an ally in the media.

As I watched her head towards her car, I thought about Andrew, her disappointment in his support during her pregnancy, and it suddenly hit me. He was just a guy. Yeah, a charming, funny, smart one, but at the end of the day, just a plain old regular man, with flaws I knew about and some I probably didn't. Maybe I'd just taken a few steps in the direction of being over him.

The District Attorney convened a grand jury, and presented evidence, enough to indict Hal. Warren came in to see Betty a few days after the indictment. She recounted the conversation for Mary-Day and me.

"You know, Betty, this might be an opportunity to do some house-cleaning. I've been leery of Diane ever since that time she neglected to call Hal when I made my big donation. There was that and her failure to follow through with that PR opportunity at the *Globe*."

Betty was smiling, and I yelled, "This is so not funny! What did you say?"

"Don't worry, Diane, I told him you were the best thing to happen to APO since sliced bread, and gave him the straight poop on the donation phone call, and the *Globe* incident. Right down to the Botox."

Mary-Day called Frannie Schwartz, and invited her to join us for a visit to my North End shelter. Progress was uneven; some weeks it was almost immaculate, other times, the water bowls went unfilled. I called Bart/Ponytail to give him a heads up.

Mary-Day and I took the T and met Frannie outside. Before we went in, I showed her the "before" pictures.

"This is dreadful!" she said. "Did Hal know about this?"

"I told him months ago, as soon as I discovered this place, and showed him the pictures. He said he'd think about it, but he didn't do a thing."

"Let's go inside."

We entered the shelter, still shabby but reasonably clean. Even Bart had cleaned himself up for the visit. He stood definitely sober and wide awake, with a firmer than usual voice as he showed us around.

"It looks like you're doing your best with very few resources," Frannie told him.

"I'm tryin' ma'am. But you gotta give Diane the credit, she, well, she whipped this place into shape. And me too."

We all chuckled.

"Diane, I applaud your efforts. I'll see that the rest of the board finds out. And I promise you, we'll do something about it."

And then I had my brainstorm.

"What if we reclaimed the Pet Palace..."

"And shut it down, once and for all," finished Frannie.

"Well, not exactly," I replied. "We could turn it into our flagship shelter. Maybe even come up with some innovations and, I don't know, do some research and publish it. We could play a leadership role, maybe even nationally.

"Diane, you're full of ideas, but that is one expensive piece of real estate for an animal shelter."

"We could sublet part of it, so it could pay for itself."

She looked thoughtful. "Not bad. It's certainly worth exploring. You're very creative, Diane, and we're lucky to have you."

I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

chapter

THIRTY-ONE

Three months have passed since Genie's article.

As a first-time non-violent offender, Hal received an eight-year sentence, which would've been lower had he been able to make full restitution. The sale of the used TV's and computers didn't bring enough, and you couldn't sell a vacation you'd already taken. Joyce was done with him, and refused to ask her sugar daddy to swoop in to the rescue and make up the difference with a fat check, so he was off to the big house. With time off for good behavior, he'd probably serve three or four. No Paris or Puerta Vallarta for you, mister.

As soon as the court pressed charges, the Board slammed the guillotine down on Hal's neck. He had the balls to ask for his pension, which had been frozen solid.

Betty, Mary-Day, Katelyn and I were meeting for a splurge dinner at the Harvest, where Hal had exhorted me never to hurt Mark, and where I'd first started to wonder about his finances. Everything had come full circle.

Katelyn had gotten her neighbor to watch Aidan so she was coming too. They were all dying to meet Genie, so she would be joining us.

Katelyn was so excited about seeing us, and as a bonus enjoying a night out on her own, that she was the first to arrive. She was already seated as we brushed past tweedy professorial sorts, Joyce's colleagues, rubbing elbows with sharp business school types.

"Genie, you gotta tell us about Hal in Colorado," commanded Betty.

"Da. I vill, don't you vorry," she said in her best Russian accent. "Hal is big deal to Russian counts. They loooooove him. 'Hal, dance some more. Hal is good shot, nyet?'" She turned on her camera's video and passed around it around so we could all see the footage of Hal's marksmanship.

And then Betty dropped this bombshell.

"You forgot to tell them about my phone call from HIM."

"What?" we all yelled in unison. "He called you?"

"Yep, called me today from the pen. He told me his big plans: I'm gonna get me a publisher and Mal's gonna help and I'll write my memoir. Diane can just kiss my you-know-what. Then I'll write my screenplay,' he said. 'I'll really stick it to these Boston Brahmin Harvard types whose asses I've been kissing for the past decade. When I'm up on stage at the Oscars, we'll see who's laughing then.'"

"He'll have all the time in the world in cell #62, where he's the bitch of a car thief named Itchy," laughed Mary-Day.

"Then he said, 'I should've known that Diane was trouble from the moment I met her, always in my face about some damn shelter or other. Plus, she was lousy at her job, and a ball buster besides. Oh, and then he says "And Mary-Day, she was always in my face with a knife in my back.'"

Katelyn, laughing, said, "How'd you manage that, Mary-Day?"

Betty continued. "'And you Betty, Jesus. You turn Judas when I've treated you like royalty for the past fifteen years. I will never understand you women, never. Next job, I'm hiring as many men as I can get away with.'"

"You go, Hal-baby," from Mary-Day. "Just go buy yourself a sex-discrimination suit at your next job."

"What next job?" smirked Betty. She paused. "You kids are something else, you know that? You've done something a bunch of old farts, including me, never could've accomplished. The departure of Harold I. Mason, Jr. from APO. Here's to youth and the future."

"Wait just a minute, Ms. Foster," I said, "To Betty, forever young."

"Here, here," seconded Mary-Day. She raised her glass, and we all joined in clinking and drinking.

Genie grabbed a napkin and drew a picture of Hal in prison stripes, hacking at rocks in the blistering sun.

Katelyn tapped her knife to her glass. "I have an announcement, too," she said. "I got a new job."

"That's fantastic, Katelyn, tell us," exclaimed Betty.

"Believe it or not, it's at a fancy ad agency, like where Diane used to work. I'm the receptionist, which means I can sometimes find time to do homework. Plus, Aidan likes my regular hours much better, no more baby-sitters at night. So he's, well, mostly staying out of trouble."

Betty smiled, patted Katelyn on the arm.

"You deserve it, honey, I'm so glad for you. Meanwhile, we have some big plans, right ladies?"

Mary-Day and I nodded.

"First up, we'll diversify the board," explained Betty. "Hell, we're probably the only nonprofit in Boston without a single person of color among its trustees, only a handful of women, and an average trustee age of 110. Good God, attendance at any college besides Harvard would be diversity for us. And we want Frannie Schwartz as our next board chair. Plus," she stopped to take a swig from her wineglass, "I think I may just try for eliminating the world 'interim' from my 'interim president' job title."

A unanimous chorus of "you go girl" and high-fives all around.

The next morning's mail brought unwanted news in the form of an envelope that I thought might be a wedding invitation, my name and address handsomely calligraphied. Who would send me such a thing at the office? I opened it gingerly and read:

Alison Cooke-Davison and Andrew Davison

joyfully announce the arrival of

Baker Cooke Davison

March 10, 2013

9 pounds, 4 ounces

21" long

The announcement featured a picture of tiny Baker Cooke, his face peeking out from a little oval cutout, surrounded by a clutch of blue balloons.

I Facebooked Genie immediately.

Alison has given birth to Baker Cooke Davison. He was the size of a watermelon.

She wrote back immediately.

If a name is destiny, I'll guess we'll be dining in his restaurant some day. .

My reply.

Do I have to send a gift?

From Genie:

How about some cake pans?

I didn't think I'd ever see Hal again. I was wrong.

Genie called me the other day, sputtering so frantically I couldn't make out a word. Finally I understood her to say, "Check your email."

I clicked, saw that she'd forwarded me something from, oh my God, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. It was a listing of upcoming events taking place at several medium security prisons – an art exhibition at Walpole, a talent show at Plymouth, and, yes, a play at the Concord Correctional Institute, penned by none other than Harold I. Mason, Jr.

"Can members of the press bring a friend?"

"Absolutely. It's Saturday night. And look good. You never know where you'll meet your next boyfriend."

How to dress for a theatrical performance in a medium security prison? I assumed nothing too seductive; wouldn't want to activate a bunch of libidos with nowhere to go. I tossed on a pair of jeans, boots, a plain crewneck sweater, and yes, my cap from the Garment District. Wouldn't you know, those things had become trendy for girls, and I rather liked mine, for aesthetic as well as sentimental reasons.

We drove through the countryish lanes of Concord, one of the Boston area's most expensive zip codes. Huge colonial manses in pristine condition from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nestled on two and three acre beautifully landscaped plots, a mere mile or so from the prison. I imagined Hal thinking he deserved to be installed of one of those big houses, as opposed to The Big House.

It was a prison all right, barbed wire along the top, a searchlight atop a tower in case of runaways. Damn, I forgot my cake with the knife baked in.

We entered through the visitors' door, and were promptly frisked. We've all become accustomed to frisking at airports these days, though this was a little "friskier" than that. A few other people milled about, presumably family members of the performers. When we reached critical mass, a guard opened the door, and we walked down a long hallway into a meeting room. We were spared the sight of rows of cellblocks, but I was picturing Hal in his tiny eight by ten space, with a simple washbasin, toilet and bunk bed.

The "theater" was an unprepossessing white room, with cheap metal folding chairs arrayed auditorium style. It had no stage, just an empty space at the front of the room. A few guests were already seated when our group arrived. Including Mark. He was studying his program, but looked up briefly when he heard us enter. And saw me.

My first instinct was to duck and run, but I realized I had nothing to hide anymore. I still didn't know for sure if he'd ever figured out that I'd been the "boy" in the coffee shop in Melrose. But I wanted him to. So I doffed my cap, smiled, and extended it in his direction. A shocked expression on his face. Good. I like surprising people.

And then, in came the inmates, about thirty of them. They sat behind us other audience members, laughing and punching each other, and resembling nothing so much as a bunch of restless seventh-grade boys. Except that they'd done worse things than pinch someone's lunch money or vandalize a locker. I'd expected orange jumpsuits – what did I know about prison life except what I saw on film? – but they wore mostly gray sweatpants, white t-shirts, sneakers with white socks. A few sported denim jackets with the letters DOC for Department of Corrections imprinted on the back. A middle-aged guy in a track suit came to the front of the room and asked for silence. He introduced himself as the Program Director at the prison, and spoke briefly about the rehabilitative aspects of the arts, how writing, performing and painting had been demonstrated to reduce recidivism.

"And now, I hope you'll enjoy a one-act play by one of Concord's newest residents. Hal Mason. It's called "Sticking it to the Man in the Crimson Suit." The unsubtle title of Hal's Harvard expose screenplay.

The set consisted of a table and chair, obviously meant as an office. On the wall behind

flew a Harvard banner. A middle-aged man (*Purse snatcher? Counterfeiter?*) sat at the desk. In walked a guy dressed in, I swear to God, a floral print dress, and those chopstick things stuck into her bun. In other words, Joyce.

The guy at the desk stood, grim-faced, as the woman started to berate him.

"Just who do you think you are, messing with my office?" she screamed in a falsetto.

"You know perfectly well I'm the dean of admissions at this illustrious institution," he said, smiling.

"Yes, an institution that could not survive without the help of our generous donors."

"And their stupid children?" he asked, leering. The audience erupted in laughter. They liked the idea of stupid rich kids being admitted to Harvard.

"Look, Dean Anderson," said the woman. "Maybe we need some, some intellectual diversity around here. With wealthy parents. Who can help us give scholarships to needy kids."

"You want intellectual diversity? I'll show you intellectual diversity. Bobby, come out here."

Someone dressed as a slovenly teenager, kind of like me in Colorado, shuffled onto the stage. I caught Mark sneaking a glance in my direction.

"Ms. Salvi - *huh?* – I'd like you to meet a young man I interviewed for our freshman class the other day. Bobby, why don't you tell Harvard's chief fundraiser a little about yourself."

"Well, um, mostly I ski and surf. I mean I do that stuff on vacations, in Hawaii and Switzerland with my folks. I actually go to this boarding school in Switzerland."

"And your SAT scores, Bobby?" asked the Dean.

"Well, they could've been better. Around 1150 with verbal and math. I'm not a total moron."

"And tell me about your parents, Bobby."

The fundraising Salvi woman interrupted. "I know perfectly well what his parents do, and you know that I know. Father – CEO of General

Mining Corporation, Mother – South African diamond heiress. And yes, they've been very generous to the university. Bobby will do just fine here."

After this, a genius middle-class Harvard reject was trotted out, presumably the one whose earned place has been stolen by Bobby and his wealthy parents.

The balance of the play consisted of a philosophical argument about preferential college admissions. A bit clunky, okay very clunky, but I actually agreed with his points. Even though they came from a very personal place – jealousy of Joyce's Harvard sinecure, anger at Hal's own children's rejection from the most prestigious halls of ivy.

Needless to say, the Dean, advocating for a pure meritocracy, got the upper hand over the fundraiser. The play ended after about forty minutes with her groveling for him to love her, and his telling her she was scum.

To thunderous applause, and shouts of "Author, Author," Hal emerged from a back room, came forward and took a bow. Then, just as the Russians had at Melrose Lodge, the crowd started chanting, "Hal! Hal! Hal!

So, Hal's admirers tended to the criminal and foreign elements. Okay, I guess we couldn't forget the old fogey WASPs on the board. Throw them in too.

After his last bow, he surveyed the audience, waved at Mark. And then he saw me. And Genie. He blanched, gave a quick nod to the audience, and, after a moment's hesitation, started backstage. But the applause grew louder, so he turned once again to the audience, straightened up with a big grin. He gave me a weird glare that I interpreted as "Fuck you, I'm doing all right, and there are people in the world who appreciate me," and trotted backstage again. The program director returned, thanked us all for coming and invited us to their next production in two months, a work entitled "Getting Back at Dad." Well, better they worked out their revenge this way than with a shiv.

The crowd dispersed. Before I had a chance to escape, Mark was standing before me.

"Nice work, Diane," he snarled. "You really fucked my dad over but good. Which means me and my whole family too. I hope you're proud of yourself."

Actually, I felt guilty as hell. I'd used Mark, and probably worse than he'd used me. I was far from perfect. Needed to think about what this all meant, and work through it. But not this minute. I smiled mildly.

"I am, actually. Your dad got what he deserved. Now, if you'll excuse me..." I grabbed Genie's arm, and we walked out together. I hoped never to lay eyes on either of them again.

On the bright side, I had a lot to look forward to this summer. My favorite project was planning the décor for Genie and Donnie's wedding. I'd create a different centerpiece for each table, half reflecting the groom's Chinese heritage and half the WASPy bride's – gong on one table, fife and drum on another, pagoda vs. colonial church. Genie's mom loved it.

"This'll be the most unusual wedding Greenwich has ever seen," she complimented. "Sure you don't want to do this for a living, Diane? You'd make a hell of a lot more than you do at your animal shelter place."

Could I really make a living at this, and would I want to? Do it part time as a sideline? Not sure, but fun to think about.

Oh, remember the guy from the plane? The one I tried to flirt with while I was in disguise? He's just moved into the neighborhood. I've seen him walking his mutt every now and then. I was determined to make friends with both of them. When I got around to it. No rush.

The End

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to my early readers, some of whom were kind enough to read more than one version: Heidi Brown (three at least), Carolyn Connolly, Ellen Effren, Leslie Taubman Friedman, Barbara Gaffin, Alan Gelb, Laurie Kaplowitz, Aaron Kleiner, Aliya Kleiner, Liz Loudon, Sally Pellegrum, Vivian Podrid, Mary Jane Reynolds, Nancy Salitsky, and Phyllis Waldman. Extra thanks to Nicolas Boillot and Bev Zibrak – you know why.

I am indebted to Lon Otto, a wonderful writing teacher, with whom I was fortunate to study at the Iowa Summer Writer's Festival. Thank you, Amy Axelrod, for guiding me through the publication maze.

The world's greatest book group actually offered to read and critique my novel-in-progress without being asked. Drum roll please for Nancy Mark Honig, Sonya Kurzweil, Alison McCarty, Renee Meshel, Natalie Schatz, Donna Weber and Terry Yoffie.

Special thanks to the fabulous Jack Zelinka for the information on Samurai and to the equally fabulous Sydney Zelinka, who identified problems with the "voice."

Grub Street, with its super-efficient and supportive Sonya Larson, is Boston's indispensable non-profit creative writing center.

There were several readers whose names became lost when I acquired a new computer. I'm so sorry, but whoever you are, I thank you too!

And the biggest shout-out of all goes to Michelle Hoover, without whose insightful, creative guidance this book would never have made it from computer to book shelf.

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From (A)Musings

Adults Only (an excerpt)

Possibly my favorite part of any vacation takes place in my bed, months before I board the plane. Get your mind out of the gutter, this isn't about pre-vacation sex; I'm all too single. No, it's about lying awake in anticipation, the movie in my head starring *moi* sipping a *café crème* at the Flore, hiking the Atlas mountains with a Berber guide, swinging through the Costa Rican jungle tethered to a leather harness.

So why am I on a last-minute flight to Mexico in March? And an even bigger why, on my way to an all-inclusive, adults-only resort (a welcome porno DVD on the pillow)? My typical vacation M.O: Eject me from the plane, hand me my walking shoes, and point me in the direction of a little-known museum, an architectural masterwork, a backcountry hiking trail. Wind me up at 9:00 a.m. and set the timer to run for twelve hours.

But after vaulting the twin hurdles of a Bar Mitzvah (son) and college applications (daughter) over the past few months, the thought of my usual forced-march style holiday made me want to reach for the smelling salts. A few days lazing by a pool, joined by some friendly singles or sociable

couples from the hotel, sounded like just the ticket for a stressed-out single mom.

My suitcase is stuffed with paperbacks, tubes of sunscreen, and a brand-new beach cover-up to conceal my brand new body, ten pounds heavier than it was a year ago. But that's another story.

I think I might be in trouble when, 3000 feet in the air, a twenty-ish guy in a Hawaiian shirt limbos down the aisle chanting "No Drinking in Cancun." Right on cue, up pops a commercial on my TV screen for one of the most popular DVDs of all time - that's right, *Girls Gone Wild* - and it suddenly dawns on me. I am fifty-six years old and I am en route to Spring Break In Cancun.

But when I get to my hotel in the more sedate Playa del Carmen, I realize that's not my problem. As I check in, a panel of six huge TV screens lights up with the words *Welcome Andi Brown*, and I know I won't find bodacious young people puking in the lobby and hooking up on the lounge chairs. Because I am on... a cruise. As in, I've told my friends that if they ever hear me use the words *going* and *cruise* in the same sentence, to put my out of my misery. Immediately.

Okay, so this hotel's not about to leave its moorings, but here are the dead giveaways that all that's missing are the lifeboats and a guy in a cap and gold-trimmed double-breasted blazer. Four restaurants - Asian, Tapas, French-Mex and Whatever-You-Want-We-Got-It. Fitness center. Volleyball. Elvis crooning *Can't Help Falling in Love with You* on the loudspeaker.

The hotel's website hadn't mentioned one of its more surprising features, an ambulatory art gallery. A menacing grizzly bear stalks this one guy's arm from elbow to shoulder. An eerily realistic ape takes over the entire back of a very large gentleman. A guy with a devilish sense of humor has etched the letters 666 on his shoulder, nestled between Miss Liberty's torch and a snarling jackal.

About the author

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22349108R00149

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Charleston, SC
18 September 2013

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If Bridget Jones and The Office had a baby, it might look something like **Animal Cracker**.

In **Animal Cracker**, a bunch of smart women plot to get the goods on their boss at Boston's venerable Animal Protection Organization. Hal Mason is Brad-Pitt handsome, with a Harvard professor wife and an adorable but shiftless son who wins the heart of Diane Salvi, the organization's new communications director and the book's narrator. When Diane lands the job of her dreams, she's impressed with her new boss, but soon learns that Hal has managed to earn the adulation of the organization's board of directors and the scorn of his staff. As Diane's suspicions about Hal mount, she enlists some friends in the office, along with her reporter roommate, to investigate if he's just plain annoying, or much, much worse.

Diane's journey is one of a young woman's drive to create a fulfilling life as she navigates the vagaries of the workplace and tries to find love, all while holding on to her principles.



Andi Brown has enjoyed her career as a professional fundraiser in the non-profit sector. She lives in the Boston area. You can follow Andi on Twitter [@andibrownauthor](https://twitter.com/andibrownauthor)

ISBN 9781484107607



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