



Temporary Insanity

A NOVEL

Leslie Carroll

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LESLIE CARROLL



HarperCollins e-books

For temps and grandmothers everywhere

“Well, in *our* country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, *here*, it takes all the running *you* can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass

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Chapter 1



When he took me in his arms, almost literally sweeping me off my feet, I could smell the Bay Rum on his cheeks. It was a scent that took me back a few years . . . back to the days when we were in college together and the sweetly pungent fragrance would be connected forever in my mind with no other man but him, although it never went any further at the time than a sophomore's secret crush on a senior. I used to get a giddy rush of anticipation and undergo a flurry of hormonal overactivity when the aroma of Jon's aftershave would float through the corridors, announcing his imminent presence, invading my nostrils with pure, unadulterated lust.

These days we were no longer students, but pros at this kind of thing. Torn between exploring the look in his deep brown eyes (to see if he was as into this as I was), and succumbing to total fantasy, I chose to close my eyes and inhale the Bay Rum. I was immediately transported to a sun-drenched beach on Jon's native Caribbean island, where breezes wafted through coconut palms and an afternoon's biggest decision was whether to order a planter's punch or a mai tai.

In all the time I'd known him, and certainly on every occasion when our paths had crossed since graduation, including the star-studded funeral of Nick Katzanides, the guiding light of our alma mater's theater department, I'd wondered what it would be like to kiss Jon; how it would feel to dance a salsa with our tongues; his strong, permanently tanned arms enfolding my body, holding me until I could feel our hearts bongo to the same rhythmic beat.

The reality was even more glorious than I had imagined. And believe it or not, it was all in a day's "work." Show business is an iffy career path at best, but boy-oh-boy, there are days like today that make all the years of struggle and tenacity worthwhile—when that trajectory can rocket you all the way to heaven.

"Okay, you two, you can stop now." The director's voice, evincing a slight impatience, intruded on my idyll. Jon and I broke our embrace. I gazed up at him. Already wearing three-inch stilettos, I'd been standing on my tiptoes to get the full benefit of kissing this six-foot-four demigod. "Jesus, that was amazing," I murmured to him, deliciously dazed. The kiss was the kind that could make a normally sane woman lose her mind.

"Just trying to help you get the part, Alice," Jon murmured in my ear. He gave it an improvisational nibble and I nearly melted onto the floor of the rehearsal studio. "It's the least I can do for an old C.U. classmate."

"An old C.U. classmate who doesn't have an agent," I whispered. "I only got this audition because I wrote a note to the casting director telling him we were old pals." Jon had come a long way since our days as theater students together. While I was one of thousands of young actresses with talent and training trying to make it in New York, competing for only a

handful of roles compared to the number of parts written for men, Jon was blessed with being tall, dark, hunky, *and* gifted. He had also developed a reputation for being a genuinely nice guy in a cutthroat business. His star ascended quickly when, just a few years out of college, he was plucked from relative obscurity by a megawatt movie star producing her first film. She took one look at Jon's screen test and essentially told the casting director to wash him, strip him, and bring him to her tent.

From then to now, he'd become a household name in Hollywood and was making a rare return to the New York stage. I was among the dozens of women called in to audition for the supporting role of his wacky girlfriend. And it was true that the only reason I got a special appointment and the opportunity to read with the star himself was because we were old buds. Part of Jon's charm was that he didn't forget where he came from or whom he'd encountered or worked with along the way, even if their careers weren't at the same level as his.

"Good reading, Alice," the director said. He and the casting director had barricaded themselves behind a long folding table littered with stacks of actors' photos and résumés, donut crumbs, crumpled napkins, paper coffee cups, and a large bottle of Tums. "Strong work on the scene, and . . . obviously you two have some chemistry going there."

I felt the heat spreading into my hairline. "Well, we've known each other since . . ." I realized I didn't want to give away my age.

"It's easy to work with Alice," Jon said graciously, preserving what was left of my professional dignity.

The director nodded noncommittally. "We'll just take the script from you—"

Oh, right, there's a script. This is real life, not my bluest

dreams. I retrieved the loose pages from the floor, where I had let them slip from my hand during the make-out session with Jon.

“—and we’ll be in touch,” the director continued. “If you don’t hear from us by the end of the week, it means we decided to go another way with the role.” He wasn’t making any effort to move, so I approached the folding table and shook his hand.

Jon came over and gave me a soft peck on the cheek. “Great to run into you again, Alice,” he said, affectionately placing his warm hand on the small of my back. “If I don’t see you, good luck with your career.”

“I really appreciate what you did for me this afternoon. It was very sweet.” I was trying to express my enormous gratitude with grace; that is, without bursting into tears or jumping Jon’s bones (again) for joy.

“Well, I know you received good training,” Jon teased, referring to the theater program we both matriculated from, “and back then you were a damn fine little actress.”

“So you figured I wouldn’t embarrass either of us,” I joked. I smiled at him; we were close enough for me to take one last inhalation of Bay Rum. One for the road. “Thanks again.”

I was feeling so warm and fuzzy that I actually walked down the four flights of stairs instead of taking the lazy way out and waiting for the elevator. Back on the street and into the sunlight, I looked at my watch.

Shit, shit, shit. I’d promised my uncle I’d be back at work over an hour ago. The audition had taken longer than I’d anticipated. They ran behind schedule, which is par for the course in these situations, but then they really gave me the best chance to prove myself instead of rushing me in and out

the door—which is also customary, especially when one of the decision makers is being done a favor by everyone else in the room.

I fished through my purse for my cell phone and dialed the office.

“Law offices of Balzer and Price, how may I direct your call?”

“Hey, Louise, it’s me,” I said to the receptionist. “Is my uncle around?”

“Yes . . . but I don’t think you want to talk to him. He’s got a waiting room full of clients and he’s screaming bloody murder that you aren’t back yet. One of them actually turned up the volume on his Walkman so he wouldn’t have to hear your uncle cursing your absence. And you know how Hilda hates hip-hop. She’s ready to slit her wrists, I think.”

So much for basking in the afterglow of a magical audition and a hopeful job prospect with a man I’d been dreaming about for years. “Tell my uncle to cool his jets. I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’m at the mercy of the subway system.”

As an actress in New York, I’m at the mercy of a lot of things, actually. In addition to the previously mentioned low ratio of women’s roles to the high number of actresses beating the bushes for them, even when directors aren’t passing you over in favor of casting their wives or girlfriends (or both), we’re victims of the vagaries of a highly personal, subjective selection process. From the outside, I’m sure we seem nuts not to throw in the towel at some point. I look at it this way: I can’t imagine *not* giving what I most love to do my very best shot. And I’ve inherited a certain philosophy from my grandmother, the wisest woman I’ve ever known. Nothing is worth doing unless you’re willing to give it a hundred and ten percent, time after time. Come to think of it, I’m the

same way when it comes to men. I live in hope because the alternative is unimaginable.

One reason I hate to leave the office during the day—even though I’m entitled to a lunch hour, and it’s rare that I have a midday audition—is because I’m terrified that all hell will break loose while I’m gone. My fears were inevitably confirmed. I returned to a secretary’s nightmare.

I had reminded my “Uncle Earwax” (real name Erwin Balzer—known to his colleagues as “Balz”), oh, about five times that Eusebia Melba and her entire family were coming in to the office. About three years ago, half of them had piled into a taxicab that subsequently got into a collision with another cab, which contained—coincidentally—the other half of the Melba family. Consequently, we had eight injured Melbas, seven cases of whiplash, six cracked ribs, five fractured wrists, four chipped teeth, three broken noses, and two uninsured taxis.

And a partridge in a pear tree.

I’d been working on the case for months. Untangling the details so the legal pleadings could be drafted was a job and a half. Sorting out the many Melbas’ multiple injuries was an ordeal in and of itself. Factor in the language barrier between us and it was enough to give anyone a permanent migraine.

Uncle Earwax was livid. And loud. “What are you trying to do to me, here, Alice?” he yelled at me. “We’ve got too much to get done today for you to run out to an audition,” he insisted, mouth full, sauerkraut dripping like snot-colored seaweed down his chin. He was shoveling in a late lunch. “The Melbas have been waiting for over an hour for you. Every one of them—even the baby—has an appointment scheduled for tomorrow with the defendants’ designated orthope-

dist. You're the one who's been keeping track of their injuries, so you need to fill out their physical exam sheets and xerox whatever medical reports we've got in their file so they can bring them to the doctor. The photocopier is jammed, by the way. Some moron must have tried to use it without taking the staples out of a document or something. No one else in the office seems to know how to fix the machine, so maybe you should do that first."

I went over to the copier while trying to get a word in edgewise, but there was no way to interrupt Uncle Earwax's tirade. "We've got the Morro motion papers to finish, you've got to do a letter to that schmuck Winkler to get his ass down here to sign his deposition transcript, and you've got to do whatever it takes to get the Cienega case onto the trial calendar. That idiot calls me every day to find out why it's taken eight years to get her slip-and-fall case into court. If she'd bothered to cooperate with the investigation back in 1998—"

I removed an unbent paper clip from the guts of the photocopier and got it humming like new again. There was a crash from the corner office. The one with the picture windows that looks out onto the busy intersection of Broadway and Canal Street.

"No, no, no, no, NO!" A second earsplitting crash. Milton Price, Uncle Earwax's law partner, bounded into the reception area wreathed in a cloud of cigar smoke, his face the color of a ripe beefsteak tomato. His secretary, Hilda, scurried back to her chair and donned her headphones, pretending to become reabsorbed in his dictation.

The sixty-seven-year-old lawyer began to bounce like a jack-in-the box, causing a clump of ash to fall into one of the open files that was sitting on the floor by Hilda's desk. Mr. Price re-

moved his *Romeo y Julietta* just long enough to berate his employee. "Hilda, how many times do I have to tell you—?"

Saved by Alexander Graham Bell. The phone rang with all the aggressiveness of a force of nature.

"*Come mierda*," Hilda cursed under her breath, and pursed her lips in the direction of her boss.

Between the cigar smoke and the mutual animosity in the air, I had just developed a raging headache, magnified tenfold by the constant cacophony. And this was just an average day at the office for me. Try telling the old man there was a law against smoking in the suite he and my uncle paid five grand a month to maintain.

"Balzer and Price law offices, how may I direct your call?" Louise asked mildly, seemingly oblivious to the din. "Mr. Jones? And how do you spell that . . . ? And you're calling for who . . . ?"

"Can't anyone do anything right around here?!" Mr. Price demanded rhetorically. "It's for me," he snapped, pointing a stubby finger at the telephone receiver. "I've been waiting for his call. Put it through to my office." He waddled back into his own room, muttering invectives directed at his support staff.

I peered through the receptionist's window at the eight members of the Melba family. Carmen, the oldest daughter, balanced a picnic hamper on her lap. Carlos and Luis had a two-handled cooler between them.

"*Momentito*," Hilda said, peering out of the sliding glass partition that separated the reception area from the secretarial stations.

It was a lot longer than a *momentito* before I finished typing up all the information sheets on the individual Melbas' injuries. I buzzed my uncle. "I'm done. We can bring the clients into your office whenever you're ready."

"Tell them I'll be right with them," responded the disembodied voice of Uncle Earwax.

"Tell them he'll be right with them," I echoed to Hilda, who conveyed the information in both English and Spanish.

I walked into my uncle's office with the fistful of physical exam sheets. "Shit!" I practically tripped over a giant Redweld containing all the Alvin Oliver hospital records. "Might as well use this file for a doorstep," I quipped, "since you'll never win the case." I surveyed my uncle's desktop, thinking a twister left less damage in its wake, then started shuffling the piles of random papers into semi-orderly stacks, so as to create some vacant space on the opposite side of the desk. "Do you want the entire family in here," I asked, "or do you just want to explain everything to Mrs. Melba?"

"They seem to regard this visit as a festive occasion," he replied, not answering my question. "What's that I smell? I'm starving."

"You just had two hot dogs and a pastrami sandwich from Katz's." I sniffed the air. "I think it's fried chicken. With a side of potato salad."

"Before you bring the clients in . . ." Uncle Earwax pulled a manila folder from the bottom of one of the piles lying by his left hand. "You screwed up the Kaplan summons and complaint." He shoved the papers at me.

Taking the legal pleadings, I frowned and bit my lip. "What did I do?"

"Your body might have been in your chair, but your head was at one of your tryouts or something. You didn't pay attention." He nattered on about which county the lawsuit should have been brought in. "Now you've got to fix it. And you fucked me up this afternoon, too—either you're an actress or you work for

me. Who overpays you to work in this office?" he challenged. *Fifteen bucks an hour to endure this because it's a family business*, I was thinking. "So your head can be in the clouds half the time!" He sighed audibly. "The things I do for your mother."

Some favor, I thought.

"Fix the Kaplan papers. And send in the Melbas."

"Yes," I said meekly, feeling my blood pressure rise by the second. I dropped the Kaplan documents on my desk, then ushered in Eusebia Melba, along with Carmen, Luis, Carlos, Orlando, and Mariella, who packed away the last of the potato salad before smoothing out her skirt and joining her mother. Mrs. Melba's youngest daughter, Cookie, remained with her infant son Enrique, breast-feeding him in the reception area.

Uncle Erwin cleaned something out of his ear with his right forefinger, then began to explain to the family, loudly, as though Mrs. M. were deaf—and in halting English, as though it were his own second language—the significance of today's visit. Mrs. M.'s English was pretty good, though not stellar. I discreetly whispered a few words in my uncle's ear.

He activated the intercom. "Hilda!" he yelled. "Can you get in here for a few minutes?"

So much for subtlety, I thought. *And why bother with such formalities as the intercom button?* As Hilda translated Uncle Erwin's sentences, I handed each of the Melbas their physical exam sheets to review. Mrs. M. followed every word of type with her index finger, moving it along the text as if it had been written in braille. At one point she frowned and looked up at Hilda. "*Que?*"

Hilda followed the client's gaze back to the page. "*Yo no se,*" she said, sensing a storm in the offing. From her point of

view she was being paid to put up with Mr. *Price's* shit, not Mr. *Balzer's*.

Mrs. Melba reached across the desk and handed the paper to my uncle. She pointed to the place where I'd listed her injuries. Uncle Erwin feigned shock and total ignorance. "Alice, what's this?" He showed me the document.

Oops. I'd mistakenly given her a broken wrist and apparently had attributed her broken ribs to another member of her family. I gathered up the physical exam sheets and quickly scanned the rest of them for additional errors. I'd gleaned the information from the legal pleadings Uncle Earwax had dictated—although, knowing his scant attention to detail, I should have double-checked and looked at the individual medical reports on my own. I usually do.

I looked at my uncle. "I took this from your dictation," I said, showing him the sheaf of papers. "*You* must have told me that—"

"What?!" Uncle Erwin thundered. "Alice, how the hell could you be so stupid?! *Estupida!!*" he added for emphasis, waving his arms and wildly gesturing in my direction, in case the clients hadn't comprehended him. "You went to the best schools, you've been working for me for two years already, and still you make stupid mistakes like it's your first day on the job. Louise could do your job better than you do it and she can't even manage to take a simple phone message."

I stood, shaking, in my uncle's office, feeling hot tears begin to well up. Carmen Melba fished in her red leather purse for a tissue and handed it to me. This wasn't the first occasion when I'd been torn between sticking up for myself and protecting my uncle—not just because he's my

mother's brother, but because he's the attorney his clients trust and respect.

You don't have to take this, you know.

But he's my uncle. He's *family*.

He's abusive. Just because you're related to him, it doesn't give him the right to treat you this way.

But—

I know you'll try to make a million excuses for him because you love him . . . "He's stressed, he's having a bad day, suffering from heartburn . . ." Alice, wake up! And look to yourself, for once.

Uncle Erwin tossed the physical exam sheets at me. "Take these inside, correct them, and reprint them," he commanded. He shrugged at Mrs. Melba and threw up his hands as if to wash them of my sins. "*Estupida*," he repeated, jerking his head in my direction.

I give myself good advice from time to time, but I very seldom follow it. Now I felt I had no choice. Uncle Earwax had pushed me one step too far. My face flushed, my cheeks wet with tears, my heart pounding, I leaned down to whisper something to my uncle. Something I'd been wanting to say to him for a long time.

"*Fuck you*," I hissed in the quietest, most controlled tone I could manage.

Then I grabbed my coat and purse and walked out the door.

I was seething, and determined to change my life. From the back of my appointment book, I pulled out a slightly rumpled clipping I'd been carrying around for months.

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—TURBO TEMPS—

is looking for a few *fast* women (and men)!
We want to talk to *you*!

So, Uncle Earwax had called me stupid. In front of a room full of clients. Which is how I happened, the following morning, to be sitting on the carpet of Turbo Temps' Forty-second Street office on the unluckiest of floors—the thirteenth.

I slid my tush against the apricot-colored wall of Turbo Temps' waiting room and balled up my tweed coat, sticking it between the small of my back and the painted Sheetrock. For the entertainment pleasure of the job applicants, sus-

pended from the ceiling were three television screens, each showing the same Schwarzenegger film, with the volume mercifully muted. Someone was having a horrific allergic reaction to the enormous bunch of lilacs displayed on the glass coffee table and was sneezing uncontrollably without benefit of a handkerchief. All of the furniture in Turbo Temps' nicely appointed waiting area was occupied. People were sprawled around the room the way my theatrical colleagues camped out in the Actors' Equity lounge during the wee hours of the morning, just to sign up for auditions. A couple of Broadway shows had recently closed and a major national tour had just ended, which was why the temporary employment agency was flooded with bright, educated people all looking for work. Temp agencies' rosters typically overflow with the names of actors, writers, and musicians, all in need of a job to tide them over until the next gig. In fact, I'm willing to bet that if all the actors in New York who routinely work in office buildings in order to make ends meet gathered on the same day at the same time on the pier at Twenty-third Street, the concentrated weight would force Manhattan to dip precipitously into the Hudson.

There weren't enough clipboards to go around. I had been told to take a numbered ticket as if I were on line at Zabars' appetizing counter at eleven A.M. on a Sunday. Finally, I snagged a clipboard and a Turbo Temps employment application, or rather "employment application," as it was spelled at the top of the form.

Hmmmm.

I wondered what to write in the narrow box where I was supposed to explain why I'd left my last job. It did not appear to be multiple choice. I have a habit when I'm anxious, and I have a ballpoint pen in my hand, of clicking and unclick-

ing the spring mechanism at the top. The waiting area was surprisingly quiet for the size of the crowd encamped there, although there were a few people with their cell phones surgically attached to their ears speaking in hushed but hurried—and occasionally harried—tones to their brokers, their agents, or their mothers.

My pen-clicking tic got me a few dirty looks as I struggled to find an appropriate, truthful-yet-vague answer to the obvious question of what I was doing there. From a literal perspective, not an existential one. Still, I had to look within for some much-needed guidance.

Okay, *why did I leave my most recent employment?*

Because my own uncle called me stupid in front of a room full of people.

Well, are you stupid?

No, of course not.

So why did you leave, then?

Because my uncle humiliated me . . .

Lots of bosses humiliate their employees. Sad, but true. If you have such thin skin, we can't place you with an attorney's office. The receptionist will eat you for breakfast.

Okay, not *humiliate*, then. He made me feel . . . insignificant. He . . . belittled me?

Belittled?

Belittled.

Thus went my conversation with myself. Yes, Uncle Earwax belittled me.

And what happens, Alice, when someone feels belittled?

They feel . . . smaller?

Aha! Now we're getting somewhere. And if you feel smaller, then you're not as big as you used to be or feel. You're a size or more smaller, right?

I looked down at the "employment application." Why had I left my most recent job? they asked. I wrote a single word: "downsized."

Well, as a great man once said, a lie is a sort of myth and a myth is a sort of truth.

Finally, my number was called and I was ushered into a small, cramped inner office overlooking an air shaft. This cubby bore no resemblance to the waiting area, where it was clear Turbo Temps spent the lion's share of their interior decorating budget.

"Hi, I'm Tina," said a young woman, who seemed barely old enough to be out of school herself. She extended her hand. "Can I pour you some coffee?"

I accepted her offer and she emptied the murky contents of a glass carafe into a paper cup and handed it to me. Good thing I drink it black because she neglected to offer me any milk or sugar.

"So, Alice, welcome to Turbo Temps. I'll be your employment counselor."

I looked down at the ad in my hand. "What happened to Wally and Stacie?"

"Stacie's on maternity leave and Wally's at the track," Tina replied with a forced cheeriness. "So it's me and Linda here all by ourselves today."

Me and Linda? Shouldn't it be "Linda and I"? No, wait . . . it's "Linda and me," isn't it? Probably not a good thing for someone seeking a secretarial job to have a brain fart about grammar. Then again, it's probably worse for a placement counselor.

I perched on the chair opposite Tina's desk. The upholstery was the worse for wear and there was a mysterious stain on the seat. While Tina reviewed my job application and résumé, I surveyed her terrain. Her certificates in Personnel

Placement and Legal Assistant from Interboro Community College were suspended in dusty black frames on an uninspiringly “greige” wall. There was a large travel poster of the Amalfi Coast, slightly crinkled, with the corners frayed and torn. I took a guess that Tina had probably carted it from job to job. I picked up one of her business cards from a black plastic holder facing me on the desk. It read: Tina Benedetto, Turbo Temps Employment Consultant.

Oh, dear.

Alice, you shouldn't judge people on their ability to spell (or not). Plenty of geniuses were lousy spellers. Just look at . . . oh, Christ. No, I'm not thinking Christ was a crappy speller, although Aramaic is probably a bitch to master . . . just, “Oh, Christ, I can't think of a famously shitty speller so I can make my point to myself.”

Tina looked up from my application. “Ohhh, you were downsized,” she said sympathetically. “That’s happening so much lately. In fact it’s getting harder to find permanent positions for people because of it.” Her face brightened. “You may be in luck, though. Placing temps is usually easier because the employers don’t have to pay benefits, and if they find themselves suddenly overstaffed, they just let you go.” She looked at my résumé again. “Okay, you’ve got a good background, education, all that stuff, so if you’ll just follow me, we’ll give you a typing test and a legal secretarial aptitude test, and after that, we’ll determine how to place you.”

Eek.

This is where I got nervous. I suppose I’d known on some sort of intellectual level that I would probably have to take a test, but I’ve never performed well in situations where I feel like I’m being judged. Not a great thing for an actress, where every audition situation is a short but hellish sixteen-bar up-

tempo or a monologue-delivered-out-of-context-to-a-blank-wall equivalent of a typing test.

Tina led me into a long, narrow room full of computer terminals and electric typewriters, the dinosaurs of the technological age, though many New York City law firms still use them to type forms that they're too cheap to download onto their computer system. This was not my first visit to an employment agency; therefore, I knew that sometimes the typewriter keyboards are specially rigged so that if you make a mistake, you can't backspace over it and correct it. My "employment consultant" seated me on a dirty orange swivel chair in front of one of the terminals and showed me the "test": a single-spaced sheet of text that I was supposed to retype, verbatim, first into the computer and then on the typewriter. Tina picked up a black plastic timer and set the clock.

My palms became moist; I could feel beads of sweat begin to form on my brow, and a zit on my chin swell to the size of a suburb. I suddenly developed a raging headache.

All you need to do is retype the page, Alice. As quickly and as accurately as you can. Just think of it as a purely mechanical exercise.

Hah! I'm self-taught as a typist, and while I'm fast, I still need to look down at the keys. This is where my actress memory stands me in good stead. I looked at a sentence or two, memorized them, and began typing, repeating the process as necessary, while on either side of me, other applicants underwent the same test. The brightly garbed girl on my right muttered each word aloud as she typed. The man on my left, in a pin-striped suit so freshly dry-cleaned I could still smell the chemicals, cursed under his breath with practically every keystroke. An older woman seated with her back to me was typing so fast, I was developing an instant inferiority complex. It was hard to keep my concentration.

As I struggled to focus and tap-tapped away on the keyboard, I wondered why employment agencies always give typing test text that has next to nothing to do with the types of jobs in the offering. I continued to type: *In order to bake the perfect batch of brownies, it is important to blend the batter so that bubbles form on its surface, though overbeating will cause their consistency to be less moist, and therefore, less desirable.* What the heck was this? I didn't think Turbo Temps would be sending me over to Betty Crocker.

The woman on my right released a string of expletives when, in readjusting the angle of the testing text, she accidentally knocked the contents of her coffee cup into the keyboard. She looked over at me, terrified. I didn't know what I could do to help, and my own little meter was ticking away. I felt badly that the best I could offer her was a sympathetic look.

Across from me, the gray-haired speed demon went into a full-fledged panic when the system suddenly froze on her and she was unable to effect a single keystroke. "I don't know what to do," she repeated helplessly.

"Maybe you should wait for Tina to come back," I suggested. I felt so sorry for her; still, she was raising my blood pressure several notches.

My speed and accuracy weren't bad on the computer, but the typewriter began to trip me up because my muscle memory was so accustomed to using the correcting key, which of course had been disabled. I ended up wasting a lot of time trying to make corrections that I knew were impossible to do, then stressing out over the number of uncorrectable errors. I winced when the timer's little bell rang and Tina came to collect my efforts.

If I'd nearly given myself an anxiety attack with the typing

portion of the evaluation, it was nothing compared to the legal aptitude test Tina then handed me. I returned to the computer and attempted to format the dummy legal pleading in front of me. Too bad there wasn't a crash course in "legal formatting for dummies," because everything I had learned had been on the job from Uncle Earwax. I hadn't a clue about which "hot keys" were required to create footnotes, blacklining, tables of authorities, and other terms of art in the lexicon of legal arcana. I wasn't even sure what a "table of authorities" *was*.

My efforts proved disastrous. My headache had reached Mach 1, I was in a cold sweat, on the verge of tears, and no doubt I was also breaking out into a rash.

Tina was pretty hard on the applicant whose computer had fritzed out. It hadn't been her fault, and essentially Tina was accusing her of lying on her résumé about her ace typing skills. "You only scored thirty-five words per minute with two errors," she tsk-tsked, "and you claim to type ninety words per minute." She switched into a patronizing tone that didn't befit her extreme youth. "Our clients do not take kindly to, well, liars," she said bluntly. "I know you've been out of the job market for a while and you're anxious to reenter the workforce, but I'm not going to be able to do anything for you if we have 'character issues.' "

The applicant looked stunned and tried to stammer out the circumstances under which her typing score ended up so low, but Tina's assault on her integrity had gotten the better of her emotions.

I couldn't control myself. I never can sit idly by in situations like this. "Her computer froze," I said. "And instead of assuming the worst of this lady and attacking her, why can't you just give her the benefit of the doubt and retest her on a different computer?"

Tina gave me a look of surprise, as though the notion hadn't occurred to her.

"And call a technician to fix that unit," I added, pointing to the rogue CPU.

The employment consultant blinked once or twice, gave a little tug on the hem of her jacket, seated the gray-haired applicant in the chair I had just vacated, and wound the timer. Then she perused my scores and asked me to follow her. "Are you *sure* you were a legal secretary?" Tina frowned as we headed back to her room.

I explained the multitasking expected of me in Uncle Erwin's office, adding that while it was true that I had some law firm mileage under my belt, it had indeed been in learn-as-you-go situations. Yet I assured her that I was a quick study and a fast learner.

"Well, what sort of job were you looking for?" she asked me.

"A job in a law office where I have as little as possible to do with lawyers." *Well, it was the truth.* Legal skills pay more than regular secretarial ones, which was why I had gone to a legal temp placement agency in the first place. It's just that I really hate lawyers, especially if they're like Uncle Earwax. And his colleagues. And his adversaries. But, since I need a day job to pay the rent, I might as well try to make as much money as I can. Then, if I get cast in a show, which may pay me next to nothing, I'll have a financial cushion to fall back on.

Assuming you don't go shoe-shopping, Alice.

"I was hoping for the graveyard shift in a word-processing center," I said to Tina. Maximum salary for minimum attorney exposure.

Tina shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't do that with your legal aptitude test results. In the word-processing centers, you have to know the correct way to format the documents."

"But they *look* right," I insisted. Style over substance if absolutely necessary.

"That may be, but if a document needs to be revised by someone on a subsequent shift, they won't be able to do it quickly and correctly unless everyone does it the same way."

So much for aesthetics and creativity.

You want to work in law firms. What the hell do you expect?

"So, where does that leave me?" I asked Tina.

"I can send you out on interviews for first-shift legal secretarial—simple letters and such—or for first-shift paralegal work, which would translate to a couple of dollars less per hour, but more research and less direct contact with the attorneys."

First shift would mean the same day-job hours I was used to. And the lowest pay scale. As the shifts got later, the pay rate increased. I sighed. If I could make a few dollars more per hour than Uncle Scrooge had been coughing up, I suppose I could live with it, so I numbly acquiesced to Tina's assessment of my talents. After all, beggars can't be choosers, and within a couple of weeks the landlord would be begging for the monthly rent, twirling his metaphorical mustache and threatening to evict my ancient granny if we didn't fork over our check forthwith.

"I'll be in touch," Tina assured me. "I'll line up a couple of interviews and give you a call." I left Turbo Temps wishing she hadn't looked like her task was Herculean.

Chapter 2



"Your uncle's a rat bastard," Gram said, pouring milk into her tea. She squeezed a lemon wedge over her cup and drank the curdled brew, seemingly oblivious to the science experiment she'd created. Gram liked her tea that way. With milk for the English side of the family and lemon for the Russian side.

"Your mother's people, they never gave Danny and me a penny when we were starving and living off cat food in that single room above the brothel on Eighth Avenue."

Although she always had a flair for the dramatic, which means I probably come by it honestly, Gram did have a point. She'd never completed a formal education, having run away from home in her mid-teens to become a Ziegfeld Follies girl during the waning years of those extravaganzas. She also claimed to have had an affair with the great impresario, "but that was only between his marriages." Gram always had her scruples, and, for a nonagenarian, most of her marbles.

The apartment we shared, Gram and I, might have been a monument to vaudeville. She kept every room painted a shade of Florentine red—"bordello red," she called it with a wink, recalling her humble marital dwelling in Hell's Kitchen. The

numerous framed photos on the walls, sepia-toned and yellowing with their increasing age, bore testament to the remarkable career she and her husband shared, beginning back in the 1930s. Grandpa Danny Finnegan, about ten years Gram's senior, had at one time been the toast of Broadway, a hooper who had headlined as "the one, the only Danny Boy" at the Palace Theatre, where Judy Garland, decades later, performed her farewell concerts. To play the Palace—that was the pinnacle of success back then. But Grandpa Danny and, at one time, Gram, had been very fond of their liquor. It was Danny's love for Kentucky mash which, with his working-class New York accent he pronounced "boy-bun," that had been his undoing. It destroyed his senses of timing and discipline as a dancer, wrecked his relationships with producers, and rendered him incapable of sustaining the tap dance studio that he and Gram had started when their performing careers began to wane.

Still, Gram never had a bad word to say about her husband, even after the night that he stumbled boozily down the five flights of stairs onto Eighth Avenue for a cigarette (she wouldn't let him smoke in the house, especially around their babies), and never returned.

Despite his transgressions—and they were legion—Grandpa Danny remained a saint. Uncle Erwin, on the other hand—actually it was Gram who'd dubbed the man "Uncle Earwax" back when I was a kid—was a louse. Gram was never too crazy about my mother's side of the family.

She offered me a Pepperidge Farm cookie. Gram liked to take the cookies out of the bag, artfully arrange them on one of her flowered Royal Doulton plates, and offer them to guests, insisting they were homemade. She took a Milano from the dish and issued an unladylike snort. "A family takes care of

its own. Through thick and thin. What right has that man to call you 'stupid'?" Her indignation physically manifested itself in an increasingly pink rash below her throat and across her "poitrine," as she liked to call it. "He's a Philistine. He wouldn't know art or beauty or culture if it bit him in the ass."

"I'm afraid it has little or nothing to do with any of those three things," I told her.

"I know, I know," Gram sighed into her tea. "He's just a rat bastard. Like Richard Nixon."

Her other pet peeve.

I turned her teacup around on the saucer and Gram gave me a confused look. "It's chipped there," I explained gently. "You could hurt yourself."

She ignored me. Or maybe she just didn't hear my remark. "So tell me about the employment agency. Did they love you?" She held up her hand, indicating I should wait to respond. "Shhh, listen to that," she said, "can you hear it? Close your eyes; it's even better that way."

I did so and listened as one of the city's picturesque—and anachronistic—horse-drawn carriages *clop-clopped* down the street, past our third-story window.

"That's my favorite thing about living on this block for all these years," Gram said dreamily. "Even better than having the crosstown bus at the corner." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "Now. Did the temp people love you?"

I swallowed a large gulp of my now-cool tea. "I'm afraid not. I thought my skills were marketable ones, but they're not good enough to get me placed in the jobs I feel I can stand waking up for, five mornings a week. Although anything would be better than Uncle Earwax at this point. My suspicions were confirmed, though, that seat-of-the-pants training won't get you very far in those fancy law offices."

Gram ran a gnarled finger over my hand. Her pale skin appeared nearly translucent, her knuckles swollen and blue from arthritis. Only her indoor gardening hobby kept her hands pliant. "It's kind of like show business, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"All these office jobs. I could never type a lick, never learned shorthand, those receptionist jobs with all the cables tangled up like spaghetti terrified me. Your Aunt Edna did that for years. No wonder she suffered a breakdown at forty. But take performing. There's something we both know. In my day, you didn't take acting classes. Dancing, of course. Singing, maybe—if you wanted to go for grand opera. But acting? You could either do it or you couldn't. If a producer liked your looks, he hired you, and if you were really abominable, they'd get you a coach for the part."

I wasn't sure where she was going with all this. "So are you saying I should take lessons so I can get these word processing skills I never learned under my belt?"

Gram shook her head emphatically. "Nah. Why waste time and money taking lessons for something you don't really want to be doing with your life? You're a smart girl, Alice, and you know what you know. And a smart person will see that and offer you a job."

I hoped she was right. I told her about the poor woman at the temp agency whose computer had frozen during her typing test, the employment counselor's reaction, and my going to bat for the lady. Gram beamed and squeezed my hand. "Oooh, you're such an activist," she said proudly. "You get that from me! You're the only one in the family who understands why you have to tilt with windmills from time to time. Even your Grandpa Danny didn't get it. And," she added with a sigh, "your mother's side of the family *never* did."

* * *

"You have the wisest grandmother," my friend Dorian said over a Bud Lite at The Wooden Horse, our favorite Greek diner. I was shoveling in a turkey club. Dorian doesn't eat. Actually, that's not true, but he doesn't pay for meals. Or groceries. Dorian has a master's degree that he could turn into good money by teaching theater courses, but to do so would be tantamount to admitting defeat as an actor. He also staunchly refuses to get a survival job like I've got, or to tend bar or wait tables as do so many New York artists striving for their big break. So he makes ends meet by doing background work on film, commercials, and TV shows that are shot in New York. Perks of on-set employment include all the food you can eat, all day long. When he doesn't have an "extra" job, Dorian reads *The Hollywood Reporter* to learn what's filming around town. He's got a nose for scoping out their shooting locations and he manages to hang around the "crafts service" food tables long enough to chow down. Since there are hundreds of people involved in making a movie on any given day, no one is likely to question his presence. If anyone ever does, he flips them his valid Screen Actors Guild card and tells them his paperwork is a couple of blocks away, back in the extras holding area, which is usually a large hall, like a high school gym or a church basement where the producers corral the background actors until they're ready to be brought on set for a shot.

"You know she offered me tap-dancing lessons. For free," Dorian said. "But I was afraid to embarrass myself, even in front of your grandmother. I'm hopeless. Can't sing a note and can't dance to save my life. I must be the only gay man in New York with no rhythm. What's the terpsichorean equivalent of tone deafness?"

When I started to ruminate over it, the words “two left feet” on the very tip of my tongue, Dorian reminded me that his question had been rhetorical.

“Hiiiiii, guys!” Our friend Isabel breezed over to the table, heedless of the waitress she’d almost blindsided with her enormous shoulder bag. “Am I dripping in sweat or what?”

Dorian looked at her. “What,” he responded, then offered her a sip of his cold longneck. “You look like something the cat dragged in.”

“Just about,” Izzy said. She relaxed her shoulder and her bag fell to the floor with a thunk that caused my plate to hop an inch or so off the table. “The Public Theater is doing a musical version of *Romeo and Juliet*. I just got out of the audition, and wouldn’t you know it, nobody on the subway would give me a seat, even though they kept slamming into my bag and then giving me dirty looks. You would think they’d realize that if I had this damn thing sitting on my lap, it would be out of everyone’s way.” She looked at her watch. “Holy shit! I was on line down there for five hours.” She shook her head disgustedly and slid her butt onto the red pleather banquette. “All that for sixteen bars of an uptempo and sixteen bars of a ballad.”

“There’s already a pretty damn good musical version of R&J,” I said, offering Izzy half my sandwich. She hungrily accepted it.

“Yeah, I believe it’s called *West Side Story*,” Dorian added. “And, pardon my asking, but what sort of an uptempo did you sing for an audition for *Romeo and Juliet*?”

Izzy grinned, then tried to discreetly slither a slice of tomato back into her mouth before responding. “It’s not called *Romeo and Juliet*. It’s a rock opera called *Starcrossed*! Exclamation point. Don’t forget the exclamation point—to

make sure you know it's a musical, like *Oklahoma!* or *Oliver!* or *Fiorello!* Go figure. I didn't know what else to sing, so I went with 'My Heart Belongs to Daddy' and then I did one chorus of 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' from *Jesus Christ Superstar*." Dorian and I stared at her. "I *said* I didn't know what else to do," she said defensively, spilling tomato seeds from my turkey club down the front of her shirt. "God-damn!" I handed her a paper napkin.

"Here. Blot. Are they still setting the show in Renaissance Verona? Not that you didn't knock 'em dead, because I'm sure you did, but you know how narrow-minded casting directors can be. You don't exactly look classically Italian at the moment," I said, appraising her spiky blond hair and blue eyes.

"Yeah, but with a name like Isabel *Martinucci*, they oughta figure it out."

"It shouldn't matter if you're really Italian or not," Dorian added. "Hel-lo! Isn't that why they call it '*acting*'? Does that mean that because my name is Dorian Mueller I should only play Nazis? Or, in my case, gay Nazis? I wouldn't even get cast in *The Producers*, because I can't sing or dance. I'd barely work a day in my life!"

"I've always wanted to be Italian," I told them. "When I started acting professionally I thought of changing my name from Alice to Alessandra, but 'Alessandra Finnegan' doesn't exactly do the trick and I owe my Gram too much to insult her by changing my surname."

"I like your name," Dorian said. "It sounds like a name from a good old-fashioned Capra film." He waved his hand in front of himself as though he were visualizing an image on a giant movie screen. His voice modulated into the timbre and cadences of one of the old Fox Movietone newsreel an-

nouncers. “ ‘Alice Finnegan, the faithful and devoted secretary with a heart of gold, just struggling to afford seamless nylons during the lean years. *Loyalty* is her middle name.’ ”

It was a good opportunity to tell them about my placement interview at Turbo Temps. Obviously, I didn’t have the greatest feeling in the world about the experience, but I needed something to tide me over until I got cast in a show that would pay the bills. Crawling back to Balzer and Price after such a provocative exit line was a non-option, and Gram’s Social Security checks alone didn’t come within a ballfield of paying the rent. Besides, I detested the thought of sponging off of her. I treated our living arrangement as seriously as I would any situation where I was sharing the place with a roommate.

“Welcome back to temporary hell,” Izzy said.

Dorian took a slug of beer. “Isn’t that *purgatory*?”

Izzy looked at him and snickered. “Yeah, temporary hell is perennial purgatory. You know, sometimes you just have to hold your nose and jump in,” she said. “Look at *my* bread and butter.” Izzy worked for attorneys too, the kind who specialized in medical malpractice, defending butchers—I mean doctors—who fucked up royally, usually resulting in the patients’ deaths (if the victims were fortunate) or major-league physical deterioration (if they weren’t). “I can’t even take a lunch break when I work for these guys, because I can’t keep the food down anyway. The things I have to type make me gag. If the gory details don’t get to me, my bosses’ cavalier attitudes do. One of these lawyers actually had the balls to dictate *into a tape*, mind you, ‘with any luck the patient will expire in the next couple of months, thereby avoiding the necessity of a prolonged and protracted trial.’ ”

"Whatever happened to getting one's day in court?" Dorian asked us.

I finished the last crumb of my sandwich. "That's the difference between your day jobs and ours," I told him. "The wheels of justice turn swiftly only on *Law & Order*."

"So why do you girls work for them? Wasn't it Shakespeare who said, 'Let's kill all the lawyers'?"

"Yes, Dorian," I replied. "Though, unfortunately, the speech is often taken out of context."

"It doesn't change the sentiment, however," Izzy added.

When I returned home from The Wooden Horse, Turbo Temps Tina (sort of like Bronx Barbie) had left me a voice mail regarding an interview the following afternoon with Ramona Marlboro, the managing coordinator of legal assistants at Newter & Spade, a conservative "white shoe" law firm in midtown. They handle mostly corporate litigation and white-collar crime, such as insider trading or embezzlement. These days, more than ever, they must be very busy.

Well, I thought, combing through my closet for something appropriate to wear, preferably something without a plunging neckline or a well-over-the-knee-hem, *Ramona Marlboro merits a brand-new pair of pantyhose, fresh out of the cellophane*. I tugged them on and opted to go with a simple brown suit that I use for background work on films and TV shows. It does nothing for my coloring, but extras aren't supposed to stand out; the point is to look as wren-like as possible most of the time. I once did a film job where the high-powered star was a blonde who insisted that there be no other blondes on set. She had enough clout to get away with it. Izzy was livid when she heard about it and wanted to phone the Screen Actors Guild and start up a discrimi-

nation suit. Since my hair is more or less a dirty strawberry blond, I got away with being hired, but Izzy's shade is usually closer to lemon yellow and working for lawyers for so many years can turn even the most rational human being into a rabidly litigious one. I think Dorian finally talked her out of investigating what it would take to file a class-action suit joined by every blond SAG actress in New York by reminding her that she might end up blacklisted forever over barely a hundred dollars, the take-home pay for a normal day of extra work.

Back to my boring brown suit. One of the tricks when you go in to these humongous law firms looking for employment is to look as non-threatening as possible. *They* want to be the threatening ones.

Oh, and one other bit of advice: Leave your sexuality at home, Alice. Don't look alluring.

I'm not doing anything on purpose, I told my mirror image. This is what I look like. Do you want me to look like hell on purpose?

You're going to be interviewed by a woman. Trust me, she'll want to be the best-looking one in the room. You're just there to do your job so you can leave at a decent hour of the day and pay your rent; you're not there to meet a husband. Besides, do you really want to marry a lawyer?

Ummmm . . .

Don't answer that.

I arrived at the plushy offices of Newter & Spade and was introduced to Ms. Marlboro, the woman in charge of hiring temporary legal assistants. Turbo Temps had already predetermined that I wasn't going to be able to cut it in the word processing center and I'd begged not to work directly

for one of the lawyers as his secretary. The whippet-thin Ramona Marlboro appeared to be in her early thirties with short, dark hair, thinning on top, actually. Yes, *thinning*. I bit my lip. Her appearance was already a bad sign. My job history is littered with bad luck working for small-boobed, short-haired female superiors. I have nearly scientific data to prove that I get along fine with a boss who's a woman as long as her hairdo is page-boy length or longer. Ramona was a definite *uh-oh*. She shook hands with me, then surreptitiously smoothed hers over the jacket of her navy double-breasted suit before offering me a seat.

Ramona reviewed my résumé, and, on noting that I'd minored in English in college, asked me if I thought I could digest documents. I didn't know the term of art (Uncle Earwax, who was my on-the-job-trainer, had never used it), and had visions of munching away like a nanny goat on sheet after sheet of legal papers. Turns out Ramona meant "digest" as in *Reader's Digest*. As in summarizing the key points and reducing them to a few words or sentences. Sure, I thought I could handle the assignment, I told her.

"You'll start tomorrow, then," she said, and offered to take me to lunch. Upstairs at the subsidized company dining room. The girl was a big spender.

Actually, the dining experience at Newter & Spade was an eye-opener. I know that the caste system is still very much in evidence in India, but who knew that it flourished high above the Avenue of the Americas? Ramona permitted me a peek inside the walnut-paneled walls of the partners' dining room, where the odor of expensive cigar smoke warred for predominance with the permeating scent of pink and white speckled rubrum lilies arrayed in the sort (and size) of displays I've only seen at funeral homes. Cream-colored linens

and silver flatware adorned the tables. White-jacketed waiters served food and beverages, including alcoholic ones, on china and in cut crystal.

So this was the veldt where the legal lions headed at feeding time. I thought it must also be where the government secreted its cloning experiments. My best guess was that all of the partners in this sanctum sanctorum were within a seven-year age span of one another, their hair color (gray, gray, gray), weight (high), and follicle count (low) also falling within a narrow range. The generalissimos of this empire of litigation also sported a distinctive uniform: navy, black, or charcoal pin-striped suits, white shirt, simple patterned silk tie (with dashes of red in it), black shoes. I spied only one woman at a corner table and she was in camouflage as well. Ramona spoke in hushed tones with more veneration for the Turner who was the head of the mergers and acquisitions division than for the Turner seascape that graced the wall above his balding head.

We headed into an open area, plushly carpeted, that looked out over the street and shared the same view of Central Park with its paneled counterpart. This was the dining room reserved for the firm's associates and their guests. Ramona's midlevel executive position enabled her to partake of the room's ambience on Fridays, she told me reverentially, as though she'd been granted permission to kiss the Pope's ring. Boy, what a different world from Balzer and Price, where we scarfed down food at our desks, trying very hard not to dribble crumbs into our keyboards, grateful to snag enough time to enjoy a lunch break without all hell breaking loose from the impatient clients and the incessantly ringing phones.

"I'll get us a special dispensation to eat in the associates' dining room this afternoon, but ordinarily you'll be eating in

here,” Ramona said, as we stepped into a noisy though pleasant room with a cafeteria-style atmosphere. The joint was jumping. This was where Newter & Spade’s peons ate, where legal assistants, secretaries, mailroom personnel, and temps slid their trays along shelves of aluminum tubing, busing their own dishes to tall rolling carts stacked with discarded turquoise laminated lunch trays.

We selected our food and Ramona handed her ID card to the cashier, who scanned it to verify that Ramona was a genuine employee and not someone who worked for a company on another floor intent on scamming the law firm for a discounted meal. There might not be such a thing as a free lunch, but sodas, tea, and coffee were, in fact, on the house. My turkey club set Ramona back only \$3.50, instead of at least \$5.00, which is what it might have cost me at a local deli.

I was so caught up in enjoying my complimentary root beer that I wasn’t as alert as I should have been to the guy on my right, and I accidentally slammed my tray into his with what felt like a G-force shove, “pulling an Izzy,” as my friends and I affectionately refer to such clumsy maneuvers.

“Oh, my God, I am *so* sorry,” I exclaimed, panic in my voice and terror in my eyes. “Umm, I’ll clean it right up. Wait right there—” I grabbed a pile of napkins so thick that it probably accounted for the deforestation of three countries, and began to mop up the dark, sticky puddle of root beer. Without thinking, I blotted the man’s suit jacket. While he was still wearing it. I was heading for his pants leg when the guy grabbed my wrist.

“Whoa, there, Nellie!”

“The name’s Alice,” I replied stupidly, my face crimson, my mind more focused on the fact that I might have just won

the prize for the shortest employment history at Newter & Spade.

Nice first impression, Alice.

I should have been more on the ball. I could have kicked myself. Shit, did I have to do this on my very first day? I am not ordinarily a klutz. Ramona regarded me through the narrow slits of her eyes. Her expression was lethal.

She hates you already.

Ramona? Did I really louse up her reputation that much?

It's not her reputation she's concerned with. Not at the moment, anyway. But I'd watch out for that, too, if I were you. Oh, wait, I am you.

Then what? What's her problem?

Look at the guy, Alice. Look at how he's looking at you.

Ohmigod, do you think that's her boyfriend?

"I guess this is why Newter & Spade so strongly discourages employees from fraternizing," Ramona said, her smile as wide as a billboard, her eyes sparking with rancor. "Because accidents can and do happen. Sorry, Eric, we'll go back to the commoners' room, where the little people belong." Ramona made it sound like a joke, but her opinions about both the law firm's hierarchy and my egregious faux pas were layered onto her subtext with a trowel.

"No big deal. I have no client contact this afternoon. Don't stress it," he said directly to me. "It's why they invented dry cleaners. Don't be stupid, come join us." Eric motioned toward a table where two other men around his age—I'd guess mid-thirties—were sitting. Their attire was so similar that they might as well have been in livery. I looked around the room and a single word sprang to mind: conformity. The one person dining alone at a remote corner table, a man in a brown pin-stripe, floral tie, and a pale yellow shirt with white collar and

cuffs, didn't fit the sartorial mold. Maybe he just wanted to be on his own, although it crossed my mind, from the few observations I'd been able to make about Newter & Spade thus far, that maybe his wardrobe was reason enough for his ostracism.

Be thankful it's only a day job, Alice. It's not your life.

Yeah, that's what I need to keep reminding myself.

Oh, God, I don't want to end up like them.

"The man whose suit you might have ruined—that's Eric Witherspoon. On the fast track for partner," Ramona whispered in my ear as we followed the senior associate to his table. We seated ourselves and Eric then introduced himself to me, followed by introductions to his colleagues, whose names and subspecialties at Newter & Spade went in one of my ears and out the other.

"And who are you?" Eric asked me. His manner was gentle and solicitous and seemed out of place in this hotbed of competitiveness.

"I'm Alice Finnegan—"

"Oh, she's just a temp," Ramona interrupted.

In response to her statement, Eric's friends leaned back in their chairs and cased our immediate vicinity in an effort to ascertain who else might have overheard Ramona's disclaimer. While Eric continued to engage Ramona and me in polite small talk, the other associates turned toward one other and resumed their conversation, refusing to make eye contact with me for the remainder of their meal. When they left the table, they curtly said goodbye to Eric and nodded at Ramona. I may not always be a good judge of character, but my acting training had made me a pretty accurate judge of characters. On the surface, the men's nods seemed a pleasant enough gesture, yet to me they conveyed volumes of subtext. Affrontedness. Betrayal. Arrogance (theirs). Presumption (ours).

From the few minutes I'd spent observing the Newter & Spade zeitgeist, it would seem that everyone had eyes in the backs of their heads, the better to see who might be gaining on them or honing in on their territory. I sensed that the only way to survive and thrive in such an environment was to become either a backstabber or a brown-noser. It was going to be hard to work here without getting dragged into such negativity. Competition has always made me uncomfortable to the point of squeamish.

So why did you become an actress who works at law firms, Alice? Hard to get much more competitive than those two professions, you know.

Yeah, I realize that. Some things defy even the most scrutinizing analysis. Actually, I think people do things for two reasons, primarily: love or money. I work for lawyers for money. I act for love. And despite the fickle nature of show business, to give up performing would be like cutting off an arm. It's part of who I am, embedded in my soul, and I won't go down without an ugly fight. Gram feels the same way. She'll still execute a triple time step from time to time, even though time has caught up with her.

After lunch I accompanied Ramona back to her office. She handed me a typewritten list of Newter & Spade's house rules (including what constituted billable hours—as in lunch counts as “billable” only if it's off-site with clients or adversaries—the dress code for the dining rooms, and the rescinding of “casual Fridays”), then asked me to be back in her office at nine-thirty the following morning, giving me a limp-wristed, fish-cold handshake. “Welcome aboard,” Ramona said, looking like the first thing she wanted to do as soon as I turned my back was phone Turbo Temps to ask Tina what she'd been smoking.

* * *

"I think I should be fine, just as long as I remember that it's only a job; it's not my career," I said to Gram. I was fixing us a big jelly omelet. Every once in a while Gram liked to sort of reverse the days and eat breakfast food for dinner. It was part of her charm. That sort of coloring outside the lines always appealed to me, particularly when I was growing up. Grandparents always let you do special, off-the-wall stuff that your parents routinely frown on, however innocuous. They give you the wings to fly while your parents are trying to ground you. Gram was the first person to believe in my theatrical talent and encourage me to turn a dream into a goal. Her own experiences, however difficult, had beaten the odds and proven her own parents wrong—that the elusive brass ring of a career upon the wicked stage was indeed attainable.

As I was describing Ramona to her, I could tell that Gram didn't like what she was hearing. "That woman needs to get laid," she said pointedly. I couldn't help agreeing. "Just remember your history with people like her," she reminded me. I laughed and said it was the first thing I thought of the moment I saw Ramona Marlboro. "It's not only her small breasts and short hair, Alice. Sometimes there's additional alchemy involved that can end up creating problems for you. You know, a person's *name* says a lot about who they really are."

The Barbie I got for my seventh birthday came complete with her own trousseau. My grandmother came complete with her own brand of folklore. I thought it was fun the way we used to play her "name game" when I was a kid, because I love to play with words, but I didn't lay too much store by her theories. Take my own name, for example. What kind of special magic is in "Alice Finnegan"? I stopped trying to find it long ago.

I poured Gram another cup of tea and told her about meeting Eric Witherspoon, including the embarrassing details of our first encounter. "He didn't really seem like one of them," I said to Gram. "He struck me as being a lot more genuine. Polite, anyway, at the very least. His two friends were downright rude. I couldn't believe it," I added. Ramona seemed like a snake, I told Gram, a term I usually reserved for males of our species. At least I wasn't going to be working directly with her. If I were, I definitely would be thinking twice about taking the job, even though I was anxious to have one. I'd phone Tina and ask her if Turbo Temps had any other firms where they would be able to place me. But Ramona was just going to be my supervisor. She'd sign my time sheet once a week and assign me to various cases where I'd be working with an array of attorneys, legal assistants, and other temps. I'd barely have to see her or deal with her. Or so I believed.

"You dropped one shoe a minute ago and got me curious, Gram. So drop the other one. Let's play your name game."

She finished her tea, leaving a vibrant smear of lipstick on the rim of the delicate china cup. "Okay, who's first?"

"Eric."

"What did you say his last name was?"

"Witherspoon."

She closed her eyes for a half second, not much more than a blink, really, then looked at me. "You thought he was a decent guy, basically. Is that what you were telling me?" I nodded. "Wither. Spoon. Sounds to me like he's strong and resilient, but only to a point. Then he'll collapse under pressure like a house of cards." She looked very earnest, like she had just rendered a verdict; but then she smiled, and her eyes—palest blue, but rimmed in a chocolate brown—twinkled and danced.

"Oh, well, it's only a game," I said, finishing my last bite of omelet. "Now it's Ramona's turn. Ramona Marlboro."

Gram looked down into her teacup and I followed her gaze. I'd been a bit sloppy and let a few tea leaves get through the strainer when I'd poured her that last cup. "Marlboro, huh?" she asked. "It wasn't me, you know, it was Shakespeare who said 'what's in a name,' " Gram added. "And your new boss is named for a carcinogen."

Chapter 3



Speaking of carcinogens, on my first day of work at Newter & Spade, Ramona assigned me to work on a class-action lawsuit brought against a major tobacco company by a bunch of people who had lost family members to lung cancer allegedly caused by their cigarettes. Newter & Spade represented the defendant corporation. My job was to review and “digest” document after document, reading each one and typing key information about it into a computer database, so that every single document could be accessed on the computer in case the attorneys handling the case wanted to use it as an exhibit in court. The fields on the database enabled them to sort the records by various criteria; for example, all the correspondence written by one party to another.

I plowed through several dozen internal memos, struck by the corporation’s cavalier attitude toward how potentially lethal their merchandise was, and how fully aware they were of the product’s addictive properties, some of which were deliberately added to the cigarettes in order to hook smokers and keep them that way.

Yeah, yeah, but smoking is a choice. Ever heard of free will, Alice?

But how much free will does a hardcore drug addict have, I argued with myself.

I was working in the document coding room, airless and charmless but for my colleagues: four other temporary legal assistants, each of us doing the same assignment on the same matter. The boxes of paperwork were endless. According to Marlana, a long-term temp still banking on a career as an opera singer, if the attorneys on a given case were pleased with your work, they'd tell Ramona, who would then assign you to another set of attorneys on another case, and so on, once you were no longer needed on the current job. Marlana had been at Newter & Spade for two years, still technically working through Turbo Temps.

"Ramona once offered me a permanent job but I found out that I made more money working as a temp, even without the benefits; and besides, once you realize how hard they work their permanent staffers around here, you'll be glad you've got your freedom." Newter & Spade didn't pay its legal assistants overtime, Marlana explained. But, she added, with the temp assignments, if you didn't have anywhere else to go after five-thirty in the evening and they still needed you, you'd pull down time and a half through the agency. After midnight, it kicked into double time. I couldn't imagine being there for so many hours at a stretch, doing what we were doing, without losing my mind, although the overtime was certainly an attractive incentive.

I was grateful for Marlana's guidance. This single mother raising two teenage sons while juggling an artistic career had a very no-nonsense approach to the job. She hated Ramona, too, which I looked upon as a good sign. Marlana had once overheard Ramona say something that led her to believe that Ramona didn't like black people very much. And apparently

she'd also made some cracks about overweight people. "Carbohydratedly challenged," as Marlena referred to herself. "I finally got reconciled to loving my body after trying to be a size eight for twenty years," she said. "Then this scrawny bitch has to go and make some remark—within my earshot—about my bringing in breakfast every morning and eating it at my desk. Said it made her lose her appetite. She's not even in the room with us. It was completely gratuitous. Just plain nasty."

"My grandmother said she needs a man," I told Marlena, taking the liberty of cleaning up Gram's verbatim remarks on the subject.

"All the men I know like women with some meat on their bones," Marlena responded. "So don't be expecting her to lighten up anytime soon. Hey, I heard they're assigning a new senior associate to this case," she remarked to the room. We sat in a sort of square configuration, each facing a computer terminal, with our backs to one another, but we could swivel around in our chairs to parlay whenever someone had something to share or we simply needed to take a break from digesting the documents. The job required a lot of concentration and if you didn't take a few minutes to look away from the screen at least once an hour, you could end up with a splitting headache. I discovered that fact at around eleven-thirty, when after only two hours on the job I felt like I had been blindsided in the temple with a two-by-four.

"Anyone know who the new guy—or woman—is?" asked Natalie. Marlena and the other two document-coding temps, the pianist Roger, whose wife had just left him, and Lisa, who was an NYU grad student studying for her master's in American history, shook their heads.

Marlena and Natalie in particular were very warm and

welcoming to me and made my first day at Newter & Spade—which seemed to issue a new house rule every half hour—a lot easier to adjust to. Natalie was a stunning émigré from Russia, a refugee, actually, whose parents came over during Jimmy Carter’s administration when a lot of Russian Jews were allowed to leave the country. Natalie had been just a kid then. She grew up in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, and bore no trace of an accent. Not a Russian one, anyway—surprising for someone who came from a neighborhood nicknamed “Little Odessa.” In fact, she sounded like she’d lived in Brooklyn all her life. Natalie was engaged and temping because her fiancé didn’t want his future wife to work; he was Old World that way, so she was just picking up assignments until she got married.

Our personal phone calls from the document-coding room were monitored, Natalie explained, so she had to routinely retreat to the ladies’ room and use her cell phone to call the florist, the bandleader, and other vendors she and Dmitri had hired for their wedding. She asked me to accompany her and keep a lookout to make sure no one came in who might rat her out for not being at her computer terminal. One of her conversations must not have been too pleasant. I heard her screaming invectives at someone in Russian.

“The son of a bitch says pink roses are impossible!” she spat after cutting off the person at the other end of the call. She snapped the phone shut and tossed it in her purse.

“You’re the customer, Natalie. Isn’t it a cardinal rule of consumer economics that ‘the customer is always right’? What kind of florist would refuse to provide pink roses for a wedding?”

“Florist? That was Dmitri! He says pink roses are a deal-breaker. Says people will think he’s a fairy whose wife pushes

him around before they're even married. 'Pussy-whipped,' he said to me. I hate that phrase. Son of a bitch." She struggled to wriggle her engagement ring off her finger and dramatically threw it in the bottom of her pocketbook. "Son of a bitch! My mother is right. He has no class."

Natalie and I returned to the coding room to learn that Ramona had stopped by and, on not seeing us, had demanded to know where we were. Marlena had apparently defended our right to go to the ladies' room and invoked the word "sweatshop" in a voice loud enough to make our supervisor even testier than usual. Given Marlena's forthrightness, I expressed my surprise that Ramona hadn't had her canned ages ago.

"Not only is my work too good for them to do that, but that skinny witch is afraid of me," Marlena said. "Scared I'll bring Al Sharpton and the NAACP down on her head."

"Would you?" I asked her.

Marlena smiled. "Depends on Ramona. I'd like to think I probably wouldn't do a thing except go home to my boys and cry about it. But let her wonder."

Speaking of wondering, I suppose many people might wonder why I decided to stay at Newter & Spade based on what I had already experienced there within just a few short hours, including the lunch now destined to be filed in the annals of my employment history as the meal of Alice's Egregious "Izzy." The firm certainly didn't treat people well. You've heard the expression "the fish starts rotting from the head"? A sort of British public school hierarchy prevailed. It began with the way the most senior partner behaved to his underlings and filtered all the way down the food chain to the temps' treatment at the hands of their immediate superiors.

I stayed for a number of reasons. First of all—and I apply this to all aspects of my life—I am not a quitter unless I am pushed beyond the brink of humiliation, as I was by Uncle Earwax. Second, Tina was leading me to believe that I was not as employable at one of these major law firms as I had optimistically thought I was, and even if I investigated what another temp agency might be able to do for me in terms of placement, the results would probably be pretty much what they currently were. With a sigh of resignation, I also expected to become inured, as I've always done (usually for far too long), to my situation. I've managed to put up with a lot as long as I continue to remind myself that the circumstances are only temporary; and beyond performing my assignments with diligence, I have no emotional investment at stake. At five-thirty, I clock out and go back to my life, such as it is.

There were some genuine positives to be considered as well. The other Newter & Spade temps were very nice people. Marlena and Natalie were feisty and gregarious, and while Lisa and Roger tended to be quiet and keep to themselves a little more, I got the impression that they were nonetheless pleasant and friendly. I enjoyed the opportunity to expand my circle of acquaintances.

If we wore headphones and kept the volume low, Ramona did let people listen to music on a Walkman. Natalie had just loaned me hers to hear one of my favorite songs, the "Shoop-Shoop Song: (It's In His Kiss)." I was bopping my head to the music while devoting the rest of my attention to a stack of memos from one of the tobacco company executives to his board of directors, when Eric Witherspoon poked his head in the door to introduce himself to the room and mention that he was now working on the case. "So if I call down here and ask for some information, you'll have a face to put with the

voice," he said affably. I was too embarrassed to look at him directly. I had the not-so-irrational fear that if he saw me there, he'd probably make the assumption that my document coding was as inept as my ability to handle a lunch tray and insist that Ramona find a more capable replacement. A trained chimp, for example.

"You, sorry, excuse me. What's your name again?" He was standing right behind me.

"Me?" I swiveled around in my chair. "Alice Finnegan," I replied too loudly. He was looking very corporate in a navy single-breasted suit. I realized I was still wearing Natalie's headphones; I slipped them around my neck and lowered my voice. "Sorry again about that mess yesterday. Root beer can't be very good for worsted."

Eric thrust his hands in his pockets. "Well, it could have been 'worsted,' " he joked, "I might have been wearing white."

I figured it might be considered a sign of disrespect to a senior associate if I didn't laugh.

Where's your integrity? The man has a totally lame sense of humor, Alice.

"Thanks. You're the only person I've ever met who laughs at that joke."

That's because it isn't funny.

"Well, maybe it was the way you told it," I replied pleasantly.

"You're okay, muppet," Eric said, tapping the back of my chair. "You're okay."

After Eric left the document-coding room, all four of my co-workers spun their chairs around to face me. Marlena arched an eyebrow.

"Just being friendly," I said.

"Unh-huhmmm," she sardonically responded.

I related to them the unfortunate circumstances of my

first encounter with Eric Witherspoon. "I felt it might be the better part of valor to be extra nice to him so he doesn't complain to Ramona that she assigned a complete doofus to his case."

"What's with the 'muppet'?" Roger asked.

I shook my head. "I haven't a clue."

"Kind of an endearment, wouldn't you say?" Lisa chimed in, my first inclination that she was intrigued by office gossip as much as anyone else in the room.

"Muppet? An endearment?"

"It is if you like sock puppets," Marlena replied dryly.

By the time I got home, I felt like I'd run a marathon. Ordinarily, I walk up the two flights of stairs from the lobby to our third-floor apartment, and I feel horribly guilty when I don't, as it's pretty much my only form of regular exercise; but this evening, even the act of retrieving the mail from the box seemed like an overexertion. I'd been tense all day, anxious to put my best foot forward at Newter & Spade, particularly after my stellar stumble into Eric Witherspoon on the day of my interview.

I pushed the button to call for the elevator. As I waited, I was joined by a tall, rugged-looking guy carrying a worn black Gladstone bag, the kind I remember our family pediatrician sporting. I'd never seen him before; if I had, I certainly would have remembered. It was one of those moments where you kind of want to flirt, but you're totally embarrassed to, because it's so obvious that you're flirting, so you play this "I'm not flirting" cat-and-mouse game with your eyes. Check out the other person; when you catch him checking you out, look the other way with an air of feigned unconcern. Repeat as needed until you

reach your destination, at which point you will mentally kick yourself to kingdom come for not having started a conversation.

The elevator arrived. It's the kind that has an automatic sliding inner door and a heavy outer one that has to be opened by the passengers. The sandy-haired man stepped forward and reached for it, allowing me to precede him into the car.

"Thanks." I smiled sheepishly. When he smiled back, I quickly glanced at the wall in front of me, pretending to observe a new scratch in the woodwork.

Go for it, Alice.

I pushed three and he reached past me and pressed the button for the sixth floor. "Live here?" I asked the guy.

He shook his head, and gestured with his thumb back toward the line of intercom buttons. "No." He gave a little chuckle. "Just making a house call." The elevator door slowly closed.

I looked down at his bag. "Wow. I didn't think people did that anymore."

"Well, this is kind of an emergency."

"Well, I think that's pretty neat, anyway. In this day and age."

The guy smiled. "Not really, when you think about it."

"I've been having a pretty rough day myself, you know. First day at a new job."

I feel like an idiot.

He looked down at his black bag, then back at me. "I wish I could help you, but I'm afraid I don't have the right tools in here."

"Oh, well," I replied.

Now what?

We reached the third floor.

Shit.

"Alice Finnegan," I said, thrusting my hand at him while I backed open the outer elevator door with my tush.

"Dan Carpenter."

Silence.

"Well, have a nice evening," he added.

"Yeah, thanks. You, too."

The elevator door closed with a quiet *thumph*. After re-counting the saga of my first day at Newter & Spade, I thought about telling Gram about this charming M.D. who makes house calls, but as the name "Dan" sprang onto the tip of my tongue, I decided not to embroil her in a discussion of men so named. She always became agitated when she spoke of the husband who'd abandoned her. Grandpa Danny might have behaved like a heel when all was said and done, but he was her grand passion. As far as I knew, the blazing torch she still carried for him was the reason she never remarried. What man could ever hold a candle to such an Olympic-sized flame?

I did phone Izzy, though. A cute-guy sighting in my apartment building was a rare occurrence and worthy of a news bulletin. "So, do *you* know of any doctors who make house calls nowadays?" I asked her. "Even pediatricians?" When I described Dan Carpenter's looks, she sighed.

"Honey, if I'd had a pediatrician like that when I was a kid, I would have been continuously bedridden with every childhood illness known to man."

"But not the disfiguring ones," I added. "You'd be mortified to have him practice his bedside manner when you looked like hell, all red and pockmarked and swollen. No mumps or measles, chicken pox or scarlet fever."

"Shit. That about covers them all. How's a girl ever to meet a doctor when she can't start young?"

After a few weeks, I had the Newter & Spade routine down cold. There were even the rare days when I looked forward to coming in to work because I enjoyed our coding-room camaraderie. Funny thing was that we temps shared so much of our lives, secrets, wishes, and fantasies with one another between the hours of nine-thirty and five-thirty (with occasional overtime), and yet we never took our friendship beyond the office walls—although Natalie had once or twice conspiratorially dragged me downstairs to the Korean nail salon across the street for a manicure during business hours. The first time she convinced me to accompany her, I felt like a juvenile delinquent playing hooky.

It was Izzy to whom I confided things I felt uncomfortable discussing with anyone else, including—or perhaps most especially—Gram. Sexual harrassment was one of those things. Not only was Isabel my closest friend, but she knew the big law firm drill. There was very little Izzy hadn't seen in all her years of temping for attorneys.

"There's one partner who completely gives me the willies," I told her one evening after we'd caught a Julia Roberts movie together. "An older guy. Bart Harrison." Even speaking his name left an icky taste in my mouth.

"I think I know him!" Izzy exclaimed. "Looks sort of like Thurston Howell III from *Gilligan's Island*?"

"That's him! He always seems like he's holding a dry martini and should have a wife named Muffy, if not 'Lovey.' How do you know him?" I asked her.

"About ten years ago when I was working at Sullivan Proc-

tor, he was the world's oldest senior associate, passed over for partner for about the umpteenth time. I'm not sure of the circumstances, but there were rumors . . ."

"Maybe he wasn't a rainmaker," I posited, referring to attorneys who are promoted primarily for their ability to bring new clients into their firm.

"Nah, that wasn't it. What happened was that he had a series of secretaries quit on him, then they edged him out as gracefully and as quietly as they could. Putting egos aside, no one easily gives up ninety-plus grand a year—which is what he was making back then as the Methuselah of senior associates—without a good reason."

"I can take an educated guess as to why they dumped him," I said. "He's come down to the coding room a couple of times, which is rare enough for a partner, but he's got an agenda. I think the only reason he shows up himself rather than send one of his underlings—or even phone us to look up what he wants—is that whenever he walks into the room I get the feeling that he's a lion who hasn't eaten in a week looking at a bunch of juicy hyenas. The things he says, thinking he's being funny or jovial—Marlena always looks like she's ready to drop him in one punch. He made some ludicrous remark about black women smelling differently from white women, told Natalie he hoped her fiancé was an 'ass man,' and made some crass remark about her 'cushiony lips.' He asked Lisa if she wanted to come to his office for a private tutorial—Lisa's the grad student. He wondered aloud if Roger was gay, being the only guy working in what Mr. Harrison called a "hen house," then when Roger said he was recently separated from his wife—God knows why he'd even bother to share any personal information with him—Harrison kind of leered at the rest of us and told Roger he had a lot of

options available to him if he wanted to ‘get over’ his grief. The man’s a total pig.”

“Did he ever say anything to *you*?” Izzy asked me.

“He stares at my chest or my legs or both, depending on what I’m wearing on any given day.” I filled Izzy in on all the details. “I’ve been very careful how I dress, too. On my first day of work Ramona handed me a sheet of Newter & Spade’s house rules, which included a pretty conservative dress code. But there *was* one day when I was wearing a cocktail dress. I was so bleary-eyed from waking up before dawn to get one of the first audition slots for a Noël Coward play so I could get it over with and get to Newter & Spade before nine-thirty that I forgot to bring a more suitable change of clothes. And, in the world of Murphy’s Law, it was one of the days that Bart Harrison chose to make an appearance in the document-coding room.

“We work in a pretty isolated area, and ordinarily no one from the firm sees us unless we go up to the dining room for lunch or if they make a special trip to the coding room, so since I wasn’t planning to eat upstairs—wouldn’t have been *permitted* to eat there, as it turned out—I figured I was safe. When Ramona stopped by to check up on us, make sure we weren’t all taking a bathroom break at once or stretching our legs in the alcove by the coffeemaker, she gave me a reprimand about my wardrobe. Actually, she *forbade* me from entering the company cafeteria dressed as I was.

“Harrison came in at around two-thirty and he smelled like a distillery. Do you remember if he drank during the day when he was at Sullivan Proctor? Because it sure seemed to me like he’d had a quite a few with lunch.”

“I’m pretty sure he did,” Izzy said, then added sarcasti-

cally, "although within the cloistered confines of these white-shoe law firms, alcoholism's like a badge of honor. But even if Ramona seems to have it in for you, she's still a *woman*. She'll listen to you if you go to her and mention the way Harrison treats you and the other women in your department."

So I did.

But not before a considerable amount of agonizing over it.

Alice, can't you just ignore the guy when he makes asinine remarks? That's all they are. Is it really that big a deal?

Are you kidding? You are kidding, right?

Think about the potential consequences.

Isn't this what people are supposed to do when they are sexually harrassed on the job? The proper channels, I mean. Going directly to their supervisor to lodge a complaint. I'm standing up for a room full of temps whom Mr. Harrison is treating with phenomenal disrespect. I despise people who get their rocks off by bullying and humiliating others. It's enough to give me hives. Put it this way: I can't afford to *not* carry this banner.

Sometimes the person who charges into battle waving a big red flag is the one who gets shot down first. You need this job. Just show up, do it, and then go home. Some causes just aren't worth dying for, Alice.

And some things must be said.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Ramona asked testily. "Bart Harrison's a partner. You're a temp. If you don't like it here, you can go back to your agency and ask them to place you somewhere else."

She was right on the second count. Except that I was painfully aware that my homespun skills were an obstacle

when it came to placing me in a firm where I could earn enough money to keep the landlord at bay.

"I would appreciate your speaking to him about the way he treats the temps in the coding room. Or speak to someone who would be the most appropriate channel for conveying our complaint."

"*Our* complaint?" Ramona responded.

I looked at her quizzically. "Mr. Harrison has made gratuitous, sexually charged remarks to every woman I work with, and even makes disparaging comments to Roger. Roger's wife walked out and Mr. Harrison seems to delight in emasculating him."

There was a knock on Ramona's door. "Come in," she said. Eric Witherspoon poked his head inside. Ramona immediately warmed up and pasted a wide smile across her nasty face. "What can I do for you?" She was practically flirting.

"I just had a question," Eric said. "But it can wait until—"

"Go ahead. We're not discussing anything important," Ramona insisted. I could scarcely believe she'd said that, since I thought that bringing Mr. Harrison's inappropriate behavior to her attention was not exactly trivial.

"That's okay. When you're done," Eric said, closing the door.

Ramona looked very peeved; her dislike for me couldn't have been more evident if it had been etched into her face. "You say you're coming to me on behalf of all the temps in the document-coding room?" I nodded. "Well, I have news for you, Alice. You're the only one who has ever walked in here with a complaint about Bart Harrison."

"But Marlana—"

Ramona raised her hand to cut me off. "Marlena has been at Newter & Spade for more than two years and she has

never once even made a passing reference to Mr. Harrison. You've been here for barely a month and suddenly you think you're Joan of Arc—"

Eric knocked on the door again as he simultaneously turned the handle. "I'm heading back to my office. I couldn't wait anymore. Alice, would you give me a call when you get back to the coding room? I have a question that I think you can answer for me."

"Alice is only a temp. And the newest one here. Is there something *I* can help you with?" Ramona asked Eric sweetly.

Eric briefly looked at the floor, then back at Ramona. "No, actually. It's a question for Alice. Specifically." He closed the door with more haste than one would imagine for a senior associate talking to a midlevel administrator.

"So?" I asked her after Eric was gone.

"So, *what?*"

"Can you convey our feelings about Mr. Harrison's sexual remarks to him?"

Ramona rested her hands on the desk and leaned toward me. "It's *your* crusade, Alice. Not the others'. I told you, you're the only one who has ever mentioned the situation to me. What are we supposed to do? Fire a partner because he occasionally acts like a boor? That's not the way things work in the real world. Bart Harrison is only answerable to Raymond Spade. And not only is Ray Spade Mr. Harrison's golf buddy, he's the man's first cousin."

"What about Mr. Newter?"

"There is no Mr. Newter," Ramona replied. "He was killed in a skiing accident in 1996. Alice, my advice to you is don't take on a partner. Just do your job. And do it well. Then go home. And come back in the morning ready to put in another full day, Bart Harrison's dirty comments or no dirty

comments." She stood up and gestured to the door; it was clear that our meeting had come to an end.

I let myself out of Ramona's office. I hated her guts but she'd certainly sounded like my conscience when it was playing devil's advocate.

Fifteen minutes after I returned to the coding room, my extension rang and Eric asked if I had a moment to talk with him in person. Sure, why not, I responded. He came down from his office and stood at the doorway, crooking his finger at me.

I left my computer terminal and joined him in the hall. "What's up?" I asked him.

"Do you like baseball?"

"Sure. Yeah, I like it fine." I'm not a huge sports fan, but baseball is one that I enjoy because I can actually understand what's going on. Another reason I like it is because it's also one of the few games where the players don't usually act homicidal as part of the rules.

"Would . . . ?" Eric glanced at the floor, then back at me. "Would you be interested in accompanying me to a Yankees game after work tomorrow night? The firm has season tickets—a whole bunch of box seats between home plate and first base—and there are about a half dozen of us going to tomorrow evening's game. So, if you'd like to join me . . . I'd . . . well, I'd really like that."

I thought it was sort of charming that even highly salaried powerful attorneys got a bit bashful when they asked a girl out. "Is this a . . . date?" I said, thinking that it was better not to assume anything.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and smiled sheepishly at me. "Yeah, I guess it is. Are you okay with that? I mean, I didn't even ask you whether you have a boyfriend. And of

course . . . if you do, we can still go to the game as friends, but if that's too weird for you, I understand."

"I don't have a boyfriend. Lately I've been dating José Cuervo." Eric gave me a funny look. "I'm drowning my sorrows at being single-and-presently-prospectless in tequila," I explained.

"Cool. I mean cool for me that you aren't seeing anyone right now. So, it's a date for the game tomorrow?"

It was becoming hard to continue to act casual. I felt a silly grin spreading across my face.

Hey, Alice, this is the first time you've been asked out on a date in how long?

Shut up. Am I being taunted by my own conscience?

Are you sure you're supposed to accept that kind of an offer from someone you're working with? What did Ramona's silly list of rules say again?

Shut up. My social life currently consists of going home to hang out with Gram and the occasional get-togethers with Dorian, who mostly talks about himself, and Izzy, whom I love, but she's got a husband to go home to and he hates it when she stays out too late.

"Yes. Sure. I'd like that," I told Eric. "Very much." I found the juxtaposition of his confidence as a professional and his personal shyness somewhat intriguing, if not a touch endearing. And he was nice-looking, too. Not much taller than average, not built like a brick shithouse, not drop-dead gorgeous, but very pleasant-looking. And he dressed well, so there was another point in his favor. But I think what I appreciated most about him, even though I didn't know him well, was the way he didn't allow the Newter & Spade mindset to infect the way he treated people. Eric was warm, courteous, respectful. And for that he could have resembled

Frankenstein's first cousin and I would still have gone to the Yankee game with him. Gladly.

Hmnh. Ain't it nearly always true that when you're not looking for something, that's when you get it?!

You're such an optimist, Alice.

Chapter 4



“Don’t hate me,” Eric said anxiously into the phone. It was twenty-four hours since our last conversation.

“Do I have a reason to?” I asked him.

“Bart Harrison gathered together all the associates on the tobacco case this morning. The plaintiffs just responded to our motion for summary judgment to dismiss their claims and we need to file a sur-reply by the end of the week, which means no Yankees game tonight. He’s the lead partner on the case; working late is not exactly something you say no to. Unless you don’t want to make partner yourself. Which I do. Sorry about that, Alice.”

I had been looking forward to the game, I have to admit. I’d even remembered to stuff a pair of jeans and sneakers into a Duane Reade plastic shopping bag, so I’d have the appropriate attire to wear to a baseball game. “Not a problem,” I said, hoping to mask my mild disappointment with a smile in my voice. Actually, it was probably a blessing in disguise. I’d gotten some news earlier in the day as well. I’d been asked to audition for a recurring role on a soap opera next Tuesday afternoon and needed to run to the casting director’s office

after work to pick up the scene I was supposed to perform at the audition so I could learn it backwards and forwards beforehand. I could better use the time I might have spent yelling my lungs raw for Derek Jeter by studying the soap script instead.

Oops, that was another problem. I'd have to tell Ramona that I would need to run out to an audition in the middle of the day. I got paid by the hour through Turbo Temps, so technically it shouldn't be a big deal; I just wouldn't include those hours on my time sheet and "eat" the money I'd have made had I been slaving over a hot computer at Newter & Spade.

Still, everyone I worked for at the firm, from Ramona on up to Mr. Harrison, took it as a personal affront if any of their employees needed time to handle anything pertaining to their non-Newter & Spade lives. Lisa had to leave early one day to get down to NYU for an exam, and they were nasty about it. There was a particularly awful week when Roger's wife suddenly started giving him a song and dance about joint custody of their son. She kept calling Roger at work to yell at him, and he had to make a whole slew of phone calls to his lawyer; the poor man was already going through a nightmare, and Ramona's disagreeableness made it far worse.

Eric's voice sounded both harried and apologetic. "I'll try to see if all the tickets aren't already snagged for one of next week's games. The Baltimore Orioles will be in town then."

"Is that good?"

"Eastern Division rivals. And they currently suck. Which is great if you're a Yankee fan."

"Whatever you say."

"You *are* pissed off at me."

"Because I said 'whatever you say'? That was a reference

to Baltimore sucking, not to my opinions of your canceling our plans. I'm okay with that. Really, I am," I added, hoping that I was reassuring him sufficiently. I hate to hurt people's feelings—unless they've trampled on mine, in which case they deserve what they get. I have a real tendency to go for the jugular when I've been wounded in some way. I'm even fiercer when that happens to someone I love. I come by my loyalty genetically. No one is more defiantly so than Gram. She's always looked out for me and it's inspired me to champion others.

Eric had an incoming call and had to end our conversation. I hung up the phone and turned to Marlena and Natalie. "Eric canceled on me," I told them.

"He seems pleasant enough, but it's probably a lucky break," Marlena commented.

"Yeah," Natalie concurred, nodding her head. "And if you do ever go anywhere with him, watch your ass. They're all sons of bitches around here."

Actually, I kind of like him, I was thinking.

Remember, Alice, these supportive colleagues of yours were nowhere to be found when you charged into Ramona's office like Henry V, seeking some behavior modification from Bart Harrison.

Good point.

All I'm saying is not to discount your instincts so easily—and to weigh everything with a grain of salt in the scales.

After work I went across town to the television network's executive offices and picked up the pages I was asked to learn for the soap opera audition. It was a tense, dramatic scene between a man and a woman. It read like a cliché, but I was determined to play it with as much sincerity as possible. I decided it might be a good idea to tape the show

for the rest of the week to see how the actors performed their roles, and also how they were dressed, which would inform my own wardrobe choices for Tuesday afternoon. On the bus ride home I reread the scene, then took out my cell phone and called Izzy, asking for her help. Even though she'd be reading the guy's part, she was still a better actor than Dorian was. She was also a devoted fan of this particular soap, and would be able to provide me with some hints and nuances I wouldn't have gotten from watching hours of videotape on my own. Unfortunately, she wasn't available.

"Dominick and I have been fighting like cats and dogs, and our apartment is so small you have to step outside if you want to change your mind, so we're taking the next few days off. We're going up to a B&B in Rhinebeck so we can argue in peace. I can help you on Monday after work if you still need me," she said apologetically.

She filled me in on the characters in the scene I was handed. "I can't believe they called you in to replace Melanie Mason—the actress playing Darva! That's wonderful! Melanie is a real bitch. She was up for contract renewal and demanded an arm and a leg, so the network told her to go fuck herself. And now they're recasting her part. *Yes!*" I could almost visualize Izzy making that "pull-down" motion with her fist and forearm.

"Darva is a real gold digger, so I guess the character really went to Melanie Mason's head. Does she really think anyone else will hire her? She's a stick figure with big hair who couldn't act her way out of a Baggie. Okay, what you need to know about Darva, besides the gold digger part, is that she grew up in a trailer park in Tennessee, but she has no accent because when she came to Huddlerville, she hired the high

school drama coach to teach her how to lose it, and she traded him her virginity. Then of course she got pregnant and left the baby in the local Wal-Mart, hoping someone would adopt it. Greta Gainsborough, who is a golden-haired five-year-old, adopted in infancy by the filthy-rich Gainsboroughs, who own everything in Huddlerville, is actually Darva's daughter. Years later, Darva tried to get herself hired to be the little girl's nanny, but she learned that she hated domestic duties, and she always thought herself above menial chores, so she couldn't hack it. And now she's scheming to snag a rich man so she can marry him and use his considerable fortune to hire a high-priced lawyer to initiate a custody battle for Greta. So she's been sniffing around Wilkes Chamberlain. Wilkes was named for John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Abraham Lincoln, and he—Wilkes Chamberlain—also has a mean and violent streak in him. So Darva has lately taken to thinking that if the rich WC won't marry her, she might be able to convince him to kidnap Greta . . . or worse."

"You mean like murder Greta's adoptive parents, the Gainsboroughs?"

"Bingo! Ding-ding-ding, give that woman a hundred dollars! Maybe you shouldn't *act* in soaps, Alice. Just send your résumé off to the producers to get a job writing them."

"Thanks, I guess. This is great, Izzy. You've spared me from . . . I mean, I hardly need to watch any episodes of the show myself. Oh! How does Darva dress? Shit. Wait a minute, there's static on the line. *Quelle surprise*. Damn! Can you hear me? Now half the people on the bus are staring at me and giving me dirty looks. I'm becoming one of those horrifically rude cell phone users that I always want to strangle and the City Council wants to arrest."

"Tell them to take a flying leap into the Hudson off Pier sixty-two. But do it with a smile. Alice, are you sill there? Darva still dresses like trailer trash, despite all her claims that she's bettered herself. Don't forget the big hair. It's where she hides her Marlboros and it's a major part of her character. Darva has lots of scenes with her beautician, Angelique. Angelique is a combination of confidante, confessor, and psychotherapist. Anyway, if they gave you a scene between Darva and Wilkes, chances are she's being conniving and seductive and she switches tacks about a half dozen times in three pages to try to get him to go along with whatever her objective is in the scene."

"You pretty well nailed it," I told her.

"I wish I could help you prepare for the audition. It really sounds like fun, but I've got to keep the home fires burning this weekend. Or put some out. Call Dorian and see if he's available. He knows the show really well, too. He does a lot of background work on it. Anytime they need a tall, blond resident of Huddlerville, there's Dorian, front and center. He's Mr. Midwest."

I thanked Izzy and shut down my cell phone, much to the relief of everyone on the number 104 bus.

"Dorian's a sweet boy," Gram said when I got home and told her about the soap opera audition. "I'm sure he'd be happy to help you," she added, skimming my script. A little light in the loafers to play Wilkes Chamberlain, if you ask me, but he'll do a better job on the scene than I will. I was never too good at playing the heavy."

That's true enough. Grandpa Danny left her with two kids to raise alone; yet she the man remains a troubled saint who happens to wear his halo at a rakish angle.

"Invite Dorian to dinner," Gram suggested. "I roasted a capon. There's more than enough for three."

I phoned Dorian. "Have you eaten yet?" I asked him.

"*Law & Order: Special Victims' Unit* was shooting at the Chelsea Baths this afternoon, so yeah, I just ate. Thanks. Why? What's up?"

Gram looked a question at me. "He said he already had dinner," I whispered to her, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with the palm of my hand.

She shrugged. "Tell him I rubbed the capon with garlic and lemon pepper."

So I did, then waited for Dorian's response. "He'll be here by seven-thirty," I told Gram, laughing. Does that woman know people or what?

Over Gram's roast capon and potatoes gratinée which she always called "Kennedy potatoes" for some reason, Dorian filled us in on the details of Darva's dastardly doings over the past umpteen seasons.

"Angelique. That doesn't seem like a fitting name for a beautician," Gram remarked, referring to Huddlerville's hairdresser extraordinaire.

"Your grandmother is so perceptive!" Dorian responded enthusiastically. "Angelique is really the black sheep of the Gainsborough family. She spent her inheritance on charitable relief causes in Africa and doesn't want another penny from her family's ill-gotten treasury."

"So how did the Gainsboroughs make their fortune?" I couldn't believe I was getting into this soap opera. But I needed as much backstory as possible so I could give the best possible audition. I had about eighteen seasons to catch up on, even though Darva had only been on the show for the past six years.

Dorian scratched his head and helped himself to more potatoes. "That's a very interesting question. The writers have never really come right out and said it. Because they're afraid if they get too specific that they'll lose viewers. Like if they say it's tobacco, for example, then smokers and the entire state of North Carolina will stop watching the show. All we know is that Gainsborough industries has polluted the heretofore pristine waters of Huddlerville and that no one can swim in the lake anymore. You should concentrate on the relationship between Darva and Wilkes, though, because that's the scene you have. She's a woman who will stop at nothing to achieve her goals. Like the time she tried to seduce Wilkes by playing a song she wrote about how love-starved she was for him. See, Melanie Mason, who's been playing the role, used to be a B-level country & western star, so they wanted to give her a chance to perform."

"I hope they don't expect that from *me*," I told Dorian. "I play guitar about as well as I play ice hockey."

We retired to my bedroom and Dorian helped me get through the scene, beat by beat. He really knows how to handle this kind of script from years of observing principal soap actors at work. Dorian doesn't pass the downtime between crowd scenes by reading the newspaper or chatting with the other background actors and day players; he studies the stars and learns as much as he can about how they dress and comport themselves off-camera, as well as the way the good ones analyze and tackle relatively inane material and make it playable.

"Find the transitions within the scene," Dorian suggested. "I hate to say it, but act like it's Shakespeare. Go beat to beat, moment to moment. May I?" He asked me for the script, then began to mark off sections of dialogue. "See, here, she's

coming on to him; then *here* she's making it seem like her plan to kidnap Greta is *his* idea. *Here* she's flattering him by pretending to wax enthusiastic about his antique gun collection, playing the 'little woman' and appealing to his macho side, playing the eager student to his experienced and knowledgeable teacher. You'll want to make each shift very clear. Your intention is the same all the way throughout, of course, but you're going about it in several different ways."

"Dorian, you're a hell of a coach," I observed. "You really should consider parlaying your master's degree into a teaching career. Shit, if I'd gotten an MFA, that's what I'd be doing, assuming I'd be good at it, instead of working outside the business for a bunch of arrogant attorneys. You've got a great handle on script analysis and you know how to talk to actors."

Dorian's expression hardened. "You know how I feel about that. Teaching, to me, is like . . ." He started to tear up. "It's like admitting my failure to make it as an actor. Maybe not so much *failure* as *defeat*. One thing I love about you and Izzy is how you guys throw yourselves so completely into your roles. Total emotional commitment. I've just never felt entirely comfortable pulling out all the stops . . . doing the psychological digging to reach rage, or fear, or lust."

I touched his hand. "Dorian," I said gently, "the teaching thing was just an observation. I wasn't suggesting that you quit acting. Now or ever. There are those who do both, you know." To lighten the mood, I playfully smacked the top of his head with the script. "Besides, you're a working actor. Much more so than Izzy and me put together. It's how you make your living. So stop beating yourself up, and stop kvetching!"

But Dorian remained glum. "I have a 'look,' " he said. "And

right now it's a marketable one. The All-American Boy. My employment—unfortunately—has little to do with talent.”

The grass is always greener . . .

I endeavored to cheer him up. “You think you’re the only ‘All-American Boy’ in show biz, Jack Armstrong? Think of all the other six-foot-tall, blue-eyed blonds you beat out of a role.”

Dorian plastered a grin on his face. “Okay, you win. Dorian’s pity party is over.”

“Good, because I still need your help here,” I replied, returning to the soap script. “So what’s the actor like who plays Wilkes Chamberlain?”

“Hunky. Dark. Dumb. Too dumb to be my type. Well, put it this way, he’s no Einstein.” I wondered if Dorian was saying that the actor was gay. Not that I cared either way, but Dorian could get gossipy and I was curious. He shook his head at my question. “Pathetically straight. He may even be married with a kid or two.”

After Dorian went home I delved even further into the script. Yeah, it was drivel, but it was lucrative drivel. A lot of actors, especially those trained for the stage, have a tendency to demean soap opera actors . . .

Don't let yourself fall into that trap, Alice. It's acting. That's where your heart is. You're an actress. Even if you're temporarily making ends meet by doing other work.

Yeah, I know. Sometimes I forget.

It does you no good to belittle the writing or the acting. There's nothing demeaning about making a damn good living doing what you love to do best.

My conscience had a very good point. After Uncle Earwax’s insults and Ramona Marlboro making a practice of poking her head in the ladies’ room to ask why her temps

had been in there for so long, frankly, I'd never felt more demeaned than in the past few weeks.

Focus on your future, Alice.

So, by Tuesday, I was totally psyched for the soap audition. Big-haired Darva was under my skin, in my blood, I was ready to nail the scene. I was anxious and antsy all morning at Newter & Spade.

I hate having to run to an audition in the middle of the day. It's hard to switch off my day job brain and kick those acting synapses into place, then click back over to day job brain again. And I find myself having an allegiance to my temp jobs that's often above and beyond the call of duty. Dorian was right when he melodramatically intoned that evening at The Wooden Horse that loyalty is my middle name. With Uncle Earwax, even though on some intellectual level I realized he didn't appreciate me, he was still family. And as Gram is fond of saying, "A family takes care of its own. Through thick and thin." Given my uncle's penchant for not paying too much attention to details, I felt that if I wasn't there to keep an eye on things, he'd ending up doing something that would result in some form of malpractice. Izzy switches gears with considerably more ease than I do, and I admire the hell out of her for it.

In the ladies' room at Newter & Spade, I changed out of my suit and into my Darva outfit—a red tube top, short skirt, and Candies mules—and made my hair as big as it could go with the help of Natalie's skillful backcombing and half a can of hairspray. Since I wasn't sure what the situation would be like at the network, I figured I'd better do the wardrobe thing back at the office, taking my civilian clothes with me in a shopping bag in case there was an opportunity to change back into them after the audition. I didn't really want to

spend too much time walking around the city looking like Darva. It would help me get into character on the way to the audition, but might get me assaulted on the way back. I got a couple of curious comments and several strange looks from other visitors to the ladies' room. Needless to say, on the subway ride uptown, no one batted an eye.

My appointment was with Lois Sarkisian, the soap's casting director, a legend in the industry. I arrived at her office fifteen minutes ahead of schedule and introduced myself to her secretary, Janet, who in this industry will one day be sitting at Ms. Sarkisian's desk. Janet asked me to wait in Ms. Sarkisian's outer office and apologetically told me they were running a bit behind schedule. She hoped I didn't mind waiting. "Of course not," I replied cheerily, surreptitiously checking my watch and hoping that Ramona back at Newter & Spade wasn't doing the same. "It happens." It's important to try to maintain a good attitude when you get thrown a curve like this, because if they think you're cranky or a pain in the ass they won't want to hire you.

I made use of the time by attempting to give my scene one last review, but instead, I became anxious watching a couple of other actresses enter and leave. My competition was significantly blonder, taller, and thinner than I was, and they, too, were dolled up (or down), in trailer-trash chic.

Shit, I thought, as I looked at one of the women, I should have worn a charm bracelet. That would have been a perfect key to Darva's character.

Alice, you always do that.

Always do what?

Psych yourself out. For God's sake, stop worrying about how the other actresses look and what what they're wearing. Just go in there and have fun.

Right!

Lois Sarkisian opened her door and poked her head out. She was holding my headshot. She smiled pleasantly and beckoned me inside. The first thing she did was scrutinize my face and compare it to my photograph. "Well, you look like your picture, and that's a good thing," she said succinctly. "You have no idea how many people I call in based on a glamorous photograph, and what turns up in my office on the day of the audition bears as much resemblance to the headshot they sent me as you do to Sylvester Stallone." She went behind her desk and motioned for me to sit opposite her.

"Wow," I said stupidly, knowing from the hundreds of auditions I've attended, how truly unsurprising it is for actors' photographs to look exponentially better than the performers do in real life. Ah, the miracles of retouching, airbrushing, and digital photography. I extended my hand across her desk. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Sarkisian."

She shook my hand but was otherwise done with pleasantries. "Let's hear the scene." She donned a pair of bifocals and picked up a copy of the Darva/Wilkes Chamberlain scene. Ms. Sarkisian read with little inflection. I had the script memorized to the extent that I could lift my gaze from the pages and make eye contact with her when I said my lines. I was having fun and playing for keeps, remembering to take each roller-coaster dip and hairpin turn, shifting my intentions with each section of the scene, all the while maintaining my overall objective to convince Wilkes to kidnap my innocent young daughter Greta from her adoptive parents, Grayson and Greer Gainsborough. I had the final line of the scene, and I made sure to keep my gaze on "Wilkes," holding the cliffhanger intensity of the look for three or four seconds, which is how the scene would be played on the air—with a

tense, dramatic “button” until the camera stopped rolling and they went to a commercial.

“Terrific! Just terrific, Alice,” Ms. Sarkisian said, putting down her script. “You found the arc of the scene and the shifts and nuances in it. You’re a real actress.” She sounded somewhat surprised.

Actually, I was the one who was surprised. “Well, what kind of people usually audition for you?” I asked her. I figured it was a legitimate question.

“Beautiful people. Many models. Like the woman who came in right before you did. They have a terrific look for soaps but I can’t use them because they can’t read a line of dialogue to save their lives. And they lack the training as well as the stamina to learn several pages overnight and be ready to perform them in one take the next day. We rarely do more than one take, unless someone muffs something, because we’ve got to shoot an entire one-hour episode each day.” Ms. Sarkisian pushed her chair away from the desk and took me in with her gaze. “You’re very good, Alice. And I’m glad I called you in. It was refreshing to hear someone read this stuff who really knows what she’s doing.” She slid her chair back to the desk and peered over her bifocals at me, then looked through them down past the bridge of her nose. “But you’re just not pretty enough for me to put you on tape and send it out to Frances in L.A.”

Frances Dixon was the Los Angeles-based soap’s executive producer, the final arbiter of who got hired to hang out in Huddlerville.

Did you just hear what she said to you?

“I’m not . . . what???” I repeated Ms. Sarkisian’s words. Yeah, grant it, I’m not built like a supermodel, but I’ve never been considered unattractive.

“You *are* very pretty, Alice. Don’t misunderstand me . . .”

What could I possibly misunderstand?

"... but you just aren't pretty *enough*. Do you watch the show?"

I nodded mutely, robbed of words.

"Most of the women in Huddlerville, except for the older characters and the extras, of course, have a certain look to them . . ."

Yeah, a certain anorexic look.

"You see, the camera already makes a person appear ten pounds heavier than they are in real life. And you appear lovely right now, and you have a sexy quality to your persona, but part of my problem with your look is that once we put the camera on you, you'll look too heavy."

"I can lose those ten pounds," I blurted. Goodbye Ben & Jerry's, hello Benzedrine.

"We need to have our Darva by next week," Ms. Sarkisian responded, sensing my desperation.

"I could—"

Ms. Sarkisian interrupted me. "Your weight is only a part of it. As I mentioned, and I meant it as a compliment, Alice, there's a sexiness to you, a ripeness, that isn't *optimal* for soaps. When we're looking to fill a role like Darva, we cast women who look as close to our concepts of physical perfection as we can find them and who can still read a line of dialogue without bumping into the furniture."

Well, there's nothing much you can do about that, Alice, and you shouldn't try. You are who you are. Now thank the lady and get out of her office.

"Another thing for you to think about, if you're still bent on pursuing a career in daytime drama," Ms. Sarkisian began. "Losing ten pounds or so is a good start, but you should consider getting a nose job."

I froze. This was too much. For the record, I do not have Cyrano's honker, a *nez* to end all *nezes*, plastered to the center of my face. Not even remotely close. It's not a pert little button nose, but it's a perfectly acceptable one. So, now this woman, a total stranger with the power to put me on national television five days a week, has decided that I need plastic surgery. Well! I was in a car accident when I was sixteen, sitting in the back seat of a taxi that got rear-ended near Times Square. In the era before mandatory seat belts in cabs, with no restraint, I went flying into the partition that separated the front and back seats, busting my nose and thereby necessitating stellar reconstructive efforts to prevent me from looking like a prizefighter for the rest of my life. So, in fact, I'd already *had* a nose job, thank you very much.

I understand all too well the nature of her profession, but Lois Sarkisian, a good fifteen pounds overweight herself—not counting that ten-pounds-for-the-camera allocation—who still wears hand-crocheted vests and has poorly highlighted hair, has a lot of nerve to rip apart people's appearances the way she did. What happened to simply thanking me for coming in, complimenting me on the work I did on the scene, but telling me they'll be seeing several other candidates for the role, and saying bye-bye? Where does it say "eviscerate the actor" in the casting directors' handbook? I'd already had enough damaging negativity to last a lifetime from college professors who'd felt it was their duty to discourage their fledgling charges from ever making a serious stab at the business. Small wonder Dorian took such a dim view of acting teachers.

I rose, shouldered my purse, and grabbed the bag that contained the suit and shoes I'd been wearing at Newter &

Spade. "Thank you—" I began, continuing to observe audition protocol.

"You *are* quite a good actress, Alice," Ms. Sarkisian reiterated, interrupting me and extending her hand. "But you should seriously consider that nose job."

I took her hand, shook it, and held it firmly while I looked her straight in the eye. "*Again?*" I asked, then released my grasp, turned, and walked out of her office.

Chapter 5



"Gram . . . ?" I sniffled into my cell. Through tears, I told her what had just transpired in Ms. Sarkisian's office. "No, I haven't left yet . . . where? . . . I'm in one of the . . . stalls in the ladies' room. Thanks . . . I know, but I feel like after all these years I should have a thicker skin than this . . . I don't?" I touched my nose, the poor, innocent protrusion that had been the unwilling victim of Ms. Sarkisian's abuse. "I'm glad you don't think it's ugly . . . though it could use some powder right about now. I'm sure it's bright red." I sat on the toilet and cradled the phone to my ear, listening to her words of comfort. No value can be placed on having someone who loves you so much and is always in your corner; who will get mad at the world on your behalf, then switch gears and calm you down, and even when milk and cookies aren't an immediate option, will offer you the emotional equivalent. Gram was a goddess. And I've been trying to live up to her examples—and her expectations—all my life.

I left the stall and went to the sink, checked my image in the mirror, the better to study my nose from every angle, and splashed some cool tap water on my tear-stained face.

Darva stared back at me. Our relationship, however brief, had come to an end, so I changed back into my civilian clothes and stuffed the Darva outfit and accessories in the shopping bag.

Like Gram said, you're disappointed and hurt right now, but it isn't the end of the world. Pull yourself together, Alice.

So I did. I took the elevator to the lobby, marched straight past the security desk and out into . . .

A pouring rainstorm.

No umbrella.

My suit was about to shrink exponentially, probably to the size of a washcloth. My shoes would most likely melt on the trip back to Newter & Spade, no matter how successful I was at negotiating the kind of puddles that routinely accumulate at city street corners.

Ms. Sarkisian's secretary had collected the guest pass issued to me by the security desk when I entered the building, so I couldn't get back upstairs to change clothes. And even if they'd let me back in, getting soaked through to the skin in my Darva getup, an already skimpy outfit that fairly screamed, "come and get it, y'all!" was not a good idea.

So with both time and the weather against me, I made a mad dash for the nearest mass transit. I rode the bus back to Newter & Spade in a puddle made by my wet butt and my dripping, backcombed hair that Natalie had sprayed within an inch of its chemically enhanced life. It looked even worse by the time I arrived back at the office; the hairspray had become a sort of insoluble glue, turning my hair into matted clumps.

I nearly bumped into Ramona as I exited the elevator. "What happened to you?" she asked, aghast at my appearance.

"Got caught in the rain. Sorry."

"Oh, dear." She appraised my appearance. "Do you have anything you can change into?"

I nodded. Her solicitousness was uncharacteristic.

"I hope you don't catch a cold."

"Thanks. Me, too."

"Because you're too familiar with the tobacco case for me to bring in someone to replace you right now. They'll never get up to speed. And you had better change into whatever else you have with you because you'll ruin our furniture if you sit on the upholstery for the rest of the afternoon in that wet skirt."

What were you thinking, Alice? That she had a niceness gene implanted during her lunch hour?

Nope, she was the same old Ramona. And she deserved what she got—which was the Darva outfit. Fully accessorized. I did wish I could have detangled my hair, though. After Ramona retreated to her office, Natalie and I took a trip to the ladies' room, where she made a brave attempt to return my coiffure to some semblance of normalcy. With limited luck. The best she could manage was to tame the shellacked poufs that had been the Darva-do into flat, shellacked sections resembling cheap wall paneling. "Well, it's a lot better than it was," I said, appraising her efforts in the mirror. "Thanks, I owe you one."

"If you really mean it, you can marry Dmitri for me," she scoffed.

"What is it this time?" I asked her.

"He wants some hip-hop guy to perform with the band. He doesn't even like hip-hop. But he says he wants to make some decisions regarding our wedding. He's mad that I'm choosing the food, the flowers, the musicians. He's driving me crazy."

"So maybe he doesn't really mean it. Maybe he's doing this—demanding a hip-hop artist—just to try to show you he wants some control."

She tugged at a section of my hair that still seemed to displease her. "No, he isn't. He's doing it because he's a son of a bitch."

As we walked back to our desks, I looked at my watch, thinking the sooner I could get out of Newter & Spade, the better. Only a couple of hours to go before I would be liberated for the day. God, I could use a drink. My extension rang and I picked up the receiver, hoping it wasn't Ramona with a tibat of criticism she'd forgotten to impart upon first seeing my drowned rat impression.

"Good news, muppet!" Eric. He's the only person in the world who has ever called me that. "The sun is shining, the birds are singing, there will be no rain delay tonight!"

"What are you talking about?"

"It stopped raining. Are you up for the Yankees game this evening? First pitch is seven-thirty, so we can leave right from the office. I snagged a pair of seats in one of the company boxes closer to home plate. Kind of last-minute, I know, but no one was grabbing them because they figured the downpour this afternoon meant the game would be called. So what do you say?"

"Don't they let you pause for breath up there?"

"Sorry. Shit, you're right. I *was* kind of talking pretty fast, I guess. I was just so jazzed about getting the tickets and I wanted to make it up to you, for having to cancel last week. You were really understanding about that and I appreciated it."

Did I have a choice?

"Thanks." Now, I could go home and be miserable in front of Gram, ruining her evening by rehashing the horrible audi-

tion experience, or I could try to do something to take my mind off it. I opted for the latter. "You know something? I've had an afternoon from hell . . . so, *what* the hell? Yeah, sure, we're on."

"Yee-hah! Oh, shit, that's Harrison on my other line. Gotta run. Meet me in the lobby at six P.M. See you. 'Bye." Eric disengaged the line.

I swiveled my chair around and turned to my temp colleagues. "Guess who's going to the Yankees game tonight? With Mr. Fast-Track Senior Associate?"

Marlena, who took many things in stride when she wasn't cursing Ramona or Bart Harrison behind their tailored backs, looked at me, appalled. "Like *that*? Don't get me wrong, honey, I'm sure the *cholos* at the stadium will love it."

Shit. I'm dressed like Darva. I had visions of enduring a symphony of wolf whistles and lip-smacking on the subway ride up to the Bronx. I fingered the fabric of my suit, which I had laid out over two chairs so it would dry faster. While a business suit was nearly as inappropriate for a baseball game as what I was currently wearing, it would still draw less attention. However, there was no way I was going to be able to wear it in a couple of hours; it was still far too damp. "Well," I sighed, "I guess this is what Eric gets."

"Eric and every other Newter & Spade lawyer and his wife who are going with you guys," Marlena commented.

Good God, I hadn't thought about that. "I should have declined, huh?" I asked my co-workers.

"No, I wouldn't say that," Roger said. "Not if you're an exhibitionist, that is."

"Or suicidal," Marlena added.

"Have fun, *muppet*," Natalie teased.

* * *

There's something nostalgic about walking through the tunnel at Yankee Stadium and emerging inside the legendary arena, inhaling the crisp evening air as you make your way to your seats. The organ music plays and you can almost hear the ghost of Gehrig echoing, *Today-ay-ay . . . is the happiest-est day-ay-ay . . .*

Just thinking about it makes me cry, even though I only know the famed "Pride of the Yankees" as indelibly portrayed on celluloid by Gary Cooper. Another great Yankee was being honored at this game, as it turned out. It was Yogi Berra commemorative bobble-head doll night. All children under the age of fourteen were given a ceramic replica of Mr. Malaprop. The ticket taker took a shine to me, so he gave me one of the dolls. Eric grinned at the guy, handed him a five-dollar tip, and suggested I shove the figurine in my purse or else all the Newter & Spade wives and girlfriends would want one, too. "We're a very competitive bunch," he warned me.

Just before the official start of the game, Yogi was introduced, to a resounding standing ovation. He ambled from the Yankee dugout out to the pitcher's mound, where a mike was set up.

Today-ay-ay-ay . . .

"I just want to thank everyone here for making tonight necessary," he said.

Eric shook his head, amused. "You gotta love this guy." He placed his fingers together and brought them to his mouth, releasing a whistle so shrill he could have summoned a taxi in Topeka.

Other Newter & Spade attorneys started to trickle into the stadium as Yogi was returning to the catcher's mound to receive the ceremonial first pitch. As they scooted past

us to their seats, they took one look at my Darva getup and apparently decided that Eric must have hired me for the night. When he introduced me, saying simply, "This is Alice," he might as well have been telling them he had congenital herpes.

While the Baltimore Orioles were having an unimpressive series of first-inning at-bats, a tall man holding the hand of a little girl passed our chairs on the way down to the very first row. In her free arm, the child was clutching a staggering array of premium items—an inflatable doll in the home team's uniform with Bernie Williams's number on the back of the jersey, a felt pennant, a paper sack of buttered popcorn, a pint-sized catcher's mitt, and her Yogi Berra bobble-head icon. Her blond braids were tucked under an adult's pin-striped Yankees cap, nearly obscuring her vision.

"Look where you're going, Lucy," the man cautioned, and I recognized the voice and looked up. It was Dan Carpenter, the guy I'd met in the elevator a few weeks ago. The not-childless, and therefore most-likely-married Dan Carpenter, evidently.

Lucy became distracted by a routine grounder that was misplayed at first, leading to a single. "Tag him!" she was shouting at the top of her lungs. She became aggravated at the Yankee first baseman and started jumping up and down, expertly, vociferously, and somewhat crudely conveying her impressions of the lousy fielding. The overlarge hat slouched over her eyes, and she lost her footing.

Suddenly she was a little girl in pigtails again. "My Yogi Bear doll!" she shrieked, as she lost control of it among her possessions and helplessly watched it shatter on the cement steps just below her. She burst into gut-wrenching sobs. I

watched Dan try to calm her down, but she was inconsolable. "My birthday's ruined!" Lucy bawled.

He steered her to their front-row seats without further incident, but the kid was not a happy camper. "I'll get you something else, sweetheart," Dan soothed. "What would you like? Should I buy you a jersey?"

Lucy shook her head and her pigtails went flying. "I already *have* a jersey," she said. "I want a Yogi Bear doll."

"But they only had a limited number of them," reasoned Dan. "And they gave them all away. I don't think we can get another one for you."

Eric, too, had been observing this scenario with interest. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he whispered to me.

I reached into my purse.

"Do you want to give it to them or should I?"

I'd love to, but I refuse to approach Dan Carpenter looking like Darva. Even if he's probably married.

"It was your idea; you do it," I urged him. "I'll watch."

I handed Eric the Yogi Berra doll and stood up so he could get past me. He descended the three steps or so to the first row and tapped Dan on the shoulder. The crowd was too noisy for me to hear exactly what Eric told them, but it appeared to be something along the lines of, "My friend and I wanted your daughter to have this."

He received an odd response. *Lucy* broke into a megawatt grin, jumped up and down, and seized the doll from Eric's hands. *Dan* shook his head. Did he not want to accept the gift? In response to something Dan said to him, Eric turned and pointed toward our seats, directly at me, in fact. He motioned with his hand for me to stand up and join them.

Oh, God. No way to avoid it now.

I rose and tugged on the hem of my miniskirt, feeling like Daisy-Mae-visits-a-kindergarten-class. Gingerly in my high-heeled Candies, I walked down the few steps to Dan's seats.

"Hey, sit the fuck down!" one rather energetic Yankee fan yelled.

"Sit on my lap!" another called.

"Sit on my face!" chorused a third.

Lovely. A class act, all of you.

"Jesus, it's you," said Dan, when I approached their seats.

Eric looked perplexed. "Do you two know each other?"

"Not exactly," I said, sounding like the Hertz rent-a-car ad campaign.

I'm not really a slut, Dan, I was just trying to play one on TV.

"We met in the elevator of my apartment building," I explained. "Dr. Carpenter was on his way to a house call."

"You're a doctor?" Eric sounded impressed. "What's your specialty?"

"Pediatrics," I answered.

"What are you two talking about?"

"What do you mean?" I asked Dan.

"I'm not a doctor."

"You're not?"

"I'm confused," Eric said.

"*You're* confused?" Dan echoed.

"He was carrying one of those black bags like the pediatrician brought to our house when I was a kid," I said. I pointed my finger at Dan. "And you said it was an emergency and you were making a house call."

Dan burst out laughing. I felt my face growing redder and redder, from the apples of my cheeks to the roots of my overteased hair. "I'm not a doctor—I'm a carpenter!"

I was temporarily flummoxed. "*Dan* Carpenter—"

"Who is a carpenter," he replied, still laughing. "I yam what I yam," he added, imitating Robin Williams's imitation of Popeye. "I carry my tools in that bag. I do custom cabinetry, furniture, and the day you met me, one of my clients had a wobbly dining table leg and was in the middle of preparing a huge dinner party."

"He built me a dollhouse, too," Lucy chimed in. "For my sixth birthday. That was last year. And even made me patio furniture."

"Well, everyone needs a well-appointed patio," Eric said encouragingly.

"And he built me a grandfather clock for the house. From *scratch*," the child added proudly. "It *chimes*, too." She was clutching the Yogi Berra bobble-head like it was a plaster saint.

"Maybe you should let me take that from you, honey," Dan suggested to the girl. "Don't you want to put on your mitt? You're in a great position to catch fouls and pop-ups." The remark was a silver bullet. I was impressed with the way Dan deftly managed to maneuver the ceramic doll away from Lucy without needing to mention that it might end up shattered as well if she didn't relinquish it for the time being.

"And I think we should let Eric and Alice get back to their seats so they can enjoy the rest of the game." He whispered something into Lucy's ear.

"Thank you, Eric and Alice!" she crowed.

Then I caught Dan looking at my outfit. "I'll . . . just be . . . go . . . sit down now. Nice to see you again."

"Uh-yeah," he said.

"That was a very sweet idea, by the way," I told Eric, when we returned to our seats. I gave him a kiss on the cheek. He smelled woody.

"You were a really good sport about it, too, muppet."

"What a great father Dan is," I added.

But Derek Jeter had just drilled a ball that was sailing out toward Monument Park, the crowd had risen to its feet, and my date didn't hear a word I said.

I can't say that we were ostracized by Eric's colleagues, but they certainly didn't make any effort to converse with us during the game. Eric was quite knowledgeable about baseball and he made the experience a lot of fun for me. I didn't mind the fact that his friends, most of them Newter & Spade partners and their wives or girlfriends, were ignoring us; it gave Eric and me a chance to begin to become better acquainted. I learned that he was born in Queens but had grown up in Connecticut and attended fancy schools like Groton and Brown. It made him a bit of an intellectual snob, but I've discovered far worse evils in men. I'd be the last person to fault anyone for enjoying six-hundred-page biographies or for being more fluent in current events than I could ever hope to be in this lifetime. I liked his company and his easygoing generosity. Giving Lucy the bobble-head doll wasn't exactly offering to underwrite her college tuition, but it was a nice gesture, and it stood out in contrast to his colleagues' self-absorption.

So when Eric asked if he could take me to a movie one evening later in the week, providing Bart Harrison didn't require his presence in the office, I readily said yes. I thoroughly enjoyed the gentle goodnight kiss we shared when he dropped me off in a cab in front of my apartment building. Not only that, I actually found myself looking forward to working at Newter & Spade.

Sometimes New York can be a very small world. More than seven million stories in this city and Izzy, Dorian, and I were

sharing three of them as we sat in a church basement in Greenwich Village waiting to be called to the set of Kevin Costner's latest movie. Since production companies often hire dozens if not hundreds of extras, depending on the scenes they're shooting, it's not unusual for actors to run into their friends on set or in the holding area reserved for the background players.

"I think tonight makes an even dozen," Dorian remarked. He started counting film shoots on his fingers.

"Jeez, we've really worked on a dozen films together?" Izzy asked.

"I think this makes a dozen where we were actually called for the same scenes," I said. "I know I've done work on some of the same pictures you have, but on different days. And Dorian's in practically everything, so that almost doesn't count. Who'da thunk that—what was it—about eight years ago, when we all met at Nick Katzanides's memorial, that we'd still be such pals today? You know everyone always says let's stay in touch, but you almost never do."

"I think it was Nick's ghost that did it," Izzy posited. "Love him or hate him, if you ever studied with him, it bonded you to everyone else who ever did, too."

I nodded my head in agreement. "Even famous people. I had an audition for the the show that Jon Santos is doing, and I hadn't seen him since the memorial. But it was like old-home week."

"It didn't matter *how* you knew Nick, either; it still bonded you," Dorian observed with a chuckle. "Alice studied with him in college, Izzy took his private class, and I was directed by him in summer stock. If you could imitate Nick, it made you family—"

"—With everyone else who could imitate Nick!" I laughed.

"Isabel, what are you doing? Do you call that *acting*?" I exclaimed in Nick's nasal Greek accent.

"Oh, God, he was brutal!" Izzy proclaimed.

"But brilliant," said Dorian. "He was the best director I ever had. You think I'm good at script analysis?" he asked me. "Who do you think taught me everything I know?"

"Hmnh. Eight years ago, we three were total strangers toasting our mutual mentor with copious quantities of ouzo. And now look at us." I put an arm around each of them. "My best friends in the world. I love you guys so much." I felt tears start to spring to my eyes.

"Oh, no. Don't cry or you'll make *me* cry." Izzy's eyes grew moist.

"Then you'll both ruin your makeup. And the ladies' rooms in church basements are notorious for their unflattering lighting."

Izzy rewarded Dorian with a gentle shot to the ribs.

Dorian watched the crafts service caterers setting up tables for the dinner break. We'd had a six P.M. call time, which meant we'd be shooting through the night. Izzy and I had come straight to the set from our respective day jobs. It was now close to midnight and I was bouncing around the room, due to all the caffeine and sugar I'd ingested while waiting around the holding area with nothing to do but drink coffee, eat Krispy Kremes, and shoot the breeze with my two closest friends. We hadn't done a damn thing since we'd signed in. Every time the production assistants came in and scanned the room, handpicking the actors they wanted from among the hundred or so hires, none of us was selected. This wasn't unusual. There have been entire shoots where I'd done absolutely nothing but sit around, until the final scene of the day when a PA would come into the holding area and ask who

hadn't worked yet, then take those background players and use them for whatever was left to film.

"Costner has the best food," Dorian said, stuffing donuts into a plastic bag, which he then shoved into his backpack. "I can't wait for dinner. The last time I worked a Costner picture, we had filet mignon, lobster tails, and a pasta bar."

"Yeah, but you still only took home around a hundred dollars. A hundred and fifty max, right?" Isabel said bitterly. "Man may be able to live on filet mignon alone, but his landlord sure as hell can't. And these days, it takes two salaries to make ends meet. Dominick can never understand why I work in an office all day and then do this all night," she added. "He says we never talk. That I never see him. You know, he's right? He asked me, when I got home at dawn last week after doing a day job and a night shoot back-to-back, and was getting an hour of sleep before dragging my ass back in to the law office at nine A.M., why the hell I bothered to get married since I was never home." She threw up her hands. "He's right! This is no way for a grown-up to live."

I sighed. "Well, a woman in her mid-thirties still rooming with her grandmother and doing the same thing you are for a living isn't exactly doing what grown-ups do, either. Doesn't there come a time when you have to cut the ties?"

"Well, I'm not sure what you're considering a perennial adolescence," Dorian said. "Living with your grandmother or striving to become a full-time working actress. Or both. The only thing I can add to this discussion is, one of these days you'll want to get married, right?"

I nodded. "Obviously, I'd change my living situation then."

"What if you got a boyfriend?" Izzy asked.

"Oh, frabjous day, callou, callay!" I cheered, quoting Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. I've had boyfriends since I've lived

with Gram, but never had them stay overnight unless she was out of town visiting friends. I would stay at the guy's house, which wasn't always the greatest situation, either, since they sometimes had roommates. But it certainly does cramp one's style.

"I want to hear all about this guy at work," Izzy prompted.

I began to tell them about Eric Witherspoon. We'd had three dates by now: the Yankees game, a really awful Jim Carrey movie, and dinner at a Mexican restaurant in Eric's Park Slope neighborhood, after which I became violently ill and spent the rest of the evening in the bathroom of Eric's attractive two-bedroom garden apartment. It was the night I'd sort of anticipated taking our relationship to that Big Next Step, but all I could do was try to stay alive. Making love became the farthest thing from my mind.

"Was he a gentleman about it?" Dorian asked.

Before I could reply, one of the production assistants, walkie-talkie in hand, descended the steps into the church basement and motioned for us to follow her.

"I hope we're not going to be working through the dinner break," Dorian muttered.

The PA advised us to bring our personal belongings; in fact we could use them in the scene, as we were meant to portray passersby. While I'm glad for the work, and proud to be a card-carrying member of the Screen Actors Guild, I've always thought it was pretty hysterical that production companies had to hire professional actors to walk up and down the street dozens of times in succession, pretending to be average New Yorkers. Honestly, it is a bit silly. It is presumed that those without professional credentials cannot be relied upon to repeat the same "take" multiple times, or not to look into the camera, make googly faces, or wave "Hi, Mom." I've

got two initials in response to that, but . . . I'm reluctant to state them in print, however, lest the union brass swoop down and snatch my hard-won SAG card from my wallet.

Upstairs on the sidewalk, Dorian was separated from us and sent to one end of the block. On the word "action," he was to pretend to be a harried businessman on the way down the street, heading toward, then past, Izzy and me. While the world, and Mr. Costner, whirled by, she and I were asked to act like pals who had serendipitously run into each other, stopping to chat in front of the window of Tribal Wonders, the exotic Third World *tchotchke* shop near where we'd been positioned.

Izzy and I got our marching orders from a second assistant director. I was stationed about ten feet from the shop and Izzy was placed about the same distance from the other end of the storefront. On "action," we were to head toward each other, meet, and begin an animated conversation in front of the shop. Once Dorian got a couple of steps past us, we girls started to walk together in the direction Dorian had come from, continuing our progress until we heard the director yell "cut."

Not rocket science. But if you have to do it numerous times because, for whatever reason, the take was no good, and you spend hours standing on your feet, it can be pretty grueling and physically exhausting. We'd sat in the holding area for close to six hours. While in real life it was past midnight, in movieland it was supposed to be early evening; and no matter where else we'd spent the rest of our day and how tired we were simply from hanging around an uncomfortable rec room for hours, once we heard "action," it was time to be peppy.

Thank God it wasn't raining or snowing or 105 degrees,

like it was the day I did an Andy Garcia movie, sitting on the sun-drenched steps of the Metropolitan Museum.

"And—action!" we heard.

It was as good a time as any to continue our conversation about Eric Witherspoon. "Dorian's going to be pissed that he wasn't here to get the answer to his question," Izzy said. "So was Eric a gentleman about you getting sick all over his bathroom?"

"Yes, he was, and I wasn't 'sick all over his bathroom.' I just . . . sort of . . . couldn't leave the room, that's all. Without running right back in there. I was phenomenally embarrassed."

Dorian passed us, walking full-tilt, with his game face on. Izzy and I started to move down the block. "I've got to ask the \$64,000 question now, rather than save it up for later," she said.

"And—cut!"

We stopped walking immediately.

"Back to one, please," we heard over a megaphone. The direction was echoed by the half dozen production assistants, telling us to return to our starting positions and prepare for another take. I gave Izzy a little goodbye wave and walked back to my place. We all waited for a few minutes.

"Action!"

We met again and Izzy tugged on the sleeve of my spring coat. "So, do you love him?"

"It's too soon to tell," I admitted. "I'm very—"

"Cut!"

"We didn't get very far that time," I commented.

"Background, back to one," the director called.

We'd barely moved. Dorian had only gotten a few feet from his starting position. "I'm very fond of him, Izzy," I called out to her as we returned to our first mark. "I have a

really good time with him. Do I love him? No, not yet. Am I in love with him? I could be, if things continue the way they're going. I've almost grown used to his sense of humor—which is pretty sophomoric, I'm afraid. I've seen him be nice to old ladies, waiters, and house pets, and he's cute. I definitely enjoyed making out with him on our second date." Good thing the filmmakers had shut down the sidewalk or I might have received some really strange looks from passersby.

"Was that *in* the Jim Carrey movie, or afterwards?" Izzy shouted back.

"In. I have to confess, it was unwatchable."

"So why did you go? Am I being too nosy, here?"

"Action!" We began a fourth take.

"Well, fancy meeting *you* here," Izzy joked as we reached the storefront.

"No. Eric likes Jim Carrey." I smiled a cat-that-swallowed-the-canary grin. "So he's not perfect. But that night, he liked me better."

Izzy pretended to be fascinated by an object in the Tribal Wonders window. "*Now* you decide to start acting?" I teased.

She ignored me. "What's your favorite thing about him? Eric, not Jim Carrey."

I figured I'd better "act," too, so I pointed and nodded at an intriguing mask with cornhusks for hair. "My favorite thing? His integrity, I think. His loyalty. He doesn't have the obnoxious cutthroat personality of his colleagues—or I wouldn't be with him—yet he's a real company man. Which could be a really annoying thing, but the fact that he doesn't like to hear a bad word said about Newter & Spade, that he really enjoys his job instead of making cynical wisecracks about it, like so many people do—I like that about him. I

guess his refusal to say anything negative about a place that too often treats its employees like shit kind of reminds me of the way Gram is about Grandpa Danny. It feels like behavioral comfort food to me.”

Dorian passed us, striding purposefully. “What’s the worst thing about him?” she asked.

“He calls me ‘muppet.’”

“Muppet?”

“And—cut! Background back to one. Right away, please.”

We stopped on a dime and turned to head back to our places. “Yup, muppet. And I’m afraid to ask him why. Do I look like Kermit or something?”

Izzy shook her head. “Not a bit.” She broke into a mischievous grin. “Miss Piggy, maybe.”

I gave her a playful shot in the arm.

“Action!” We were on take five.

The night wore on. Dorian was right; we did eat like royalty. The ambience in the church basement wasn’t exactly Le Cirque, but the crafts service staff provided us with four-star cuisine: all we could eat of salmon filet with a lemon *beurre blanc* topped with capers, beef tenderloin with sliced mushrooms in Madeira-laced gravy, the fresh pasta bar with the four different sauces that Dorian had remembered from his past experience on a Costner film, and the usual available-all-day table laden with perennial breakfast items: bagels, cereals, muffins, Pop Tarts, and Krispy Kremes, as well as an array of salty items: pretzels, potato chips, Fritos . . . and, of course, enormous urns of hot coffee.

After chowing down, we returned to the street to continue filming. Just after three A.M. the director determined that he’d gotten the take he wanted for the shot Izzy, Dorian, and I had been working on for the past three hours.

Outdoor shoots depend on light and weather most of all. When things drag on during a day shoot, you end up burning daylight and if you continue to work into dusk, your shots won't match. In our case, in a couple more hours we'd be approaching dawn and run into the same type of problem. The production team set up for a new scene, the extras were shuffled around, and some of them were permitted to sign out and go home if they weren't needed for the final shot of the night. Izzy was one of them. Dorian and I gave her a hug and headed back to work. I spent the next two and a half hours walking back and forth across the same intersection. Dorian was asked to look like he was waiting impatiently for a bus. I have no idea whether there was supposed to be any continuity between the first scene we worked on and this one. The focus wasn't on us, anyway. *Background* is really a very apt word for what we were doing. Human set dressing. And if those shots survived the editing room, in the cinema you'd still need to keep your eyes peeled in order to catch our "performances."

After several takes, the director "checked the gate," liked what he saw on the monitor, and called it a night. We wrapped at 5:47 A.M. My lower back felt sore and my legs felt like Jell-O. There had been no place to sit, or even perch between takes, during all the time we were outside.

"And people think this is glamorous," Dorian said with a bitter chuckle as we piled into a production company van to take us uptown. The van was only permitted to stop at Twenty-third, Thirty-fourth, and Forty-second Streets. Being dropped off at the Port Authority in the pre-dawn hours was not especially safe, but catching a cab home from there would be a few dollars cheaper than hailing one from our Greenwich Village shoot location.

At Twenty-third Street, I leaned over to give Dorian a hug be-

fore he exited the van and noticed that his backpack was stuffed to capacity. His meals for the rest of the week, I presumed.

When the van arrived at Forty-second Street, I climbed out, practically stumbling from exhaustion, and immediately hailed a taxi. Manhattan had already begun to yawn and stretch. The sky had gotten considerably lighter. Garbage trucks were beginning their noisy, quotidian rounds, the rude clanking of canisters and Dumpsters performing the function of an urban rooster. Out of sheer curiosity, I checked my watch. I shook my head, chuckling to myself. I'd been awake for the past twenty-three hours, working my temp job and the Costner film back-to-back. I figured that after a nice hot shower, I could crawl into bed and get about forty-four minutes of sleep before I needed to get ready to head back to Newter & Spade. I could get a head start on that nap if I closed my eyes in the cab.

I leaned back against the seat, feeling the springs beneath my butt bounce and jog as we sped up an empty Eighth Avenue. *Yeah*, I thought, musing on Dorian's most recent observation. *Hi-ho, the glamorous life.*

Chapter 6



“Jesus, muppet, you look terrible,” Eric said sympathetically. He’d made a mid-afternoon visit to the document-coding room to review the hard copy of some documents that looked like “smoking guns,” judging from the digested computer entries. My co-workers had developed the habit of discreetly pretending to ignore Eric’s demonstrations of familiarity with me.

“I’ll cheer you up. Who’s jolly and goes ‘ho, ho, ho?’ ” he asked. *He’d* developed the habit of regaling us with jokes whenever he came down to see us.

“Okay, who?” Natalie replied, refusing to venture a guess.

“Santa Claus in a bordello!” Eric grinned impishly.

“You know, you ain’t no Eddie Murphy,” Marlena said pointedly, lapsing into the street attitude she deliberately adopted when she felt feisty. “You ain’t even Henny Youngman. And just because you’ve got a captive audience, it don’t mean you got to torture us, too.”

“You *do* have the sense of humor of an eleven-year-old,” I added sleepily. I could have used a couple of toothpicks to keep my eyes propped open.

Eric glanced at me and shook his head. "And *you* do look like shit. I'll be right back," he said.

After a couple of minutes' absence, he returned with a Styrofoam cup of steaming tea and nearly knocked over Ramona, who had appeared in our doorway just a moment before.

"Hey, what brings you down here?" she asked, giving him a megawatt smile. Her eyes sparkled. "Slumming?"

"Just needed to check out a couple of things," he replied noncommittally, then went over to Natalie to inquire about the memos he wanted to review. Natalie shuffled through her box of documents and retrieved the papers in question. Eric thanked her. But he didn't leave the room. When Ramona continued to lurk in the doorway, Eric stopped at Roger's desk to ask him how his son was holding up during the divorce. It became apparent that whatever power trip was going on between Ramona and Eric, it was a war of attrition.

Eric blinked first. He'd had his back to me, leaning against my desk while I worked. I noticed that he had surreptitiously placed the cup of tea on my desktop, right near my left hand.

"I'll be back in my office if anyone needs to get in touch with me," Eric said. Then, without glancing in my direction, he sidled past Ramona. She turned to watch him leave, looked at her fleet of temps, then returned her focus to Eric, who must have been halfway down the hall by then. "You forgot your tea," she called after him, grabbing the Styrofoam cup. When a half ounce or so spilled out, she jumped back to avoid splattering her skirt, and nearly dropped the cup and its entire contents onto the carpet. "Jesus, this is hot!" she exclaimed, seeming as surprised as the infamous McDonald's coffee plaintiff.

Eric returned to the doorway. "Thanks." He carefully took the cup from her hands and hastily departed. With no further reason to remain, Ramona pursed her lips sourly and bid us a curt goodbye.

Two minutes later, maybe less, Eric walked back into the coding room and wordlessly replaced the Styrofoam cup of tea where he had deliberately left it. It was full again, the spillage replaced.

Marlena adjusted her swivel chair to face me and leaned forward with a conspiratorial grin. "Someone's looking out for you," she said in a stage whisper. "I think it's time you introduced lawyer-boy to your grandmother."

I hadn't taken Marlena's advice when she offered it, but waited a few more weeks, as spring turned to early summer, to be sure that what was going on between Eric and me was a real relationship. Sure, Gram knew I'd been staying at his place in Park Slope a couple of nights a week and most weekends, but she'd grown accustomed to that behavior whenever I got involved with a guy, just as long as I let her know where I was headed after work. She didn't want to think I'd gotten pushed in front of the subway and she'd have to learn about it on the ten o'clock news. Having been through her devastating, inevitable I-told-you-so's whenever I had waxed rhapsodic about a man who was most definitely, absolutely, positively The One, only to have him dump me three days later, I'd promised myself I wouldn't let it happen again. Invariably, Gram felt that I never found men who were worthy of me. Her own experience with men was in itself a cautionary tale.

Gram never considered any other offers after Grandpa Danny abandoned her. She staunchly maintained that was

because he was the irreplaceable love of her life. *I*, on the other hand, remain hopeful that permanency is just around the corner, but I'm still not immune to the I-told-you-so's. Therefore, I'd promised myself that the next time I would introduce Gram to my beau, she'd be meeting a keeper.

The partners at Newter & Spade kept their associates on a short lead. Sometimes there was a reason for it—if there was a deadline approaching or a case had taken a surprise turn that needed to be responded to immediately—but the rest of the time, it seemed to me, as an outside observer, that it was more of a power trip or a control issue than anything else. As long as Bart Harrison gave him his head and we had time to be together, Eric and I enjoyed considerable quality time exploring New York City's vast cultural resources, enabling me to catch up on the museums I'd always intended to visit, the first-run movies I'd heretofore waited to see on DVD, the Broadway and Off-Broadway shows I couldn't often afford to attend, plus a couple more Yankee games. He even got me into a bowling alley once—and I am not a girl who wears rented shoes.

"What does your friend like to eat?" Gram asked. She was puttering around the kitchen in a much-loved and well-worn kimono, fluttering the butterfly extensions of her sleeves far too close to the open flames of the gas range. I warned her for about the thousandth time in recent memory about the potential hazards of her lounging wardrobe, which also included a pair of precipitously high platform mules that were constantly sloshing off her feet. The fact that she hadn't fallen and twisted her ankle by now was a minor miracle.

"You shouldn't have to cook dinner for my . . . boyfriend." I tasted the word in my mouth. It was the first time I'd spoken it aloud with reference to Eric Witherspoon.

Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all.

"I'll do it, Gram. Besides, it'll give me a chance to show off my culinary skills." In all the weeks we'd been a couple, I'd never cooked for him before. And since Eric had admitted on more than one occasion that *his* skills in the kitchen didn't run any further than nuking a bowl of instant oatmeal, our comestible relationship thus far, when we weren't dining out at nice restaurants, had consisted primarily of take-out Chinese or pizza.

"He likes chicken. Beef. Anything. I don't know. We can surprise him or I can ask him point-blank. We've got three whole days to devise a menu. What about chicken paprikash?" I asked Gram.

"Is he watching his cholesterol? There's an awful lot of sour cream in the sauce." She shrugged. "Whatever you do is fine with me and it'll taste wonderful." She sounded less than enthusiastic. I watched her remove a pot of spaghetti from the stove and drain the pasta without turning off the gas. The voluminous sleeves on her robe were barely an inch from immolating her. I reached past her and turned the knob to the off position. "Gram, you really have to watch that! Please." It was my umpteenth-and-first admonition.

"I'm fine, Alice," Gram replied testily. "You don't need to mother-hen me."

But I felt otherwise. Gram's increasing lack of attention to things like the dangers of an open flame concerned me greatly. There were days when I was afraid to leave her alone, and yet I had to go to work and continue to live the life of a responsible, independent adult. I wanted to be there to prevent accidents from occurring, yet I couldn't be her full-time nurse.

It's a painful and difficult thing to watch someone you

love cope with the problems of aging. It must be a zillion times more painful for *them*. As much as her kimono sleeves and platform shoes made me anxious for her safety, I understood that for Gram to give them up would mean a concession to her increasing fragility, her mortality. For a woman who'd run away from home to become a showgirl more than seventy-five years earlier, relinquishing glamour would never come without a fight.

I encouraged Gram to sit down while I finished preparing our meal. I took our pasta bowls into the dining gallery, then poured each of us a glass of chianti. Gram always said that a glass of wine with dinner helped the evening news go down more smoothly. She was addicted to it. The news program, not the wine. I turned on the broadcast, then went into the kitchen to fetch some cheese for Gram.

"Isn't that where you're working now?" she asked me, motioning with her hand for me to join her so I could hear the anchorman's report.

I returned to the table to listen.

"... the telecommunications and technology giant alleges that its legal counsel, the New York-based firm of Newter & Spade, along with AllGood Telecom's certified public accountants at Morehouse and Essex, advised them to under-report their earnings in the face of numerous pending class-action lawsuits. The alleged under-reporting took place between the years of 1997 and 2002. A spokesman for AllGood would only communicate through his attorneys at Newter & Spade, who refused to comment at this time. The eighty-year-old law firm, as well as AllGood's accountants, may be the next targets of government scrutiny in this case . . ." The program moved to the subsequent news segment, at which point Gram and I pulled our at-

tention away from the TV screen and began eating our spaghetti in silence.

"I wonder what that means for your pals," Gram said thoughtfully.

"They're not my pals. In fact, they never stop reminding me that I'm 'just a temp.'"

"What about your man?" she asked.

I studied the swirl of pasta wrapped around my fork. "I have no idea. I don't know if he's ever worked on any of the AllGood cases. You could always bring it up when he comes for dinner," I smirked. "Or not." I considered whether to share with her what was on my mind, then decided to go for it.

"Do you have any idea how important your support is to me, in everything I do?" I asked Gram. "You've taught me that talent isn't enough; that you have to partner it with tenacity to be a success in show business, and I extend that wisdom to the rest of my life. Okay, so not every guy I've given my heart to has turned out to be a prince." I caught her raised eyebrow. It was better to own up to the truth myself. Hearing it from her lips made it more painful. "Fine. None of them have. Yet. *Yet*. Unlike you, Gram, I get back on the horse."

Her pale eyes immediately welled up with tears. I jumped up from the table and knelt by her chair. "I'm so sorry, Gram. I just . . ." I was at a loss for words.

"Do you know why I never so much as went out for a cup of coffee after your grandfather went away?"

I wanted to hear her answer, whether or not it was a confirmation of my assumptions, so I shook my head.

"Because I always thought he was going to come back. Maybe later rather than sooner—but *someday*. When I was finally ready to admit I was living in a fantasy world where

that was concerned, I was afraid that any other man I fell in love with would do the same thing. And I don't want to see my history repeat itself with you, Alice. You deserve all the happiness you can manage."

I took Gram's hands in mine. Hers were cold. I held them until the heat from my body warmed her. "Tell me honestly. Are you sure you're not afraid *I'll* abandon you, too, one day?"

Gram's eyes grew watery again. "Your spaghetti's getting cold," she said quietly. She deposited a gentle kiss on the top of my head.

We ate the rest of our meal in silence.

Gram was a good girl and didn't broach the subject of Newter & Spade's involvement in the AllGood Telecom investigations when Eric came over for dinner. We had a lovely meal, except that all conversation had halted during Gram's news program when the anchor reported that Congress had convened a commission to study the AllGood situation, to determine what sort of malfeasance had been committed and who was responsible. There was a palpable and awkward silence at the table, then we dug back in to the chicken paprikash as though nothing had happened. Eric asked for a second slice of my homemade apple pie, then insisted on washing the dishes, which pleased Gram immensely. He'd also brought a lovely bottle of wine, which we devoured with our meal, and gave each of us a bouquet of flowers that he'd obviously taken some care to select, as opposed to grabbing something from the Korean deli on the next block.

It seemed less awkward if Eric went back to Brooklyn alone after dinner. Besides, I could get Gram's immediate and uncensored reaction to him. Whether Eric liked Gram was never an issue. Everyone loves my grandmother.

"Well, of course he was on his best behavior," she said, after Eric had gone. "Do you love him?"

There was a long silence.

"Well?" she asked.

"I . . . think . . . so," I said slowly. "There was never a single event where he did something so wonderful, for example, that all of a sudden it hit me like a ton of bricks and I realized, *Wow, I love this guy!* It's more like something that's been steadily building over time. We have a great time together, we talk a lot about anything and everything, we respect one another and one another's feelings. We really get along in every way . . ."

"Are you happy with him, Alice?"

I nodded.

"If you're happy, then I'm happy," Gram said slowly. "You deserve a man who knows your worth. And maybe this is the one." I smiled. "But it's not enough that *he* knows it. *You* have to know it, too. In fact, you have to know it *first*." She gave my arm a firm but loving squeeze, the way she used to do when I was five or six years old.

I came around behind her to give her a hug, and noticed, for the first time, how sparse her blond-tinted hair had become. Her hair had once been too thick to hold a curl. Back in the 1920s when marcel waving was all the vogue, Gram's short wedge-shaped haircut needed an extra dose of chemicals to tame it. "How did you become so damn insightful, Gram?" I asked, still holding her, leaning over her shoulder, enjoying the familiar comfort of her favorite cologne.

"So, you think I'm insightful, do you?"

I rested my chin into her wisps of hair and nodded.

"I can feel you laughing," she remarked, when my chin

bobbled a bit. Actually, I was trying very hard not to cry. She seemed so frail to me, so fragile. "Well, I no longer have good eyesight, so at least I should still have some insight. No one gets past ninety without learning a thing or two about life."

"I hope I get there, Gram."

"So do I. But I'll let you in on a little secret, Alice. It's no fun being old."

A tear traveled down my cheek, finding its way to her scalp, baptizing a strand or two of golden gray.

"I can't remember the last time Dominick and I went on a double date," Izzy remarked, dabbing at a fresh brown gravy stain on her shirt. "Shit, I knew I should have stuck with just cheese fries." I handed her another napkin. "In fact I can't even remember the last time we went on a date at all." Isabel turned to her husband, a good-looking, though slightly burly man with the blackest hair I've ever seen. "Dom, when was the last time we saw a movie?"

Dominick instinctively inched away from his wife when she lifted a forkful of french fries smothered in cheese and gravy from the platter in the center of the table and brought it toward her own plate. Dominick used to be a fry cook in his dad's diner. Now he does freelance computer repair. He's a good person to know. Dom also knows his way around telephone and cable systems. For all I know, he and Izzy still get free HBO. "Why don't you measure our dates by the quantity instead?" he asked Izzy. "Think about it. Count up the years we've been together. We were high school sweethearts," he explained to Eric.

"No, we weren't," Izzy corrected, "we hated each other back then."

"Yeah, but we still went out," Dominick insisted.

Isabel continued to push him. "You're not answering my question, hon. When was the last time we saw a movie together?"

"On *DVD* or *video*?" Dominick asked Izzy.

"No, silly, in a *movie theater*. Movies at home don't count." She turned to Eric, said, "We saw *Slap Shot* last night for about the four hundredth time," then looked back at Dominick. "Alice and I go to more movies than *we've* ever gone to. The last thing we probably saw was *Terminator 2*. That was the night you proposed to me."

"Well, *that's* romantic," Eric said, laughing. He was fitting in well with Izzy and Dominick, which was a relief. Dominick hates, I mean *hates* lawyers. They're all evil scum-suckers, according to him. In fact, he did use that phrase in front of Eric, who didn't take it to heart and deflected it nicely. Eric also avoided becoming defensive when Dominick launched into a diatribe against corporate greed that included some pointed questions about Newter & Spade's representation of AllGood Telecom and the congressional hearings, which were now into their fifth week.

Essentially, apart from those few *uh-oh* moments, the double date was a success. I was surprised that we'd been able to make it happen at all; it had taken the four of us several attempts. Izzy had to cancel once because she had a stomach virus, but the other seven times, Eric had to work late and begged off at the last minute. He offered to pick up the check, but Dominick insisted that they split it. Somehow, Eric's accepting the offer made him a better man in Dominick's eyes, even though it meant Dom's springing for half the bill. Not that it would have broken anyone—we'd just gone to one of our favorite burger joints.

Eric must have been enjoying my friends, because he seemed reluctant to end the evening so early.

"Are you avoiding getting into bed with me tonight?" I teased.

He gave me an affectionate kiss. "Quite the opposite, in fact, muppet. But I feel bad that it took us so long to finally all get together—which was mostly *my* fault—that I want to hang out a little more. I like Dominick, and your friend Izzy is a hoot." He turned to the other couple. "Anyone here like old-fashioned folk music?"

"You mean like Pete Seeger and Joni Mitchell?" Izzy asked.

"I love Peter, Paul and Mary," Dominick added. "I'm a sucker for 'Puff, the Magic Dragon.' "

Eric grinned. "I know a place in the Village. This tiny little club. It's like stepping back into the sixties. A lot of folksingers got their start there, and the famous ones pop in from time to time, if they're in town. Then they have these amateur nights . . . is tonight Saturday?"

I nodded my head. "You *must* have had a hellish week," I laughed, "since you can't even remember what day it is."

"Either that or way too much beer at dinner," Izzy rejoined.

"Then we're on!" Eric hailed a cab and the four of us piled in and headed down Ninth Avenue. We picked up Bleeker Street at Abingdon Square and continued east for a few blocks. "This is it, driver," Eric said, tapping the Plexiglas shield that separated the front seat from the rear.

"You know, you'd better be taking good care of my best friend," Izzy said, conspiratorially pulling Eric toward her and steering him onto the sidewalk. "Because Dominick and I are Italian." She was a bit looped after a few lite beers and her speech was a little slurry.

I saw Eric give a perceptible little shudder. "What's that

supposed to mean?" I could just imagine the visions of Tony Soprano that danced across the forefront of his brain.

"It means we have Italian tempers, that's all," Izzy sweetly replied. "Where the hell are we, anyway?"

Eric proudly, and somewhat drunkenly, pointed to the unobtrusive storefront. "The Troubadour East," he proclaimed as though he'd discovered the treasure of the Sierra Madre. "One of the best-kept secrets in New York."

"I'll say. It doesn't even have a sign out front," observed Dominick.

"I can't believe you just said that to Eric," I whispered to Izzy. Her expression made me laugh. Or maybe it was all the beer.

"Just wanna keep him on his toes, that's all."

"I think you may have scared the shit out of him."

"Alice, if there's one thing you should have learned from your vast experience in temp hell . . . it's you can't scare the shit out of a lawyer!"

Eric waited just outside the front door for the rest of us to join him. "So, what I was starting to say about Saturdays," he began, "is that it's open mike night. And I've seen some amazing amateurs up there. You wouldn't heckle them with, 'Keep your day job, bubba'!"

"You sound funny saying 'bubba.' " I giggled. I gestured dramatically to the club's door. "Lead on, Macduff!"

"It's *lay* on, you nitwit!" Izzy corrected, playfully jabbing me in the arm.

"I knew that," I answered, trying to suppress an unladylike burp. "But why does everyone always say it wrong?"

"Am *I* Shakespeare? Do *I* know?"

We entered the club, a room not much bigger than Gram's living room, just as dark, and not nearly as grand. The walls

were exposed brick, hung with numerous posters from the great old days of folk music. Many of them were advertising placards, announcing appearances at the Troubadour East. In 1967, Dylan shared a bill there with Joan Baez and Buffy St. Marie.

The venue wasn't restricted to musicians, apparently. "Shit, Lenny Bruce played here," Dominick said reverentially, reading one of the handbills. The late comic was a favorite of his. Dom shook his head. "What a fucking legend he was," he murmured.

On the tiny stage, a short-haired woman crooning ballads accompanied herself on a twelve-string guitar. She rested her short legs on a rung of the tall wooden stool, reminding me of a child in a high chair. A handful of people in the audience sat on mismatched chairs at funky tables, covered with a laminated decoupage of ancient Troubadour programs. There was scarcely room for the candle that provided the sole source of illumination and the tent card that listed the drinks menu. The Troubadour East didn't serve any food, not even a pretzel.

The singer finished her set, hopped off the stool, and stood her guitar against the back wall of the stage.

"That was really nice, Laura," Eric told the woman. "Are those your songs?" She nodded and he introduced us to her. "Laura's the manager here. Her father founded and still owns the place, but he rarely comes in anymore."

"Well, it's a rough commute," Laura laughed. Her speaking voice was as husky and throaty as her singing voice. "He's living on a sailboat in Sausalito." She turned to Izzy, Dominick, and me. "Well, there's no cover, no minimum here, so park yourselves and drink to your hearts' content." She gestured at the nearly empty room and stepped down from the tiny stage to take our orders.

Eric pulled chairs away from the tables so Izzy and I could sit. "They're very informal here," he said. "Even on amateur nights. If it's crowded, they restrict the performer to just a couple of songs, but" —he waved his arm, as if to indicate the sparseness of listeners—"on a night like tonight, if someone's good, Laura'll let them go on forever."

Dominick ensconced himself beneath the yellowed Lenny Bruce poster and ordered a draft beer. Izzy decided to switch to red wine, so I figured what the hell, and asked for a glass as well.

The next singer performed passionate renditions of protest songs like "Bread and Roses." She invited us to sing along if we knew the lyrics. I had a history teacher in eleventh grade who was a card-carrying Communist and when he didn't feel like holding class, he'd grab his guitar and lead us all out to the front lawn of the school, where he'd teach us "songs of oppression and retribution," as he termed them. And I've always had a knee-jerk reaction to a perceived injustice, so I was well versed, as it were, in the lyrics, having carried them in my head now for decades. I looked around the room and realized, to my instant discomfort, that I was the only one who had taken up the singer's offer to chime in.

I feel like an idiot

Who cares what other people think, Alice? Are you having fun?

You bet!

You know how much you love to sing. What do you care if you're the only one?

"You have a pretty good voice, there, muppet," Eric whispered in my ear.

I touched his hand, beamed, and nodded a thank-you to him without missing a beat. I *was* having fun. And the wine made it even easier to cut loose.

Billie Hedges, the protest singer, finished her set, and we all ordered another round of drinks. Eric offered to buy Billie one as well, so as she packed up her guitar, she downed a beer and chatted with us for a few minutes. Laura readied the stage for the next performer, refocusing the two little spotlights, raising the mike, and running a brief sound check.

"I'm in kind of a Guthrie mood tonight," the guitarist said as he took the stage, gently tapping the head of the mike.

I grabbed Izzy by the sleeve. "That's him—the guy I met in my building and who Eric and I ran into at the Yankees game—the one I thought was a pediatrician. And when I saw him at the ballpark I was dressed like Darva. The ultimate bad-hair, bad-wardrobe day. Can I crawl under the table now?"

"If you can fit. But what do you care?"

She's got a point.

But somehow, I did. Care. I *always* care when I think I've made an awful impression.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's give it up for one of our Saturday night regulars, Dan Carpenter," Laura cooed into a mike at the end of the bar.

"Hey, muppet, now I remember why I recognize this guy. I thought his face was familiar when we saw him and Lucy at Yankee Stadium. I've watched him perform here before. You're in for a treat."

"Like I said, I was in a Guthrie sort of mood tonight," Dan said, affixing a capo to the neck of his guitar, "but I think I'll start with a little Jim Croce, or maybe a little Harry Chapin, move into some pre-fanatic Cat Stevens, then segue into some Peter Paul and Mary, if you all can still stand me—"

At which Dominick flicked his Bic lighter, held it aloft, whooped, and yelled, "'Puff, the Magic Dragon'!"

"Just for you, then," Dan ad-libbed, grinning at Dominick. "Can you wait a couple of minutes? They say if you can remember the sixties, you weren't there, so I'll revisit some seventies songs for a while." But after only one bittersweet Croce ballad, and a touching (too touching for me) rendition of Harry Chapin's "Old College Avenue," which had me tearfully reminiscing about my Old College Boyfriend, in fact in the same town where Chapin set his song, we were all feeling too morose. To lift our spirits, Dan immediately went into "Puff," and from the opening lyric got us all singing, full-out, as though we were at a hootenanny.

The guys wanted one more Chapin standby: "Cat's in the Cradle," a real fathers-and-sons story. "This gets me every time," Eric said, blinking back the moisture from his eyes as the song began.

"Well, that was a downer!" Dan quipped. "So, it's time for some Woody."

Laura tossed Dan a tambourine, which he immediately lateraled to me.

I pointed to myself. "Me?"

Dan gestured for me to join him onstage.

I don't do backup without backup, so I grabbed Izzy by the arm and dragged her with me. Dan launched into "This Land Is Your Land," involving the entire audience in a sing-along. By the second verse, Izzy and I had really gotten into it, shaking the tambourine and losing our self-consciousness, to the point of harmonizing with Dan. Eric and Dominick were cheering, albeit drunkenly, for us.

When he'd ended the song, Dan announced dramatically, "The B-vox stylings of . . ."

"Alice and Izzy," I said.

"You two have good voices," he commented.

We beamed. "Thanks."

"So, while Laura is being so generous with her time, any requests?"

"'Blowin' in the Wind,'" Eric suggested, raising his beer bottle in a toast.

"Done. No, no, you two stay here," Dan insisted, when Izzy and I went to leave the stage.

"I need to visit the loo," Izzy announced, abandoning me for the lure of the ladies' room.

"Rat fink," I hissed playfully in her ear.

I must admit I love "Blowin' in the Wind." It always wafts back sentimental breezes from my ultra-progressive education.

"Muppet, you've got a really nice voice," Eric said to me. "You sound good with Dan, too. Can you play a solo for Alice to sing?" he called out to Dan.

Dan shrugged affably. "Sure. Why not? Are we okay on time, Laura?" She nodded yes and Dan turned back to me. "Got any favorites?"

"Do you know 'House of the Rising Sun'?"

He answered by playing the deep, rolling opening chords of the Dylan classic made famous by The Animals. Laura handed me the mike from the bar.

I looked at Dan and smiled. I was ready. I began my solo, throaty and bluesy. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Izzy give Eric one of her trademark nudges. They were both beaming like lunatics, which boosted my confidence level. Of course, my alcohol level was already boosted, so perhaps I didn't need their encouragement as much as I thought I did. I started to really own the song, and as the verses progressed, the down-and-dirtier I got.

"Rock on!" Eric yelled.

I was drained when we finished. "Whew!"

Dan looked at me. "Would the lady like to do an encore?"

"Me and Bobby McGee'!" Izzy shouted.

"You know I haven't had enough drugs to sing that," I joked.

"Then buy her a drink on me," Dan said to Laura.

It was worth it just to see Dominick and Izzy happy together and having fun in each other's company without carping. I asked for a double shot of tequila and tossed it back before I launched into the song, searing my throat sufficiently to be able to belt out the number, Janis-style. "Okay, now I'm beat," I rasped when we finished. "And wasted, to boot. I'll just go and be a spectator now." I looked at Dan. "Thanks for the opportunity to make a fool of myself in front of my friends. It's been swell." I shook Dan's hand and tottered off the stage.

"What are you talking about?" Dan responded. "Your boyfriend's right. You're talented."

"I hope so," I muttered, "since I'm an actress."

Dan retuned his guitar. "Okay, folks, one last song, and then I'll call it a night. Bobby Darin made this a hit back in—"

"'Mack the Knife'!" Dominick interrupted, waving his lighter again.

Dan politely shook him off. "I was thinking of something mellower. Actually, this is a great old Tim Hardin song. And a lot of people recorded this, including Harry Belafonte, but it was Darin whose career changed course with his cover of this song, hitting number eight on the charts in 1967. And it's kind of become a closing signature of mine."

My friends and I exchanged curious glances, as though we were participants in a trivia game on pop music arcana. I didn't

recognize the opening chords, but as soon as Dan got into the melody, the classic was unmistakable: "If I Were a Carpenter."

When he got to the lines about will you marry me and have my baby, I felt very self-conscious all of a sudden.

"So this is the carpenter you thought was a *pediatrician*?" Izzy gently taunted.

"Don't remind me," I whispered to her, not sure how to identify the sour taste in my mouth. "I guess this is his trademark song. A little corny, but—"

"You're blushing," Izzy interrupted. "Holy Secret Crush, Batman, you're the color of this wine." She jabbed a finger at the glass.

"Stop it!" I insisted.

Dan sang on, his rendition simple, direct, and honest.

I looked over at Eric. He took my hand in his and together we swayed in our seats, enjoying the music. When his set was over, we all gave Dan Carpenter a standing ovation. Eric went over to shake Dan's hand. "I really like it when you come down here, man," he said. "Good stuff."

"Come back again," Dan replied graciously. "And bring your girlfriend." He looked at me, then back at Eric. "Take good care of her, buddy. She's fucking magical."

We paid for our drinks and said goodbye to Dominick and Izzy on the pavement outside the Troubadour East. Bleecker Street was uncharacteristically deserted for a Saturday night. Eric and I stood in front of the club waiting for a passing taxi to take us back to his place in Brooklyn. I'd been spending more and more nights there lately, sometimes arriving at the apartment before he got home from Newter & Spade. It really made me feel like an Official Girlfriend the day he'd given me my own set of keys to his apartment.

We walked to the corner of LaGuardia Place, where a scruffy young guy with an acoustic guitar, the case open beside him to receive donations, was playing "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?" He sang the lyric in a high tenor twang reminiscent of Willie Nelson. Eric started crooning along softly, then he took my hand and led me into a sort of dance, right where we were standing. Being New York City, no one noticed.

"Have I told you lately that I love you?" Eric sang into my ear. His breath tickled. I pulled back from him just a bit and looked at him. "No, you haven't," I said. "In fact, you've never told me that at all."

We stopped moving. Eric held me, looked into my eyes, and said "I love you, muppet. I do."

"I love you, too," I said quietly. It was right then that I realized that I did.

We lay in each other's arms on the rug in front of Eric's fireplace. "This is definitely nice," I murmured into his neck. "It's so . . . quiet . . . here. Manhattan's so noisy. I can never relax, no matter how hard I try. This feels like a home." He stroked my hair. "You've got a garden, a fireplace . . ." I laughed. "A *dishwasher* . . ."

"You've got a dishwasher back at your place," Eric teased, nuzzling me.

"Yeah, her name is Alice."

"You know . . ." he began slowly, his fingers tracing a gentle line down my arm, "you're here so much of the time these days, anyway . . . I've been giving some thought to this lately . . . would you . . . are you . . .?"

He was having difficulty finding the words he wanted to use. "Nice verbal dexterity for a litigator," I teased.

I'd managed to lighten the mood of the moment for him. "Okay. Do you wanna move in wit' me?" he asked, in a dead-on imitation of a working-class Brooklyn accent. "Hey, what's the matter, muppet? You're not usually so silent." His eyes looked very dark, almost black, in the firelight.

"It's a lot to think about. That's why," I replied. "It's . . . a very big step in our relationship."

"I know," Eric replied. "Are we ready for it?"

"Are you?"

"If I weren't, I wouldn't have asked you to move in here."

"I thought lawyers are already supposed to know the answers to questions they ask their witnesses," I said, moving to my stomach and propping myself up on my elbows so I could better read his face.

"Your Honor, I move to strike the answer as non-responsive. The witness is being evasive," Eric said with mock pomposity. "Look, muppet, I'm in love with you. And . . . I love you. I've never before asked a woman to move in with me. Yes, it's a big deal. A very big deal. But once I make up my mind about something, I stick to it. There's no going back."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm not going to renege on my offer. So take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere. Except to the office at the crack of dawn." He sat up and took me in his arms. "I do hope you'll say yes."

"I want to," I said softly. "But in the light of day I *do* need time to consider it. It's not just me I have to think of. Or us. I need to make sure that my grandmother is okay with my decision. That she'll *be* okay. Regardless of my ultimate decision, I feel very responsible for her welfare."

Eric nodded and stroked my hair. "Understood."

We made love right there in front of the fireplace. It was

different, somehow, from all the other times. Perhaps because our relationship had reached a higher plateau tonight, we did as well. Nevertheless, while a well-satiated Eric slumbered and snored, I stared at the ceiling until the sun rose, counting the cracks, my blessings, and the number of hours until I could sit down and have a heart-to-heart conversation with Gram.

Chapter 7



Ramona was making us all crazy in the document-coding room. Ever since Newter & Spade's legal advice to AllGood Telecom had come under federal scrutiny, she had behaved as though it was her personal mission to exonerate her employers. So, while Roger and Lisa remained on the class-action tobacco company suit, Marlena, Natalie, and I were assigned to digest and input the volumes of documents pertaining to AllGood, nearly all of which were redacted with thick black lines through the text. This rendered the papers either partially illegible or totally useless, as Newter & Spade asserted its attorney-client privilege. It was highly unlikely that the congressional committee would discover any smoking guns within the pages of these documents. For me, at least, the hearings had proven considerably beneficial. I was pulling down plenty of overtime, since the discovery process—including document production—was on a rigidly imposed deadline.

I used some of my new-found wealth to take Gram to dinner at her favorite restaurant, where in a quiet ambience, without the drone of the evening news in our ears, I could tell her about Eric's proposal and we could openly share our

feelings on the subject. She was less accepting of the idea than I had hoped. Not very sanguine about it at all, in fact. Her eyes bore a look of betrayal and I felt horribly guilty about expressing my need to move on and have a proper, adult relationship with a man.

"I'm in my thirties, Gram."

"So?"

"Most women my age are married with kids, even in this day and age. I love you to pieces, and you've always been here for me . . . and I always want to be there for you . . . but I . . . I feel like . . . living with you—don't misinterpret this, please—I feel like I'm in some sort of state of suspended adolescence. It's not right for a grown woman."

"There's no such thing as 'right' across the board. For anyone. Everyone is unique and every decision they make a uniquely personal one," Gram said—sagely, but testily. I could see that my news was hurting her. I felt terrible. "Are you in love with him?" she asked, as though she didn't want to hear the answer.

"Yes," I said gently. "And he loves me, too. It sounds corny, but I want you to be happy for me. And to understand. *You* ran away from home, for God's sake, at *fifteen*, to make your way in the world. You were barely of the age of consent when you married Grandpa Danny. And I know you got tons of flack from the family, but it's what you needed to do. I'm not going very far, you know. It's only Brooklyn, not Bolivia."

Gram sighed. I hated that I was causing her distress. It was like cutting out a piece of my heart. She was my favorite relative in all the world, and the only one who really knew me, really understood me. Certainly not Uncle Erwin or my parents down in Florida . . . my father the golf fanatic who wears white patent-leather shoes, or my nutsy, overweight mother

Aida who gets daily massages and cares more about discovering new diets and spa treatments than anything else. Her latest is the Danish diet: nothing but. The prune variety acts as a digestive aid for the cherry, cheese, blueberry, apricot, poppy seed, and cinnamon streusel.

I felt that by attempting to seek a different kind of happiness elsewhere, I was jilting Gram in some respect. There was no way to make any of this feel like a win-win situation for either of us. We'd been looking out for each other for several years now. How could I balance my need to live my own life with my immense concern for Gram's safety and well-being, when she was puttering about her kitchen alone, trailing her kimono sleeves around the carelessly exposed flames of the gas range? It's what it means to be an adult. Isn't it? To learn how to strike out alone and take care of yourself? Or is it taking care of others who need you that's what being a "grown-up" is all about? Or is that being a nurse?

Oh, God help me, I'm going in circles.

Hello, Alice.

Are you God or my conscience? Or are you two the same thing? Hey, I haven't heard from you in a while.

You've been pretty busy. I've been here. Waiting for you to slow down so we could have a chat.

What should I do about Eric and Gram?

What does your heart say?

My heart says the question is corny.

Alice, shut up and stop being cute. Just answer the question.

My heart says I have a wonderful opportunity here. And that just because I wouldn't be living with Gram anymore, it doesn't mean I'll not be able to visit her often to check up on her, spend time with her, and make sure she's okay. She lived

a lot of years alone before I moved in with her. And though she's gotten older . . . now I'm feeling like shit again. Grandpa Danny walked out on her, and I'm sure she feels like I'm abandoning her as well.

But?

I want her to applaud my decision. I want her to be happy for me.

She will. No, strike that. Maybe she will. But understand for now that it's difficult for her. At least as hard as it is for you to be comfortable with your choice.

This isn't easy.

Of course not, Alice. It's not supposed to be. It's life.

Well, at least I can take comfort in recognizing that I'm not the first or only person ever to agonize over decisions like this, right?

You must be joking. Join the club, Alice. Time to take responsibility for your actions and your decisions. Heck, girl, it's time to take action and make decisions.

"I am so glad you don't own a piano," Dorian wheezed, straining to haul a box of books up Eric's front stoop. I'd rented a small U-Haul to transport my stuff, which consisted primarily of clothes, books, collectibles, and CDs. Dorian was the designated driver, since neither Izzy nor I have licenses, being the true dyed-in-the wool Bronx girls that we are. Moving day became a Tom-Sawyer-like adventure, since I'd managed to convince Dorian that in helping me schlep my stuff, he was getting a free workout, thereby gaining considerable strides toward the "six-pack" abdominal definition he so coveted. Izzy was just glad to get out of the house and away from Dominick for a few hours. I've never known two people who love each other as much as they profess to do, to

fight so much. They argue even more than my parents do, which is quite a feat.

And where was Eric during all this? Bart Harrison demanded his presence even though it was a Saturday, so Eric was in the office from early morning until about four P.M., when he came home to find us relaxing in his garden. Over Chinese take-out and champagne on Eric's slate patio, my best friends waxed rhapsodic over my new verdant view. "If I woke up to this every morning," Dorian mused, I'd never go anywhere. I'd probably just sit out here and drink all day. Or maybe I'd become a screenwriter."

"You *could* do both," Izzy offered helpfully. "I've been told it's possible." She refilled her champagne glass. "Alice, you have to let me know how the morning commute into midtown is from out here. If it's not too heinous, maybe I can get Dominick to look for a rental in the neighborhood." She leaned back in her chair and focused her gaze on the ivy tendrils climbing the trellises on Eric's garden walls. "I could sure use a change from looking straight into the kitchen across the way. I know what everyone in Apartment 3-C, including their dog, has for breakfast. And sometimes the only way Dominick and I can drown out the sound of their knock-down drag-outs is to fight even louder ourselves." She laughed ruefully. "Jesus, I sound like a broken record. That's all I ever seem to talk about, isn't it? Don't answer that; it was rhetorical." Izzy raised her glass. "Well, here's to healthy relationships." She looked at me and Eric. "Somebody's gotta have 'em, right?"

Eric reached across the table, took my hand in his, and nodded. He noticed a tear beginning to trickle out of the corner of my eye. "You okay, muppet?" he asked. "I love you. You know that, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. I'm very happy. I was just thinking about Gram, that's all. I need to know that she's going to be okay."

"Hey, I've got that covered," Dorian said softly. "I decided to take her up on the tap-dancing lessons after all, so I'll be going over there a few times a week for a couple of hours. She's even offered to feed me dinner." I chuckled at Dorian's ability to make things somehow inure to everyone's benefit. It was a gift. "That's what friends are for," he added.

"Dorian, you crack me up," Izzy said.

He rose from the wrought-iron garden chair and approached a branch dangling over the back wall of the garden, laden with some sort of bright red berries. "I wonder if these would be any good in the champagne," he said, grasping a handful.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Eric cautioned.

"Why? Is it poaching or something to take them?"

Eric grinned. "Nope, they're my berries, but I don't want you to sue me if you eat them and end up in the hospital. It may be pretty out here, but it's still New York. They came through and sprayed for the West Nile Virus a couple of weeks ago. So who knows what poison is all over them."

"You never tasted them?" I asked.

Eric shook his head. "I'm not much of a risk-taker. A real chickenshit," he kidded.

Dorian returned to the table, berry-less, champagne glass in hand, looking glum. "I would have tried them," he said.

"That's because they're growing wild, so you wouldn't have had to pay for them," Izzy teased. When Dorian looked insulted and hurt, Izzy apologized and quickly changed the subject. "Okay, someone's got to ask this. I've been waiting for months now and it's never been brought

up. The suspense has been killing me. Eric, why do you call Alice ‘muppet’?”

“I’ve been dying to know this, too,” I concurred, “but I’ve been too afraid of the answer.”

Eric laughed. “Have you ever seen Alice dance?”

“Is she worse than me?” Dorian asked. “I’ve got no rhythm.”

“She looks like that blond muppet chick that hangs around with the band. You know, Animal and Dr. Teeth and those guys.”

What the hell was he talking about? “Eric, when have you ever seen me dance like that?”

He ran his hand down the side of his face and rested his chin in his palm. “The very first day I came down to the document-coding room at Newter & Spade, you had a set of headphones on. You were bopping around to whatever song you were listening to—unless it was a meditation tape,” he joked. “And you looked exactly like that blond muppet.”

“I think you’re far too familiar with *Sesame Street* for a man your age,” I teased.

“For the record, I want you both to know that this remark was made by a woman in her thirties who just moved in with her boyfriend and brought her baby doll with her. And I’m not talking about a negligee,” Eric told Izzy and Dorian. “Not that I mind; I’ve still got my very first teddy bear. It’s just that—”

“You want the jury to note the irony in Ms. Finnegan’s casting aspersions on the content of your television viewing habits,” Izzy said, mimicking Eric’s legal jargon.

We killed off about three bottles of bubbly. Good thing we’d already returned the U-Haul. Dorian and Izzy insisted on taking the train back into Manhattan, so Eric and I tipsily staggered uphill to the station with them, saw them safely

off, then took a walk around the neighborhood. I hadn't realized that I now lived several blocks from the subway. Even though I'd been spending a lot of time at Eric's since we'd started dating, I hadn't thought too much about the commute. It might take some getting used to on a daily basis. Oh, well, at least it would be good exercise.

We were approaching midsummer. After a few weeks, I did indeed grow accustomed to the routine, although there were a few times when I was unlucky enough to end up in an unair-conditioned car in a crowded train stalled between stations. Being squashed amid hundreds of straphangers packed like sardines, armpits raised to reach the railings, is *not* exactly a pleasant experience. I'd arrive at work feeling like I could use a second shower.

Coming home, though, was often a blessing. As I walked down Seventh Avenue toward my new home, I could feel my body relaxing, adjusting to the slower, more leisurely pace of life. The sidewalks teemed with kids at play, there were a number of artsy-craftsy emporiums to browse in, affordable restaurants—and my garden, my new-found greatest joy. Most often, I had the patio to myself in the early to mid-evenings, since Eric was invariably working late on one case or another. He was still going full steam ahead on the tobacco class-action suit, and the investigation of Newter & Spade's activities with regard to AllGood Telecom was also very much on the firm's front burner. The combination of negative press, plus an evident financial downturn meant that the law office had hired fewer summer associates than ever before, so this season Eric was working even harder. Of course the summer associate deal was a source of embarrassment to Newter & Spade. They pretended it was business as usual all

around, but I noticed plenty of anxious faces, including Eric's, in their corridors of power. Any source of concern to him became a matter of interest to me as well, though I was tremendously relieved that it wasn't *my* career on the line all the time.

As far as my theatrical endeavors were going, things were typically slow during the summer, so there weren't too many auditions worth attending. I think I'd been living in Brooklyn for close to a month before I had a reason to awaken in the pre-dawn hours in order to get to the Actors' Equity building by daybreak, get the audition over with, and report to my computer terminal at Newter & Spade before ten A.M. A major regional Shakespeare festival with more endowments than Pamela Anderson was looking for replacements for their season and a number of roles were right up my alley.

Eric hadn't come home until after midnight, and he needed his sleep, so I didn't want to wake him at five A.M. to ask him to accompany me to the subway. After downing two cups of high-test black coffee and dressing nicely in a floaty summer floral print dress and strappy sandals, I headed up the hill toward the station. The streets were desolate; the sun hadn't even begun to consider rising and shining. I commiserated with it. I waited for the subway for about ten minutes and made sure to enter the center car where the conductor is stationed. At that early hour, I had the car all to myself. At the next stop, a young man got on and wedged himself into one of the corner seats as though the train were packed with passengers. By the time we arrived at the last stop in Brooklyn before heading under the East River into Manhattan, there were barely a handful of other riders on board.

When I prepare for an audition, I sometimes mutter to myself, reworking my monologue over and over in my head,

ensuring that the words and the emotions behind them are such second nature to me that whatever nerves or anxiety I have about auditioning are transcended once I launch into my speech. I was focused on my thoughts, running through my monologue, and I honestly can't recall whether I was very softly giving voice to the speech or whether I was only mouthing the words when the young man approached me.

"Hey."

I looked up.

"You're bothering me."

A stab of panic hit my gut. We were in the tunnel now; it would be a few minutes before we reached the next station. The other passengers had their noses buried in books or newspapers. "I'm sorry," I stammered. I already knew something was wrong.

The man got even closer. I could smell his breath, the odor of his skin, a repugnantly sweaty masculine scent. "Gimme your wallet," he said in a quiet, even voice. Before I could consider a response, whether physical or verbal, I heard a *click* and saw his blade stop just centimeters from my midriff.

I've never studied martial arts except in theater classes where the aim is *not* to injure your opponent, even though you're supposed to be giving the appearance of inflicting bodily harm. I have no self-defense training whatsoever. Even if I had known what to do, would I have been able to summon the wherewithal to execute it anyway? A million thoughts flashed through my brain. I thought about Eric asleep in our bed. About Gram as my life's guiding light. About ending up in a pool of blood over a few dollars and some credit cards.

Apparently I was spending too much time thinking.

"I said, *bitch*—" the man slapped my face. Very hard. I felt

my head go back and hit the wall of the subway car. I tasted blood and my cheek immediately began to throb like crazy. "I said, gimme your fucking wallet!" He hit me again, on the same side of my face, and grabbed my purse—which I had been wearing over my head and across my chest—breaking the shoulder strap. The sharp tug on the leather sliced into the back of my neck. The laceration stung me.

No one looked up. They remained frozen in their seats, looking toward the ground, undoubtedly wishing they were somewhere else.

My assailant whipped around and faced the rest of the car, menacingly brandishing his knife, "Don't nobody move!" he commanded. As the train lumbered into the next station, he fumbled through my purse for my wallet. Because of the configuration of the stations, the conductor had been in the next car, having had to open the doors on the opposite side of the train at the last station in Brooklyn. The mugger located the zippered compartment where my wallet had been stashed just as the doors were opening. He took the wallet, threw my purse on the floor, dashed out of the subway car, and raced up the nearest set of stairs that led to the street before I could even approach the conductor.

I was shaking. My face must have resembled a piece of meat. It hurt too much to cry. Finally, another passenger came to my aid and helped me retrieve my damaged purse and the rest of its contents, including my makeup kit, which had opened and spilled stuff all over the place. It was going to take more than Max Factor to repair the damage, I was certain.

They held the train in the station while the conductor summoned the police. This did not endear me to the now-increased number of riders who, despite my ravaged appear-

ance, were pissed off at the delay, and seemed to be holding it against me personally. By the time the Transit Authority cop arrived, the kid was long gone anyway, but the cop took a statement from me, wrote up my complaint, and said he'd do his best to track down my attacker. I didn't really believe him, but at least he was sympathetic. I opted to just get back on a train and head to Actors' Equity as originally planned, where I knew there'd be a clean bathroom, dressing area, and a number of functioning phones. I was sure I could bum a quarter off someone, so I could cancel my credit cards.

But not for a couple of hours yet. I forgot how early it still was. The union doesn't open its doors, even to its membership, until eight A.M., even though performers line up for hours ahead of time on the filthy, smelly—especially in the summer—sidewalk waiting to secure an audition. When I arrived on West Forty-sixth Street, I scanned the line for familiar faces. There were already a dozen or so actors who had set up camp, with portable stick chairs and plenty of reading material.

My face had swollen so much that I could barely see out of my left eye. As I walked the length of the unemployment line, someone grabbed my arm. "Jesus, M, and J, what happened to you?!" Izzy exclaimed.

I reconstructed the incident for her. I felt entirely numb, surprising myself that I still couldn't seem to cry. I touched my lip. It was tender and raw. Flecks of dried blood came off on my fingertip.

"You don't seriously think you're going to audition like this? C'mon with me." She tapped the shoulder of the actor ahead of her on the line. "Would you mind holding our place, please?" When she got a nod of assent, she grabbed my hand and whisked me off to the McDonald's on the corner, where

she procured some ice and several fistfuls of paper napkins. "I don't think you want to look at this right now," she said, gently dabbing at my split lip. She reached around and felt the back of my head. "You've got a lump there, too," she said, wiping blood off her fingers. "We've really got to clean you up."

"Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck," I kept muttering.

Izzy gingerly gave me a hug. "Hey, sweetie, you're alive and that's what matters. And I know it doesn't look pretty right now, but at least he didn't bust any teeth, or your nose or your eye socket, so you won't need plastic surgery."

"*Again?*" I asked weakly, deliberately referring to my ill-fated audition for Lois Sarkisian. We both chuckled.

"Well, at least you've still got your sense of humor," Izzy said.

"Do me a favor, Iz."

"What?"

"Don't tell my grandmother. I know you. You'll tell Dorian and Dorian will mention it to Gram when he goes for his next tap-dancing lesson, and she'll freak out and get heart palpitations—literally—and I'll be okay, so it's not worth it to worry her."

I couldn't believe what happened when eight A.M. rolled around and they finally opened the building. Along with all the other performers, Izzy and I were ushered up the back stairs to the second-floor lounge and audition studios.

No one is admitted into this area until they flash a valid Actors' Equity card, verifying that they are a union member in good standing. As I neared the front desk, I automatically reached into my purse for my wallet, only to remember that it had been stolen two and a half hours earlier. "I got mugged on the subway in from Brooklyn," I explained to the Equity staffer.

"Sorry," he said, "those are the rules." He pointed to a sign that was posted on the wall.

"Look, I know that—and I know why you have those rules, and I'm sure they're a grand idea . . . but . . . look," I repeated. "Look at my face! You can see I've been assaulted. The guy took my wallet; my Equity card was inside it, *yes*, I am a member in good standing, just check the computer—"

"The administrative offices don't open until nine-thirty," the gatekeeper replied curtly, without a trace of sympathy. "You can wait outside until then."

"Can't she at least wait in the lounge?" Izzy asked, "until this can be straightened out?"

"Nope. Sorry. We've got rules."

"Your rules are *bullshit*!" Izzy shouted at him, and started to drag me by the hand past his station, but the guy blocked my way.

I tried reason. "You think I've come all the way from Brooklyn and just happened to pick, of *all* places on the planet, the Actors' Equity members' lounge to get myself cleaned up after I've been mugged and beaten!"

"No, I think you might be sneaking in here to audition for a union job—"

"Only if it's a stage version of *Raging Bull*, you moron! Are you out of your tiny fucking mind?!" Izzy yelled.

"I can let *you* in if you show me your Equity card, but I can't let your friend in," the guy told Izzy. Meanwhile the line behind us was backing up and people were grumbling loudly.

"Jesus Christ, just let her in!" one of the actors shouted.

"It's not like she's going to be any competition for us anyway," an actress readily agreed. "Just look at her face!"

"Yeah, just look at my face!" I repeated, before I realized what a left-handed remark the woman had made.

But the Equity staffer remained stubborn; he insisted that

he couldn't even ask a supervisor to bend the rules until someone came in at nine-thirty. Defeated, Izzy and I went out to the elevator bank, where she handed me her entire bottle of premenstrual medication—the only painkiller she had on her—gave me a hug, and offered to accompany me up to Newter & Spade.

"Nope. At least one of us should get a shot at this audition," I told her. "From someone with a broken face, break a leg," I added, wishing her good luck. I headed to my temp job still clutching the makeshift ice pack to my face. It was barely sunrise and already it had been quite a day.

Chapter 8



I had to do some fancy footwork to get up to Newter & Spade as well, but the security guard on duty in the lobby of the office building recognized me, even in my disfigured state, and allowed me to go upstairs without my employee identification, which of course was also in my wallet.

The good thing about getting paid by the hour was that I was logging in a bit of extra time this morning, having arrived at work well before nine A.M. Ramona was in early, too. "Do you think you should see a doctor?" she asked me.

I doubted it. Izzy was right; I had suffered only cuts and bruises, as ugly as they now were. There was probably nothing an M.D. could have done that Isabel hadn't taken care of already.

Ramona looked at me and clucked her tongue a couple of times. "I'm sorry I can't let you turn around and go home; we got a whole new shipment of boxes to code on the AllGood probe. Of course, that being said, you're a temp, so I can't *really* make you stay today. I guess it depends on whether you need the money . . ."

She was way off base with that comment. But she was also

correct. I *did* need the money. A whole day's pay was a considerable enough amount to warrant slogging through the pain. "I'll stay," I said quietly. Actually, I was edgy at the thought of getting right back on a subway anyway. Over the course of the day I'd be able to overcome my anxiety. The mugging had been an unfortunate random incident. In the hundreds of thousands of mass transit trips I've taken during my lifetime, it was the only time anything bad had happened to me.

Ramona smiled. "Just so you know, in case you get hungry later—I'd rather you didn't take your lunch upstairs in the dining room this afternoon. You might put people off their food."

"You are one sorry bitch," Marlena muttered under her breath as she entered the document coding room with her usual Egg McMuffin and diet Coke. She was putting in a little extra time as well. I don't think Ramona heard the remark; she was too focused on turning up her nose at Marlena's meal. Ramona put her hand to her mouth. "Excuse me, that smell makes me sick," she said, then quickly left us alone.

"If that woman were walking down the street and accidentally fell down a manhole, no one would mourn her," Marlena said. "She's pure evil. I think she was separated at birth from Lady Macbeth. My God, what happened to you? Are you all right?" she asked. She came over and gently touched my face. "You poor baby. Does it hurt?"

I nodded. "Like hell." Then I told her I would save my narrative until Natalie, Roger, and Lisa had arrived so I only had to relive it once. The consensus around the coding room was that I should forget about the money and just go home and get some rest.

I opted, however, to remain at Newter & Spade for the rest

of the day, preferring to spend the time with friends, rather than home alone mulling over what I should-have-could-have done to prevent the attack, and bemoaning my busted-up face.

I got lonely at lunchtime when all four of my colleagues went upstairs to the cafeteria. At least I was busy, combing through file after file of internal memos regarding the All-Good probe.

When my co-workers returned from lunch they found me staring at a single sheet of paper. "Can you believe this?" I said. I read them the memo from Raymond Spade to all of the firm's senior partners. The correspondence reflected the company's significantly weakened financial situation as a result of the AllGood Telecom congressional hearings. Not only were relatively minor changes enumerated—such as a moratorium on expenditures for firm "perks," like skyboxes and costly summer associate outings, including the weekly sunset harbor cruises—but Newter & Spade was considering a hiring freeze, as well as layoffs of existing "deadwood" within the firm. The cutbacks would hit every division and each department, from marginally productive partners all the way down to the mailroom.

"I'm surprised this hasn't been redacted," I remarked, as the other coding temps gathered around to read the contents of the memo for themselves. "Or stamped 'confidential' all over it."

"It should have been," Ramona said, entering the room and snatching the memo out of my hand. Had she been lurking outside the door? "Alice, come with me," she added curtly, crooking her finger. Her thin lips pressed tightly together, she marched me, mini-martinet that she was, into her office, closing the door behind us with the heel of her shoe.

She didn't even offer me a chair. Ramona picked up the phone and dialed an extension, impatiently drumming her fingers on the desk as she waited for the line to connect. "This is Ramona Marlboro. I'd like an escort sent to my office on the twenty-third floor, please." She waited another moment. "As soon as possible," she replied in response to a question I didn't hear. Ramona replaced the receiver and turned to me. "When you leave this room, you will go into the coding room and collect your personal belongings. A security guard will accompany you to ensure that you don't take any of Newter & Spade's property out of the building. You will not speak to the other temps in the room while you are collecting your things. The security guard will then escort you down to the lobby and out to the street. You are not to enter the premises ever again."

If the stinging blows dealt to my face by this morning's mugger had blindsided me, Ramona's slap bore twice the impact. "I-I don't understand," I found myself stammering. "What did I do?"

"Sit down, Alice."

Tentatively, I took a chair.

"The reason I felt it was an imperative to let you go immediately was your dissemination to temporary employees of Newter & Spade the contents of a confidential interoffice memo."

"It was one of the papers in the box you'd assigned me to input into the AllGood database," I protested. "That memo was part of my job—"

"It's not your job to disclose the contents of any of the documents you input like it's storytime," Ramona replied. "We prize discretion at Newter & Spade." She opened a drawer of her desk and retrieved a lined yellow notepad.

"Your transgressions since your employment commenced here are numerous, but I chose to retain you because your work has been good." She read from the list. "Of course, we could begin with your unforgiveable behavior in the associates' dining room on the very afternoon I hired you, when you spilled soda all over one of the senior associates. You went on to enter a relationship with that associate. You overstepped all bounds appropriate for a temp, appearing at baseball games and other office functions with him—"

"Excuse me, but isn't what I do on my own time my own *business*?"

"Not in this case," Ramona said tartly. "I also understand that you've been living with him for the past several weeks. There are no secrets here, Alice," she added smugly, reading my expression.

"You really *are* a bitch," I said.

There was a knock on the door and the security guard entered. "And you're fired," Ramona said. "I'll inform the agency that we'll no longer be requiring your services." She looked like a cat with a dish of cream; I could have strangled her. "Take Ms. Finnegan back to the document-coding room," Ramona instructed the guard. He looked glum.

"I'm real sorry about this," he said softly as he herded me back to my desk. "But I gotta—"

"I know. You're just doing your job. And I thought my day couldn't get any worse," I added, in a feeble attempt at self-deprecating humor.

"We'd brought you something from upstairs," Natalie said, defiantly handing me a wrapped sandwich. "Because Ramona wouldn't let you go up and have lunch," she hissed, for the guard's benefit.

He pretended to look the other way as Natalie stuffed the

sandwich into my purse. "She's not supposed to talk to you guys from now on," he said, blocking the doorway with his bulk. "But go ahead and say goodbye to your friends," he told me. "Ramona Marlboro's a real witch, anyway. Do you believe in karma?" He didn't wait for an answer from any of us. "Well, she'll get what's coming to her one day. That's what I think."

"If you want us to go to the mat for you on anything, we will," Marlena assured me. I would have liked to believe her but I recalled what had happened the day I went to Ramona championing our collective complaint against Bart Harrison.

Halfway back to Brooklyn, stunned, crying, my head pounding in pain once again, in between bites of the tuna sandwich Natalie had sneaked out of the Newter & Spade cafeteria I realized I hadn't even thought twice about getting on a subway to go home.

When Eric showed up sometime in the middle of the evening, he found me in bed with a fresh, though probably useless by this time, ice pack pressed to my left cheek. "I am so sorry, muppet," he said, sitting on the side of the bed. He rubbed my leg affectionately. "I am *so* sorry."

"So you heard about what happened?"

"You mean the mugging or—"

"Or the mugging?" I interrupted, trying to make a joke out of getting fired.

"Natalie told me about the assault this afternoon, when I stopped by to say hello for a moment. I was out at a deposition all morning or I would have come down to the coding room much earlier. Then I was in AllGood powwows for the rest of the day. You know I would have called, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Honey, you should have gotten me out of bed. I would have gone with you to the station."

"Thanks, but it wouldn't have made a difference. I was attacked on the train itself. Under the East River." Then I added, "Did Ramona tell you about this afternoon?"

He nodded. "Her own version of events, I'm sure," he said, disgusted. "But I already knew. News travels fast around Newter & Spade. There are no secrets . . ."

"That's what *she* said."

"If there's anything I can do," he offered, "—except get you your job back—you know I'm here for you."

"I don't want my job back. At least not *that* job," I said weakly.

Eric sat beside me on our bed and held me. "When you decide what you want to do," he said, gently kissing the top of my head, "you just tell me. That's what I'm here for, muppet."

The following morning, after Eric had left for work and I had the sun-drenched apartment to myself, I phoned Izzy at her temp job.

"Feeling any better?" she immediately asked me.

"Yes, *but*—" I replied, and proceeded to share the previous afternoon's nightmare.

"I think you should take advantage of the situation," Izzy advised. "Look on it as a great opportunity to focus on your acting career. Don't go back to Turbo Temps just yet. File for unemployment. They wrongfully terminated you, that's for sure."

"Ramona as much as admitted that she had been keeping me on because my work was good," I agreed. "Everything else seems suspiciously like a vendetta to me."

So I took the day to relax, recuperate, and take stock of my

circumstances. And the following morning, bright and early, I fired up the computer and filed an unemployment claim on the New York State Department of Labor's website.

Nothing is ever easy, however. Or should I say, nothing is ever simple. And sometimes God is on your side . . . and sometimes . . . well, He just isn't. My face healed with barely a trace of the subway attack. Without the distraction of day-job detritus I resumed attending auditions and won numerous callbacks, due in part, I believe, to renewed confidence in my ability to become a full-time working actress. And I did get some nibbles, including a three-line "under-five" role on a soap, where the size and shape of my nose appeared of no concern whatsoever to the casting director.

On the home front, things were going swimmingly, although Eric was so busy at the office that he and I had to work at finding quality time to spend together.

After a few weeks of collecting unemployment, I received a letter in the mail. Just looking at the envelope, I felt my stomach sink. I had a sixth sense that it carried tremendous portent, and I come by my hunches honestly—through Gram—who of course had been right about Ramona Marlboro being toxic.

Newter & Spade was challenging my unemployment claim. A hearing date had been arranged for mediation in front of an adjudication officer from the New York State Department of Labor.

FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK!

Apart from the fact that I firmly believed my claim was justified, I had thought that my nightmarish days at Newter & Spade were well behind me. I had started afresh, free of the temporary insanity of my day job, and was dili-

gently working toward my own goals—those for which I had years of education and training behind me. The Department of Labor envelope and its contents sat on our dining table like radioactive material; I didn't even want to go near it until Eric came home so we could discuss how best to proceed.

His arrival, however, made the situation even worse.

"I . . . was hoping . . . you'd represent me at the hearing," I told him, my voice wavering. "The papers say that you can bring a legal representative."

Eric exhaled as though he'd been holding his breath underwater for five minutes. "How am I supposed to do that, muppet? How can I? How can I represent my girlfriend against my own employer?"

"I know that it's really sticky . . . believe me, I appreciate that . . . but you know that their charges against me are more or less trumped up. They didn't fire me because my work sucked. It was without cause. Totally."

"Alice—"

"I know I'm on the side of the angels on this. Hey, I got screwed by Ramona, and Newter & Spade is just using its legal muscle to bully me. If I don't fight it and stand up for what's right, I'd be kicking myself in the butt forever. Who knows how many other people they've dealt with this way?"

"Alice. I can't do it. No way. I want to make partner; it's only a matter of months before that happens, and after that I'll be pretty much set for life. Do you know how important that is to me?"

"More important than me?"

He looked exasperated.

"Alice—"

"If you love me, then there's nothing more important than

that. In *Ivanhoe*, Brian de Bois-Guilbert is willing to risk everything, including his life, to champion Rebecca before the Knights Templar."

Eric's face became crimson. "This isn't a *fucking fairytale*, Alice!" he thundered. It was the first time in our relationship that he'd ever raised his voice. "It was already a risk for me to shack up with one of the firm's temps! If I defend you against the firm, can't you see what'll happen? I'll become a pariah. It will wreck my career! I'm *this* close to partner," he said, holding his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. He then had the gall to try to reach out and stroke my hair, but I found myself flinching at the thought of his touch.

"You know something, Eric Witherspoon? You're a real asshole!" I spat, and went into the bathroom, slamming the door. When I emerged, maybe fifteen minutes later, he was gone. He didn't return to the apartment until well after midnight. His clothes and hair reeked of cigarette smoke and he smelled like he'd been drinking heavily.

I had nothing else to say to him, so I pretended to be asleep.

Over the next few weeks, the looming unemployment hearing did take a toll on our relationship, although we both tried very hard to work at making it work. For a while, everything was fine between us as long as we didn't discuss anything having to do with Newter & Spade.

And I didn't end up engaging a lawyer to represent me. I couldn't afford it, and besides, a very sympathetic woman over at the unemployment adjudication office assured me that the mediation hearings were more or less pro forma confirmations of the claimant's position and tended to last no more than fifteen minutes.

Or so she told me. In good faith, I'm sure.

However, drawing *professional litigants* into a litigation situation was like feeding a big-ass chunk of chum to a great white shark. And I was the chunk of chum chump.

The hearings lasted three days. Newter & Spade—represented by some outside counsel I'd never heard of, who probably charged as much per hour as the entire weekly unemployment benefit checks they were fighting so hard to deny me—brought in witnesses. Poor Natalie, under threat of her own job, I'm sure, had to corroborate that I went to the ladies' room a lot, and therefore was not at my desk in front of my computer for as much of the time as I was claiming were billable hours. Bart Harrison, his voice and manner as dry as a Tanqueray martini, complained of having been dragged down to the hearing—*him*, a top attorney whose time was billed out at \$350 per hour—to refute my preposterous fabrications of sexual harrassment. Since we weren't in a court of law, there was no punishment for perjury. Natalie was brought back into the room, accompanied by Marlina, to lie under oath that Mr. Harrison had never made any untoward remarks vis-à-vis their appearance or apparel, nor had they ever heard such remarks issue from his lips with regard to Ms. Alice Finnegan. Marlina was glum; she quite clearly didn't want to be there. Natalie's attitude was so defiant, she was practically telgraphing to the adjudication officer that her testimony was full of shit, and coerced, to boot.

Ramona testified against me, of course, repeating her litany of my misdemeanors, which included detailed descriptions of my inappropriate office attire—I could swear she used the phrase “high-class tart.” Her manner was so smug and prim that I wanted to rip out her intestines and strangle her with them.

And then . . . at the end of the third day, they brought in their surprise witness.

Eric Witherspoon.

Who admitted, under oath, that it had been inappropriate for me, as a temporary employee, to attend major league baseball games and evenings at the ballet with associates, partners, and their respective significant others.

"You invited me to those events!" I blurted. I couldn't take it anymore. The mediator warned me not to interrupt the witness and to observe the rules of the adjudication process. If he'd been running any more of a kangaroo court, he would have had a pouch instead of a placket at the front of his trousers.

Even my living arrangement had become an acceptable subject for scrutiny. I felt completely violated.

Finally, after Eric had been testifying against me for upwards of an hour, I was permitted the opportunity to cross-examine the witness.

"I just have one question," I said. "Mr. Witherspoon . . . do you love me?"

I had caught him completely off guard.

"Of—of course I do, muppet. You know that. You know I do." The others in the room snickered at his nickname for me.

"I have no further questions," I told the hearing officer. What else was I going to say, anyway? All attempts to defend myself over the past three days had been denied or deflected. The adjudicator had no interest in listening to reason or common sense. He simply wanted to appear important and influential to the high-powered attorneys arguing on Newter & Spade's behalf against a mere speck of a woman, an insignificant and now disgruntled former temporary employee who had had ideas above her lowly station. I wanted to stand up and shout,

"You're nothing but a pack of cards!" to the assemblage that had already determined my fate before I'd even entered the room, most particularly Ramona, who expected the prompt execution of justice as she demanded my immediate decapitation.

"Did you really have to be there today?" I asked Eric on the subway back into Brooklyn. Yes, the farce continued when my boyfriend—who had just testified against me—and I left the Department of Labor offices together.

"It was expected of me," he replied morosely.

I shook my head, disgusted with the entire situation. "And I used to be so proud of your integrity."

By now, Eric and I were striving like crazy to keep our professional lives separate from our personal ones. We attempted to repair the fraying threads of our relationship, reweaving them in such a way that the ever-annoying loose ends that will unravel the entire tapestry if you tug too hard at them were tucked away, hidden underneath the weft. If you looked at the underside of the fabric that represented our life together, it wasn't especially pretty, but the errant strands were at least secured.

Two weeks after the final day of unemployment hearings, I received the adjudicator's formal decision in the mail. Newter & Spade, with their fancy uniformed militia and their megaton cannons, had defeated the little lady armed only with a BB gun and the belief that her claim was justified. My benefits were to cease immediately. There was no point in contesting it; I'd given it my best shot, and I'd only have been setting myself up for more aggravation. Getting revenge on Newter & Spade by appealing the decision and forcing my former employers to shell out hundreds more

dollars an hour in of-counsel legal expenses wasn't worth the emotional cost to me.

I refused to let my loss ruin my entire day, so I went out, shopped for groceries, made a terrific gourmet dinner for us, and dressed up in a sexy negligee. After dinner, Eric and I curled up in front of the fireplace and made exquisite love. And, satiated and glowing, I felt as though I had transcended my feelings about his testifying against me, accepted that he was simply a cog in the nasty corporate wheel, and was ready to fully rededicate my heart to our relationship with a renewed vigor and appreciation about what was genuinely important in the grand scheme of life.

"Muppet," Eric said, tracing his finger along the length of my bare back, sending a tickle along my spine. "We can't do this anymore. I can't."

"Can't what?" I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"This. Living here. Together. You can't live here anymore."

"I can't *what*?" I breathed. Did he just say what I thought I'd heard?

"They're circling the wagons at work and Ray Spade—and others—have been coming down on me pretty hard."

"Why? For what?"

"For living with you. Especially after the hearings and all."

"You won, for fuck's sake," I said, getting up and retrieving the envelope containing the mediator's decision. "Here," I said, tossing it at Eric. "Glory in your Goliath-dom. What more do they want?"

"Alice, how can we show up at office functions together after this? After what you dragged the firm through?"

"What I—?" I was aghast. Livid. "*You—your cronies*—were the ones who decided to play hardball by challenging my right to collect unemployment."

Eric shrugged noncommittally.

"And you wait until just after we've made fabulous love to spring this on me?"

He looked sheepish, uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, mup—"

"Don't you dare call me pet names right now!" I said tensely, wrapping our blanket around my shoulders. Suddenly, I no longer wanted my own lover to see me nude. Considering he'd trampled on my vulnerability, I suppose it made sense.

"Anyway . . . Alice . . . I want you to move out. Take your time . . . but if you can manage it by the end of this week . . . I'd . . . appreciate it."

A lump wedged itself in my throat. "That's very magnanimous of you. And where do you expect me to go?"

"Can't you move back in with your grandmother?"

"That's pretty audacious, Eric. How do you know she didn't take in a boarder to help her with the rent after I gave up everything to move in with *you*?" I rose and began walking around the apartment, pulling open drawers and removing my stuff.

"Would you like me to help you?" Eric asked. It took a lot of balls for him to act solicitous. I felt that the slick, wet spot between us wasn't what remained of our final moments of passion, but the manifestation of Eric's arrogance and hypocrisy.

"No, thank you," I replied evenly. "When I needed your help, it was conspicuously unavailable." He sat in the center of the living room, stark naked, looking at me as though he were wondering where we'd gone wrong. "I'll make a few phone calls and try to get everything out of here tomorrow," I told him.

After Eric went to sleep, I took the mobile phone into the

bathroom, closed the door, and dialed a number. "Gram?" Good thing she was a night owl. "Is my room still available?" Her response made me laugh and cry simultaneously, loud enough to wake my slumbering, soon-to-be-former-beau. "Yes . . . the 'name game' . . . yes . . . yup . . . he folded like a house of cards. Gram?" I sniffled. "I'm coming home."

Chapter 9



Just when I'm wondering where my next paycheck will come from, thinking I never want to see another lawyer again, unless it's his obituary photo, I get a call from my friend Rafe, who was cast in the national tour of a big splashy musical. He'll be on the road for a minimum of nine months; and if he resists his natural inclination to spend all his per diems at the local watering holes along the way, he'll return to New York next June a rich man. Well, rich enough not to have to immediately look for another day job.

Do I want to take over his temp job as an executive assistant in a market research firm, he asks me. His boss would prefer to replace him with a semi-known quantity rather than "wasting her time" (Rafe's words) in interviewing candidates supplied by any number of agencies. What kind of a place is it, I want to know. He tells me the company studies trends in advertising and marketing and how they affect consumers. "Huh?" I say. "My boss's beat is fashion," Rafe says, then adds "I think you'll like it. Besides, you won't be working for lawyers."

At this point, cleaning sewers with my bare hands

would be preferable, so I agree to meet his boss the following afternoon.

I arrive at the Association of Research Marketing and Promotion Industrial Trends fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. The receptionist, who pokes her head up from a Lisa Scottoline thriller when I approach her station, is kind, hangs up my coat for me, and ushers me into the conference room, where I am offered a choice of soft drinks or Perrier. I'm hoping there might be a fancy cookie or two on hand as well, but the paneled sanctum looks like it has never seen so much as a donut crumb, let alone the residue from a Mint Milano.

Rafe enters the conference room and introduces me to his boss. Claire Hunt is an impeccably groomed and tailored Woman of a Certain Age, given, I learn, to wearing jackets in Nancy-Reagan-red that match her lipstick and perfectly set off her fair Irish complexion and short, expensively coiffed and highlighted platinum hair. *Uh-oh, short hair*, I think, aware of my continuing streak of bad luck working for female bosses with short hair and boobs smaller than a B-cup. But recalling Gram's perennial platitudes, I remind myself not to judge a book by its cover. On the other hand, Gram also counsels that "experience is the best teacher." I try to forget the dueling truisms in my brain and concentrate instead on a time-honored acting exercise by working on "being in the moment."

Ms. Hunt and I continue to size up one another. Her heels, unlike my stilettos, are just a half inch higher than "sensible," communicating that she is a respectable businesswoman who understands the fashion business like the back of her only slightly liver-spotted hand, but won't kowtow to its fickle whims. I catch her looking at my pumps and won-

der if she thinks impractical footwear is the sign of an impractical mind.

Ms. Hunt makes a point of telling me that she cut her corporate teeth at a time when women rarely made vice president, and rather than trumpet her femaleness, she prefers to keep her identity, as presented to the outside world, couched in non-gender-specificity. While her four brothers and sisters call her "Claire," in business she is known as "C. Hunt."

She seems impressed by my résumé, by the schools I attended, and by the fact that my heels, like my hosiery, are pale and therefore add the illusion of height to my relatively diminutive frame. Okay, so I had her pinned wrong on why she was looking at my feet. She asks me where I got my robin's-egg-blue wool bouclé suit and looks at me as though her offer of employment is conditional upon my response. When I confess that I don't remember (recalling perfectly that I'd bought it in a thrift shop), she looks displeased. Rafe, who has been in the room the entire time, looks disappointed in me.

I'm gratified that Ms. Hunt doesn't see fit to give me a typing test and is assuming from my résumé that I can handle whatever she's planning to throw at me between next week and the time Rafe returns to New York. She is operating on the assumption that Rafe will actually want his old day job back. I know for a fact he won't, but his spending tendencies on the road will more than likely boomerang him right back to the desk outside her windowed corner office.

Rafe excuses himself, and I figure this is where the interview will finally get tough, but in fact Ms. Hunt seems to just want to chew the fat about fashion for a while. She throws some names at me, which I recognize only because I've read them in *Vogue*. How I recall that Tom Ford, currently de-

signing for the house of Yves St. Laurent, used to be at Gucci is a Zen-like miracle. The words just come to me. She waxes rhapsodic about Barneys and I nod and smile, as though I actually shop there and am so intimately familiar with their exorbitantly priced merchandise that I have several Visa receipts from the store stuffed in my wallet. *Not.*

"Do you think that people are put off by a Barneys ad for a five-hundred-dollar hat when the ad is placed next to a story about starving children in Rwanda?" she asks me. Is there a right answer to this question, I wonder. I'm not even sure exactly what her company does and whose interests they represent. I am, however, saved by the buzzer. Rafe intercoms Ms. Hunt and tells her that there's an important call on her line.

Ms. Hunt looks grave. Her expression makes her unlined lips look thinner, if that is even possible. She stands and smoothes out the nonexistent creases in her jungle red blazer. "I need to take this in my office," she says, extending her hand to me. "Be here at half past nine on Monday morning. Your hours are nine-thirty to five-thirty, with one hour for lunch, for which you will not be paid. You'll receive an hourly wage. It was twenty-three dollars you asked for, wasn't it? Rafe will give you the paperwork you need to complete and he'll submit it to payroll."

End of interview. Ms. Hunt leaves the conference room without another word or a look back in my direction to gauge my reaction to her offer of employment. I feel like I should be tremendously relieved, but for some reason, I am not. It seemed too easy, somehow. Where were the hoops of fire? I was certainly pleased that she handily accepted my bid for twenty-three dollars per hour. And because I nailed this job on my own without the assistance of a placement coun-

selor, at least I wouldn't be tithing part of my salary to Turbo Temps. I realized that I hadn't asked Ms. Hunt about benefits or vacation time. And neither of us had brought up the subject of my acting career. Ms. Hunt had appeared sanguine about losing Rafe to a performing job. So I hoped she wouldn't get upset if *I* went to auditions, but something about her persona gave me the distinct impression that she was a woman who didn't like to feel "betrayed."

Dorian, Isabel, and I met at McHales for a drink at the end of the day. Dorian was on his third Beefeater martini. I sidled up next to him in the booth. "I always thought drinking men lost their looks, but I was plainly mistaken," I purred, invoking a famous line from Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It was true. Tall and blond, over six feet with sparkling blue eyes, he was the ultimate alpha male. No matter how many martinis Dorian consumed, he never appeared drunk, never gained an ounce, and didn't have so much as a crow's foot or a busted blood vessel anywhere on his handsome, open face.

Izzy took a sip of her lite beer and lit up. "Since when do you smoke?" I asked her. She'd highlighted her blond hair and cut it even shorter, and now she looked like a cross between Meg Ryan and the Little Prince.

"I only smoke when I drink."

I waved over the waitress and asked for a vodka tonic.

"Anybody hungry?" she asked us.

"I already ate," Dorian said a bit sheepishly. "There's a Hugh Grant shoot over by Worldwide Plaza."

"Mozzarella sticks, please," Izzy said to the waitress.

"I'll share 'em with her." The waitress looked discontented with our meager order. "So," I beamed, as she left the table, "I got the job."

"Did you ever think you wouldn't?" Dorian asked.

"I mean, Rafe wouldn't suggest you as his replacement if he thought you wouldn't get it," Izzy posited.

"At least I won't be working for lawyers. Not for another nine months, anyway. It feels like a vacation. Or at least time off for good behavior."

"Well, *I've* certainly had it with those lunatics," Izzy commiserated. You think in the graveyard shift you don't have to deal with them," she said of her current middle-of-the-night word processing job at a white-shoe firm. "But I've got them in my ear, and they drone on . . . and *on* . . . and *onnn*. I swear, most of them just like the sound of their own voices. And you know, when you call over the supervisor because you can't understand what the hell they're saying through the Dictaphone, she gets mad at you—like you've interrupted her sleep or something."

"What we really need to do is get out of these survival jobs and take charge of our lives," I said. "And not expect some casting director to come knocking on our doors, offering a chance at salvation."

"Alice is right," Dorian agreed. "At the risk of sounding like Mickey Rooney talking to two Judy Garlands, we should put on a show together. Something that really showcases the three of us. Anyone got an uncle with a barn?"

"My uncle Earwax has a loft space near Canal Street. That's where his office is. In one of those belle époque buildings with the high tin ceilings. The acoustics are fabulous. In fact, when I worked for him, his partner's apoplectic temper tantrums carried all the way to Cleveland."

"Let's go for it!" Izzy exclaimed, waving her cigarette in the air. I ducked to avoid it making contact with my left cheek. "I mean, the way my career is going I'll be old

enough to play someone's grandmother before I get an agent."

"Puh-lease. Both of you don't yet look thirty," Dorian said affably.

Izzy laughed. "I love you, but I think you need your eyes checked for myopia."

Those two had a way of getting me revved up. "Okay, each of us has to hit the books when we get home tonight and find something with great parts for all three of us; something that won't cost a fortune to self-produce. Check dead playwrights first. The deader the better. We won't have to pay them any royalties."

We ordered another round of drinks to celebrate our new brainstorm. "All for one and one for all!" Dorian proclaimed as we bumped glasses.

"I guess that makes us Musketeer Productions," I said.

"Only if I can be Aramis," Dorian insisted. "It's my favorite cologne."

"So, tell me, did you get it?" Gram asked, when I arrived home, slightly tipsy, later in the evening.

"The job?"

She nodded, jabbing with a fork at a piece of burnt rye bread that had gotten lodged in the toaster oven.

"Gram, stop that, you'll get electrocuted. Here, let me do it." I gently edged her away from the toaster and pulled the plug before attempting to extricate her toast. "Yes, Rafe's boss offered me the job. She seems nice enough—I mean, Rafe has worked for her for several months and never complained—but there's something a little . . . I don't know . . . off-putting about her."

"Does she have short hair?" Gram asked.

I smiled.

"That's it, then. I'd watch your back if I were you. Remember Ramona." She went over to the sideboard and pulled out two turquoise tapers, placing them into her silver candlesticks. "We're only having omelets for dinner, but in honor of your new job, I think we should get a little festive, don't you?"

When I hugged her, I felt the bones of her rib cage beneath her blue and white kimono-style cotton bathrobe and realized how frail my once-voluptuous granny had become. I was still angry with Eric Witherspoon, though I hadn't regretted my initial decision to move in with him; and yet, perhaps the way things turned out had been for the best. Gram needed me now. And I needed her now, too.

I told Gram about my plan with Izzy and Dorian to produce our own show, asking for her thoughts on the subject.

She clapped her hands. "Good for you! You're too talented, and too smart, to wait around for some dopey director to call you. Is there a part for me?" she winked, primping a little. "I can still do my high kicks." At which point, Gram rose from her chair, hiked up her skirts, and demonstrated a few steps that would have made a Rockette jealous.

"Do you want one? Seriously?" I would have found something appropriate for Gram, too, if she meant it.

Gram shook her head. "No, but thank you, sweetheart. So what will you three produce?"

I shrugged. "That's the tough part. Long-dead playwrights don't get royalties anymore, but long-dead playwrights also wrote plays with too many characters for us to afford to produce them. And large-cast classics aren't always done too well on a shoestring anyway. Shaw in the basement is usually even worse than Shakespeare in the Park."

"What about a new play?" Gram asked. "Don't you know a dramatist who would kill to have his play produced anywhere in the city, even if it were performed on a sewer grating?"

I laughed. "Between Dorian, Isabel, and me, we probably know several good writers, but casting directors don't always trust new material, either. And the whole point of showcasing ourselves in something is to entice them to show up!"

"Sounds like you're damned if you do and damned if you don't," Gram observed.

I nodded. "But we're tired of growing old while sitting on our butts waiting for the phone to ring. So we'll think of something."

Irony of ironies, the Association of Research Marketing and Promotion Industrial Trends is only two blocks north of Newter & Spade. Sometimes it takes all the running you can do just to stay in the same place. This means that I can arrange to meet Natalie and Marlana outside the office for the occasional lunches and stealth manicures. I arrived at my new place of employment and burst out laughing at the gilded signage behind the head of Terry the receptionist.

"Well, you're in a good mood for someone just starting a job," she observed. "Probably because you don't know Ms. C. *Hunt* very well yet," she added under her breath. "Hey, something must be pretty funny."

I pointed to the wall behind the reception desk. "Look at the sign."

"What sign?" Terry asked me.

"The one above your head. The one you work under. The name of this company. Check out each one of the capital letters. What do they spell?"

Terry rose, turned around, and read the wall. "A . . . R . . . M . . . P . . . oh, shit! I never noticed it before." She uttered a long, throaty laugh. "Shit, that's funny. I've gotta call my sister. She'll think it's a riot. Oh, hold on a sec, Alice! Terry slipped a tasseled bookmark into her Scotto-line novel and opened the center drawer of her desk, retrieving one of Claire Hunt's envelopes. It contained a set of keys to the main suite, the ladies' room, and her own office.

I headed over to the desk where Rafe used to work and saw that the door opposite it was closed. Ms. Hunt hadn't arrived yet. I picked up the phone and dialed Rafe. I caught him packing for his tour. "First of all, thanks for the welcome note you left for me," I told him, perusing a card he'd stuck into one corner of the blotter. Then I started to laugh again. "Secondly, did you ever realize that the acronym for this place is ARMPIT?"

Rafe cracked up. "I wondered how long it would take you to figure it out. Yup, I knew . . . but I didn't want to scare you."

"That's very reassuring," I said. "Haven't the people who run this place noticed it? I mean, how could you not?"

Rafe chuckled. "I have no idea. Believe it or not, the subject never came up while I was working there, and *I* didn't want to be the one to raise it. Is she in yet?"

"Nope."

"Okay, well, if you've got any questions, I'll be home until Wednesday, so give a holler if you need me. Otherwise, in case of emergency, call my cell."

I thanked Rafe and hung up the phone, then started to familiarize myself with my new surroundings, but after only a few moments I became extremely distracted by the man

who walked by my desk. He did a double-take, then turned back to speak to me.

"You're not Rafe," he said.

"You're astute," I replied. My God, he was gorgeous. I mean, stop-traffic, hold-the-phone, who-the-heck-is-this-guy gorgeous. He resembled Tom Selleck in his heyday, though Tom Selleck in his heyday would have *wished* he looked that good. Bang! I was smitten. Down for the count.

"I'm Tony DiCarlo," the man said, extending his hand.

I shook it. "Alice Finnegan. I've taken over for Rafe Bowden. He got a national tour."

"Are you an actress, too?" Tony asked.

I nodded.

He shook his head. "It's a tough life. Well, a pleasure to meet you, Alice. That's my office, right over there," he added, pointing a few feet down the hall from Claire Hunt's room. "Don't think I'm rude if I keep the door closed all the time." Tony lowered his voice to a whisper and put his finger to his lips. "I'm a smoker."

"Your secret's safe with me," I whispered back.

Tony gave me a wink, then headed into his own room, shutting the door.

IlikemyjobIlikemyjobIlikemyjob! Rafe had never mentioned Tony. I wonder why.

At around ten A.M., Claire Hunt came in, looking like an advertisement for Talbots. She bade me a cordial good morning, solicitously asked if I was acclimating myself, told me to see her in half an hour when she would have some letters for me to type and send out, and retreated into her office.

Only three hundred feet uptown from Newter & Spade, and it felt like I was a world away from my former temp job. I'd come with a recommendation from my predecessor, my

new boss seemed to be relatively courteous . . . and, my God . . . Tony DiCarlo was the most physically perfect specimen of a man I've ever laid eyes on. I wasn't sure I'd ever grow accustomed to talking with him without staring.

A few minutes later, I looked at the clock; it wasn't yet time to collect my assignment from Ms. Hunt, so I e-mailed Izzy to tell her about Tony. People's looks ordinarily didn't register with me that way; this was a first. For example, Sean Connery could walk by me on the street and I would scarcely notice, unless he actually bumped into me. Okay, well, maybe not Sean Connery. "You have to come over here for lunch someday and see for yourself," I gushed to Izzy. "He's like every woman's fantasy—the kind that couldn't possibly come true because no one looks that good in real life." The only thing about him that convinced me that Tony was flesh and blood and not computer-generated virtual virility was that he smoked. I'm no big fan of cigarettes, but it was reassuring to be reminded that no one, not even Tony DiCarlo, was perfect.

I stepped inside Claire Hunt's office for the first time. Her framed undergraduate and MBA diplomas took pride of place on one wall. "Tasteful" prints decorated two others. Nothing was out of place on her desk, bookshelves, or credenza (atop which were a couple of elegantly framed photos of Ms. Hunt with a younger woman I assumed was her daughter). Her inner sanctum, like her personal appearance, was fastidious. And when I retrieved a few letters from her "out" box, I learned that even her handwriting was meticulous. Claire Hunt wrote the drafts of her correspondence in flawless parochial school penmanship. It was almost a shame to retype it.

And that was all I did for my entire first day on the job.

Sent out four letters. Compared to the nonstop influx of work at Newter & Spade, this was heaven. Except that I was bored and had no one to converse with. I didn't want to talk on the phone because my desk was right outside Claire Hunt's office. So I e-mailed Izzy a lot, checked out eBay for a while, even though I wasn't interested in purchasing anything, and photocopied a few recipes for my boss from a new cookbook on Tuscan cuisine she'd borrowed from Terry the receptionist.

At the end of the day Ms. Hunt summoned me back to her office and closed the door. "Alice, you did a lovely job on the letters I gave you," she began. "And there may be several days like this one where I won't have much for you to do. So I'm asking this favor of you . . ."

I expected her to ask me to pick up her dry cleaning, call her shrink to explain why she couldn't make either her appointments or her payments, or cat-sit for her—all of which are actual, off-the-job-description-chart requests I've received in former office temp assignments.

"Just look busy, Alice." I must have given her a funny look. "Don't read a book or newspaper or do crossword puzzles, but you're otherwise welcome to constructively use your time on any work of your own. As you know, I'm a vice president here, and impressions are everything. My division must give every appearance of a constant flow of output."

If I wasn't mistaken, her "division" consisted of the two of us.

"That's all," Ms. Hunt concluded, placing her manicured hands on the desk in front of her. The red of her nail polish flawlessly matched her suit jacket. "You may go."

I returned to my own desk to find an e-mail from Isabel, suggesting that the Three Musketeers have another planning session about the play we intended to produce. I started to

fire back a reply when I got to thinking about Ms. Hunt's directive to "look busy."

Hmmmmmm. All this time on my hands.

Use it wisely, Alice.

I realized I'd forgotten to return Terry's cookbook to her; it was still on my desk. I picked it up and as I flipped through it, I was hit smack-bang with an epiphany. *Aha!* A way to spin time into money. I typed a quick response to Izzy's e-mail. "I still can't come up with a good suggestion about what show to do, but I have an idea on how we might be able to afford to produce it. What do you think of this . . . ?"

Chapter 10



So, while Claire Hunt kept me only marginally busy, I made it look like she was a whirlwind of activity, clicking away on my computer keyboard for hours on end . . . churning out a cookbook of favorite recipes and special event menus, sales of which would help to fund our production. Gram and I could hold up our end pretty well, and Izzy was a phenomenal cook with a trove of family recipes, but Dorian was little help in this regard, since the contents of his refrigerator consisted solely of anything you could mix with gin. Then Izzy had the bright idea to assign Dorian the section on cocktails, insisting that he come up with more than how to mix the perfect martini.

And things with Ms. Hunt were progressing quite swimmingly, until . . .

"I didn't ask you to correct my letters, Alice, just type and send them." She pointed to her original draft and my subsequent printed version of one of the letters.

I glanced at the two documents. "But it should have said 'to *whom* we owe' yadda yadda yadda, not 'to *who* we owe . . .'"

C. Hunt suddenly morphed into the Wicked Witch of the

West. I was beginning to understand how she'd earned her nickname around the association. "You type what I write," she said in a steely voice.

"I was only trying to—"

Make them correct, I know. But why bother fixing her grammar, Alice? If she doesn't want to appear educated, that's her problem. Apparently, it's a bigger deal to her to be corrected by her assistant, a lowly temporary employee.

"Do us both a favor, Alice." She was big on "favors," I was learning. "Type what you see," she said. "Always. Exactly as I handwrote it on the draft. Then bring it to me for signature. That's it. You may go."

I turned and headed for the door. Claire Hunt's voice stopped me.

"Alice."

"Yes?"

"Don't think so much. Now retype these as I originally gave them to you. Thank you."

I sat down at my chair, completely baffled. I hadn't made a fuss of any sort or called Ms. Hunt's attention to the grammatical errors in her correspondence. I simply corrected them, quietly and without fanfare. But I guess she felt I was asserting a kind of superiority over her, although it hadn't been my intention. Maybe I care too much, but being diligent, vigilant, and going the extra mile, even in a temp job, has always been my work ethic. I'd felt that letting little errors slip by unnoticed or uncorrected was a failure on my part to acquit myself properly as her assistant. After all, she'd instructed me to "keep busy" in order to make her look good; didn't my efforts to clean up her communications count as well? I wondered how Rafe had handled things, but he'd been on the road for a month already, and since I didn't think

this qualified as an “emergency,” I wasn’t inclined to bother contacting him.

But the little slap on the wrist I’d received from Claire Hunt turned out to be only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Who’d have guessed, while I was steaming full speed ahead in ARMPIT’s comfy surroundings, more or less a lady of leisure, that I was unwittingly doing an impression of the *Titanic*?

“Alice, come with me,” Ms. Hunt said. It was the afternoon after the grammar conversation. The mail had just arrived and she had a sheaf of envelopes in her hand. “Bring a legal pad and a pen with you.”

“Ummm . . . we’re going into the ladies’ room,” I observed.

“Yes, we are.”

We were the only two women in there. Ms. Hunt entered one of the stalls and closed the door. I heard the sound of an envelope being opened, followed by a few moments of silence. Then . . . “Alice, take a letter to Norbert Morrison of the *Sacramento Bee*. Dear Mr. Morrison—Alice, have you got that?”

Can you believe this? The woman is giving you dictation from the toilet.

Well, this was a first. “Ummm . . . yes,” I replied, starting to scribble away in fast longhand. She dictated the entire letter, then three more, pausing occasionally to do what came naturally. I was stunned. Was this her revenge on me for not transcribing her own drafts verbatim? She certainly couldn’t have pulled this stunt when Rafe was her assistant.

Alice, the woman is a nut.

My intuition had just made a good point. So working at ARMPIT had definitely become a little less rosy. At least I still had Tony DiCarlo to flirt with. Rabid feminists will no

doubt want to take me to task over this, but screw 'em! Knowing I was going to have the pleasure of looking at Tony gave me a reason to wake up in the morning. What's wrong with a healthy, single, lusty, single, horny, single girl thinking of a guy as "eye candy" every once in a while? The man looked just as amazing in a business suit (his shirts always looked so crisp, I could swear he never sweated) as he did in sportswear.

Every week I began to count down the days to casual Friday, mostly because Tony showed up to work in his red close-fitting polo shirt with the collar that opened just enough to expose a perfect tan. He'd taken to inviting me into his office to chat, but since he was smoking in there, he would always close the door and I used to pray with every fiber of my being that it would occur to him to make an attempt to ravish me. Didn't he know I was having blue dreams about him at night? Wasn't it written all over me? I needed a good, healthy pick-me-up after the Eric Witherspoon disaster. So why didn't he try to pick me up? Did ARMPIT have no fraternization rules, too? Was I ugly? Repulsive? He seemed to like my company, my sense of humor, and my wardrobe. I couldn't figure it out and when I asked Gram to play the name game, she came up blank.

This began to worry me. Not because she couldn't parse the hidden meaning behind my gorgeous co-worker's nomenclature, but because she seemed to be losing interest lately in things that had once given her extreme pleasure, including the unthinkable—chocolate ice cream. Her sense of fun was diminishing. Dorian saw it, too. She was less inclined to find time for his tap-dancing tutorials. It wasn't that Dorian wasn't paying for them—she couldn't have cared less about the money; in fact, she gleefully espoused the philoso-

phy that “making a lot of money is a perfectly acceptable goal if one has no other discernible talents”—but she’d lapsed into a sort of lethargy from which none of us seemed to be able to shake her.

It was a glorious Indian summer Friday and I was headed to the subway on my way home, looking forward to a quiet weekend with Gram. I had made it my mission to do whatever it might take to cheer her up, no matter how long it took. I was passing by the building that housed Newter & Spade’s offices when I heard someone call my name. I turned around to see Ramona, coming up on my heels, gesturing wildly. I sped up, wanting to have nothing to do with her after the way she had treated me, not merely while I was temping at her firm, but at the spate of unemployment hearings that followed.

She caught up with me when I was forced to stop at the intersection, waiting for the light to change. “Alice,” she began, slightly breathless from chasing me down the street. “I want to speak to you about something.” She motioned to the Starbucks on the corner where we were standing. “Let me buy you a cup of coffee.” She appeared edgy, agitated.

I looked at her warily. What could she possibly say to me . . . what further damage to my psyche could she be intent on perpetrating? “Thanks for the offer,” I said curtly, “but I need to get home to my sick granny.” I realized I sounded like Little Red Riding Hood.

Ramona reached out and touched my arm. It was so out of character for her that I felt compelled, against my better judgment, to give her at least a few moments of my time.

We found a quiet corner of Starbucks and sat down. I’m sure my demeanor, on looking across the table at Ramona, was none too cordial. I leaned back in the chair and folded

my arms across my chest, waiting for her to speak first. The nerve of her for trying to be my friend, *now*!

"I need to apologize to you," Ramona said. I sat up straight in my chair and grasped my grande cup of latte with both hands, needing the support. "I didn't come clean with you about something . . . not that I needed to . . . but things got ugly and a bit out of hand, and I've given a lot of thought to it over the past couple of months." Was she waiting for me to respond? To absolve her? To cue her to her next little prepared speech? Wordlessly, I waited for her to continue.

"Eric Witherspoon and I used to date," she said.

Wow. Un-hunh. So she'd had a method to her madness.

"Before you came to work at Newter & Spade. About two years before then. From my perspective, anyway, things were pretty hot and heavy between us. I wanted to move in with him and get married, but he wasn't interested in taking our relationship to that level. He told me 'no way' was he ready for marriage. So I suggested that we just live together and see how that worked out—to see if we wanted to possibly go to the logical next phase. Eric then said that even moving in with a woman was a huge step that he wasn't prepared to take."

"And where do you think I fit into all this?"

"Alice, he refused to take me to firm outings, like the baseball games and concerts and sunset cruises. And I swallowed all his reasons and then kept offering him a million compromises, twisting my emotions into a pretzel to accommodate *his* needs, even though he was shitting on my own." Ramona took a sip of her coffee and looked away. "And then he starts inviting *you*—a temp—on the kinds of excursions he refused to bring *me* to." Her voice began to tremble. "And he asks you to move in with him."

I watched her struggling with the words. She looked like

she was drowning, but I couldn't bring myself to throw her a rope. I had learned not to trust her. Ramona was the sort of person who would expect *you* to abide by the rules of engagement, and then fight dirty. Besides, even in her attempt to extend herself, to act halfway human, she'd just spat out the word "temp" as though it were tainted with arsenic.

"I was jealous of you, Alice. And I was angry with Eric for being a shit."

Maybe he didn't love you all that much Ramona, I was thinking.

Maybe he didn't love you all that much, Alice. After all, look how he behaved when push came to shove.

"So I took things out on you," Ramona continued. "And it wasn't very professional of me. And I know that Eric ended up acting like a bastard to you, too, so I wanted you to know everything." She chuckled ruefully. "I guess that sort of makes us a sisterhood."

Ugh. He slept with her. Isn't that enough to make you sick?

I had to keep things in perspective. I couldn't let her sucker me. Just because she'd confessed that I'd become more involved with an ex-boyfriend of hers than she'd ever been didn't excuse her from making my existence during the time I'd known her into a living hell. "Ramona, your envy cost me my job and then my rightful ability to collect my unemployment insurance benefits. You made me miserable personally, emotionally, and financially. So an 'I'm sorry' isn't going to cut it. My grandmother never stops reminding me that actions have consequences; and you'll have to take more responsibility for yours than offering confessions from the lovelorn and commiserating about the fact that Eric Wither-spoon is basically a shit across the board." I finished my coffee and got up from my chair.

"I can't make it up to you, Alice. I mean, there's nothing I can do to get your benefits reinstated. The hearing officer rendered his decision and it's final. And . . . I mean . . . I can't offer you your temp job back."

"I wouldn't want it even if you could," I said.

I'm being abused in greener pastures for more money now.

I looked at Ramona, wondering how it could be that I was disgusted by her and felt sorry for her at the same time. "You know, I sort of figured right from the start that you wanted Eric."

"I wanted him *back*," Ramona corrected.

"Yeah, I just didn't guess the 'back' part. And you know something? It was a real learning experience for me . . . knowing you . . . professionally and personally. I learned that when all is said and done, you don't have *anything* I want." Ramona looked affronted. "I don't want *my* former job, I don't want *your* former boyfriend—or mine, which in this case is the same person—and there's a part of me that feels like I should be cordial and say 'it was nice knowing you,' but you know what, Ramona? It wasn't."

She narrowed her eyes. "Alice, I was just trying to . . ." She couldn't seem to figure out how to end the sentence.

Salve your conscience?

I looked at my watch. "I'm late. Thanks for the coffee." I walked past her and descended the steps to the subway.

When I got home and related the Ramona incident to Gram, it was the first time in ages that her old feisty self reemerged. "What is it you young people say?"

"What is *what*, Gram?"

She scratched her head. "Oh, hell. I hear it all the time on the bus." She thought for a few moments, then her face lit up like a chandelier, her eyes sparkling. "'You go, girl!' That's it!"

She gave me a hug and planted a wet kiss on my cheek. "I'm proud of you, Alice. Someone had to put that girl in her place one day. And I'm glad it was you and today was the day. People like Ramona, they just don't get it. Reaching out to try to be nice and when you extend your hand to take the one she's offering, she slaps yours and then insults you, to boot."

"Well, Gram, to Ramona, 'temp' is another dirty four-letter word. And I hate that, because she made me feel dirty, personally. She made me feel ashamed to be temping—as though I were too inept or inadequate to have a full-time position somewhere—omitting the fact that not only isn't it true, but I'm one of a zillion artists here in the city who want something more than what the Ramonas of the world have settled for."

Gram stroked the top of my hand, then held mine in hers. She still had a pretty firm grip for an old bat. I say that affectionately. "You don't have to charge into battle for all the temps in the universe. Or even the temps in Manhattan. Just stand up for yourself. Don't let these bosses abuse you. You're better than they are, Alice. Just remember that. You have a gift that they don't; and they'll never have it."

I looked at her. "My acting talent?"

She smiled. "That's gravy. You're you, Alice. You're special. And they'll never be you."

That's what grandmothers are for.

Claire Hunt's new habit of dictating her correspondence to me while she was *en commode*, was not, apparently, a one-shot deal. She took to the practice whenever her biology and the arrival of the mail coincided more or less simultaneously. Sure it was abusive, sure it was wacko, but I'd grown to live

with it, accepting the trade-offs of the job as the time and opportunity to work on the Musketeers' cookbook—which had been shaping up quite nicely during the past several weeks of my tenure at ARMPIT—and the occasional lunch with Tony DiCarlo.

We were on our way back to the office, Tony and I, entering the building via the side street delivery entrance, since it was closer to the Mexican restaurant where we'd lunched. I'd had a couple of margaritas and was feeling no pain. In my comfortably anesthetized condition, Claire Hunt could have been Torquemada and I would have enjoyed working for her.

The heavy metal door closed behind us, sealing us inside the lower lobby. The clicks of my high heels reverberated with each step I took toward the elevator bank. Then, the unexpected—but so fervently hoped-for—happened.

Tony grasped me by the hand, leaned against the cool wall of gray-painted cinderblock, and pulled me toward him. It was the first time I'd ever felt his body . . . and . . . wow; my blue dreams weren't nearly as fulfilling as the real deal. Tony was all toned muscle, lean and hard—everywhere—I learned, as our hips ground together. We kissed as though we were already lovers, with a raw, hungry, feral passion. The danger of our being discovered added to the thrill. We'd never had a conversation about "what if," we'd exchanged no looks requesting and granting permission to explore each other. This was just one big "NOW!" that swept us both into the pipe of a tsunami.

Tony's hands roamed across my chest, down to my waist and hips. He grabbed my ass, precipitously hiking up my minidress, and pulled me closer. Our friendship had reached not the "should" we rip off each other's clothes and fuck like bunnies, but the "when" stage.

"You're quite a kisser," Tony remarked, when we came up for air.

His observation seemed a bit unnecessary. "It takes two," I said, breathless. "We've got to stop meeting like this," I teased.

Tony kissed me again. "Do we?" His eyes, nearly black, shone, even in the unforgiving fluorescents, like polished onyx.

We heard the metal door to the street being pushed open. "Oh, shit," I gasped, and pulled away from our embrace, yanking my skirt down to make sure I wasn't going to give someone a real show.

Silently, although I could see Tony's heart pounding through his red crew shirt, while mine was thudding away so energetically it might as well have echoed through the cement corridor, we waited for the elevator with the stranger who had just entered the building. My face felt so flushed it must have matched Tony's shirt. Could the stranger tell, guess, surmise, what we'd just been doing? Having just passionately made out with the handsomest man I'd ever seen both in real life and on-screen, I was unable to suppress a smile and conceal my exhilaration.

We arrived at the third floor. Tony stopped at the reception desk to ask Terry if he had any phone messages, while I headed past him. He caught up with me and lightly touched my arm. "Thanks for . . . lunch," I said, grinning like a lunatic. "And for lunch, too."

Tony winked at me and retreated into his office—even *I* wanted a cigarette after our little amorous exertion—and I was just about to sit down at my desk when Claire Hunt approached me, looking very agitated.

"Alice, I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I was on my lunch hour." I looked at my watch. I hadn't

been gone more than sixty minutes, for which I wasn't being paid by ARMPIT anyway.

She looked displeased. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor . . ."

Uh-oh.

"Yes?" I smiled pleasantly. Even Claire Hunt could not ruin my afterglow.

"Alice, my daughter Regina got engaged last weekend—"

"Oh, congratulations," I said.

Ms. Hunt acknowledged my felicitations with a curt nod of her head. "— and since she's living in Ohio at the moment, we agreed that I should take care of the wedding plans from this end, since she wants to be married in Manhattan. And she insists on a June wedding, so with less than a year to go, we'll really have to scramble." I waited for the other shoe to drop. "I would like you to go to Barnes & Noble and pick up a number of wedding planning guides, so I can review venues and vendors with Regina. Purchase a few of those bridal magazines, too, while you're there. Two of everything. We'll send one set to Regina and then she and I can better discuss things."

"You're going to pick out her dress for her?" I heard myself ask incredulously.

"Certainly," my boss replied. "Regina freely admits that her mother is a far better judge of fashion than she is. Regina is a *microbiologist*," she added, as if to imply that scientific and sartorial abilities didn't mix. I decided that if Claire Hunt was *my* mother, *I'd* live in Ohio, too. Or anywhere far, far away.

Okay, I was set to take a field trip to the bookstore. This could be fun. I grabbed my purse, then . . . "Ummm, Ms. Hunt, I might be spending a lot of money on all these books

and magazines, especially since you'd like me to get two sets of everything. What shall I use to pay for them?"

"You have a credit card, don't you?"

Uh-oh again.

I nodded, not liking one bit where I thought she was going with this idea.

"Well, just use your card and bring me the receipt. I'll give you a personal check to reimburse you when you return. It'll save embarrassment for you in case the bookstore won't accept my check. And you certainly wouldn't be able to use *my* credit card there." How she always managed to twist circumstances so that it would seem like *she* was doing *me* a favor was remarkable. God, I disliked her. I pictured her asking *Rafe* to plow through a bunch of bridal books.

So, off I toodled, returning with a venti latte for myself and two large shopping bags for her.

Ms. Hunt looked at them and frowned. "Alice, can you do me a favor? My manicure is fresh. Would you just take the publications out of the bags and put them on my credenza?"

I complied, then noticed that her nails weren't so newly lacquered that she couldn't flip through the books and magazines, while I stood by, awaiting further instruction. I reached into my wallet and retrieved the Visa bill for the books. "If you could please write me a check for this, I'd appreciate it," I said, uncomfortable at even having to request the promised reimbursement.

"Oh, Alice, can it wait until later? My nails." She finished perusing the publications and shook her head. "No, I'm afraid these won't do. Would you return them to the store and bring back some others?" She motioned for me to put the books into the shopping bags. "Oh, I'm so glad I didn't give

you that check," she said airily, "since the amount might not be the same."

Back I went to Barnes & Noble. Got a credit to my Visa account, then spent another \$82.43 and hightailed it back to ARMPIT.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry, Alice, these just don't have what Regina and I are looking for. Would you do me a favor—"

I'd brought her all the major sources on the subject of wedding planning, Manhattan-based and otherwise. Twice. "Excuse me, Ms. Hunt," I interrupted, "but perhaps you could explain to me exactly what it is you are looking for—perhaps the names of specific books or magazines—and that would better enable me to accomplish my task." I was working at pretending I was a flight attendant, which was the only perennially cheery-in-the-face-of-abuse job description I could think of.

"I would, Alice, but I'm just too swamped right now," Ms. Hunt replied apologetically, with a casual wave toward her pristine desk and empty "out" box.

Alice, the bitch had time to get her nails done, hasn't given you a letter to type since ten a.m. and she's too busy.

Still, she was my boss. I swallowed the remark I wanted to make and tried to shush my subconscious so it didn't pop out of its own accord, attempting instead to talk myself into turning the drudgery into an adventure.

Fuck her, Alice, have fun at the bookstore and pretend you're planning your own wedding.

That's what I've *been* doing!

By the third round-trip, my arms ached, the store clerk was sick of issuing credits back to my charge account, I was sweating bullets, and my post-lunch glow had waned to the proportions of a single ember. But I stood my

ground and refused to leave Ms. Hunt's office until she reimbursed me.

Still, all things considered, it wasn't such a bad job, even though my boss was a human succubus. Since she rarely taxed my time, I'd been able to "look busy," and as a result had made huge headway with the Musketeers' cookbook. Once that was finished, Izzy, Dorian, and I could begin some serious fundraising and proceed full speed ahead on our theatrical venture. Instead of bemoaning my situation—which was a temporary one anyway—it felt healthier for my psyche to regard working for C. Hunt as a way of biding my time in purgatory until such time as I could claim my independence and fly off to join the stars.

Chapter 11



Over the next couple of months I felt like my entire life, both personally and professionally, was devoted to planning: planning the Musketeers' joint venture, which was really taking shape (we'd come up with a venue, a workable budget, and a show—*No Exit*—which might as well describe my life in day-job hell), and helping Claire Hunt plan her daughter Regina's wedding, which was going to be a far more lavish production. I'd filled half a file drawer with brochures, catalogues, and magazines from every imaginable hotel, caterer, band, chamber ensemble, and florist within a taxi ride from Times Square.

There were several more lunches and make-out sessions with Tony, too, and he kept employing the phrase "when we're lovers," which seemed to connote some future projected date in his mind, although I sort of wondered what our present status was, since we'd done just about everything except get naked.

One afternoon, when Ms. Hunt was off at her hairdresser, I returned to Tony's office with him following our post-lunch passion in the restaurant (as well as en route to the backstairs elevator bank), and we continued our perennial foreplay on

his leather couch. I felt anxious, a sort of combustible combination of the fear of being caught and the desire to finally consummate the relationship. Tony was on top of me, one hand rather expertly caressing my breasts, the other hand traveling up my thigh, when Terry's voice over the intercom made him jump up as though he'd just received a major electric shock.

"Tony? It's Cindy Lou." Terry announced the caller matter-of-factly.

"Cindy Lou who?" I heard myself ask, the pit of my stomach instantly sensing doom.

A few moments later, Terry buzzed again. "Hey, Tony, did you hear me? You *in* there? Your *wife* is on the line."

Tony bolted toward his desk. "I'll take it," he told Terry over the live intercom. He looked at me and put his fingers to his lips.

This was not what I'd signed on for when I started becoming involved with Tony DiCarlo. To say that the news hit me like a cannonball, would not be much of an understatement. In a split second, my lust for—as well as my trust in—Tony had been torpedoed.

He motioned with his hand for me to stay seated on the couch and not to leave his office. Then he patted himself down, searching for a cigarette. When he came up empty, he signaled for me to check the pockets of his blazer, which upon entering his office he'd tossed on one arm of the couch—just prior to continuing to fondle my bosom. I located a pack of True (*True—hah!* Oh, the irony of it) and underhanded it to him.

Tony lit up and in my presence proceeded to carry on a brief conversation with his wife, as though I were merely one of his male co-workers, or anyone else whose nipples hadn't

just grown hard under his touch. I became increasingly humiliated sitting across the room and listening to him discuss grocery shopping, weekend plans, and their daughter Rebecca's soccer practice.

Soccer practice! Daughter!

All of this was news to me. Tony had no family photos on his desk, and obviously had neglected to mention the existence of a wife and child or I would never have been in my current predicament, no matter how fuckable he was. I would have drooled from the safety of my desk, and accepted that my erotic fantasies of him, though entertaining, would never be fulfilled. Being a homewrecker lacks allure for me.

I began to pace the room. Tony continued to chat amiably with the missus as his eyes followed my motions. I decided I wasn't going to leave his office until he wrapped up the phone call. He had some serious '*splainin*' to do. After the longest seven and a half minutes of my life, he hung up. I thought he might get up from his chair and we'd sit on the couch together while he came clean, but he remained barricaded behind his desk, as if for protection from any lethal volleys I might lob across the room.

"I don't imagine that was your *ex-wife*," I said, seething.

He shook his head. "Cindy Lou and I are having some problems right now—"

"And what the hell am *I* to you? Some afternoon delight? What exactly have we been doing these past several weeks?!"

He looked more nervous than sorry, as if he thought I might slug him. It crossed my mind, but unlike Izzy, I've never hit a man in my life and, no matter how pissed off I was, would probably end up more injured than he would. "Alice . . . I . . . listen—"

I waited impatiently for Tony to provide me with an explanation, confession, whatever. The intercom buzzed again.

"Tony? Have you seen Alice? She's not at her desk and there's a rather frantic woman on the phone for her."

Shit, what if something's up with Gram? Tony be damned, I've got to take the call.

"I know you guys came back from lunch at the same time, so I thought you might know where she got to. I already checked the ladies' room . . ." Terry continued over the intercom.

I headed for the door and motioned to Tony not to let on where I was.

"If I see her, I'll let her know, Terry," he responded into the speaker. "Maybe you should try her again at her desk."

I dashed back to my station just as Terry buzzed me. My heart was pounding. "You've got a call for me?" I asked her breathlessly.

"Yeah, let me connect you."

I picked up the receiver, fearing the worst.

"Alice?" Izzy was sobbing on the other end of the line.

"Izzy, what's wrong?"

"Dominick didn't come home last night." Her speech came in stunted sobs. "I think it's over."

"Where do you think he might have gone?" I asked sympathetically.

"I don't knowwww," she wailed into the phone. "And. Just. When. I. Thought. Things. Were. Getting. Better. Between. Us." Her voice was choking with so much emotion she could barely get the words out.

"Where are you now?" I asked gently.

"At work," she sniffled. "But I can't concentrate. All day I kept thinking he'd call me, and I had to go in to work because

I just started this day shift job at Wilkinson Owens and I can't afford to lose it. But I just can't function right now," she continued, through a flood of tears.

That newly minted asshole Tony DiCarlo would have to wait to be reamed out by me. Claire Hunt, still having her hair highlighted, could also bide her time. My best girlfriend came before billable hours. Izzy's new temp job was only two avenues east of ARMPIT. "Tell you what, I'll meet you in the lobby of your building in ten minutes," I told her. "Can you hang on a little longer?"

"Uh-huh," she said pathetically, her voice small and tired, like that of a little girl.

I grabbed my overcoat and purse and breezed past Terry's reception desk. "I've got an emergency," I told her. "If Ms. Hunt returns before I get back, please convey that for me; and if she gives you one of her sourpuss looks, tell her not to worry, I won't claim it on my time sheet." I sped out the door and hurried across town.

Izzy looked like she'd been weeping for hours. We looked for a quiet place to talk and settled on the dark, empty bar area of a local restaurant. I bought her a draft beer and offered her my shoulder to cry on.

"Do you think Dominick is having an affair?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "I don't know, honey. I *doubt* it. I think, when all is said and done, he adores you."

"Maybe it's my fault," Izzy said, unable to control her tears. "I'm not home that much—between working my ass off and auditioning, and our Musketeers meetings. When I took a graveyard shift job a while back, I thought it would be great because it was better money and I'd still have my days free for auditions . . . but it meant that I was leaving Dominick alone most nights a week. What kind of marriage

are people supposed to have when you live like that?" By now she really *was* crying into her beer. "So maybe he just went and found someone else to—someone else to—" She was having trouble articulating her deepest fear. "And if he *did* . . . after I rip his limbs off, I'm gonna go after the little slut, whoever she is." Despite her tears, Izzy defiantly slammed her beer stein on the bar. I edged away to avoid the inevitable splash.

I felt even dirtier than I had earlier that afternoon. Ashamed. I could picture Cindy Lou DiCarlo in similar pain . . . and in her case, I'd been the "little slut." I wanted to take a shower, to cleanse the slime from my body, but how could I scrub my conscience?

I put my arm around Izzy. "I'm sure Dominick isn't cheating on you," I said softly, hoping I was speaking the truth. "Maybe there was some good reason that you haven't heard from him today—that he didn't come home last night." My words sounded hollow, even to me.

"You mean, like if he was in an accident or something?" Izzy briefly perked up, the possibility of his lying inert on the road infinitely preferable to his lying all-too-ert in some chick's arms. "If he spent the night in a hospital, so help me God, I'll kill him!"

I felt at a loss, not knowing what other words to offer her beyond the vague reassurance of her husband's fidelity.

"My fucking acting career is ruining my marriage," Izzy moaned. "I center my life around it. Decide which survival jobs to take based on the amount of time I have to work on my craft. But what else can I do? It's the only thing I love—besides Dominick . . . and my friends, of course—and it's the only thing I'm really good at and really enjoy . . ." She cracked a smile and made herself chuckle. "Except sex." I was glad she hadn't lost

her sense of humor. "I'm just not good at having both, I guess. So am I supposed to quit acting to save my marriage?"

"I think even if you did do that, after a while you'd realize you're only fifty percent fulfilled," I said. "Besides, we're doing something about it—you and Dorian and I—to take more control of our careers; to create a sure thing for ourselves instead of taking all these potshots in the dark."

Izzy polished off her beer. "Well, if last night was the big wake-up call, it looks like Dominick already made my decision for me." She looked into the bottom of her glass. "I wonder if he's *ever* coming home."

I reached across the gap between our barstools and hugged her. I didn't know what else to say. A cell phone rang. The lone man at the opposite end of the bar reached for his pocket as Izzy and I went for our purses. It was hers.

Izzy's face registered deep concern. "Where the fuck are you?" she said anxiously into the phone. She listened for a few moments. "They don't have telephones in Pennsylvania? Why Pennsylvania?" She nodded, apparently trying to piece together information. "Are *you* okay? . . . When do you think you'll be home? . . . Uh-hunh . . . Okay . . . I'll see you then." She closed the phone and stuck it back in her purse.

"What happened to him?" I asked her.

She sighed. "Last night he went off on his motorcycle with a bunch of other biker friends and for some reason they decided to go to this roadhouse in rural Pennsylvania and his friend Gary had too much to drink, so they were trying to talk him out of getting back on his bike and they didn't want to leave him there. Then Gary got belligerent, at least I think that's what Dominick was telling me, and when Dominick tried to grab his keys, Gary socked him, and got on his bike and sped off, so the rest of the guys didn't know whether to

stay there with Dominick to see if he needed first aid or to chase after Gary to make sure he didn't do anything stupid, and when they all caught up to Gary, he was out on the trestle, or whatever they call it, of one of those arch-shaped bridges and he was drunk off his ass and saying he was going to jump. The guys spent hours trying to talk him out of it, then another bunch of hours trying to sober him up enough so he could ride back into the city, and according to Dominick, they just a few minutes ago got to somewhere where his cell could get a signal."

I reached out to touch her arm. "See, I knew it would be okay. And he wasn't cheating on you. Aren't you relieved?"

"I'm telling you something," she said, getting up off her stool, her hands fluttering in an I'm-at-my-wits'-end gesture. "No signal, he claims," she muttered. "We're switching cell plans to that company with the TV commercials where the guy can get a signal from a fucking *manhole*!"

A phone rang again, and the man at the far end of the bar, Izzy, and I repeated the plunge into either pocket or pocket-book. This time, it was mine. Dorian was on the line. "Alice, can you get away from work and come straight home? Your grandmother's acting kind of funny."

"I'll be there as fast as I can," I said, and hung up. "Dorian just called from my place," I told Izzy. I tossed a ten-dollar bill on the bar and gave her a quick hug. "I'm glad Dominick is okay; look, I've gotta run."

"Is everything all right? You look really pale."

"It's my grandmother," I told her, my voice shaking. "I'll call you later. Love you!"

There was no time to submit to the vagaries of mass transit. Just outside the bar, I grabbed a cab and rushed home.

"She was in the middle of showing me a buck and wing,

and then suddenly she became, like, deathly white," a panicky Dorian said as I walked in the door. "So I got her into the chair and then called you right away." Gram was sitting at the dining table, the color drained from her skin, her mouth drooping slightly.

"Oh, shit," I muttered, trying to stay levelheaded. "Oh, God."

Oh, God, please let her be okay. I found out I'd been a bad girl today . . . but I didn't know . . . please don't punish me by doing anything to Gram.

"Gram?" I pulled up the chair next to hers and looked into her eyes. They were rheumy and she seemed to have difficulty focusing them. "Gram," I said a bit louder, "it's Alice. Can you hear me?" She nodded mutely. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I want to get into bed," she said, her voice very small. "S'nothing. I'm just . . . I just felt tired all of a sudden is all."

I debated with myself as to whether or not it was a good idea to move her. I asked her if she'd gotten dizzy, if she could remember how her current state had begun. She said she couldn't. Dorian stood by, his face a picture of concern and helplessness.

"Just get me into bed," Gram said.

"Dorian, I'm going to need your help on this one," I told him. I pulled Gram's chair away from the table. "Here," I said, gently slipping an arm around her waist. "I'll help you stand, and Dorian's going to come around on the other side and we'll get you to bed, okay?"

She still seemed disoriented. "Yes. Thanks."

It was too difficult, too logistically awkward for Dorian to aid me in getting Gram out of the dining chair. I finally managed to get her to her feet, and we took a single step as Dorian came over to her left side.

Then . . .

Oh, God, no.

Gram went limp in my arms.

"Dorian! Call 911 for an ambulance!" I barked. "I've got her." She felt like a leaden sack of bones in my arms and I struggled under her weight. I didn't know whether Gram had simply fainted or whether it was much worse, and I wasn't exactly a competent diagnostician. "Everything's going to be all right," I soothed in Gram's ear, my lack of confidence in my own words utter and complete. I hadn't a clue that she could hear me.

"Alice, if I die," she said, in a voice so feeble, so soft I could barely hear her, "I want you to scatter my ashes all over the theater district."

"You're not going to die, Gram," I said, my eyes closed, praying that I spoke the truth.

"Don't forget to hit Times Square."

"Shhh," I whispered to her.

"And Shubert Alley."

As we waited for EMS to arrive, I realized that I'd developed a sense of eerie tranquillity, in contrast to Dorian's agitation. In fact, the more his anxiety increased with each passing minute, the calmer I seemed to become. When the paramedics arrived with the gurney and placed an oxygen mask over Gram's face, I was surprised to discover that I had the presence of mind to relate with clarity her medical history and the cocktail of prescription medications she swallowed daily.

She was conscious, thank God. I thanked Dorian profusely and suggested that he might as well go home; I'd call him when I had a better idea of what was going on. I insisted on riding with Gram in the ambulance to the hospital. "Don't worry," I whispered to her as I clutched her hand. "I'm right here. I love you. I won't let anything else bad happen to you."

Like I could prevent it. If only. But I wanted to believe it was true.

I thought I heard a telephone. I *did* hear a telephone. Mine. I could have sworn I'd turned it off. I reached into my purse, retrieved the phone, and answered it.

"Alice?"

"Ms. Hunt, how did you get this number?" Deliberately, I'd never given it to her.

"I called Rafe's cell. You know he was a bit annoyed to get my call; he was in his dressing room preparing to go onstage for a matinee. I told him it was an emergency and I needed to know if you had a cell phone, so he gave me the number. Alice, you just left work this afternoon—"

"Ms. Hunt, I'm terribly sorry, but I had a series of crises myself and—"

"Alice, we've got a real emergency here. The florist we selected for Regina's wedding—not the one that's doing her bouquet, but the one that's doing the centerpieces—well, they're giving me a song and dance about the price on the camellias, and I know *you're* the one who has been negotiating with them. So I need you to do me a favor. Call them and—"

"Ms. Hunt, this isn't a good time right now—"

She barreled ahead as though I hadn't spoken. "—and tell them in no uncertain terms that the original price quote for the camellias stands, I don't care if they've had droughts in Holland or strikes in Argentina, or *whatever* in *whichever* country they get them from, but they made a deal and we'd be delighted to take our business elsewhere. Then call the florist who's doing the bouquets for Regina and her bridesmaids—"

"Ms. Hunt. This is not a good time for me to make those telephone calls."

"Alice, I am your boss and this is an emergency!"

"No, Ms. Hunt. *This* is an emergency. Your daughter is getting married *five months* from now. I am currently sitting in the back of an ambulance holding my grandmother's hand and praying to God that she makes it to the hospital in time."

There was a silence on the line. I should have just pressed "end" and snapped the phone shut.

"Will you be in the office tomorrow?" Ms. Hunt asked, her tone considerably altered, though not quite sympathetic.

I looked at Gram, her breathing now regular and even. "I hope so," I told her. If I did, it would mean that Gram was going to be okay. Although I detested the thought of looking at Tony DiCarlo ever again and was certain that both Ms. Hunt and Ramona Marlboro must have attended the same employee management seminars, under the circumstances, never before had I so looked forward to coming in to ARMPIT.

Gram remained in the hospital for seventy-two hours while the doctors ran a battery of tests, eventually determining that she had suffered a mild stroke. I wanted to stay with her until she was released, no matter how long it took, but the doctors wouldn't let me sleep there, at first while she was in the intensive care unit, and later in her semiprivate room. So I took an unpaid leave to spend the full visiting hours sessions at her bedside.

I brought her home to our apartment, armed with a bunch of prescriptions and the directive to monitor her activities as closely as I could and remain watchful as to even the slightest change in her behavior. I hated needing to leave her alone to go off to work, but what choice did we have? The rent had to be paid. Even if I'd been able to stay home with her, I

wasn't a trained nurse. And Gram emphatically refused the assistance of a home health care attendant. It was a lose-lose situation.

Back at ARMPIT, Tony was solicitous of my grandmother's condition, and I tried to behave in as civil a manner as possible, despite my urge to spit venom in his perfectly featured face. Still, I didn't like feeling like a doormat; so, one quiet afternoon, after I'd been back at work for a few days, I knocked on his office door. "It's Alice. Can I come in?"

He came to the door and opened it. I slipped in and closed it behind me. "I don't remember whether or not you apologized to me," I began, knowing full well he hadn't. "Has anyone ever made you feel like a used Kleenex? Just used you and tossed you in the trash when they were done?"

Tony looked at me, not knowing how to answer the question.

"No? That never happened to you? Well, you're very lucky, then. Because that's how you made me feel."

"It's not as if you weren't enjoying yourself, Alice."

A harsh-sounding laugh escaped my lips. "I wasn't about to deny that. *However*, you suckered me. I can tell you right now that we wouldn't have shared a single kiss—not even to satisfy my curiosity—if I'd had any inclination that you were married. Obviously I'm no prude, but there are some things I just don't believe in . . . mostly because I know how dreadful I would feel if I were in the shoes of the Cindy Lous of the world."

Tony came around to the front of his desk and rested his butt against it. "I'm sorry, Alice."

That's it? I wondered.

"I'm not going to say any more than that, because I don't know what I could say to you that won't sound . . . I don't

know . . . *fatuous* or something. I want you to know, though, that I do respect you. And I hope we can at least be acquaintances from now on."

He held out his hand for me to shake, as though proposing a bargain. I found myself taking it. I shook his hand and regarded him grimly. "I'm going back to my desk now. Thank you for the apology," I said, trying hard to sound cool and unemotional.

Did I handle that like a grown-up?

Alice, I'm proud of you. No tears, no recriminations. And you handled Ms. Hunt well, too, that afternoon in the ambulance. You know, just because you're someone's employee, it doesn't give them carte blanche to abuse you.

I told Gram what I'd said to Tony. Incidentally, she was wowing everyone with her remarkable powers of recuperation. In fact, it seemed that she'd taken out a new lease on life since her hospitalization. She'd even expressed taking an active part in the Musketeers' meetings—which we had started holding at our apartment, over a couple of bottles of wine—saying she'd always wanted to be a producer.

"Have I taught you nothing, Alice?" Gram said, laughing.

"What do you mean?"

"You really can pick 'em, my sweetheart."

"Well, what about Grandpa Danny?" I countered.

"That's what I mean," she said. "You take right after *me*! We're such suckers for charm—though at least your Grandpa Danny was a paragon of fidelity." Most grandmothers would probably have wagged a bony finger at a grandchild who'd confessed she'd come within six inches of committing adultery. But Gram looked upon my behavior philosophically, accepting it as one of life's rites of passage.

I'd had such rotten luck with men this year that I decided to forswear them for a while. If I counted up all the hours I'd

spent since (in a conservative estimate) the sixth grade wondering whether:

- “Johnny” liked me or
- what was the magic charm, metaphorically speaking, that would get him to notice me, and
- why didn’t “Johnny” love me as much as I loved *him*, or
- why did he seem to fancy “Mary” more than me . . .

and on and on, up through this morning . . . and I got to take all that time back and put it to a different use, I bet I’d have a string of days, if not months, with which to concentrate on my career, on spending more time with Gram and my friends . . . *wow*.

Okay, so I made a pact with myself to focus on Alice for a while. But I didn’t tell anyone else about it in case I couldn’t keep it. Sort of like a New Year’s resolution.

Chapter 12



Sometimes, I must admit, working with Claire Hunt could be almost fun. There was the wintry Friday afternoon when she stopped by my desk on her way back from lunch . . .

“Alice, I wondered if you could do me a favor . . .”

I didn’t feel the customary *uh-oh* sensation upon hearing this. Perhaps it was because Ms. Hunt was almost smiling. She must have had a cocktail or two with her midday meal.

Ms. Hunt didn’t wait for my response. She never did when it came to asking for one of her “favors.” She placed her hands on my desk and leaned forward, reducing her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Regina has a fitting for her wedding gown at five forty-five this evening at Saks Fifth Avenue. I thought perhaps you could accompany me, so my daughter could have the benefit of a more youthful eye than mine. Her bridesmaids are all still in Ohio. And they’re scientists, too, of course.”

I thought about it for a couple of moments. “I have a meeting after work this evening,” I told her truthfully. Dorian, Izzy, and I had some major decisions to make regarding the selection of a director for our show.

"If it's money you're concerned about, I wouldn't dream of taking advantage of you."

Hah!

"You can certainly bill the company for your overtime, Alice."

You can certainly use the money, Alice.

"Let me see if I can rearrange my schedule," I told her, and after she went into her office, I phoned Isabel.

"Don't worry about it," Izzy said. "I just got a call from Dorian two seconds ago and he's stuck on a shoot, so it would have been just you and me anyway. I'll go home and give Dominick some extra attention. We went into couples counseling and made a pact to spend more quality time together, anyway."

"You know, I'm worried about Dorian. He seems so . . . I don't know . . . so lonely," I said to Izzy. "He just goes from one background job to the next, and I know he's making okay money when he's booking work, but I can tell, just from looking into his eyes and listening to him, that he's so unfulfilled by it. He never gets to play a real role; he's like furniture."

"You and I have been on the same wavelength," Izzy agreed. "And I also think Dorian's too inclined to pick up a gin bottle for comfort. I mean, when was the last time he was in a relationship with anyone?"

I pondered her question for a moment or two. "Never. At least in all the time we've been friends, he's never mentioned anyone. And he's not that secretive a guy. In fact, when he gets going, he can be pretty gossipy."

"That's why it's such a good thing that we're producing our own show," Izzy said. "Dorian may need the affirmation even more than we do." She laughed. "And *that's* saying something!"

I told Izzy where I was going after work. She thought it was a hoot.

"Have you ever met Regina?" she asked me.

"I spoke to her on the phone once for just a minute, when she was looking for her mother and the receptionist switched her to my extension by mistake. It wasn't enough to get a sense of her."

Izzy chuckled. "Well, have fun! And remember, you're getting paid for it."

Regina swung by the office at four-thirty. She was tall and very thin and not unattractive, but a personal sense of style was clearly not a priority for her. On that count, anyway, Claire Hunt had been right about her daughter. Regina also didn't strike me as the blushing gushing bride type, the fluffy wedding appearing to be more of a nod to her mother's wishes than a plan of her own.

The three of us went down to the street to hail a cab. I ended up sitting on the "hump" of the back seat, per Ms. Hunt's determination, since Regina's legs were longer than mine and Ms. Hunt needed to sit by a window because she claimed that car travel often made her nauseous and she required fresh air.

Great.

When my boss directed the driver to head north, for the George Washington Bridge, I sensed that we were in trouble.

"Oh, I thought we were going to Saks Fifth Avenue," I said, attempting to sound casual.

"We are," Ms. Hunt replied, "but we're not going to the flagship store," she added, referring to the original Saks emporium, which is on Fifth Avenue, only a few blocks from ARMPIT. "Their bridal salon is too small and cramped and

their staff seemed so overwhelmed that they made Regina anxious, so—”

“They made *you* anxious, Mother,” Regina corrected quietly.

Ms. Hunt chose to ignore the comment. “So then we discovered the Short Hills location, and it’s so much more pleasant.”

Everything I have ever heard from now-married friends, including Izzy, about the nightmares that went into planning their nuptials must be true. During the loooooonnnng cab ride out to New Jersey, where we were imprisoned in a snarl of rush-hour traffic, Ms. Hunt managed to either ignore or correct everything her daughter said, every idea the younger woman expressed. And there I was, trapped between them, the three of us bundled into our winter coats, with the heat turned up full blast, squashed and miserable, as they squabbled. Every once in a while, Ms. Hunt would look to me for confirmation of something she’d just said. “Isn’t that true, Alice?” she would ask me.

She wasn’t paying me enough to get between her and her daughter. Not at a time like this. In fact, not ever. So no matter which one of them I might have agreed with, I would reply, “Huh? Oh, I’m sorry, I thought it was a family discussion. I wasn’t listening.” I think my boss finally took the hint.

We arrived. Finally. I was grateful to stretch my legs and back, which had cramped up during the ride out to Short Hills. Regina took long strides and her mother strove to keep up with her pace. I found myself straggling behind, ignored by both women.

Why am I here? I asked myself.

It’s a paycheck, Alice. Look on this as an adventure . . . and if that becomes impossible, you’ll be home in a couple of hours.

The bridal salon was spacious and well appointed and the

large fitting rooms had comfy chairs, so I ensconced myself in one of them, as Ms. Hunt directed me to watch her purse and Regina's as though I were the ladies' maid.

Miranda, the fitter, was competent, accommodating, but harried. It was clear that she didn't mind Regina but didn't much care for her mother, who decided that the gown—which was so simple that it bordered on boring—needed some trim after all, despite her previous decision to excise it.

"Well, I thought it looked more elegant without the soutache," Ms. Hunt remarked, "but now that I see it on Regina, I think she needs a little something extra to draw the eye. What do you think, Alice?"

Uh-oh.

"I think that all eyes will be focused on the bride with or without the trim," I answered, trying to be Switzerland. "After all, it's her day. Isn't that what the magazines say?"

"Mother, I could care less about the trim. I'm fine without it. If you like the soutache appliqué, or whatever it's called, then we'll have it stitched on. I could be married in a white lab coat and be happy. But you're not, so—"

"My daughter's a microbiologist," Ms. Hunt told Miranda, who had clearly heard this disclaimer during earlier fittings.

She rolled her eyes upward and looked at me. "*Yo se, yo se,*" she said, assuming I spoke Spanish.

"She *knows* that, Mother. She doesn't *care*. All that matters to Miranda today is whether we put back the trim or leave the gown as it is."

Ms. Hunt ignored Regina. "Alice," she said turning to me, "don't you think they should add some more boning through the bodice? Regina needs something to give her a little lift, don't you agree?"

No way was I responding to this one.

Regina blushed crimson, the color spreading across her throat and chest. I felt mortified on her behalf. "Mother," she said, "I am thirty-four years old. I have a life that I am quite satisfied with and a career that I find exceptionally gratifying. I am having this ridiculously ostentatious and expensive wedding to make *you* happy, because you never let me forget that you and Daddy eloped—so you didn't get the dress, the flowers, the band, the hall, and the presents. I've even agreed to get married in New York, where none of my friends live anymore, where Arthur has never even *been* before, to make things convenient for *you*, so you can have your little fantasy. But I'm warning you right this minute—I am about this close"—Regina demonstrated by holding her thumb and forefinger about an inch and a half apart—"to calling off the whole thing and doing exactly what you and Daddy did!"

I admired the fact that Regina had never raised her voice. I wanted to give her a standing ovation, but her mother had loaded me down with their coats; there wasn't a hook to hang them on and no extra chairs in the room. Still, I was so embarrassed to be a witness to this domestic dispute that I wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Miranda, her mouth full of straight pins, acted like she'd seen it all before, hundreds of times, with each bride at every fitting.

"We'll discuss this on the way home," Ms. Hunt told Regina, her tone steely.

Oh, God, do I have to endure another couple of hours of this on the ride back into Manhattan, I wondered.

Be careful what you wish for, Alice.

The fitting ended. A betting man could have successfully predicted the outcome. The soutache trim was to be reapplied; and boning, as well as a built-in bra, were to be inserted into the lining of the bodice. Having boned up on

several bridal books as part of my current job description, I knew that these more or less last-minute alterations would cost an additional fortune.

We left Saks. Ms. Hunt took out her cell phone to call a New Jersey car service to take us back to New York. Regina seemed like another person, having become somewhat emboldened by her little speech in the fitting room. Ms. Hunt was clearly unaccustomed to not having the upper hand, particularly in front of an employee. She suddenly snapped her phone shut without making a call and returned it to her purse.

"Regina, I think we should talk about this," she said decisively, "and I haven't eaten a thing since lunch. I'm getting a headache." She pointed across the parking lot at an Applebee's. "Let's discuss it over dinner." They started to make their way toward the restaurant. I trailed a few steps after them.

"Oh, no, Alice," Ms. Hunt said to me, having realized that I was following them. "This is a family dinner. Regina and I have a great deal of ground to cover. And I'm sure she would be more comfortable if we didn't have . . ."—she reduced her voice to a bare whisper—"a *stranger* at the table. You understand, don't you?"

I nodded.

So where does that leave me? Stranded in the middle of north Jersey, that's where.

I couldn't believe she was doing this.

"I'll see you in the office on Monday," Ms. Hunt said cheerily, as she headed off with Regina.

Shit.

I had *no* idea where I was in relation to any sort of transportation back to New York City. This much I knew: I wasn't about to pay the fifty-seven dollars it cost Ms. Hunt to take

a taxi from midtown to Short Hills. I didn't even have that much in my wallet. I returned to Saks and sought out the customer service desk, where a nice woman pointed me in the direction of a New Jersey Transit bus stop and told me which lines would take me to the Port Authority.

Done.

I made it home at around nine-thirty in the evening, utterly exhausted.

"So where have you been?" Gram asked. I realized I'd never called her to tell her I was going to be home late. She'd still assumed we were having a Musketeers production meeting at six-thirty in the living room. "I was so worried about you."

Damn. I hate doing that to her. I apologized and explained that I'd gotten so caught up in the Hunts' dysfunctional *mishegas*, as Uncle Earwax would have said, that I totally forgot to apprise her of my plans. I told her all about my evening with Ms. Hunt and Regina at the bridal salon. "Can you imagine her calling such attention to her own daughter's underendowed bosom?" I said.

"If she'd been *my* mother, I'd have decked her," Gram said.

Winter turned to spring, the near-affair with Tony DiCarlo receded into memory, the pigeons returned to Central Park, and Regina Hunt's wedding plans were in full swing. I sat at my ARMPIT desk "looking busy," not with the Musketeers' cookbook—which was now completed and waiting to be marketed by us to potential backers of our theatrical production—but with frequent wedding-related communications. Since it was rather obvious that my tasks had nothing to do with research marketing and promotion industrial trends, Ms. Hunt had instructed me to keep my voice low so that our co-

workers couldn't glean the substance of my conversations. Of course, everyone in the office knew what was going on. I'd even heard rumors that Ms. Hunt was on her way out the door. If that was the truth, then she probably had little to lose by spending company time orchestrating her daughter's wedding.

Lucky Rafe, though. He'd been offered a three-month extension of his national tour, which, naturally, he'd accepted, so he wasn't planning to return to New York until September.

I was in Ms. Hunt's office going over the list of invitees to the Great Event when something struck me. Not that I expected it—I was, after all, simply Ms. Hunt's temporary executive assistant, but—

"Alice, I hope you won't be insulted if Regina and I don't include you on this list. We're looking at nearly two hundred dollars a plate, and I don't feel it's appropriate to invite you."

I swallowed hard. I had absolutely no desire to attend Regina Hunt's wedding. Still, this felt like a slap in my face after all the months of work I'd been doing to help in the planning of it. I was perfectly aware that I was getting paid to handle whatever Ms. Hunt threw at me, and I knew how expensive it all was. Nevertheless, it seemed ungracious to make a point of not sending me an invitation.

"Well, you'll save on postage," I muttered. She didn't hear me. By now I should have been used to her treating me like an insignificant appendage. It was only during her infrequent client meetings when she would glowingly introduce me as her "trusted assistant" that I seemed to register on Ms. Hunt's radar screen as a human being and valued asset. I often wondered whether she had treated or would have treated Rafe the same way. And sometimes I got the impression that there had been a lot that Rafe didn't tell me about Claire Hunt;

he'd let me discover on my own why C. Hunt ("the 'H' is silent," Terry would say) had earned her office nickname. My pal must have known that if he'd given me a heads-up in advance, I most likely wouldn't have interviewed for his job.

At least I *had* a job.

I met Dorian for drinks after work. "My treat," I insisted immediately. I knew the film season was slower than usual and Dorian staunchly refused to take survival jobs to tide him over during the lean times. Izzy and I admired and envied him for it, but just couldn't bring ourselves to do the same, primarily because we lived with others who depended upon our steady income as well.

Dorian looked dreadful, like he hadn't slept in days. "Are you growing that for a role?" I asked him, looking at his stubbled face. It was the first time I'd ever seen him unshaven.

He shook his head. "There's been no work, so why bother?" he replied, sounding like Eeyore. His normally clear blue eyes now looked dull and hollow.

"You look like shit," I said jovially.

Dorian gave a derisive sniff. "I hate my life."

"You sound like something out of Chekhov."

"Maybe it'll help me get *cast* in Chekhov," he mused. "I really do hate my life, you know. I've got an empty bank account, an empty bed, and an empty refrigerator."

"I'm sorry I can't help you with the first two things, but come over for dinner whenever you want. Gram and I will be happy to feed you," I offered.

"Did your grandmother tell you I quit the tap-dancing tutorials?"

I nodded. "That's one reason why we're sitting here. I'm worried about you. I know you end up on these downward

spirals. Izzy and I were on to you years ago, and we . . . we just feel so powerless . . . we want to know what we can do to help you."

Dorian brightened briefly. "Well, the show we're producing together is a good start. It's a new direction for me. You have no idea how emasculating it is to go on one audition after another—"

I held up my hand to interrupt him. "What are you talking about? Of *course* I know how demoralizing it is."

"But not *emasculating*," Dorian corrected. "You couldn't know *that*. It's okay when you're a kid or even when you're in your twenties. But guys in their thirties—and *older*? Imagine this as what you do for a living."

"It is what I do, Dorian."

"But not for a *living*. You make a living by being a secretary." My face flushed scarlet. He'd hit my Achilles' heel. Dorian reached across the table and gently touched my hand. "I'm sorry, Alice. I didn't mean it that way. Okay?" I nodded. "Think about how men are supposed to be breadwinners, to be self-sustaining. Now imagine that you're a guy, socialized to be in control all the time; and every day you walk into a situation where there's a line of other guys all competing for the same role, and you know that only one of you is going to get it, and it's your job to prove, time after time, to those people behind the table or sitting in the dark, empty theater that *you're* the worthy one. It's like walking into a chain saw with your dick out!" Dorian threw up his hands, exasperated. "It's not a career for *grown-ups*!" He downed the rest of his gin and tonic.

"So why do we do it?" I asked him softly. "Or, more to the point, why *you* do it?"

Dorian ran his hand across his brow. "Because it's the only

thing I know how to do. The only thing I think I'm any good at." I gave him a little disbelieving smile. "And it's the only thing I really love to do," he acknowledged. He ordered another drink. "Don't worry," he said reassuringly, "I'll be all right. Just a little spate of depression!" he added with lunatic cheeriness, plastering a huge grin on his face.

After four gin and tonics, he was still asserting the same thing. I walked him to his door, agonizing over whether I'd just been a better enabler than a friend.

Although the arrangements were going full tilt and I was up to my ass in Regina's wedding preparations, I had long ceased being interested in the lack of an invitation to the Big Event. We had one week to go. Ms. Hunt turned me into a tour guide, requesting that I recommend cultural and nightlife activities for Regina's seven bridesmaids, who were all in town from various far-flung states in the Union. "You're an actress," Ms. Hunt said to me, acknowledging it for perhaps the first time in my nine months of employment for her. "Pick some good plays and musicals for them to see." It should be noted that all of these "cruise director" duties came under the heading of "Alice, would you do me a favor . . . ?" At least she hadn't asked me to charge anything to my credit card.

Saturday night was drawing ever nearer. It was Thursday afternoon. Ms. Hunt approached my desk, smiling sweetly. I'd never seen her smile before; she was scaring me. "Alice, I wonder if you . . ."

Could do you a favor.

"What?" I asked her.

"Things will be so hectic on Saturday morning and as the mother of the bride, of course I want to spend as much time as I can with my daughter during the big day . . . so would you

come to the Pierre at around ten A.M. and stay in the ballroom to take delivery of the favors and make sure that the floral arrangements are set up correctly and go over what Regina would like the chamber orchestra to play? I know ten is rather early, but I want someone to be on the premises all day in case there's any last-minute confusion or a vendor shows up early and has nowhere to put things. Regina and I will get to the hotel by four o'clock at the latest. We start at six, as you're aware from ordering and sending out all the invitations, and—"

"No."

Ms. Hunt's frozen smile cracked like a cheap windshield. "No?" She appeared completely baffled. "Wh-what do you mean, Alice?"

"I mean no."

"But you've known for months that this Saturday was Regina's wedding."

"Yes, I did. And when I wasn't invited to it several weeks ago, I made other plans."

My boss looked extremely peeved. "Alice, you know it would have been completely inappropriate for Regina to have invited you to her wedding. She barely knows you. You're my employee. I hope you're not in a snit because you didn't receive an invitation," she said testily.

Yet you want me to give up the entire day to babysit the ballroom.

"I am not upset over that," I assured her. "But I am not able to help you this weekend. I *have* other plans for Saturday."

My boss looked appalled. "But you can bill it on your time sheet, of course. What other plans could you possibly have that would—"

"Family obligations," I replied, interrupting her. Enough already. "This isn't about the money," I said. "It's my grand-

mother's birthday on Saturday. She's in her nineties and we're having a celebration." Gram hated celebrating her birthday, especially in recent years when people would come over to the house simply to marvel at how she had managed to stay alive so long. "You might as well stick me behind glass at the Natural History Museum," she would carp. But this year I decided it would be just the two of us. I would take her wherever she wanted to go.

I figured she'd pick a fancy restaurant. She'd opted for Atlantic City. I had never been down there (I'm not the gambling type), and Gram hadn't seen the Boardwalk since she was the third runner-up in an amateur beauty pageant in 1928. "I would have won it hands-down," she said proudly, "but when they found out I was a showgirl and not a shopgirl, they wanted to disqualify me, so we hit on a compromise."

Ms. Hunt narrowed her eyes and looked at me. "Well, can you give me a few hours of your time on Saturday, Alice?"

"No," I replied. "I'll be out of town all weekend."

Seething, she stalked into her office.

"Score one for the Al-ster," Terry said, when I passed her reception desk on the way to the ladies' room a little while later. I wasn't sure what she meant. "Everyone knows everything around here," she continued, giving me a sly little look, "including about you and . . ."

I felt all the blood rush to my face, then drain away. "Are you talking about who I think you're talking about?"

Terry lowered her voice to a whisper. "We were wondering when Tony was going to spring it on you that he was married, and none of us wanted to be the one to tell you—since it was none of our business. We figured you were a big girl and could take care of yourself. Besides, we were all also a lit-

tle jealous that you were getting some nookie from him—I mean, who would turn that *down*? You’d have to be dead to think the man wasn’t an Adonis. I heard about the way you dealt with him, too. Way to go.”

“Thanks, but I felt like I was played for a fool.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, for what it’s worth, no one here at”—she turned around and glanced at the sign above her head—“ARMPIT,” she snickered, “thinks of you that way. So, go have a blast with your grandmother this weekend.” Terry opened her purse and handed me a five-dollar bill. “And put this on number twenty-eight for me when you pass a roulette table. If the number hits, I’ll give you twenty percent!”

Chapter 13



Our fellow travelers on the bus down to Atlantic City were like something out of a movie; they made great character studies. A pair of sisters—nuns, not siblings—told Gram and me that they made the trip every Saturday. “But what about church tomorrow morning?” Gram asked them.

Sister Michael Marie laughed at us as though it were the funniest joke she’d ever heard. “You think they don’t conduct mass in New Jersey?” she said. Then she went on to tell Gram a joke about a priest, a swami, and a rabbi in a rowboat.

About two and a half hours into the ride, we decided to browse through the brochures I had picked up from a local travel agency and downloaded off the Internet. “Oh, look, Gram”—I started to giggle—“this hotel says that all the wall treatments and room furnishings have been ‘hand selected.’ I wonder what that’s supposed to mean. As opposed to *what*? Or *who*?”

“Robots,” Gram hypothesized.

We hadn’t booked a hotel for Saturday night because Gram couldn’t make up her mind. I didn’t think we’d run into trouble making a spur-of-the-moment reservation, since

my Internet research pulled up a lot of vacancies at any number of the “swanky establishments” that had piqued Gram’s curiosity.

“I want to see where Donald Trump put all his money,” she said with finality, when we arrived at our destination.

“I think he’s got about three casinos down here,” I said. “Pick one.”

She smiled with pure childlike guile. “Maybe we could try all three?”

I gave her a parental look. “Let’s see how you feel after one.”

So here we were on the real-life Monopoly board. And since Gram was fascinated by The Donald’s hotels, we made the Taj Mahal our first port of call. I suppose it’s a matter of taste, but I wouldn’t exactly characterize this overdecorated monstrosity that bore little resemblance to the real Seventh Wonder of the World as “a teardrop on the cheek of time.” More like a pastie on the tit of gluttony. Clearly, the casino’s credo was, “More is more.”

“It’s a bit . . . rococo, don’t you think?” Gram said, gazing in awe at the wall-to-wall glitz.

I stuck out my tongue.

“But it fits, somehow,” she added, noting my evident distaste. “Well, come on, sweetheart, you wouldn’t expect *asceticism* from a pleasure palace, now, would you?”

I shrugged in agreement. “Shall we hit the slots?”

“No, let’s go exploring first,” Gram said decisively. She was the birthday girl, so off we went. Gram spied a huge poster advertising the weekend’s entertainment. “Oh, look, Alice, George Carlin is here tonight! I love his potty mouth.” She leaned over and whispered in my ear. “You know he was very subversive a while back. That reminds me . . . whatever happened to Lenny Bruce?”

"He died, Gram. Decades ago."

She gave me a withering look. "I *know* that. I meant whatever happened to comedians with *teeth*—with a little substance?" I'd forgotten how much she enjoyed political satire. So we picked up tickets for the ten o'clock show and then went in search of some food. What better way to spend all the overtime I'd made planning Regina Hunt's wedding? I looked at my watch. She and her mother would be arriving at the Pierre Hotel soon. I reached into my purse and made sure I had switched off my cell phone.

We stuffed our faces at one of the establishment's numerous buffets and then toured the different gaming rooms. I'd never been inside a casino before and hadn't known what to expect. I guess I thought it would look like something out of a James Bond movie, with bejeweled and glamorous women spilling out of their slinky gowns, their gloved arms slipped through those of elegant, handsome men in white dinner jackets.

Not in New Jersey. This casino was more Adam Sandler than 007: wall-to-wall tables crammed with people in sportswear more appropriate for a barbecue. No windows. Unless you wore a watch there was no way to tell the time of day. It was permanently time to gamble.

After casing the joint, Gram chose a room she liked and practically dragged me by the hand over to one of the blackjack tables. "Gram, do you know how to play this game?" I said in her ear, trying not to move my lips. "Maybe we'd better watch them for a while and get the hang of it."

She pulled me as far away from the table as she could manage. "Alice," she began, in the same tone of voice I had just used, "your Grandpa Danny was good at two things. No, three. Of course, he was a brilliant dancer, too. Grandpa

Danny knew how to drink and he knew how to gamble. In fact, he tried to teach me how to count cards. Let's see if I can remember any of it."

Oh, God. This was not a good idea. Gram sometimes didn't remember what she'd eaten for breakfast. I negotiated a compromise. She would agree to sit tight and watch through the end of this shoe, and then we'd play a few hands, with no attempt on her part to count cards, and see how things went.

Turns out Gram knew what she was doing after all. "Yes!" she exclaimed, as delighted as a nine-year-old given the run of FAO Schwarz. "It's just like riding a bicycle!" She even taught her math-challenged granddaughter a thing or two. After a couple of hours we were up about a hundred and thirty dollars, and Gram suggested we move on.

We stopped in front of the roulette tables. "Which one looks lucky to you?" I asked Gram. "ARMPIT's receptionist gave me five dollars to put on number twenty-eight."

She selected one and I placed Terry's bet. When the croupier spun the wheel, I finally grasped the allure of gambling. I felt a sudden rush of exhilaration and cheered for number twenty-eight like a lunatic—as if it could possibly affect the outcome. I found that I was holding my breath as the spinning wheel slowed, discovering that I loved the sound of the little ball careening all over the polished trough.

Aaaaaannnnnd . . . then it finally stopped.

And the ball settled into . . .

"Number twenty-eight!" the croupier called.

I began to jump up and down. Gram caught the fever and we hugged one another. Ahhh, the thrill of winning, even if we were going to pocket only twenty percent of the take—

which was fifty dollars. We were on top of the world. I reached for my cell phone and dialed Terry.

"We woouooooonnnnn!" I yelled into the phone when she answered her line.

"What? Who is this?"

"Terry, it's Alice." My heart was thumping.

"Oh, Alice. Sorry, I can't hear a thing."

I saw a black-suited bruiser approaching us.

"Ter? I just called to tell you that you won! We *won*," I said quickly, my eye on the bouncer-type. "I placed your bet and twenty-eight hit for two hundred and fifty bucks. So I'm keeping fifty and buying Gram a great bottle of champagne for her birthday. Uh-oh, gotta run!"

"Enjoy it in good health!" I heard Terry say excitedly just before I ended the call.

The big guy came over to us. Gram looked up at him. "Can we help you, young man?" she asked him angelically. The security guy gave her one look, decided it wasn't worth the trouble to scold us, shook his head, and moved on. "Whew, that was close!" Gram giggled. I hadn't seen her this happy in years.

"I guess we should go try something else. Maybe another room" I suggested.

"Slots," Gram replied. These two rolls of quarters are boring a hole in my purse." We went off in search of the slot machines, where we each poured the twenty dollars' worth of quarters the junket bus had given us on our arrival. After a half hour, I came away with seventeen dollars and Gram had won twenty-three, so we considered ourselves winners.

Gram didn't even look tired, but I was concerned that she'd been going full throttle for hours. "I don't know about

you, but I'm exhausted," I said. "What do you say we get a room, so we can lie down for a while? I know I could use a shower before we head back into the fray. I'll call room service and order that champagne with our share of Terry's bet." She concurred, and off we went to the hotel's front desk, where we received a one-night package that included a bunch of discount coupons, so we ended up getting a partial charge-back on the Carlin tickets. We also got another twenty dollars in quarters apiece, courtesy of the house. Gram was in paradise.

"You know you get a helicopter tour of Atlantic City with this package," the desk clerk said, pointing to the brochure she was about to hand us.

I turned to my grandmother. "Gram?"

"No, thank you," she told the clerk emphatically. "Those things always crash." The young woman looked at me, mortified that any other guests in the immediate vicinity might have heard her.

I shrugged. "Just one person's opinion," I said, on the verge of laughter. Oh, how I loved my outspoken granny.

Good thing our room was tastefully furnished. Given the décor in the public areas, I had visions of Versailles, which isn't my style. I insisted that Gram treat herself to a bubble bath, while I called downstairs for the champagne and a snack. Then I booked a massage for each of us for tomorrow.

"Alice, did you know that this place has a nightclub?" Gram called to me from the tub. "That's where we're going after the Carlin show."

"We are?"

"Absolutely. It's been years since I danced my fanny off. And maybe we'll both meet some nice men."

"I hope I can stay awake long enough to go dancing," I yelled in to her.

"Don't fink out on me. I'm almost three times your age and I'm raring to go!"

And dance we did. And there Gram was, boogying with the best of them, requiring little encouragement to demonstrate her high kicks, no matter what the beat. I was terrified that in the dark and crowded disco, with the blinking strobes and drinks spilling onto the floor, she might slip and break her hip. Mercifully, my fears were unfounded.

"I think I've had enough," she said breathlessly as she returned to our little table.

I was tremendously relieved. "So, shall we hit the hay?" I rose and offered her my arm. Gram grabbed a napkin from the table and mopped her glistening brow. "Let's get you some air, you're sweating."

We headed for the exit. "No, I'm not," she insisted.

"Yes, Gram, you are." I was overtired and running a bit thin on patience.

"*Horses* sweat. Ladies glow," she grinned.

"Gram, you're *glowing*. Let's go back to the room."

"Not with these quarters still in my handbag."

"Okay, then. We'll each play one roll in the slots and save the other roll for tomorrow." Note to self: Never become a parent.

It must have been close to three A.M. when we finally went to bed. I made sure that Gram took all her medications before turning in. I'd been sleeping soundly for perhaps a little more than an hour when a strange noise awakened me. It sounded like a sorrowful whimper.

Ghosts? It was my first semiconscious thought, no matter how ludicrous it seemed later on. I sat up in bed, my body

paralyzed with terror. I've always feared surprising an intruder because my chest seizes up and I want to scream but nothing comes out of my mouth. It's one of my recurring nightmares.

I looked over at Gram's bed. The covers were rumpled and arranged haphazardly; the bedspread had slid to the floor, where it lay in an amorphous lump of red quilted damask. The bed was empty.

Shit. Where was she?

She couldn't have gone out of the room and be somewhere wandering through the maze of Taj Mahal corridors, could she? Similar incidents had happened at home a handful of times over the past couple of years. Concerned neighbors would scare the hell out of me by ringing our bell at odd hours. When I came to the door, there they stood with Gram in tow—slightly disoriented and often clothed only in her bathrobe and mules—as though they had found a stray. I was grateful that they never seemed to make judgments, referred to these nocturnal adventures other than to ask solicitously the next time we met if my grandmother was feeling okay.

I tiptoed toward the front door, my own heartbeat echoing in my ears, and noticed light emanating from the bathroom. With visions of every bad slasher movie invading my brain, I pushed open the door in what felt like slow motion.

She was sitting in the empty bathtub. Naked. Hugging her knees to her chest. Whimpering like a whipped puppy.

"Gram?" I whispered.

She looked without seeing, her eyes focusing on me without appearing to recognize who I was. "They . . . were coming after . . . me," she cried softly.

My heart was breaking. I knelt by the edge of the tub.

"Who were? Who were coming after you?"

"The purple men."

I shut my eyes. Maybe if I kept them closed long enough I could stave off my tears.

"Get Alice," Gram directed me. "*She'll* know what to do."

"I *am* Alice. It's me, Gram."

"Alice is my granddaughter. She's very responsible. She handles everything. *You're* not Alice," she added, evidently amused at my error.

Debate was clearly useless. Although I did debate with *myself* whether or not to ring for the house doctor. Surely there must be staff on call at a place like this.

Gram rested her forearm on the edge of the tub and laid her cheek against it. "It was hard," she said, her voice small and sleepy, "but I scared them away." She looked up at me, her expression registering supreme pluck. "It really takes it out of you, though."

I extended my arms. "Let's get you out of here and put you to bed." I will never know where the strength to lift her came from. It was all a bit of a blur. But I got Gram back into bed and before I finished tucking her in, she'd fallen asleep, curled up on her side like a little girl. Then I paged through the leather-bound loose-leaf of hotel and casino information and located the extension for the house physician. I sat across from her on my bed, receiver in one hand, the other poised to dial, and watched her sleep. Her chest rose and fell with regular breaths. I didn't phone the doctor, but sat sentinel for the remainder of the night.

"Alice, you look terrible," Gram exclaimed when, on waking at around ten A.M., cheerful and rested, she took one look at my sallow complexion and sunken eyes.

"I . . . was up . . . most of the night," I said, giving her an opportunity to allude to her bathtub escapade.

She giggled. "We were kind of wild women, weren't we?" She ran a hand through her matted coiffure. "I haven't danced that much in decades!"

Gram didn't appear to remember a thing about what had transpired after we returned to our room. Obviously, I was worried about her and thought it might be a good idea to take an earlier bus back to New York. "Maybe we should cancel those massages," I suggested. "Just get some breakfast and check out."

She reacted with mock huffiness. "As far as I'm concerned it's still my birthday until we set foot in our own apartment again. Would you deny me that massage I was looking forward to? Besides, these bones could use it after all that bumping and grinding last night." Her tone softened. "Is it the money, Alice? I know it was a birthday treat, but this weekend shouldn't cost you a fortune. *I'll* pay for the massages."

She'd misunderstood my hesitation. Another clue, to me, that she had no recollection of any impending invasion by purple men.

I think I must have fallen asleep on the massage table, unsurprising, given that I hadn't slept all night. I heard a phone ring in one of my dreams, but in the dream no one went to answer it, so it kept on ringing. I woke when the dream-me remarked, very put-out and annoyed, "Is anyone going to *get* that?" Funny thing is, the phone kept ringing.

"Is that yours?" the masseuse asked me, kneading a particularly nasty knot out of my right scapula. She didn't sound pleased. "Didn't you see the sign?"

I'd wandered into the hotel spa bleary-eyed. Read? "What sign? Ouwwoooohh." There went the knot. I was glad to part with it; it had overstayed its welcome by several weeks, taking up seemingly permanent residence in my shoulder blade.

"The sign that says turn off all cell phones." The masseuse handed me my purse.

From my prostrate position on the massage table, I pulled the phone from my bag and answered it. "Hello?"

"Alice, I'm so glad I found you!"

Ms. Hunt. I thought I had deliberately made sure the phone was off yesterday, just to prevent such an intrusion. Oh, wait . . . I'd phoned Terry to tell her about her winning bet. I must have ended the call and not turned off the phone when I saw the casino's muscleman headed our way.

"Alice, I left several messages for you at home this morning and when you didn't return my calls, I thought I would try this number."

"This isn't a good time, Ms. Hunt," I groaned into the phone. "Owwwwwwoh. Whoa!"

"Alice? You sound like you're in pain."

The masseuse had recommenced her sweet torture. "I am."

"Well, we need to talk about something very important. Would you do me a favor . . ."

Another favor. Will wonders never cease?

". . . and come in to work early tomorrow. I'll meet you there at eight-thirty sharp. *Sharp*. Will you be there?"

I sighed into the phone. "Yes. I'll be there."

"Your boss is a very selfish woman," Gram observed from the table to my right, as another masseuse worked on her back. "And I don't think she's a very happy one."

We arrived home without further incident. Gram had returned to full lucidity and seemed to give all indication of remaining that way, but damn, she'd given me a scare.

The answering machine was blinking like crazy. Ms. Hunt had filled *every* message unit with variations on her frantic theme of needing to speak with me right away. Our machine robotically tells us the time and date of each call. Claire Hunt's had begun at seven-thirty in the morning. With no more wedding to plan, she'd found something else to occupy her every waking obsessive moment.

When it became apparent to her that I must not have been around to pick up the phone, she'd launched into numerous consecutive permutations of the request she'd made when she caught me on the cell: Be at work bright and early at eight-thirty Monday morning.

Whatever was so "very important" could wait another twelve hours. I resolved not to dwell on it. I fixed Gram a cup of tea and kept her company while she sipped it thoughtfully. "I can't remember if I told you this yesterday," I said to her. "It was 'very important.' "

She laughed. "Was it 'happy birthday,' by any chance?"

I furrowed my brow. "I didn't say that? *That*, too, then. What I meant was, 'I hope you enjoyed your celebration and I love you.' "

"You do, huh?" She gave my arm a loving squeeze accompanied by a loving-squeeze vocal effect that I couldn't spell if I tried. "You think you've got a *monopoly* on that, young lady?"

Chapter 14



ARMPIT was dark when I entered the premises at exactly eight-thirty the following morning. Terry wasn't due in for another hour, so the reception area was unlit, save for a ghostly light seeping in from the hallway by the elevator bank. The office was quiet and still, almost eerily so. Ms. Hunt was waiting for me by my desk, somewhere between leaning and perched on its rounded edge. She checked her watch as I approached and gave me a grim but satisfied look.

"Alice, do you know the difference between dahlias and daylilies?"

I hadn't prepared for a horticultural quiz. I searched for an answer that my boss might find acceptable. Before I could respond, Ms. Hunt said, "In the language of flowers, dahlias represent eloquence and dignity—except for a few years during the late nineteenth century when, for some reason, they denoted instability—but that's neither here nor there. Daylilies, on the other hand symbolize coquetry, a characterization which is singularly inappropriate for a bride on her wedding day."

What is she talking about?

"Was this some form of jealous acting-out on your part, Alice? Some form of revenge?"

"Ms. Hunt, I don't understand where you're going with this."

"Daylilies. The entire grand ballroom at the Pierre was lavishly decorated with daylilies on Saturday night. How many times did we specifically discuss that there were to be dahlias in the centerpieces, dahlias in Regina's bouquet? They're her favorite flower; I'm quite aware that you knew that. I'm sure the room was buzzing with shock when our guests saw daylilies everywhere."

I'm sure they never noticed. But that wasn't the point. "I'm positive that we ordered dahlias, Ms. Hunt. Daylilies don't even last. I remember several conversations with Melania San Miguel herself over the specific arrangements." Melania San Miguel was one of New York City's preeminent florists, known for her stunning and unusual creations, particularly for special events like weddings. However, Ms. San Miguel had a rather pronounced accent; perhaps, to her, no matter how many times I said the word "dahlias" and she repeated it, it may have sounded to her ear like "daylilies."

I retrieved the file copy of the contract from the desk drawer devoted to Regina Hunt's wedding plans. No specific blooms were referred to; only the style names of the arrangements were mentioned, creations that could be crafted with several different flowers, depending on the client's preference.

"The error you made regarding the floral arrangements was egregious, Alice, but I could have overlooked it, had the chamber ensemble performed the pieces Regina had specifically requested. She detests the Pachelbel Canon; it makes her break out in hives, which is most unattractive for a bride in her wedding gown."

"We went over the list of music as well," I told Ms. Hunt. "I can't be held responsible if the orchestra for whatever reason decided to play something else. Maybe they misunderstood when I kept mentioning the Canon, meaning they should leave it *out* of their repertoire. Maybe they thought it was her *favorite* piece because I kept referring to it."

"All of this could have been avoided if you had come to the hotel on Saturday morning as I requested you to. You could have gone over every one of the last-minute instructions in detail." Ms. Hunt sighed dramatically and shook her head. "Alice, you haven't been putting yourself into your work lately. Not for weeks, in fact. I think you may be jealous that my daughter found a man to marry while your own relationships have been less than successful, but that's no excuse for shirking your job responsibilities."

Job responsibilities? Traveling out to Jersey after work to be treated like a domestic? Expected to give up my grandmother's birthday celebration to play wedding planner? And what's this gratuitous snipe about my love life?

"You have used the Association of Research Marketing and Promotion Industrial Trends as your own personal playground. I'm aware, for example, that you created a cookbook on my computer," she said, pointing to the monitor on my desktop, "while you were on the clock."

I was seething. "Excuse me, but the very first week you hired me, you quite specifically told me to 'look busy' in order to make you look industrious in the eyes of your colleagues. I work efficiently enough to complete the few letters you give me to type in far less than one hour, let alone *eight*. So how was I expected to fill my workday? Like a little accomplice, I kept your *cover* for you!"

She ignored me the way she had done to Regina on that sojourn to Jersey. "Hand me your keys, Alice. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go."

I was stunned, though somehow not surprised. No wonder Ms. Hunt had called this meeting so early. She didn't want any of our co-workers to be there. She knew their fondness for me was about equal to their distaste for her.

"I'm very disappointed in your performance, particularly since you came to me so highly recommended by your friend. I'd like you to leave right away," she told me, "before business hours officially begin. I am not about to have you claim today on your time sheet."

I could feel my blood bubble up inside me, hot, spoiling for a fight. "I believe that it's customary to give two weeks' notice before terminating employment," I said, trying to mask my emotion. "I am, after all, on the company's payroll, which makes me an official employee."

"Even if notice were the case, and we signed no such agreement, Alice, there are extenuating circumstances here. This past week in particular, you behaved with extreme recalcitrance and displayed a cavalier attitude toward your job, evidence enough that you no longer wished to continue working for me."

I fished in my purse for the office keys, which I kept tightly in my hand. "I'm going to clear out my desk now," I said evenly, sitting down. "When I have finished, I will take my things, hand you my keys, and leave the building."

"I want you to leave *now*," she countered firmly. "Your personal effects can be sent on to you by messenger."

"An expense that you would no doubt charge off against my hours," I snapped. "By law, I am entitled to remove my own property from the premises; you're not to touch it."

"Now, Alice." C. Hunt in all her blazing fury.

You want to play hardball, bitch?

"Fine. I'll just call my attorney and have him speak with you directly."

You don't have an attorney, Alice.

Whoops. Good point.

But you know one . . . if you want to make the call.

Well, they say blood is thicker than—

Call him, kiddo. You know how much he enjoys a good fight.

I looked at my watch. Eight forty-five. It would ruin my bluff if he weren't yet in his office. Glaring a challenge at Ms. Hunt, I picked up the phone. I waited for it to connect. One ring. Two. Then three.

Where the hell are you when I need you?

"Balzer and Price law office, how may I direct your call?"

I employed my most businesslike tone of voice. "Hello, Louise. Would you please tell Mr. Balzer that Alice Finnegan is on the line for him? It's extremely important."

"Hi, Alice, how are you? We haven't heard from you in ages. What have you been up to these days?"

It was not the time to exchange pleasantries with the sweetly dim Louise. I could hear my uncle's voice through the phone line barking orders at her and, for the first time in my life, welcomed it as a relief. "Who's on the phone?" he asked Louise gruffly.

"Alice Finnegan, sir. She said it's important."

My uncle must have grabbed the receiver out of her hand. "Alice?" He sounded like General Patton, but that's essentially the persona I needed him to play.

"Mr. Balzer, I've just been terminated by my boss and not only did she not give me notice, but she's not permitting me to leave the premises with my own personal effects."

"Did she fire you for cause?" he asked me.

"*She* thinks so," I said into the phone.

"Then she's probably within her rights to terminate you at will. I wouldn't contest that. But about your personal property, that she can't do. Is she there? Put her on the line."

I knew he'd require no special urging. "One moment," I said to him, and handed Ms. Hunt the receiver. "My attorney would like to speak with you," I said, wishing there was an additional extension so I could listen in. There was no need for that, as it turned out. Uncle Erwin's voice penetrated the phone line, and I could overhear most of his diatribe loud and clear. He was in full rant mode, quoting chapter and verse, statute and subsection of a half dozen laws governing labor and employment. Or maybe he wasn't. Maybe *he* was bluffing, banking on Ms. Hunt's supposed ignorance of the intricacies of the legal process. In any event, the desired result was achieved. My uncle had thoroughly unnerved her.

She handed me the phone. "Thank you very much, Mr. Balzer," I said.

"You owe me one, Alice," he snarled.

I ended the call and hung up the phone. While Ms. Hunt was on the line with my uncle, people had begun to arrive for the start of their workday. They tried to act as though they were minding their own business, but I'm sure they figured out what was going on. I wondered what Tony DiCarlo would think when he came in and found me gone for good. Would he feel regret or relief?

"Just . . . just take your things and go," Ms. Hunt said. I had heard Uncle Erwin threaten to sue her for every last dime she'd ever made in her life. "I'll make sure that your final paycheck is mailed to you by the end of the week."

I took my time going through my desk, filling a big plastic shopping bag with my belongings. Then I stood, methodically pushed the chair close to the desk, and handed Ms. Hunt the keys. Any attempt at cordiality would have been ludicrous, so I walked past her, head held as high as I could manage.

Well, I no longer work under the sign of ARMPIT, I thought, as I rode downstairs in the elevator.

Now what?

As long as I was in midtown with a whole day—well, the rest of my life—in front of me, I paid an unscheduled visit to Turbo Temps and asked to meet with Tina. She came out to greet me where I sat waiting for her in the reception area. Little had changed at the employment agency. The enormous floral displays, with no thought given to the Victorian connotations of their individual components, still dominated the room. The giant overhead TV screens were showing the Costner movie that Dorian, Izzy, and I had worked on months ago.

Tina looked a bit uncomfortable. “Come back to my office,” she said, and motioned for me to follow her.

I took a seat. “Hi, again,” I said cheerfully. “I’m back and looking for another situation.”

Tina gave me an awkward look. “I need to talk to Wally and Stacie,” she said, then buzzed an extension. “Is he there?” she asked into the phone. Receiving a response, she nodded. “I see. Wally’s at the track,” she told me, hanging up the phone. She rang another extension. “Stacie, it’s T. Can you pop by for a sec? I’ve got Alice Finnegan here.”

Tina replaced the receiver in its cradle and sat at her desk, looking at me uncomfortably. “Stacie’s coming,” was all she said.

A few moments later, Stacie appeared, an attractive forty-ish brunette with a baby on her hip. "Hi, Alice, I'm Stacie," she said, extending her hand. "And this is Simone," she added, indicating her totally adorable daughter. "Alice, I'll come to the point," Stacie continued, seating herself in the chair beside me and placing Simone on her lap. She and Tina exchanged glances. "We're not going to be able to place you anymore."

It felt like a blow to the gut. "Why?" I asked, blindsided by her remark.

Tina gave Stacie a quick nod, as though it were the responsibility of the agency's co-owner to play bad cop. "I understand there were some . . . problems . . . with your employment at Newter & Spade," Stacie began, "and that you became aware of and then disseminated some classified and confidential information, which caused the firm some embarrassment. I'm sure you've got your version of events, and things may not have transpired exactly as Ramona Marlboro reported them to me; however, it puts Turbo Temps in an awkward position. Newter & Spade is our client and we can't afford to, well, piss them off. We have a number of other clients at that level and have to be very careful about whom we send them, since, I'm sure you'd agree, every applicant we submit is a reflection on our agency." Stacie didn't give me the chance to respond. "I hate to put it this way, but you've got a reputation as a troublemaker, Alice. And as a whistle-blower." Stacie rose from her chair and adjusted Simone on her shoulder, as if to burp her. "So I'm sorry to have to tell you that we're unable to recommend you anymore."

I began to tear up. "That's not very fair. I mean—"

"As I said, you no doubt have your own characterization of

what happened at Newter & Spade, and you may be right on some levels, but . . . that's just the way it is. I'm sorry," she added softly, "but we have a business to run."

Stacie turned to leave Tina's office. I got up from my chair. "Thanks for nothing," I said morosely.

The June sunlight was blinding for midmorning. I sat on the steps of the public library, flanked by the great stone lions Patience and Fortitude, and pondered my fate. It stunk being rejected. On the other hand, I'd really been given an opportunity to make the most of the situation. Why did I need to return to temping? At least right away.

You're an actress, Alice. I know you're planning to produce your own show with your friends, but before you become the toast of the town—in the meantime—go to every audition you can find and get an acting job. Take a leaf from Dorian's book.

My cell phone rang and I answered it. Speaking of the devil . . . "Dorian! What's up?" I listened to his surprising reply. "Holy shit! You're *where*?! Oh, Jesus Christ. Well, my uncle's a lawyer, but he doesn't do criminal work. He may know someone, though. Do you want me to call him?" Dorian readily assented. "Look, I'll do what I can," I assured him. "But I have no way of reaching you, do I? I'll come to the arraignment. If I can get hold of someone for you before then, he or she will be there, too. If not, they're supposed to appoint someone from Legal Aid to represent you. Hang tight, Dorian."

I hung up the phone. For the second time in a single morning, I found myself asking for a legal favor from Uncle Earwax. I got him on the line and explained the situation as best as I could understand it from what Dorian had told me. "Uncle Erwin, a good friend of mine needs a criminal

lawyer . . . no, I don't associate with criminals on a regular basis! I'm sure it's probably a mistake . . . He's an actor . . . you know, my friend Dorian Mueller . . . He got arrested for loitering on a film set where he wasn't employed and stealing food . . . He spent the night at Rikers Island and then they transferred him to the Tombs because the arraignment is set for this afternoon at 100 Centre Street . . . so do you know anyone who does criminal work? . . . No . . . I'm sure he doesn't have any money . . . Yeah, I *know*, he's an *actor* . . . so of *course* he doesn't have a pot to piss in . . . ”

“That's twice you'll owe me,” my uncle growled. “I'll see what I can do. Let me get right on it. I'll meet you at the Tombs in an hour.”

“I really appreciate it,” I started to say, but he'd already disconnected the call.

I took the subway down to the courthouse district and sought out Dorian. It was surreal seeing him behind bars. “Help is on the way—I hope,” I told him.

“Well, I can't say that I haven't met some interesting people,” he said with forced cheer. “So I told myself they were character studies. And I'm getting a lot of reading done!” He held up a book titled *Twenty-six Steps to Improving Your Vocabulary*. “I had it in my pocket yesterday, so I figured I'd put my hard time to good use. I've gotten all the way through the A-t's. I just passed *atrophy*. But I knew that one already. So what's up with you?”

I told him about my double whammy morning, getting fired from ARMPIT followed by the people at Turbo Temps declaring me a pariah. “So I think it's really true about my bad luck working for insane, short-haired women with small boobs and desiccated souls.”

"From everything you've ever told me about Claire Hunt and Ramona Marlboro, it would seem that they both suffer from the same illness," Dorian said.

"*Illness?*" I gave Dorian a confused look.

He nodded emphatically. "Illness. They've got *anhedonia*."

"An-*what?*"

Dorian tapped his vocabulary volume. "Anhedonia. I've got the new words memorized—that was the point of the exercise. Anhedonia means 'without pleasure.' "

"Hm!" I looked at him, impressed. "That certainly would seem to be the case, wouldn't it? Gee, I wonder if it's terminal or if there's any hope for the two of them. Maybe if they got laid, it would act as an antidote to anhedonia." I was trying to keep things light, sensing that Dorian needed as much cheering up as possible.

"Speaking of getting laid," he said, "they're not going to toss me back in here, are they?" He looked genuinely terrified. "This isn't how I hoped to snag a boyfriend," he added, injecting a touch of gallows humor.

The guard came over and told Dorian his attorneys had arrived. I looked up and saw Uncle Erwin and another man, roughly about the same age, but dressed in a much nattier fashion, with a gleaming pinky ring that reflected a captured ray of light into Dorian's face.

"This is Sy Davidoff. He's a pit bull in the courtroom," my uncle said, presenting his colleague, whom I then introduced to Dorian. Uncle Erwin drew me aside to better allow Mr. Davidoff to consult with his new client. "I called in a marker on this one, Alice," he told me, reducing his voice to a low rumble. "Literally. He was into me for about three grand after our last poker night, so I agreed to call it even if he came down here this afternoon."

For the first time in my life, I gave my uncle a hug.

"I know Dorian is a good friend of yours, and he's probably an essentially decent guy, although that's never been Sy's criterion for taking on a client—"

"Will he get Dorian off?" I asked, interrupting.

"Sy'll take care of it; don't worry. One of those putzes from Legal Aid would probably fuck up something this simple, so I didn't trust the system to work for your friend. Look, what's his big transgression—allegedly? That he stole some food? This isn't Communist Russia and it isn't *Les Misérables*." He clapped a broad hand on my shoulder. "So, you had a lousy time working for that lunatic woman in the marketing business."

I shook him off. "Was working for." I came clean, even though admitting failure to Uncle Earwax was the last thing on my to-do list for the day.

"So take tomorrow off to relax and I'll see you in my office on Wednesday," he declared, as though it were the conclusion of a done deal. When I started to reply, he raised his hand to interrupt me. "My idiot secretary just walked out on me without notice. On Friday afternoon. Claimed I gave her a nervous breakdown or something. If she hadn't been on the phone all the time with her girlfriends and listening to some noisy, thumping crap masquerading as music instead of the Dictaphone, she might have had time to do the work without feeling so overwhelmed. I've got a lot piled up, Alice, and you're the fastest secretary I ever had. Sure, you can be a real flake, but at least I never ended up facing charges of malpractice. I found out that this last girl had buried a whole batch of trial calendar papers because she didn't know how to do them, so a half a dozen cases got dismissed, and I've got

clients screaming foul in my ear and threatening to go to the Bar Association."

My uncle placed his hand on my shoulder and leaned toward me. His breath smelled of cream cheese and lox on an onion bagel. "If you want to, you can look at it this way, Alice. I'm calling in another marker."

Chapter 15



Uncle Earwax's office was as nuts as I had remembered it. In fact—if it was possible—things had gotten worse.

"Hey, where's Hilda?" I asked Louise when I returned to my old job and didn't see Mr. Price's secretary at her desk.

"Oh, she went home to Puerto Rico," Louise said cheerily.

"Forever?"

Louise nodded. "Her mother is sick."

"*Hilda* is the sick one!" Mr. Price boomed, entering the secretarial area. "She's like you, Alice; she's got terminally bad taste in boyfriends. Her current one started stalking her so she ran away from him."

Louise felt compelled to defend the absent Hilda. "Mr. Price, she said her mother was sick. If her boyfriend was stalking her, she wouldn't leave the country when she could just get an order of protection against him, right?"

"An order of protection is a license to kill," my uncle said, coming in to join the discussion. "Or it might as well be."

"Hilda left because she's got man trouble," Mr. Price insisted.

"But she told me her mother—"

"I don't give a rat's ass what she told *you*, Louise! You

think she's going to tell you she's a fuck-up in the romance department?!"

Humiliated, Louise colored a shade of mortified pink and lowered her eyes, as though Mr. Price had beaten her into submission. I thought she might cry.

"After ten years, she leaves me high and dry. Just like that!" Mr. Price ranted, taking just enough of a break to light up a cigar. "How am I supposed to talk to all my Hispanic clients? I don't know what the hell they're saying half the time."

"I'm sure they don't understand *you*, either," I muttered, waving a thick puff of smoke away from my face, but my uncle's law partner, who wore two hearing aids, missed my remark.

"Well, we've got to replace her or I can't get my work out."

"Alice can help you," Uncle Earwax volunteered, "when she's through with the three Dictaphone tapes *my* lunatic secretary left piled up when she walked out the door."

"Why don't you try one of the temp agencies?" Louise suggested helpfully. "Alice got a job through one of them a while back. Maybe she can call and see if they'll send someone down."

Mr. Price looked at me expectantly. I hesitated before speaking. "I don't think *my* phoning that agency is such a great idea."

"They don't want to deal with her," my uncle chimed in. "She's a whistle-blower."

In what seemed like a classic comedic delayed reaction, we watched the light dawn in Louise's brain as she assembled, then processed this new information. "Oh, like that Russell Crowe movie," she said. "He was wonderful in that, wasn't he?" The two men stared at her, their gazes making her uncomfortable after a moment or two of silence. "Well . . .

maybe you could call one of the other temporary employment agencies. There are some very good ones that advertise in the *Law Journal*."

"All temps are certifiable," my uncle said.

"Thanks very much!" I shot back.

"What I meant was that all the temps who don't really want to be performing artists are nuts. Never had one who wasn't," Uncle Earwax insisted. "Their brains are all screwed up. They're not high-functioning individuals. That's why they're temps. They can't get permanent employment anywhere because after a week or two on the job, they start acting like outpatients from Bellevue." He looked straight at me. "And the artists . . . well, they're *artists*!" he sneered, as though the word itself were simultaneously synonymous with "loser" and "flake."

I gave him an evil stare.

"All those actors and musicians and writers are smart and college-educated, but they don't want to work," Uncle Earwax continued, plummeting further down the Alice Finnegan respect-your-uncle meter. "No loyalty whatsoever. They're ready to walk out the minute they get a job."

"Umm. Uncle Erwin? That's *why* we temp instead of taking a permanent job somewhere. So we've got the flexibility to pursue our artistic careers, and the capability of leaving the survival job when something hits." I didn't need to educate him. My uncle knew the drill. He was just getting on my case for some reason, knowing exactly which buttons to push. Not a good idea, since it was my first day back on the job. I was now an inch away from walking out the door again, marker or no marker for Dorian's run-in with the law.

Louise came to the rescue before my relative and I came to blows. "Mr. Price? We haven't solved the problem of get-

ting you a new secretary who speaks Spanish, and you don't want to go to an agency, so what should we do?"

"*You* don't speak Spanish, do you?" Mr. Price asked Louise.

She shook her head. The poor woman had enough trouble just transcribing simple phone messages in her native English.

"Do either of you have any Latino clients with secretarial skills?" I asked the two lawyers. They exchanged shrugs.

Louise took the initiative and began to comb through the Rolodex cards on her desk. This would be a good place to note that the law offices of Balzer and Price had been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century. Neither attorney had the slightest clue how to use a computer. They came out of an era where men didn't learn to type, wore hats to work, and believed that one of the keys to winning a lawsuit was establishing a literal paper trail. The office was crammed with secondhand putty-colored filing cabinets stuffed to the gills.

Louise stuck her finger in the Rolodex, creating a gap between two cards. "Mr. Balzer, your client Mercedes Santiago has a sister who was a secretary for a while." Louise may be dumb as paint, but she's got three outstanding virtues. She's loyal, sweet as hell, and she happens to have a photographic memory. "Shall I call her for you? Mercedes, I mean?" she asked Mr. Price.

"Sure," he said, registering annoyance. "She couldn't be any more inept than someone an agency would send me and charge an arm and a leg for."

For all his bellicosity, Mr. Price could also be a pussycat. He hated to interview people because it would mean that he'd have to reject someone. So he would take a staffer on faith . . . and *then* abuse them. Go figure.

Louise placed the call. After a minute or so of discussion

with Mercedes Santiago, she covered the receiver with her hand (why she didn't press the "hold" button was a mystery to me), and spoke to Mr. Price. "Mrs. Santiago's sister is available. She left secretarial and started her own business as a storefront psychic, but it wasn't working out, so she's been looking for a job. She can start tomorrow morning."

It's your lucky day! I thought.

"Well, she couldn't be any screwier than anyone else who works here," Uncle Earwax observed, unwrapping a cheese danish. He took a large bite, and with crumbs dribbling out of his mouth offered the pastry around the room. "Anyone want some of this?" he asked earnestly. "It's delicious."

"You've got . . ." I said to him, trying to diplomatically alert him to the bits that had nestled in the corner of his mouth.

My uncle took the hint and wiped his face with his hand. "Where the hell's a napkin around this place when you need one?" He looked around the office. "Alice, this room is a mess. The first thing I want you to do is go through all these piles of loose papers that my last three secretaries willfully neglected—or buried—and see what you can take care of." He pointed to several precariously high stacks of file folders coated with a thin layer of grayish grit, their original bright colors faded from sitting on the windowsill since God was a boy.

I looked at the accumulation. "What about a bonfire?" I said cheerily. "No?"

He was not amused.

It took me most of the day to comb through all the papers. By lunchtime I had tossed a few houseflies that had gone to their eternal reward among the files, was sneezing from the dust, and was covered with soot and dirt. Uncle Earwax must

not have been too hard up for money because I found two checks he'd received for settling cases stuck in one of the old folders. One had been issued nearly a year ago. When I brought them to his attention, he threw a tantrum worthy of Mr. Price, saying he was spending a small fortune to litigate with the respective insurance companies because he believed his office had never received the checks. "Which secretary misplaced them?" I asked him.

"I think it was the one who left to become a circus performer," he answered.

"Oh, come on. You didn't really have a secretary who ran away to join the circus . . . did you?"

"Yeah, she went to clown college. But she flunked out, took the civil service exam, and immediately got a job as a court officer. Now she carries a gun." He didn't look like he was putting me on. "She had a lot of problems, that girl. She had that disease where—what do you call it when you spell all your words backwards or sideways or something?"

"Dyslexia?" I guessed. "Why would someone with dyslexia become a secretary?"

Uncle Earwax didn't respond, but dug out his wallet, opened the billfold, and handed me a hundred dollars. "It took over a year for three women to create that mess and you untangled it within the day," he said.

I looked at the bill. It wasn't too often that I saw portraits of Benjamin Franklin. "Thanks," I said, suddenly reminded of childhood birthdays when my mother's other brother, Uncle Sheldon the eccentric millionaire, would magnanimously hand me a dollar after dessert.

When I got home, I told Gram about the surprise bonus.

"So, maybe he's not such a rat bastard after all," she said.

"But I don't believe zebras can change their stripes. He's just got you hooked again, that's what I think. Don't forget, before the other day, the last time you were at your uncle's office, he called you stupid in front of his clients."

"Believe me, I haven't forgotten," I assured her. "But this time, I *swear* it's only temporary. I'm working off a sort of emotional indenture, since he went and found Dorian that crackerjack criminal lawyer and more or less covered his expenses. I didn't have another survival job prospect anyway, and this time I've promised myself that I won't let it get in the way of auditioning." I offered her the cash for household expenses but she told me to keep it. "You earned it, sweetheart," she insisted. "And knowing your mother's brother, he won't be content to behave like a mensch for more than five minutes before he reminds you of his munificence."

It was funny to hear her use Yiddish. It was spoken at home when she was a kid, but after she ran away and then married Danny Finnegan, her family had more or less written her off for dead, and as a private form of revenge she'd adopted her husband's brand of lapsed Catholicism.

Gram took my hands and looked me straight in the eye. Her expression was one of loving concern. "Alice, I hope you get to the end of that rainbow you so richly deserve."

"So do I, Gram."

"Why do you think I'm sticking around here so long? I want to be able to tell everyone on your opening night on Broadway, 'That's my granddaughter up there!'" The fierce pride in her voice didn't match the quiet sadness in her eyes.

"If you say it too loud, the usher will come down the aisle and shush you up!" I teased.

"Let her try." Gram gave my arm one of her playful squeezes. "You're going to be a big star. If it weren't for you, I would have thrown in the sponge long ago."

"Towel, Gram."

She looked around, misunderstanding me. "Where?"

I shook my head. "You throw in the *towel*. Not the sponge."

She threw up her hands and laughed. "Is that what I said? The sponge?"

"Yup." She was doing that a lot lately. Using the wrong words for things. Or she'd be in the middle of a sentence, going full tilt, and suddenly she would stop, like a horse shying at a fence, her memory stymied, and she would search for the word she wanted. I could see from her eyes that she knew the word, but it was as though one part of her brain wasn't speaking to another.

"Oh, Alice, do you know that the thing is broken?" she asked.

"What thing are you talking about, Gram?"

"You know . . . the . . . the sitting-on thing that was my mother's." She pointed at the antique settee in our living room. It was a sort of low-backed fainting couch that always made me think of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Worn, but loved, it had been reupholstered on a number of occasions, but never within my lifetime, as far as I can remember.

"No, I didn't know," I admitted. "What happened to it? Where is it broken?"

Gram showed me where there was a crack at the apex of the decorative wooden curvature that went up around the head of the settee and down along the back. "And one of the feet seems to be shot, too," Gram observed. "It's like it just decided to give up the ghost all of a sudden."

Neither one of us weighed enough to break a piece of furniture, however fragile, by sitting on it.

It's old, Alice. Like she is.

I looked at Gram. "I guess we'll have to find someone to repair it."

She smiled at me. "That's all taken care of. I'm not senile, you know. A few weeks ago I saw a bunch of business cards tucked into the edge of the bulletin board by the mailboxes, so I picked one up." She pattered into her bedroom and opened the drawer of her nightstand. It contained a total hodgepodge of junk, including paper clips, loose, unwrapped cough drops, the tiny wooden pencils people use to score bowling games, a manicure set, broken ballpoint pens, and various business cards. She withdrew one of the cards, hunted for her eyeglasses, which I pointed out to her were hanging by a chain around her neck, then read the card aloud. " 'Dan Carpenter, custom carpentry and cabinetry. One-of-a-kind designs and repairs our specialty.' I called this man. He sounded very nice on the phone. So he's coming over this evening to see what he can do for the loveseat."

I started to correct her, since technically the figure-eight shape of an old-fashioned loveseat doesn't resemble in the slightest the piece of furniture in our living room, but I figured it wasn't worth it.

"And Dorian is coming by for a lesson, so he'll be staying for dinner, of course."

I hadn't seen Dorian since Sy Davidoff had gotten the charges of trespassing and theft thrown out of court. "You may be in for a treat," I told him when he arrived for his tap-dancing tutorial. "That guy I've run into a couple of times, Dan Carpenter, is making a house call at some point this evening to try to fix Gram's settee, so . . ."

"House call." Of course. The same words Dan himself had used. No wonder I'd decided he was a pediatrician.

"What did you say he looks like?" Dorian asked, changing his shoes.

"Tall. Sandy hair. *Goyish*. Kind of a Jeff Daniels type, or like that Canadian ice dancer a while back used to look."

"Which one?" Dorian was a big fan of figure skating and followed the athletes and rankings the way major league baseball scouts follow triple-A stats.

"Underhill and Martini. I never knew which was which," I confessed. "You *know*. The guy was a real hunk and he had a fantastic butt and used to skate their programs in really tight ripped jeans and a T-shirt, like he was trumpeting his heterosexuality."

"You're thinking of Paul Martini," Dorian said, his eyes sparkling. He pretended to brandish a thick cigar, and lapsed into the characterization of an old-time vaudeville comedian like Milton Berle. "Ya know, I could use a dry martini right about now," he rasped.

"He's straight, Dorian."

"I was just kidding you. I know Paul Martini's straight. He's married with a family."

"So's Dan Carpenter. At least he's got a daughter. I wouldn't know if there's a wife in the picture. He brought the kid—Lucy—to the first Yankees game I saw with Eric Pondscum; and then I ran into him at the folk music bar that Pondscum took us to the night we double-dated with Izzy and Dominick."

Gram noisily emerged from the kitchen. She wiped her hands on a dishcloth and turned to Dorian. "Ready?" She'd been wearing her tap shoes while she fixed our dinner.

"I'll take over," I offered. "What are we having?"

"I'm roasting an oven stuffer and we have Kennedy potatoes and broiled tomatoes with bread crumbs." She went into the living room and put a CD on the stereo, then *clack-clacked* her way into the foyer. "Tea for Two" came on and she took Dorian by the hand. "He knows an entire routine now," she boasted.

Gram had a right to be proud. Actually, they both did. She'd worked a miracle with Dorian. He had elegance and grace and executed the choreography, though basic, with confidence. I was genuinely impressed. At the end of the song, I applauded. "Bravo! Brava!" I had tears in my eyes. My Gram and my best guy friend had given one another a priceless gift.

I went into the kitchen and checked on the chicken, while Gram and Dorian continued to repeat the tap number. I heard the downstairs buzzer and hit the intercom button. "Who is it?"

"It's Dan Carpenter. Furniture repair, ma'am," came the muffled reply.

I let him into the lobby, then waited near the front door for him to ring the bell. "You called me *ma'am*," I smiled, when I opened the door. He was carrying the black Gladstone bag.

"It's you," he said.

"It's me. Alice Finnegan." I extended my hand.

We shook. "Well, hello again. Yes, I remember you, Alice Finnegan. You have a very nice singing voice."

"Thanks." I motioned for him to come in. Gram stopped dancing long enough for me to introduce her and Dorian, who made me laugh by staring so longingly at Dan that he practically tripped over his own feet.

"Would you take care of things, sweetheart?" Gram asked

me without missing a beat. "She gets her talent from me, you know," she added, flirting shamelessly with Dan.

"Sorry I'm so late," Dan said apologetically, as he stepped down from the foyer into the living room. "I would have been here sooner but I got caught up at another job." He noticed our piano. "Do you play as well?"

I shook my head. "No patience for it, I'm afraid. But Gram can't imagine a home without a piano. So, here's the invalid," I joked, pointing to the settee.

Dan took a minute or two to silently appraise its condition. "She's a very . . . *cherished* piece," he sighed, "but I think we can get the old girl shipshape again. It'll take some work, though." He got down on his hands and knees and looked underneath. "It's pretty shot down here, too," he said. "Come look at it. I'll show you what's going on."

Now on all fours, I peered under the settee. "The straps are completely worn through," Dan said, hitting the deteriorating underpinnings with the beam of his flashlight. "Yup," he murmured to himself, "this baby's going to need a whole overhaul if you want her to last another few decades."

I looked over at Gram reliving her glory days, humming along with the melody to "Tea for Two" as she and Dorian went through the song again. "You have to get the steps in your body," she reminded Dorian. "They should become second nature, like breathing. Or making love. And once they do, you won't have to think about where your feet are going. They'll just take you there."

"Lasting another few decades would be nice," I said softly. "As long as her quality of life isn't diminished."

Dan knocked wood. "She's a trouper," he replied, fingering the carved frame of the settee. "Don't worry, I'll be able to restore her."

"I hope so." I told him the provenance of the piece and its importance to Gram.

"Mrs. Finnegan, I can repair your settee," Dan called to Gram over the music. "But I'm afraid I won't be able to do it all in one visit."

She kept dancing, but she looked anxious. "Well . . . then . . . how much will it cost?"

I touched his arm. "I don't give a shit *what* it costs. I'll find a way to pay for it somehow."

"I'm sure we can work something out," he told Gram.

"Don't worry, Gram," I assured her.

Dan told me he needed to dismantle the settee in order to repair it properly, including removing the carved wooden frame so that it could be carefully rejoined. A new underside had to be made and attached, and the legs removed then reinforced and rejoined. While he worked and Gram and Dorian continued their lesson, I finished fixing dinner. Soon it was nearing the end of Dorian's tap lesson and Dan was still there. I felt very awkward about the three of us sitting down to eat while Dan continued to work on the settee. I went over to Gram and whispered something in her ear.

"Mr. Carpenter, can you stay for dinner?" she asked him.

We were all pretty silent through the appetizer course. Then Dan broke the ice a bit by offering to carve the chicken, a task he performed quite deftly. As we began to eat our main course, Gram leaned forward in her chair and, addressing Dan, said, "So you're a carpenter who is a Carpenter."

He nodded. "Indeed. I am what I am."

"I like that," Gram replied. "I like a man who is exactly what he is. No chance for duplicity or betrayal."

Dan looked confused.

"Mrs. Finnegan has something she calls the 'name game,'" Dorian explained. "She'll take someone's name and analyze it and then give you a 'reading' on their character and personality based upon her interpretation of the meaning of their name."

"And a Carpenter who is a carpenter is good," Gram reiterated. "No surprises." I was stunned that she hadn't mentioned his first name. I looked over at Dorian and mouthed the word *Dan-ny*.

Dorian gave me a furtive look, brought his finger to his lips, and shook his head. *Don't*, he mouthed back.

"Well, with me, what you see is what you get," admitted Dan.

"Unlike this rat bastard my granddaughter dated a year or so ago."

"You mean Pondscum?" I said.

Gram nodded. "Pondscum."

"Wait a minute—you dated someone named Pondscum?" Dan asked incredulously.

"No, she dated a man named Witherspoon. Resilient to a point, but then he—"

"Folded like a house of cards," I said, completing the sentence.

Gram made a sour face. "Eric *Witherspoon*. But he may as well have been pond scum for the slimy way he treated Alice."

Dan asked me if that was the same Eric he'd met at the ball game and at the Troubadour East.

"Yup."

"So, you're no longer . . . ?"

"We're history," I said. "Like the bubonic plague and the Spanish Inquisition." Just then I remembered what he'd said to Eric after I sang at the Troubadour.

Fucking magical.

I blushed.

Dorian left soon after we ate dessert. He had an early call time for a film shoot. "Keep me posted," he said as we hugged goodbye.

I gave him a funny look. "On what?"

Gram was fishing in her purse for her wallet. "What do we owe you for this visit?" she asked Dan. I saw that there were only a couple of dollars in her billfold. "Can I give you a check?"

"I'll get this, Gram," I offered.

"You already did," Dan replied, packing up his tools. "Give me a call when you're able to have me come back to work on the settee. And consider this evening's house call paid for in full. Thank you both for a delicious dinner."

After he departed, I realized that I'd meant to ask after Lucy.

In the middle of the night on Sunday, I was awakened by a tugging on my arm. "Gram, is something wrong?" I asked anxiously.

"I couldn't sleep," she answered, agitatedly clasping her hands together. "So I turned on the TV for a little company. And it's full of Japanese men."

I sat up in bed and blinked the slumber from my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Come with me, Alice. You'll see. I was looking for a news program, but instead there are Japanese men inside my television set and they won't go away."

Was this like the purple men in Atlantic City? At least this time she knew I was her granddaughter. I followed her into her bedroom and looked at the TV. Then I looked at the cable box, noticing that the channel number was an unfamiliar one.

"They won't go away," Gram repeated. "I don't know how they got in there. I don't know any Japanese people."

"I think I may have figured out the problem," I told her, and searched the room for the weekly TV supplement. She'd been using it as a coaster for a china teacup. I looked up the channel number that was illuminated on the cable box's digital readout and sure enough, it was for a station that ran Japanese programming at this hour of the night. "You must have pushed the wro—different buttons than you usually do," I explained. I asked her what channel she wanted and showed her how to access it, then sat up with her for a while until she'd calmed down. By the time she seemed ready to drift off to sleep, I don't think she remembered a thing about her television's Japanese invaders.

"Hello, Alice," said the pleasant-faced woman standing in front of the locked door to the offices of Balzer and Price. Apparently I'd arrived at work before Louise and the two attorneys. "I'm surprised you're in so early after you were up so late last night with your grandmother."

"Oh, hi," I replied casually. Something suddenly registered and I gave the woman a funny look. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Rosa Santiago," the woman said. "No, we've never met. My sister Mercedes is one of your uncle's clients."

"Aha! You're going to be Mr. Price's new secretary, aren't you?" I unlocked the door and showed her inside. "Well, then, welcome to the madhouse." I realized I might have just scared her away and then Mr. Price would be gunning for my head. "I was just kidding. So how did you hear about *me*?"

"I didn't."

I showed Rosa which secretarial station would be hers and suggested that she start to acclimate herself, while I

took the messages off the answering machine and turned on the photocopier.

"Maybe *you* should get that. Louise isn't in and you haven't told me how I should answer the phones yet."

"Get what?" I asked her.

Then the phone rang.

"*That.*"

I felt like I was in the middle of a *Twilight Zone* episode. I answered the phone, took a message for Uncle Earwax, and hung up. Turning to Rosa, I said, "Okay, I get it. Weren't you recently—"

She interrupted me. "Yes, I was. Working as a psychic. But it's sometimes more of a curse than a blessing. Like when you go to the cops because you know a murder will be committed and you feel it's your duty to prevent it, and first they just think you're crazy, but when it happens, then they come looking for you and lock you up, thinking you were an accessory to the crime." She changed out of her white cross-trainers and put on a pair of black heels. "You can predict things, but you can't prevent them, and sometimes when people come and ask you questions, you know, like is so-and-so going to marry me, and they look so much in love, you can't bear to say the truth. So I quit. I don't have the stomach for it."

I was still sizing up Rosa, unsure as to whether she was for real or putting on a great act. I'd never met someone who claimed to be a psychic, so her behavior seemed a little P. T. Barnum for me. She seemed so normal, not like a Madame Woo-Woo type with gauzy scarves draped over crystal balls, gaudy jewelry, head wraps, and raps on the table. "Rosa, just a bit of advice about Mr. Price and Mr. Balzer? I don't think they go in for the voodoo-y psychic thing, so if you want to

keep this job, apart from being a good secretary, I wouldn't bring up the second sight stuff too much if I were you."

She smiled. "I know. Alice, you don't have to worry about me. Oh, be nice to your uncle today. He's going to be very cranky."

Knowing my uncle, this was a *very* safe prediction. I can't recall a day when he *wasn't* cranky.

"Oh, it's nothing you screwed up, Alice. I know that's what you were just thinking. It's not about you. Just that he's got a touch of stomach flu this morning and the Maalox he took didn't help."

"Speaking of the devil," I said, as I heard Uncle Earwax's none-too-dulcet tones through the open door and halfway down the hallway to the elevator. He entered, with Louise at his heels, taking the time to scold her for getting in to work late when there was a new secretary coming in to work for Mr. Price.

"And who are you?" he demanded of Rosa.

"The new secretary," she responded bluntly. "You'll have to tell me what to start on because Mr. Price won't be in until eleven."

Louise looked at her. "Oh, did you find the drawer with his appointment book? I hide it every night. He's very paranoid about someone coming into the office and nosing about."

I knew for a fact that Rosa hadn't opened Louise's desk.

"Act surprised when Mr. Price comes in," Rosa instructed Louise. "He's bringing you a big jar of jelly beans as an act of contrition. He's very sorry he snapped your head off yesterday when you were talking about Hilda."

Louise's hand flew to her mouth. She looked at Rosa, touched and a little amazed. "Did he tell you that?" she half whispered.

"No, he didn't."

"Then how did . . ."

Before Rosa could reply, my uncle tossed a wrapped blueberry danish on my desk and handed me a black coffee in a paper cup. "Breakfast," he said between bites of his own pastry. I handed him my napkin. He and Isabel could rival each other in a messy-eaters contest. I swear, Uncle Earwax didn't own a tie that didn't have a spot or stain in exactly the same place.

"I've got an acting assignment for you for next week," he told me. "On the Randall Dalton case—it's a slip-and-fall on some grease in the garage where his car was parked—I'll need you to read in the deposition testimony of one of the defendant's employees."

"Who am I this time?"

"The night manager of the garage. He's a Czechoslovakian immigrant. Do they even *have* a Czechoslovakia anymore? In his examination before trial, he stated that there was always an accumulation of gunk in the area where the plaintiff had parked his car. This afternoon, we'll each grab a copy of the transcript from the Dalton file and go over which sections I want you to read in. In the meantime, did you finish that tape I left for you yesterday?"

When I told him I hadn't, he got pissed off, despite the fact that I reminded him I'd spent much of the previous day organizing the mess that had been abandoned by his former secretaries.

By the time I'd finished generating all the work that he'd dictated on both sides of the tape, it was the end of the day, and I refused to stay late to pore over the Czech's transcript in the Dalton case. Besides, we had a Musketeers production meeting after work and I was sticking to my new rule of no

longer allowing the boundaries between my temp jobs and my career to become blurred or co-mingled.

"Well, get your butt in here bright and early," he grumbled. "Don't go off window-shopping first."

"When have I ever—?" I started to counter, but decided that arguing with him was useless. I would just end up getting defensive and giving myself a headache and he never listened to a damn thing I said anyway. Another note to self: Never work for your relatives or you may end up wanting to kill them (and vice versa). A "family business" is an oxymoron. Family and business don't mix. Just look at the Corleones.

Chapter 16



Izzy showed up at the apartment positively glowing. "You look fantastic!" I said. "Have you been exercising lately or something?"

"Or something," she joked lasciviously.

"Well, good for you! Good for Dominick!"

Then Dorian arrived with great news. "I got a real part on *Law & Order*!" he crowed ecstatically. "A guest spot with a couple of meaty scenes and everything. I play a white-collar criminal who gets arrested for insider trading in connection with a murder. They called me in from my headshot because I look so squeaky clean. Then I read for them, and they liked it, so then they put me on camera and I used my sense memory about getting arrested . . . and they loved it, so I booked the job!"

"Yee-hah!" I cheered. "This definitely calls for a celebration before we get down to business." I took a bottle of champagne from the fridge. "Hey, Gram, come celebrate Dorian's good fortune with us!" She was in her bedroom watching something on CNN. I poured four flutes of champagne and handed them around.

"Oh, none for me, thanks," Izzy said, declining the glass I was offering to her.

"I've never seen Izzy refuse booze, especially champagne," Dorian remarked, taking a big sip before waiting for anyone to make a toast in his honor.

"Well, I've got some news, too," she said. "Good and bad, I guess, depending on how you look at it." She motioned for us to sit down. "I suppose you're wondering why I called you all here today," she said, laughing at her mock invocation. "My life is an open book. You guys know that it's always been a roller-coaster ride for me and Dominick, and it's a real lovefest when we don't want to strangle each other or get a divorce. So we went into counseling a few months ago and the couples therapist told us that we needed to prioritize our lives, and that if our marriage had any chance of survival, we needed to block out time to be together."

"So you did . . ." Dorian prompted.

"Yeah, did we ever," Izzy laughed. "And the upshot of it is . . . that we're going to have a *baby*. So that's the good news!"

Dorian and I stared at her, our expressions somewhere between stunned and delighted. "So, congratulations, Mama!" he said, raising his glass to her.

"Oh, my God, that's amazing!" I exclaimed, going over to hug Izzy and feeling myself tear up. Despite my feelings about whether or not, with their volatile marriage, it was the right time for them to have a kid, I was thrilled for her. Izzy has desperately wanted a child for as long as I've known her. "How many weeks are you?"

"Six." She beamed.

"When did you find this out?"

"Friday. We told our parents first, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done to keep it a secret from you two and not phone you right away, but I knew we were going to get to-

gether this evening, so I wanted to tell you in person. Oh, shit, you know what? I just thought of something. I don't think hair dye is supposed to be good for you when you're pregnant. That means we're going to discover what my natural hair color is these days! It could be a great TV topic for someone like Geraldo Rivera. Certainly more suspenseful than finding out what was in Al Capone's safe."

"So what's the *bad* news?" Dorian then asked after refilling his glass.

"You think that wasn't it?" Izzy joked. "I might be a *brunette*!" She sighed, then fell silent for a few moments, running a hand through her short, soon-to-no-longer-be-blond locks. "Well, the bad news is . . . and don't hate me, guys—oh, shit, I know you're gonna hate me for this— but this isn't a good time for me to work on producing our own show. I just have too much going on right now. I've got to find a job that'll grant me maternity leave, and no one wants to hire a pregnant actress anyway, not even you two; so unless we do *A Streetcar Named Desire* instead, and do it fast, there aren't too many roles I can credibly play after I start showing . . . and besides, Dorian would be the world's worst Stanley Kowalski. Sorry, Dorian," she rattled on, "but you're just not—well, not exactly central casting's idea of a barely literate macho brute. Maybe the two of you could do *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* together or something . . . I've got Tennessee Williams on the brain tonight . . . Dorian's right on the money for Brick, and you'd make a killer Maggie, Alice."

If I hadn't held up my hand to stop her, she'd still be talking. "Izzy! Don't worry about doing a show with us right now. We'll . . . we'll put it on hold, won't we, Dorian?"

Oh, God, now I'm going to be stuck in survival-job hell forever with Uncle Earwax.

"You guys hate me. I knew you would."

I knelt by her chair. "No, we don't. There are much better things to hate: A-line skirts. Orange and brown horizontally striped 'poor boy' sweaters," I teased. "Now stop that. We could never hate you. And we think it's wonderful that you're going to have a baby. Really, we *do*. It puts things in perspective." I ruffled her hair. "I mean, this is what's really important—in the grand scheme of things."

"You mean it isn't all about *us*?" Izzy teased. "Damn! I hate when that happens!"

Dorian came around to the other side of Izzy's chair. "We're both really happy for you. And if you look at it this way, as performers we don't have anything right now that we didn't have before. We hadn't gotten so far with our Musketees plans that we can't postpone them."

"Yeah, but Alice went to all that trouble to make the cookbook."

I laughed. "Forget it for the time being. I did it on ARMPIT company time—as Ms. Hunt was very quick to point out the morning she canned me."

"You guys are the greatest!" Izzy said, hugging us. "I don't know how to thank you enough, except name the kid after one of you, depending on its gender. Although Dominick may want to have something to say about it."

"It's okay. It's kind of *his* kid, too," I teased her.

"So what are you going to do now, Isabel?" Gram asked her. "You know I gave up show business when I had my kids."

Izzy looked pained. "Did you ever regret it?"

Gram nodded. "Having children is a blessing—although sometimes you need to remind yourself of that—and for a

while I regretted it every day. And every time Alice's father behaved like a brat, I wondered if I'd done the right thing—especially since I ended up a single mother.”

“Oh, shit, is that what's going to happen to me?” Izzy started to cry.

I tried to console her. “Gram didn't mean to upset you,” I said, giving my grandmother a dirty look.

“No, don't blame her; she just answered my question. Never mind me,” Izzy said wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “I guess it's true what they say about pregnant women being all hormonal.”

Dorian and Izzy stayed for a little while longer and then went home, leaving me feeling somewhat morose. “You're disappointed, aren't you?” Gram asked me. I nodded glumly. “I know, you worked very hard to try to start up something for yourselves . . . but life goes on. So, a door closed. You know that means a window will open. And it will offer you something even better.”

I wanted to believe her soothing platitude. “It's becoming harder to remain hopeful. I feel like I keep running and running and I'm just not getting anywhere. After years of trying, Dorian's got a great part, and even if it's a one-shot deal, he'll get noticed. And Izzy's got a husband, and now a kid on the way . . . *they're* moving forward.”

“You are, too,” Gram consoled. She handed me a cup of steaming tea. It was her cure for everything, the English side of the family showing through. “But your journey isn't the same as Isabel's. Or Dorian's. Things have a way of happening when you're ready for them to happen. And right now you're on your own path of self-discovery.”

“Yeah, well, it's leading nowhere,” I muttered angrily.

“That's what you think,” Gram teased. “It just feels like it's

leading nowhere right now. In fact it's leading you where you need to be and where you're supposed to end up."

"Ahhh, the path to enlightenment. You've been watching syndicated reruns of *Kung Fu*, haven't you?"

I like to think that I'm fairly resilient, that after a minimum amount of moping, I can get back up in the saddle of the horse that threw me. So the next morning, as I headed to my uncle's office bright and early to review the deposition transcript I'd be reading into the record at the trial, I bought a copy of *Spotlight*, a performing arts trade paper that advertises most of the auditions around town—the ones you don't need an agent to get into.

I started to peruse the edition as I crossed Canal Street, like a typical New Yorker not particularly paying attention to traffic, when suddenly a taxi swerved past me, out of control. With my nose buried in the newspaper, it was only sheer instinct that made me jump back about three feet. My heart was thudding in my chest.

"Whew! Close shave," remarked a trembling Chinese street vendor, who had managed to yank his cart overflowing with knockoff purses and plastic knickknacks out of the intersection just in time. A moment later, we heard a screech of brakes and a horrible-sounding *thump*. A woman screamed, a high-pitched keening sound that pierced the heart, and I ran toward it. The young woman was kneeling on the asphalt, wailing at the sight before her: a young boy, maybe six or seven years old, lying motionless in the middle of the street.

A mob of angry witnesses chased down the cabbie, who had fled the scene but was stopped by a red light at the end of the block. They pulled him out of the car and, yelling and

pointing in a half dozen different languages, dragged him over to where the little boy lay. The anguished mother was screaming in Chinese, pointing at her child and sobbing, then turning her accusations on the driver.

Several pedestrians rushed over to the mother to prevent her from trying to lift the child into her arms. "Don't move him," a woman yelled. "I'm a doctor." But the Asian woman didn't understand. With no other means of communication, the doctor forcibly pushed her away and the mother began to claw and scratch at the doctor's face and clothing as a bystander attempted to restrain her.

I whipped out my cell phone and dialed 911, reporting the accident, and requesting an ambulance ASAP. By now a crowd of curious onlookers had formed a circle around the boy, shielding his body from oncoming cars. A middle-aged man in a suit and tie put down his briefcase and voluntarily began to direct traffic. Anybody who claims New Yorkers aren't caring souls should have been at the intersection of Broadway and Canal Street at eight forty-five that morning.

About twenty feet from where the boy lay, barely breathing, I found one of his sneakers. Even his little blue-and-white-striped athletic sock had come off his foot from the force of the impact. I picked them up and started to cry. So soon, so suddenly, a life can be snatched from us and our entire world is changed forever. I walked back to the boy's mother and wordlessly handed her the sock and sneaker. From her kneeling position, she offered a polite half bow in acknowledgment. I stood behind her and stroked her hair, trying to calm her.

Please let him be okay, was all I was thinking, in an endless loop that played inside my head. I waited until the am-

bulance arrived and the paramedics placed the boy on a gurney and loaded him inside before crossing the street to go to work.

"Alice, you look like a ghost. You saw the accident, didn't you?" Rosa said when I got upstairs to the offices of Balzer and Price.

"You saw an accident? Where?" The news brought my uncle running out of his office. "Alice, you're late. We agreed that you were supposed to be up here half an hour ago. One day on the job and already you're goofing off!"

"There was a car accident downstairs," I said quietly. "I was on my way in when it happened. A little kid got hit by a taxi and I called the ambulance and waited with his mother until it got there."

"Did you hand her a business card?"

"Who?" I didn't want to believe what I thought I was hearing.

"The mother. Was the boy badly hurt? Was he dead?"

I snapped. "Jesus Christ!" I yelled at Uncle Earwax. "Did the tinsmith forget to give you a heart? The boy was unconscious, I think. He wasn't dead, but for all I know he may not live. I don't know how badly hurt he was. A doctor was there, just passing by, and she warned people not to move him. And the *last* thing on my mind was, *Gee, do I have one of my uncle Erwin's business cards in my wallet?* Have you ever heard the expression *ambulance chaser?*" I asked rhetorically. "You're worse than Victorian grave robbers."

My uncle turned crimson. "You think I'm heartless! Listen, missy, it has nothing to do with heartless. Negligence work is what I've done for an honest living for forty years. Getting big settlements on accidents just like the one you saw this morning is what put your cousins through col-

lege. Not only that, the money put the *victims* through college, too."

"I just find it repugnant," I said.

"You find *what* repugnant? The kind of law I practice?"

"No, not particularly. I find your *attitude* repugnant."

"Alice, everyone deserves representation. My clients are good, hardworking people, not the white-collar crooks your former bosses make a killing representing. You want something to get on a high horse about, try this!" He shoved the day's edition of the *New York Law Journal* under my nose and pointed emphatically to a first-page story above the fold.

I began to read the article. "Holy cow . . ." I muttered, reading aloud, "The congressional committee that convened several months ago to probe allegations of fraud and corporate mismanagement in the AllGood Telecom scandal recommended disbarment for a number of the communications giant's leading attorneys, most notably Raymond Spade of Newter & Spade, a firm well established in the representation of a number of Fortune 500 and blue chip corporations . . .'" I shook my head in amazement and read on, looking for one specific name. I didn't find it, but wondered if the sentence about other Newter & Spade attorneys still under investigation for wrongdoing applied to Eric Witherspoon.

Uncle Earwax looked somehow vindicated. He stomped off into the file room and returned with a big tattered Redweld folder bursting with papers, which he released from his grip with a resounding *thump* on my desk. "Pull out two copies of the Miroslav Janousek deposition transcript," he demanded, "and then come into my office with a couple of yellow highlighters."

"Mr. Balzer's going to lose that trial," Rosa whispered to me. "But if I tell that to him, he'll never believe me."

I spent four hours behind closed doors with Uncle Earwax, going over the entire transcript as though it were a play script. My uncle was coaching me on how to use my theatrical training to advantage by carefully injecting an inflection on certain words. He asked me to read them with enough subtlety so that the judge and defense attorney wouldn't catch on to what I was doing, but with enough emphasis so that the jury couldn't possibly miss it. It was like we were rehearsing a scene together. My uncle read the role of, well, himself, during Mr. Janousek's examination before trial. I tried to get into character to play a middle-aged Czech garage manager. The casting wasn't exactly on the money.

"Let's take it from page ten, line three," Uncle Earwax said. " 'Question: Do you recall seeing the puddle of grease where the plaintiff slipped?' "

I responded. " 'Yes, I did, sir.' "

"Alice, hit the words 'yes' and 'did' a little harder," my uncle instructed.

I complied, repeating Mr. Janousek's response.

"No, that was a little too obvious. Take it down just a notch and we'll continue on the page. 'Question: Did you see the puddle of grease on the night of plaintiff's accident?' "

" 'I did,' " I replied.

"Good!" my uncle said. "You hit the 'did' just right that time. Continuing. 'Question: How often do you walk by the area of the garage where the plaintiff's car was parked?' "

" 'Every day, sir.' "

" 'And how long, in your own estimation, do you believe that the grease puddle had been in the same spot in the garage?' "

" 'I don't really remember . . . but for as long as I remember.' "

"And we'll stop reading-in this section right there, right before his attorney objected on the record," my uncle said. "Alice, on that last line of Janousek's, try to gloss over the first part of the sentence where he says he doesn't really remember, and punch up the words where he says 'as long as I can remember.' "

"He says 'as long as I remember,' not 'can remember,' " I corrected.

This went on for hours.

"So tomorrow morning, you'll come to court with me. I'm not sure if we'll get sent out to a trial part right away, so bring something to read. And dress like a person, not like a slut. Don't you own some nice business clothes? What did you wear when you were working uptown for those corporate lawyers?"

"If you're going to start in on my wardrobe, I'm leaving right now and you can find someone else to play the role of Miroslav Janousek," I warned him. "Don't worry about me. I'll look *appropriate* for a courtroom."

"You're an actress. So *be* an actress. Dress the part," Uncle Earwax said.

I sneered at him. "In that case, shouldn't I be wearing a workshirt and coveralls smothered in axle grease?"

I sat on a hard wooden bench at the back of the courtroom and waited while my uncle and the attorney for the defendants had an *in camera* conference with the judge in his chambers in the hope of settling the Dalton case at the eleventh hour, instead of taking it all the way to trial. Randall Dalton sat with me; Uncle Earwax felt that his client's nervous anxiety, which manifested itself in an air of self-importance, should be on display as little as possible. He

didn't want the defense counsel to think the plaintiff was a jerk. Which was what *I* thought he was. So what if he broke his leg and needed metal pins implanted in it to fix it? I'd read enough of Mr. Dalton's file yesterday afternoon to get the hunch that he'd slipped and fallen because he hadn't looked where he was going. Because on the way to his car he was making out with his girlfriend, a woman who was not going to be Mrs. Dalton anytime soon because there already was one of those. And I don't mean the client's *mother*.

My mind flashed on Tony DiCarlo and I wondered briefly what—or who—he was up to.

Moral judgments aside—and I sensed that Randall Dalton wasn't exactly my uncle's favorite client—Uncle Earwax thought the man had been seriously injured “due to the defendant's negligence” and therefore deserved his day in court.

To help pass the time, I'd brought a novel with me—a long one, so I wouldn't be likely to finish it during the trial and end up sitting there twiddling my thumbs. I figured this week was as good a time as any to catch up on the classics I'd always meant to read. But every time I opened my edition of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Mr. Dalton attempted to engage me in conversation.

I had no interest in chatting with him, although I was afraid of appearing impolite. My uncle had reminded me that I had no idea who might be observing my body language and behavior toward the plaintiff. If it looked like I didn't want to give the man the time of day, it wasn't too good for our side.

Trying a case is a lot like making a movie. It's not glamorous and everything takes a really long time. You spend untold hours playing the game of “hurry up and wait.” Unable to get past the editor's introduction of my Dickens novel

without interruption, I elected instead to constructively use this downtime for my own career by reading through the copy of *Spotlight* that I'd picked up on the way to work yesterday, circling the auditions that looked like good bets.

Mr. Dalton leaned toward me, as though he were trying to read the paper over my shoulder. "After we win my case, what do you say we go out for dinner? You name the restaurant. Anywhere in the city." He kept his voice low, almost conspiratorial.

He's a pig, Alice.

No kidding.

So tell him what you really think of him.

Is that wise at this moment in time? I turned to Mr. Dalton. "I'm not allowed to date clients."

"After your uncle wins my case, I won't *be* a client."

Alice. Tell the man the truth.

That is the truth.

Don't play coy or act passive-aggressive. Never mind what your uncle thinks; think of Shakespeare's words: To thine own self be true.

"I don't date married men," I told him.

Dingdingdingdingding! Bells and whistles and firecrackers erupted inside my psyche. Mr. Dalton looked stunned, like no one had ever refused him before.

"But . . . I have a *Lexus*," he said.

"And *I* have a conscience."

There was a flurry of activity toward the front of the room and the judge and attorneys emerged from chambers. My uncle strode over to us and announced that no settlement had been negotiated and the trial would begin after lunch that afternoon. While Uncle Earwax took Mr. Dalton aside and explained in hushed tones why the defendants hadn't of-

ferred any money on his case, I sat tight and continued to mark up the trade paper. One audition in particular caught my eye and I circled it immediately. *Grandma Finnegan's Wake*, a long-running interactive comedy—yes, a comedy—that was presented partly in a theater and partly in half of a real funeral parlor in Greenwich Village, was seeking replacements for a number of cast members who were leaving the Off-Broadway production after four years to start up a Chicago company of the show.

One available role stood out from the rest. The tempestuous Fionulla Finnegan was a former *Star Search* champion who went on to have a recording contract, reinventing herself as FiFi, then started up a line of rocker chick clothing, and became one of the hosts of the TV infotainment program *Reach for the Stars*.

I had seen *Grandma Finnegan's Wake* when it first opened, because I was intrigued by it on a number of levels, not least of which was that I shared the same last name as the title character. I thought it in pretty bad taste, but wickedly funny all the same. It looked like more fun to perform, actually, than to watch, even though audience participation amounted to more than half the show's loosely scripted format. I remembered that Fionulla got to grab the mike during the wake and sing an uptempo version of "Danny Boy" to the waxy figure of the dear departed, then went around for most of the rest of the party interviewing other "family members" about their relationship with Grandma Finnegan, as though she were shoving the mike in front of celebrities at a film premiere.

Open auditions were going to be held over the next three days, including this one. The annoying thing about these cattle calls is that you are expected to give up hours of your

time waiting to be seen, since no specific appointments are given. And of course I was supposed to be at Uncle Earwax's office all week during business hours. Or worse, stuck in this courtroom during the Dalton trial proceedings, waiting to be called to the witness stand to read in deposition testimony as a middle-aged male Czech, at the mercy of a half-deaf judge who could care less that plaintiff's counsel's secretary needed to get her butt out the door to run to an audition.

Chapter 17



Dorian's got a superstition about his auditions: He doesn't discuss them with anyone until after they're over and the roles are cast. Like the wish you make when you blow out your birthday candles, he believes it's bad luck if you talk about it. So I decided to emulate him and not tell a soul, not even Gram, about my plans—although I would have to tell Uncle Earwax *something* because I'd need to leave work, or the trial, in order to run over to the Macdougall Street Theatre.

I'd already written off this afternoon in terms of attending the *Grandma Finnegan* audition. My head wasn't in the right place, anyway; it was stuck in this shabby-looking courtroom. I needed more time to prepare, aware that even if I tried to get to the theater today I'd be doing myself a disservice, just as I'd done for years, by not taking my career seriously enough and putting my allegiances to my survival jobs ahead of it.

Discussing the situation with Uncle Earwax sooner rather than later seemed to be a good idea. Or maybe not.

"Alice," he thundered so loudly the corridor outside the courtroom reverberated with his ire, "you're barely back on

the job and already you're doing this to me! You can't do this when I'm on trial. Pick another week to pursue your career; you've been at it so long anyway, are a few more days going to kill you? What are you trying to do to me here?!"

I stood my ground. The louder he got, the quieter I became. "I'm not trying to do anything to you personally. I don't schedule a show's auditions," I said. "There's something I'm appropriate for that is seeing people over the next few days and I'll need to take off a couple of hours to do it. This is *your* life," I added, gesturing to his heavy litigation bag and the courtroom door. "And this," I said, waving the folded trade paper, "is *mine*." I refused to engage in any further conversation on the subject.

I was hoping that "Miroslav Janousek" would be called to the stand the next day so that I could get the deposition reading over and be done with my portion of the Dalton trial responsibilities, thus having time the subsequent afternoon to go to Macdougall Street. I'd spent the evening at home splitting my focus between poring over the deposition transcript and determining the most advantageous wardrobe for *Grandma Finnegans Wake*. Of course, the smartly tailored black suit would be as appropriate in a courtroom as in a funeral parlor, but I couldn't say the same for the tight gold lamé top I'd found at the bottom of a dresser drawer. I'd bought it about a hundred years ago from Victoria's Secret, but it always looked like it should have been part of a costume, rather than streetwear, so I never wore it. I could have just given it away to a thrift shop, but I figured one day there'd be a need for it.

And tomorrow would be the day.

Not.

Instead, I spent much of my time the next day bruising

my butt on the back benches of the courtroom, glancing at my watch and wondering when Uncle Earwax would call me to the stand. Turns out the trial was delayed all morning with motions on other cases that the judge insisted on hearing before the Dalton case proceeded any further.

In the afternoon, Randall Dalton himself took the stand. Attending a real trial is a great experience for actors. There are wonderful opportunities to observe human behavior and interaction. I could tell right away that the jury didn't like Dalton. He came across as arrogant, entitled, and a bit self-righteous, which isn't a great attitude for a guy who, on cross-examination from the defendant's attorney, had to admit under oath that he was an adulterer. What should have been a case judged upon *its* merits and not those of the plaintiff was turning into something else. I studied the jury's faces as they listened to Mr. Dalton's testimony and got the feeling that his behavior on the night of the accident—the fact that he was with his girlfriend at the time, whether or not he'd suffered a serious injury—couldn't help but color their consciences.

From what I saw, Rosa's little prediction was probably right on target. It would take a lot of work for my uncle to turn this case around. Especially since I could swear that as Randall Dalton stepped down from the witness stand, he picked his nose.

I was getting ready to go to work the next morning, busily accessorizing, when my watch band broke. I am lost without my wristwatch. I even wear it to bed; in fact, the only time I remove it is when I'm in the tub or the shower. My black suit has no pockets and I thought about tossing the watch in my

wallet, but without my trusty Seiko actually on my wrist, I feel naked and incomplete.

"Gram, have you an extra watch?" I asked her. She was making her toilette, her face slathered in moisturizer. It's how her skin still appeared so youthful you would swear she didn't look a day over seventy-five. "The wristband on mine finally gave out and there are no clocks in the courtroom. I think they do it on purpose, so you have no clear idea of how long a trial is dragging on."

"Take mine, sweetheart. It's in the lacquer box on the dresser. I'd get it for you but my hands are full of gunk."

"No, I don't want to take it if it's the only one you've got," I insisted.

"Alice, don't be silly. There are five clocks in this apartment, and one in the corner of the screen on the local TV news station. If I need to tell the time, I won't exactly be bereft."

I fastened Gram's watch around my wrist. "You're an angel," I said, hugging her. She raised her goo-covered hands in the air to avoid ruining my suit.

"You're *my* angel," she said.

I'm not very good at keeping secrets; not when they're my own, anyway. They tend to start burning little holes in my soul if I don't set them free. So I told Gram about the audition I planned to attend later in the day if my duties at the Dalton trial ended in time to spring me from the courthouse.

"*Grandma Finnegan's Wake*? That's a *terrible* name for a play," she remarked. "But at least it's better than that awful literary allusion masquerading as theater that you dragged me to at the New York Fringe Festival last summer: *Moby's Dick*."

"A friend was in it; we *had* to go," I replied. "But you're right. It was truly dreadful."

"Dreadful? Dreadful is an understatement. I'll bet Herman Melville was spinning in his grave."

"Well, if I get the part in *this*, will you come to the show and promise me not to put up a fuss about James Joyce's postmortem acrobatics? 'Cause this play has nothing to do with him."

Gram wiped her hands on a terrycloth fingertip towel and placed them on either side of my face, cradling my cheeks in her warm palms. "Alice, my precious baby, I will be there on your opening night. And I swear you won't hear me say a single word about James Joyce. Now run off to court before your rat bastard uncle phones the house a hundred times to ask if you've left yet. I've got a hair appointment later, but I should be home by four, if you want to call me after the audition."

I rested my hands over hers, pressing them more tightly to my face. "Will do. And I should have a better time at this one than with Darva the soap diva. Hopefully, the director won't tell me I need my nose fixed! I'll see you later, all coiffed, buffed, and polished," I kidded. "I love you, Gram."

She kissed me on the lips. Hers were moist and warm. "I love you, too, sweetheart. Break a leg and knock 'em dead!"

At least my wearing the same outfit to court two days in a row didn't call as much attention to itself as the giant gravy stain on my uncle's necktie. I have no idea why he didn't notice it when he got dressed in the morning, but I couldn't let him get up in front of the judge and jury looking like that; I felt embarrassed for him. So I discreetly alerted him to the problem and told him I was running out to the haberdasher over on Worth Street to find him a clean and tasteful replacement. He seemed somewhat

touched that I cared. Well, of course I cared. I often wanted to strangle him with his own duodenum, but he was still my flesh and blood.

I'd rigged my suit jacket so that the glittering gold lamé top I was wearing underneath didn't show, even when I had to perch on the edge of the chair and lean into the microphone as I was sitting in the witness box. It was after the official lunch break when Uncle Earwax finally called me up to read in the testimony of Miroslav Janousek, night manager of the defendant's garage.

The judge didn't have quite the vantage point I did from where I now sat, and I wondered if he had an inkling just how bored the jury appeared to be. The foreperson had a cheesy romance novel sticking out of the top of her purse at such an angle that if no one was watching, she could slip it, unnoticed, into her lap. Juror number three's eyes were closed, his head lolling back over the top of his chair. I doubted that was how he *listened*. Number six, in rally cap and sweats, had an open bag of potato chips on the floor by his left sneaker and kept winking at me.

My uncle had warned me not to state on the record that I was a professional actress. I was simply to say that I was Mr. Balzer's secretary. Which was the truth, though not really the whole truth, so help me God.

We began to read in the sworn testimony of Mr. Janousek, taken during his examination before trial. As coached by Uncle Earwax, I was careful not to obviously overemphasize any of the witness's words, endeavoring to give as neutral a reading as possible. But after a few lines, the defense counsel jumped up from his chair and shouted, "Objection!"

"Counsel will approach the bench," the judge instructed. My uncle and his adversary, Harold Wilbur, came forward,

speaking in hushed tones before the judge so the jury was unable to hear them clearly.

"Your honor, Miss Finnegan is attempting to shade the testimony of defendant's witness," Mr. Wilbur said.

"What's wrong with it? She's doing a straight reading of the deposition testimony, Your Honor," my uncle replied disingenuously.

"Your Honor, she's reading the testimony with an *accent*," Mr. Wilbur insisted. "That's not a straight reading, in my opinion."

"The man is *Czech*," Uncle Earwax countered. "So, she's sounding like a Czech. It's authentic. Why is that a problem?"

The judge looked at me, then at the two attorneys standing before him. He ruminated for a few moments. Then he sighed and leaned forward. "Counselors, I'm going to admit to the two of you that this is the most entertainment I've had all trial. And at least it woke up the jury. However, in the interest of impartiality, I will agree with Mr. Wilbur that a female American secretary deepening her voice and reading Mr. Janousek's testimony in an accent appropriate to the witness's mother country is not, strictly speaking, a straight reading of the text." The judge turned to me. "Miss Finnegan, from now on you will read in the witness's testimony in your own voice and not attempt to be Meryl Streep." He looked back at the attorneys and ordered my uncle to proceed.

Phooey!

I could see that he was displeased with the judge's ruling. From his expression, I could tell that he was blaming me. And knowing Uncle Earwax as well as I do, if His Honor had ruled in *our* favor on my affecting the Czech accent, he would have been *delighted* with my gambit.

As the reading wore on, with further interruptions from

the exceptionally objectionable Mr. Wilbur, I kept trying to surreptitiously check Gram's watch. It was my last chance to get to the *Grandma Finnegan* auditions. I tried to do the best I could with Mr. Janousek's testimony, but my mind was on getting up to the Macdougall Street Theatre. The auditions had already been going on for a few hours.

The judge raised his hand and indicated that Uncle Earwax should stop his questions. "Are we holding you up, Miss Finnegan? Do you need to catch a train? Obviously something is more important than this trial."

Oh, shit. Now you've done it, Alice. You'll be held in contempt of court.

"No, no. Everything's fine, Your Honor," I lied.

At four-thirty, I was finally asked to step down from the witness stand. I dashed out of the courthouse and hailed a cab to take me up to the theater. My heart was racing. By the time I got there, I was drenched in a rather unattractive nervous sweat.

I thought, mistakenly, that at this late hour there wouldn't be too many actors left waiting to audition; I'd even worried that the producers might have decided to call it a day by now, despite what they'd advertised in *Spotlight*. I followed a handwritten sign to the theater's lower lobby and surveyed the scene. There must have been about fifty people down there—sitting on the floor, chatting, propped up against their backpacks . . . the place looked like a bohemian railway station in the middle of the night.

I looked for a sign-in sheet, and found it on a clipboard precariously perched atop the show's main prop—an enormous mahogany casket with a shamrock carved into the slightly domed lid. I wrote my name in the next vacant slot, beside number 134. According to union rules, producers are

required to see 120 people in a day of open call auditions. If they want to cut it off after that, it's their prerogative. Since the ad stated that they were seeing people until seven P.M., I hoped they'd get to me. They were only up to number 88. I looked anxiously at Gram's watch. It was 4:58.

There wasn't much to do but find a square foot or two of floor space and park myself. So much for my black suit looking crisp by the time I got upstairs to the stage.

I took *A Tale of Two Cities* from my purse and decided to skip the introduction and go straight to the first chapter. *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity . . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.* How depressing. And I couldn't concentrate in this atmosphere, either, so I closed the book.

It's times like this when I wish I knew how to meditate. I needed a serious attitude adjustment after the Dalton trial. A stiff belt of whiskey might have done the trick just as well, but then I would have been in no shape to audition. I leaned against the wall by the casket and closed my eyes. Soon the voices of the other performers in the room became muted, as though I were hearing them from underwater—indistinct and far away. I have the same sensation when I'm lying in a dentist's chair flying on nitrous oxide.

Maybe I did fall asleep for a brief while. Or maybe my body had just shifted itself into neutral. I opened my eyes and looked at Gram's watch: 5:11. Had I really been at the audition for only thirteen minutes? Roughly half the number of people who were there when I arrived still waited to be seen. This was good news. Maybe they were really moving things along upstairs.

I stood up, flicked a bit of red and gold carpet lint off my

black hosiery, did a couple of stretches to uncramp my back muscles, went to the ladies' room, checked my makeup, and came back to my little spot. Then I decided it might be a good idea to give my photo and résumé a quick once-over in case there was something I wanted to be sure to mention to the producers and director once I got inside the auditorium.

Feeling a touch of stage fright and nervous energy, I looked at my watch again: 5:11.

That's what it said the last time I'd checked it.

"Excuse me," I said to a guy lying on his stomach in front of the casket. He was sketching the two women chatting by the stairway. "Can you tell me what time it is?"

He looked at his wrist. "Six-oh-five."

"Thanks," I said. "Not five-eleven."

The guy looked up at me. "'Fraid not. Hasn't been five-eleven in fifty-four minutes." He checked his watch again. "Make that fifty-five minutes."

"Hmnh."

That's odd.

Her battery probably died. I wondered if Gram realized that no one winds a watch anymore to get it back up and running. I removed the timepiece from my wrist and shook it vigorously like a thermometer, then gave the crystal a few sharp taps with my the pad of my index finger. The second hand began to move.

And so did the actors on the line that snaked up the stairs to the theater.

"We're on number 129!" a disembodied voice called from the street level. "With 130 on deck!" Then a stage manager, clipboard in hand, emerged at the top of the stairs. "Everybody got that? So if your number is between 131 and 140, you should be lining yourselves up on the

right side of the stairwell. Leave room for people to come back downstairs to claim their belongings. If you've got any personal property that you care about, take it with you," she cautioned. "And *please*, people. I can't say this enough. Make sure your cell phones and beepers are turned *off*. Our director has been known to tear them apart with his teeth when he hears them ring during his auditions." She gave a little smile. "Just thought I'd share that!" she said happily.

Don't forget to breathe, Alice.

I always do that, don't I, right before I walk into an audition?

Yup. And sometimes you forget to have fun, too. Go in there and cut loose. Throw yourself a party up on that stage.

Number 133, a real off-the-boat Irish working-class type, left the theater, whistling and spinning his tweed cap on the tip of his finger. "They're very nice in there," he said reassuringly in a genuine brogue. He slapped my upper arm with the cap. "Break a leg, missy!"

He'd made me smile, which was how I entered the theater. Suddenly I felt giddy, upbeat, in complete control. It was a first for me in such a situation. I introduced myself to the production staff, and Joey Moriarty, the show's co-creator and director, made a joke about my surname. "Yes, I really have my own Grandma Finnegan," I laughed. "But she's very much alive and kicking. In fact, she can still do high kicks from her days on Florenz Ziegfeld's chorus line. Gram'll display her legs to anyone at the drop of a hat." They seemed genuinely amused and intrigued, which really put me at ease. I felt like I was in the room with family, just shooting the breeze, so when they asked me what monologue I planned on performing for them, I had to take a pause to refocus my brain on the task at hand.

"Monologue?" My stage fright returned. Their casting notice in *Spotlight* mentioned nothing about monologues.

"You look terrified, Alice," Joey remarked jovially.

"Well, your ad didn't say anything about preparing a speech, so I figured—mistakenly—" I added, trying to make a joke out of my predicament, "that you'd have sides from the script, or throw me an improv or something."

"The throwing-you-an-improv part comes after the monologue," Joey chuckled.

"Does it matter what kind of play it's from?" I asked him. "Because the only thing I can remember off the top of my head is Shakespeare. It's from a comedy, at least!"

Joey leaned back in his chair and squinted at me. "Shakespeare?"

I shrugged apologetically.

"*Grandma Finnegan's Wake* is kind of a quirky show," he said. "Haven't you got anything quirky?"

Think, Alice, think.

Under the "special skills" section of my theatrical résumé, I list my ability to mimic various celebrities. It's the same skill that the character of Fionulla Finnegan employed to win on *Star Search*.

"Okay!" I told the auditors. "I'm going to give you thirty seconds of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* scene in the forest between the rivals Hermia and Helena, as though they were being performed by Fran Drescher as The Nanny and Gilda Radner as Lisa Loopner."

I'd never pulled this stunt before. I was totally flying by the seat of my pants, but I threw myself into it without looking back, forgetting that there was anyone else in the room. At the end of my half minute, Joey and his staff were cracking up while I fought to catch my breath.

"All right, you've earned your improv," he told me. He looked down at my résumé. "Which role were you interested in?"

"FiFi," I said unhesitatingly.

Joey looked at his producers. I couldn't read his thoughts. "Do you sing?"

I nodded.

"Do you know 'Danny Boy'?"

"How can someone surnamed Finnegan *not* know it?" I kidded. "Do you want me to sing it straight?"

"Well, FiFi does it practically to a disco beat with her cousins the No Commitments playing backup for her. But you'll have to sing a capella this evening. Any other stars you can imitate?"

"Singing, you mean? I can do Julie Andrews, Ethel Mer-
man, Stevie Nicks . . . Janis Joplin when I've had enough
tequila and the rare cigarette or seven . . . I'm not too sure
it's a pretty sight."

"Surprise us." Joey gestured to the mike stand. "You can
use the mike if you want. It's live, so go for it."

I tossed off the black suit jacket and took center stage in
my tight gold lamé tank top and black miniskirt.

Fionulla Finnegan, here I come!

I figured I'd totally strafe my vocal cords if I started out
with Ethel, and I can only do Janis when I'm totally wasted,
so I started out with Julie and her perfectly orotund vowel
sounds, segued on the next verse to Stevie's node-induced
dreamlike throatiness, then ended with Ethel's klaxon con-
tralto, which couldn't have been performed at a volume any
lower than earsplitting. I was afraid the plaster would start
falling from the ceiling.

It was the most fun I'd ever had at an audition. It felt more
like cutting loose at a cast party instead.

Joey complimented my work, then said we were going to bring it down a notch. "Have you ever seen the show?" he asked me.

"Back when it first opened," I admitted.

"Well, Fionulla's got a scripted speech where she eulogizes Grandma Finnegan, and then, if you remember, everything sort of degenerates, and her relatives start accusing her of turning the memorial into something about herself instead. I'd like you to try the top of the speech for me, if you would, Alice. The part before all hell breaks loose." Joey looked over at his stage manager and asked her if she had the page of text in her folder of audition material.

The stage manager leafed through the envelope and shook her head. "I don't know what happened to it," she said apologetically. "I know we had a couple of copies. People must have walked away with them."

Joey sighed and ran his hand through his hair. He thought for a moment or two, making a nervous clucking sound with his tongue, clicking it against the roof of his mouth. He turned to the producers, exchanged a couple of whispered sentences which I couldn't make out no matter how hard I tried to eavesdrop, then looked back at me.

"I know we're making you jump through hoops of fire here, Alice."

"Oh, I don't mind," I said cheerfully. "I'm having a blast." And I was.

"I just want to see if you can do the shift in tone," the director said. "You don't seem to have trouble with the outrageous, egotistical aspects of FiFi's personality, but I'd like to know how you would handle the opening remarks of the eulogy. Can you just, on your feet, give me a minute or so in that vein? Don't try to remember what Fionulla ac-

tually says in the show; I don't need the exact lines. Just the flavor."

"Can I have a second to switch gears?" I strode over to the corner of the stage where I'd left my black jacket.

As I slowly fastened the four brass buttons, I thought about the task immediately ahead of me. It was going to be the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, onstage or off. I was about to draw on every ounce of life experience and every minute of acting training to eulogize the only Grandma Finnegan I'd ever known.

Chapter 18



"It's a grandmother's prerogative to be eternally loving, eternally supportive, nurturing, and always on your side," I began, a bit unsteadily.

"Anyone who ever met Grandma Finnegan knew that her generosity of spirit was nothing short of remarkable. My Grandpa Danny, truly a legendary showman, became a man of mythical stature in Gram's mind. The truth was he was all too mortal; and even after he disappeared on her one night, forever leaving her to raise their two kids on her own, she still couldn't bring herself to speak ill of him."

I was struck with a recollection. "Sometimes, in the wee hours of the morning, I awaken and hear her talking to him as though he's right there in her bedroom, filling him in on the latest family gossip, telling him how proud he would have been that their granddaughter went into show business. Of course, when I hear my name, I become even more curious, so I tiptoe down the hall and strain to overhear her side of the conversation. I don't think Gram knows I've ever listened in. If she does, she's never mentioned it." I thought of those moments as private, almost sacred for her. To one day confess my eavesdropping seemed a violation.

I looked at Joey Moriarty and the rest of the production staff. They were still paying attention, and Joey was leaning forward in his chair. He nodded at me, wordlessly asking me to continue.

“Grandpa Danny was a saint, no matter what he did, but when it came to politics, Gram was certainly opinionated, and she never gave a damn whether her views were popular ones. Apparently she’d voted for Eugene V. Debs every time he ran, and if she thought someone was a ‘rat bastard’—her favorite expression of derision—she didn’t hesitate to tell him so, straight to his face, even though there was usually a TV set and several thousand miles between Gram and the object of her scorn.

“When it came to my choice of men—and bosses—she had a unique perspective. I was a little girl when she made up the ‘name game’ to amuse me. She would analyze someone’s personality based on their surname and tell me how my fortunes would rise or sink with them, depending on her assessment. Until very recently, she had an uncanny ability to call every shot correctly.” I remembered her coming up blank on Tony DiCarlo’s name, and how much I regretted not having the benefit of her loopy brand of wisdom at the time.

Another memory made me chuckle. “A few years ago, Gram was mugged on a street corner on upper Broadway, after going grocery shopping. She wasn’t badly hurt, thank God, but her purse was snatched. Even though she was annoyed to have to go through the hassle of canceling her charge plates, when it came to the loose change and forty-some-odd dollars that had been in her wallet, she didn’t rail against her assailant or run to the cops. She simply sighed and said to me, ‘It’s all right; he must have needed it more than I did.’ ”

I realized, as I spoke, that I was no longer acting. Or trying to please the people sitting and watching me. Or trying to second-guess what they wanted to hear me say or how they expected me to express it. The circumstances had become very real to me. There was no distance between myself and the situation. The true, unscripted recollections came to me unbidden, the words forming themselves on my tongue.

"To know Grandma Finnegan was to adore her," I continued. "She was the most vibrant, fun-loving, *mischievous* woman I've ever known. And a marvelous raconteur. She told extraordinary stories about the golden days of vaudeville, of the famous and influential personalities with whom she rubbed shoulders: how she entertained Albert Einstein in her dressing room one night after a performance; how Fiorello LaGuardia, back when he was only a congressman, had once sent her a bouquet of American Beauty roses on an opening night; and the time she'd spurned the amorous advances of David Belasco, even though it meant not getting hired for a role. I have no way of knowing if these anecdotes were true, or whether they were meant to be metaphorical, allegorical, or even cautionary tales. But I didn't care. She believed them; and therefore, so did I."

By now I had ceased any attempts to keep my voice even, my emotions in check. I didn't censor my tears, but let them roll down my cheeks, splattering onto my lapels. "Grandly, *exuberantly* theatrical, passionate about people and politics, Gram expressed herself freely. She believed in following the dictates of your heart and the promptings of your soul, and possessed the wondrous childlike qualities that grown-ups often resent in other adults because they have long since forsaken those colorful cloaks for the gray mantles of drab workaday drudgery."

I paused for a moment, because I was having trouble getting the words out of my mouth without sobbing. I had completely lost control of my audition, indeed forgotten that's what I was there for. The room was silent.

"Gram always encouraged me to express my best self and not to waste energy worrying about others' opinions of my choices in life. She inspired me to paint and write poetry, to sing, dance . . . and ironically, this woman who'd run off to become a showgirl when she was still an adolescent, never finishing high school, passed on to her granddaughter a thirst for education and a passion for literature.

"She possessed a tremendous willingness to marvel at the wonders of life, biting into it with the relish one reserves for a ripe and juicy peach on a sweltering afternoon in July. She taught me never to forget the primacy of passion, and she even coached me on how to please a man. 'Dance for him,' she urged. 'Dance naked.' "

Bereft of a handkerchief, I wiped my nose, rather inelegantly, with the back of my hand. "If a life of good friendships, affection, love, and good deeds is a kind of immortality, then I like to think that Gram is still with us today, and that her legacies eternally endure."

I finished talking and stood there on the stage at the Macdougall Street Theatre an utter basket case. I was sniffing, my eyes were red and swollen from weeping, and I couldn't find a tissue anywhere. "Well," I said, taking a breath and looking for a way to lighten up the mood. "I certainly embarrassed the hell out of myself up there just now, didn't I?"

Joey Moriarty knitted his brow and brought his hands up to his face in an expression of deep concentration. "No. No, you didn't."

I stepped off the stage and picked up my purse. No one

seemed to know quite what to say next. "So . . . thank you," I said, having a rough time segueing into audition situation mode. "For letting me come in today."

Joey stood up and shook my hand. "That was very strong work, Alice. You did what I asked you to and really threw yourself into it. It was very unselfconscious. I liked that." He turned to the producers and stage manager, who nodded in agreement. "So, we'll be in touch."

That's a very generic thing for a director to tell a performer. Still, I felt I had done the best I could, indeed given it everything I had. I walked up the stairs toward the back of the house and the exit, still sniffing, rifling through my purse for a tissue.

"Jesus, what did they do to you in there?" remarked the actor who was waiting to audition next. "I thought this show was a comedy!"

"It is," I said, using my fingers to wipe my eyes. "They're very nice, by the way. So have fun. *I* did."

The actor gave me a strange look and went inside the theater.

I left the building and went out to the street to call Gram. I wanted to tell her how the audition went, as I'd promised to do, but I got the answering machine instead. She told me she'd be home by now, so she must have decided to run some errands after her hair appointment. I punched in the code to retrieve any messages from the machine. Three message units had been used. I listened to the first call.

"Alice, it's your Uncle Erwin. Look, what the hell were you trying to do to me this afternoon? Who told you to *act*? After you left, the defendant's attorney called for a mistrial." He was yelling into the phone and I felt like I was being eviscerated by the answering machine. I wanted to call him and

shout back that Rosa had predicted he'd lose the trial anyway. In four relatively terse sentences, he'd manage to snatch away all the satisfaction I'd felt upon leaving the theater. It was hard to process anything right now, because my mind and body needed time to readjust. The only way I can begin to describe my post-audition sensation is that I felt sort of "fuzzy," as though I had entered another realm, and, like an astronaut returning to the earth's atmosphere, needed to decompress.

The answering machine beeped, indicating the end of the first message and the beginning of the next. It was a hang-up. The machine beeped again.

"Oh, Christ. Shit," the voice on the other end muttered. Uncle Erwin, take two. "Alice, where the heck are you? I need to talk with you right away. Call me."

What, so you can berate me directly and blame me for screwing up your trial? I'll see you at work in the morning anyway. You can chew me out then, when at least I'll be getting paid to hear it.

I erased the messages. In any event, I wasn't about to call my uncle from the street. I got home, found the mail was still in the box, and the apartment was dark. Gram was still out. The answering machine was blinking again, so I played the tape. A third message from Uncle Earwax. He sounded agitated.

What else is new?

"Look, Alice, I'm not going to talk to your answering machine. Will you call me right away? It's Uncle Erwin . . . in case you didn't know."

Fine.

I reached him at home. He dispensed with any niceties and cut right to the chase. "Alice, your grandmother was taken to the hospital this afternoon."

I felt suddenly hollow, as though my internal organs had plummeted to the floor. "What happened?" I asked him.

"She collapsed on the street after leaving the hairdresser. Someone called an ambulance and they took her over to Mount Sinai. Where did you go after you left the courthouse? I tried to reach you a couple of times."

My heart was thumping at a million beats a minute. I just wanted to get off the phone with him and go see Gram. "I told you, I had an audition," I said, tense, exasperated, and scared. "For an Off-Broadway show called *Grandma Finnegans Wake*."

"That's appropriate," he muttered.

"What?" His reply didn't really register. "Where is she? In the ER?"

My uncle didn't respond.

"Just tell me what part of the hospital she's in and I'll grab a cab and head over there."

It was the spring of hope . . .

There was silence on the other end of the line. Finally, Uncle Erwin spoke. "She's in the morgue, Alice."

It was the winter of despair . . .

"They tried to revive her in the ER, but she didn't make it. She died at five-eleven this evening."

My . . .

"My . . ."

Gram. Died. At. 5:11.

"She . . . died?"

It was the epoch of belief . . .

"I'm sorry, Alice."

The exact minute her watch had stopped.

It was the epoch of incredulity . . .

"How . . . They called you?"

"The social worker from the hospital tried to call you but when she got the answering machine she didn't want to leave a message. So she called your parents in Florida and your father called me. He wanted me to try to reach you as soon as possible."

"Why didn't *Mom and Dad* call me?" Were they nuts?

"They didn't want to tell you on the machine, either, and they were afraid that if they asked you to call them, it would seem ominous."

"It *was* ominous, for chrissakes! Gram *died*. Look, can I go see her?"

"I assume so. If you want to," my uncle said. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"No," I said, my voice hollow. "Thank you. I want to go alone." I hung up the phone and stood by the window. How many times since we'd been roommates had I preceded Gram home? Maybe no more than a handful, but I knew, each of those times, that I would hear her keys in the locks and feel relief that she'd arrived safely.

I wouldn't hear that jangle anymore.

I wandered numbly from room to room, touching things that were Gram's . . . a lavender silk camisole that still retained the scent of rosewater and of her soft skin . . . her favorite strand of pearls, at first cool to the touch, then warming in my hand . . . an acrylic cardigan—smelling ever so slightly of camphor—that she would wear to ward off the chill from the air conditioner. I found a single strand of gray-blond hair trapped in the pillowed fuzz of the sweater and wrapped it around my finger, then held the sweater to my chest and collapsed on the edge of Gram's bed in a flood of tears, my body shaking with loud, unchecked sobs and gut-wrenching pain,

calling out to God to answer a question for which there is no palatable reply.

In time, I could accept that there was comfort to be taken, solace to be found, in knowing that Gram had lived an enriching and enriched existence, that she had touched many lives in myriad wonderful ways, and that she did know how much she was beloved. But I had never before experienced death so closely, so personally. My initial responses on losing Gram were not born of rationally based consolation. I felt anger.

Abandonment.

Fear.

The phone rang and I figured I might as well answer it, although I had no desire to talk to anyone. There were tears in my voice. "Hello?"

"Is . . . is this Alice Finnegan?"

"Yes . . ." I said hesitantly. I thought it was a telemarketer. They always call at dinnertime. "Look, this isn't a good time—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Alice. It's Joey Moriarty—the director of *Grandma Finnegan's Wake*."

"Ohh."

"I just wanted to tell you myself that we made our casting decisions . . . and we'd like you to take over the role of Fionulla Finnegan."

It was the best of times . . .

I was a bit stunned.

"Alice? Are you there?"

"Yes . . . I'm here. Ummm. Yes. I mean, yes, I accept the part. I'm sorry . . . I'm not processing things very well right now. You see . . . I just got home a little while ago . . . I . . . I

just found out that my grandmother—who I was telling you about today—died this evening.”

It was the worst of times . . .

“While I was at the audition, actually. So, I . . .”

“Oh, God,” Joey said quietly. “I’m so sorry. Do you want to call me later, then, to talk about the logistics of things?”

“Yes. I think that would be a good idea,” I said, jotting Joey’s phone number on the back of a Chinese take-out menu.

I arrived at the hospital, identified myself as Gram’s next of kin, and was shown to the morgue. The attendant made a discreet exit and left me alone with Gram. The person—was she still a “person” if she wasn’t breathing?—on the slab before my eyes *was* Gram . . . and she *wasn’t*. The frail, small body looked familiar, but the spirit was gone. I wondered aloud if that’s what people meant when they believed that at the moment of death, one’s soul flew out of the corporeal being. Her blue-gray eyes rimmed with brown would never admire another sunset, never watch another newscast, never gaze in perennial wonder upon the changing leaves in Central Park, never read another poem.

Did she know I was there in the room with her? I took a step toward her. Then another. She wouldn’t have liked the way she smelled. Like chemicals. “Well, at least your hair looks good,” I whispered to her. I was curious and wanted to touch her skin, but actually doing it seemed too creepy. *Good thing you moisturized this morning*, I thought bitterly. “You know, I used to love your surprises, Gram, but this is a bit too much.” I wanted to make her laugh. I wanted her to make *me* laugh.

“I was offered an Off-Broadway job today. In the show that you said had a terrible name for a comedy . . . *Grandma Finnegan’s Wake*. You didn’t realize how true that was. Or

maybe you did." As I gazed at her unseeing eyes, I remembered something. "You know the very last thing you said to me this morning?" I wished she could have replied. "When I told you I was going off to that audition, you told me to 'knock 'em dead.' It's just a figure of speech, Gram. You should know that better than anyone. You weren't supposed to go off and do it yourself!"

I turned away. I couldn't look at her anymore; it hurt too much. "You promised to come to my opening night if I got the part. Remember?" I felt betrayed, regressing thirty years to the petulant little girl who awakened Christmas morning to discover that Barbie's dream house was not, in fact, under the tree. "You *promised*."

The morgue attendant came over to me and gently placed his hand on my wrist. "You about ready to go?"

I regarded him with my tear-stained face and puffy eyelids and nodded. "I guess so," I whispered. "I mean, I can't . . . change anything." I couldn't continue to look at Gram's body. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to say goodbye, because I knew that after I turned around and walked out of that strange, cold, impersonal room, I would never see her again. "I . . . my grandmother wanted to be cremated," I quietly said to the attendant. "So just tell me what I have to do."

I went home and lit a candle, which I placed on Gram's dresser. It was the only illumination in the apartment. I sat in the green velvet slipper chair by her empty bed and watched the flame flicker and dance throughout the night until my sleepy head felt as heavy as my heart.

The following day was a Saturday, so I didn't need to ask Uncle Earwax for the day off, although I doubt even he

would have begrudged me the time. After wandering aimlessly around the apartment for half the morning, I picked up the phone and returned Joey Moriarty's phone call. "Next Sunday's matinee is the last performance for the old guard," he told me, "and the new cast members will debut in the Tuesday night show. So, we'll need you to attend the next few performances in your street clothes and shadow the actress who's currently playing FiFi."

"Shadow?" I asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"You *are* an *actress*, aren't you?" Joey replied.

"Yeahhhh." Where was he going with this?

"So, haven't you ever waited tables or tended bar? That's what they call it when a new person comes in to train for a job. It's how you learn the ropes—from trailing the person you're taking over for."

I laughed for the first time in several hours. "I have to admit that I've never had a restaurant gig. All my temp jobs have been in offices."

Speaking of which . . .

I told Joey Moriarty I'd see him this evening and ended the call, then phoned Uncle Earwax at home to officially give him the news that I'd be segueing out of his office and into an Off-Broadway role. I asked him if he had a clue as to whether Gram had left a will. It wasn't that I was interested in an inheritance, but I knew that estate matters would need to be resolved and if there was no will, much of whatever she had in her bank accounts would become the property of the state. Uncle Earwax suggested that I call my parents down in south Florida and find out if Gram had an attorney. You'd think I would have known such things, but she never spoke of anyone in all the years we lived together.

"One thing I can tell you, Alice, is *I'm* sure as hell not her lawyer. The woman hated my guts. You know what she used to call me?"

"What?" I questioned disingenuously.

"Rat bastard."

"You *knew* that?"

"Yeah, I knew it. But I figured I was in a select pantheon where she was concerned. The only *other* person I ever heard your grandmother refer to as a 'rat bastard' was Richard Nixon."

I called my father, who gave me the name of his mother's lawyer; someone I'd never heard of, a guy named Bernard Pikarsky. I phoned him, introduced myself, and arranged to stop by and see him on Monday. Understanding the importance of dealing with Gram's estate as soon as possible, Uncle Earwax had given me the day off to attend to business.

Mr. Pikarsky's office took up the entire parlor floor of a Chelsea walk-up. The attorney was a short, squat, slightly ruddy white-haired man who told me he had known Gram since he was a boy. He offered me a chair and poured me a mug of freshly brewed coffee. "My parents were good friends of hers. They were garment workers—union organizers and socialists—and your grandmother was very sympathetic to them politically." Mr. Pikarsky leaned back in his well-worn leather chair and laughed. "Your *grandfather* . . . well, that was another matter. He despised socialism, communism, but couldn't stand the machine politics of Tammany Hall, even though so many of the movers and shakers were Irish. When he voted at all, he was a staunch Republican."

This was a side of my grandparents—both of them—that

I hadn't known. Gram never told me that she and Grandpa Danny ever disagreed on anything.

Mr. Pikarsky pulled open a file drawer and removed a slender manila folder. Inside it was an official-looking sealed envelope. "This is your grandmother's last will and testament," he said.

"And you had asked me to dig up whatever recent bank statements I could find," I said, and reached into my purse for the papers, which I handed across the desk.

Mr. Pikarsky opened the envelope containing Gram's will. The document itself was only a couple of pages long. "She wrote this about five years ago," he said. He briefly perused its contents, then offered it to me. "You'll see that she leaves everything to you, but apart from her personal effects in the apartment that you share, there isn't really any property, financially speaking. There appears to be enough in her accounts to cover her funeral expenses—"

"There isn't going to be a funeral," I blurted. I caught his look. "She wished to be cremated, so I'm having that taken care of, and . . . the *memorial service*," I added, choosing my words carefully, "will be private."

"Nevertheless, there's enough money on hand so that you don't end up out of pocket for whatever modest arrangements you plan to make, and there's so little here that I can't in all good conscience charge you a legal fee." My eyes widened. In my vast experience with attorneys, this was practically unheard of. Mr. Pikarsky noticed my amazed expression and shrugged. "Alice, your grandmother knew me since I was a little *pisher*. She was good to my parents. How can a 'red diaper baby' like me nickel-and-dime you over this? Come in again next week and I should have some papers from the banks and brokerage houses for you to sign, so I can

transfer to you what little funds are there. I'm sorry to say this, but if you entertained any fantasies of becoming a rich woman upon your grandmother's demise, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you." He laced his fingers together and rested his elbows on the desktop. "She didn't leave you much of a legacy."

"That's what *you* think," I said quietly. I rose from my chair, shook Mr. Pikarsky's hand, and thanked him for his time.

"I can't believe you're even here," Louise remarked when I returned to Balzer and Price the following day. She gave me a quick, awkward hug. "I'm so sorry about your grandmother. Oh, Mr. Price brought these in for you. He thought they might cheer you up." She handed me a box of Godiva chocolates and a little bag of Swedish fish.

"See? He's not such a bad guy," Rosa said. "I'm getting use to him; his bark is a lot worse than his bite."

I opened the box of chocolates and offered some to my two co-workers. Rosa popped one in her mouth, chewed it thoughtfully, and stood for a moment, studying my face. "I'm very sorry about your loss," she said.

I regarded the expression in her large, dark eyes. "You knew. Didn't you?"

Rosa gave a little nod. "But what was I supposed to do? Tell you about it? Whether or not you chose to believe me, would it have made any difference? Would you really have wanted to know?"

"No. I wouldn't have," I said softly.

"I know you loved your grandmother very much. And I know you miss her right now."

"Will I ever stop missing her?" I asked. "No, wait," I added, trying to laugh about it. "That's also something I don't want

to know. I don't think the missing ever stops, no matter how much time passes." I went over to my desk. "What's this?" I asked them, pointing to the white bakery bag.

"Your uncle brought you breakfast," Louise said. "He left it for you before he went to court. I think it's a coffee and a croissant or something. He thought you deserved a little break from all the danish. Oh, we should congratulate you on getting a part," she exclaimed. "I know it's been a rough week, but you shouldn't forget to celebrate the good things that come along."

"Did you know *that* was going to happen, too?" I asked Rosa. She shrugged and smiled enigmatically. "Okay, then, will I make a big splash in this role? No—don't answer that—because if it's not a yes, I don't want to hear it!"

Rosa laughed. "I wouldn't tell you anyway. Trust me, working for Mr. Price is a lot less stressful than being a professional psychic."

"I can't believe that!" Louise exclaimed.

"I know," said Rosa.

Dorian would have loved to perform in *Grandma Finnegan's Wake*. For one thing, the actors got fed at every performance as part of the proceedings. All the corned beef and cabbage and Irish soda bread you could shovel in. They even sold shots of whiskey to the audience. As I shadowed the actress playing Fionulla Finnegan, I wondered if some of the performers ever took a nip now and then during the show. A couple of them were cast as raging drunks anyway; the creators of *Grandma Finnegan's Wake* couldn't have given a damn about political correctness and reveled in every opportunity to play to stereotype.

Joey Moriarty had given me a somewhat skeletal script, with not much to memorize for the role of FiFi, beyond the

eulogy, which had some leeway for me to play with the text anyway, and getting the words right to “Danny Boy.” The lyric was sacred, but it wasn’t a problem. I’d been singing the song for years and it was something of an anthem around *my* branch of the Finnegan family tree. The rest of FiFi’s part was predominantly improvisational and by the third time I trailed the show, I was pretty confident that I had the scenes down. In one, she was supposed to break up a bar fight between her twin cousins Kenny and Denny, two of her backup band members, each of whom she learns has a crush on her. That looked like a fun one to play. In an equally irreverent scene, she got to whip out her blusher compact and attempt to apply some rouge to the cheeks of the dearly departed because she thought the corpse looked “too pale.”

I’m quite sure there are a number of people out there who staunchly believe that death is no laughing matter—or shouldn’t be—but this week, the brazen zaniness of *Grandma Finnegan’s Wake* was just what I needed. And I think Gram would have gotten a real high kick out of it.

Chapter 19



Each evening when I came back to the apartment, I tried to sort through Gram's things, knowing that part of life was the "moving on" part; but I couldn't bring myself to do it, because it meant coming to terms with the fact that she wasn't just on an extended vacation and would eventually be coming home. I wasn't ready to handle it. Not alone, anyway.

"I was wondering what happened to you," Dan Carpenter said when I phoned him.

I explained why I hadn't called any sooner to have him come back to work on the antique settee. There was a heavy silence on the line.

"I'm so sorry, Alice. And I apologize if this may sound hollow, since you don't know me, but it isn't: I can empathize with your loss. My grandmother was the reason I became a craftsman and not a lawyer."

I cradled the receiver to my ear through another lengthy silence.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I could use a house call, if you're not too busy. It's very hard to look at her favorite piece of furniture all pulled apart."

Dan arrived a few hours later with his worn black Gladstone.

"Can I watch?" I asked him, as he checked the status of the wooden frame.

"She's holding together pretty well," he said, appraising the new jointure. He nodded in response to my question. "Sure, grab a seat." He patted the floor beside him. "We'll work on the new underpinnings tonight. The importance of a solid foundation should never be underestimated."

Ain't it the truth?

I looked at the components of Gram's settee, scattered and spread out around the room. "Teach me, Danny Boy," I said softly. "I want to know how to pick up all the pieces and put them back together . . . stronger than they were before."

I'd spoken to both Izzy and Dorian several times since Gram's death. They'd stopped by for a brief visit on the following day, but I was an utter basket case, still incapable of accepting the finality of the situation. The day of my debut in *Grandma Finnegan's Wake* I felt ready to begin to clear out Gram's things, but I needed my best friends by my side.

"Well, you make quite a fashion statement," Izzy said as I let her in the door. "Isn't that a little small for you?"

I was wearing Gram's old and worn white acrylic cardigan with the tea stain just above the second button. "It's hers," I said simply. I held out my arm and Izzy took a deep whiff of the sleeve.

"That rose perfume she always wore," she said. "Whew, it's really strong!"

I sniffed the same area. "No, you can hardly smell it at all.

That's what scares me . . . that it'll fade away forever . . . and one day when I do this," I said, inhaling again, "I won't be able to smell *her* anymore."

Izzy pulled my head onto her shoulder. "Maybe you're right. Ever since I found out I was pregnant, I've got this incredibly heightened sense of smell. Last night, Dominick sprinkled a little parmesan on his baked ziti and I went nuts. He thought I was going clinically insane or something. Speaking of food," she said, as I lifted my head, "do you have any pickles? It must be another truism—what they say about pregnant women craving pickles."

I went to the refrigerator and pulled out two jars. "Here. They're all yours," I said, handing them to her. "Gram bought these. She was a real pickle fiend. I hate pickles."

"So do I," Izzy said, accepting the two jars. "Thanks. I hate pickles so much that when I go to McDonald's and they give me shit about making a special order for me and I don't have all day to wait around or to argue with them, I peel open the bun and pull out the pickle slices with my fingernails. Dominick thinks it's repulsive."

The doorbell rang again. It was Dorian. "Isn't your uncle upset that you're not at work today?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "No, I told him I needed the day off before my opening night. You guys are coming tonight, aren't you?"

"Aw, gee, and I was going to spend the evening shampooing my cat," Izzy teased, giving me a poke in the ribs. "Of course we're going to be there, you nimwit. Even Dominick is coming."

"What about your parents?" Dorian asked. "You would think they'd come up to the New York for the memorial

service, if not for your opening night. You know, kill two birds with one stone, and all that. Sorry."

"My parents are insane," I said. "First of all, there isn't going to be a memorial—well, not in the traditional sense, anyway. Secondly, my mother always hated Gram. Okay, that's not really true. She didn't *hate* her—she just couldn't *stand* her. My father has been afraid to fly, says it's too far to drive, gets antsy on trains and nauseous on buses. Besides, he's never been really religious, and since we're not holding a formal funeral, he says he'll mourn his mother in his own way, and even if he came up to New York, she wouldn't know he'd been to all the trouble to do it, anyway."

"Well, in a slightly selfish, sick, and twisted way, that makes sense," Izzy said.

"But what about your opening night?" Dorian asked.

I opened my arms in a theatrical, Jackie Masonesque shrug. "Can I explain them? It's a 'soft' opening. No fanfare, no critics, I'm going into a long-running show as a replacement. Sure, it's *my* opening night, just as it is for half a dozen *Grandma Finnegan* cast members, but . . ." I collapsed into a dining chair, defeated. "I don't have the energy, emotional, physical, or otherwise, to make excuses or rationalizations. They're staying in Florida, plain and simple." I looked up at my two best friends and tried not to cry. "Family is a funny thing, isn't it? I mean, you guys have always been there for me when my flesh and blood hasn't. What could be more 'family' than that?"

Dorian kissed the top of my head. "It's true. You make them where you find them. Here I am, a single, boyfriendless, relativeless guy in the big city. I think that's another reason I could never give up acting. Every cast becomes a family in a way, too. You share everything . . . joys, sorrows . . ."

"Toothbrushes," Izzy said.

I whipped my head around to look at her. "What?"

"Yeah, there was an actress on a Neil Simon show I did in summer stock who was always stealing my toothbrush. Who knows what *that's* about?"

"I need you here to help me go through some of Gram's things, if it's okay with you," I told them, changing the subject. "I tried to sort through them on my own, but it's too lonely. I can't do it."

Izzy and I did a preliminary inventory of Gram's clothing. I told her she was welcome to anything that caught her eye or might fit her. We had a brief but friendly argument over an original Pucci blouse, after which Izzy agreed that she'd probably end up spilling ketchup on it, and besides it had belonged to *my* grandmother. As we continued our treasure hunt, she reached into the back of the closet and found a faded pink feather boa. After sneezing a number of times as she yanked it through the densely packed hanging garments, she draped it dramatically around her neck and struck a pose.

"It's you!" I giggled. "And it's yours."

"I love it," she said, looking down at her shoulder admiringly, running the soft marabou feathers through her fingers. She sneezed again. "Although I think I may be allergic to it." She gave me an expectant look.

"I told you it was yours," I said. "Wear it in good health. Or on Halloween."

Dorian was poring over a number of old photographs. "Do you think I could keep this?" he said, holding up a sepia-toned studio portrait of "The Footloose Finnegans" doing the Castle Walk. I came over and looked at the photo. "It's an extra," he said. "I found another copy in one of the other folders you handed me."

"A large version of this hung at the top of the stairs of their dance studio," I said. Gram said it was the first thing people saw when they walked in. This one," I said, indicating the one Dorian lovingly cradled in his hands, "must have been one of the copies they displayed in the glass case on the street level."

We found a number of posed professional photos. "She was quite beautiful," Dorian remarked, looking at several of them.

"Inside and out," I agreed. "Although she could be remarkably vain, given half the chance." I arranged the loose photographs in a row. "What do you notice about each of them?"

Dorian looked at the line of pictures. "They're all taken at the same angle."

I nodded. "Three-quarter view, from the left side of her face only. Just like Claudette Colbert had in her film contracts."

"She looks like she's flirting with the camera," Dorian said, amused.

"Don't you think she wasn't!" I regarded the row of photos. "Yes, she was a real looker in her day," I agreed. "And I'm going to miss her like crazy . . . but I wonder if she went at a good time after all."

Dorian gave me a quizzical look. "Is there ever a right time?"

"She'd started showing signs of dementia," I told him. I glanced at the partially repaired settee she'd referred to as a "sitting-on thingy," in her struggle to define a word her eyes remembered, but her brain forgot. "And aphasia, too. Strange episodes and not remembering things. I've been thinking about what might have happened had she degenerated further. It would have been inevitable . . . and who wants to live through that—aware that you're in and out of awareness?"

"Imagine if you were a writer. Like Iris Murdoch," Dorian

mused. "Someone who lives in the mind. And then . . . when you lose your mind, it's like becoming homeless."

"She spared both of us a lot of anguish, going the way she did, I guess."

"Hey, you guys, look what I found!" Still swathed in the pink feather boa, Izzy entered the dining gallery, precariously carrying Gram's jewelry box.

"Ooh, careful!" I said, as it practically slipped out of her grasp onto the already cluttered table. I swiftly moved a Chinese ginger jar out of harm's way.

Dorian looked at the porcelain jar. "I've never seen that before. Has that always been here?"

I shook my head. "It's her."

He slid his chair away from the table. "Oh, my God."

"Wow," Izzy breathed. "I sort of want to look. Can I?" she asked tentatively.

"I guess so."

"Have you looked inside yet?"

"I was too freaked out. I just brought the ginger jar to the people who . . . you know . . . and they gave it back to me, and I brought it home and put it on the dining table for the time being."

"Do you think she's watching us?" Dorian asked. "I mean, in a manner of speaking."

I looked at the jar. "I suppose it's a matter of what you believe. I choose to believe the answer to your question is yes."

Dorian cleared away a spot on the table, since I feared that if I held the sealed jar while trying to open it, everything would fly out all over the place. I did not want to contemplate the prospect of sweeping Gram into a dustpan. As I carefully opened the jar, Izzy leaned in for a closer look while Dorian backed away and covered his eyes. "You two

are really quiet," he said a moment or two later. "So what's it look like?"

"See for yourself," Izzy challenged, but he refused.

"Not what I expected," I answered quietly.

"Which was?" Izzy asked, looking at me.

"Ash. Ashes. I mean, I guess I expected it . . . them . . . her . . . to sort of resemble my uncle's law partner's cigar ashes. Thick and grayish." I peered further into the ginger jar. "It looks more like pale little pellets, Dorian, if you're still vicariously interested." I looked up from the contents into Izzy's face. "This was a life," I said contemplatively. "Rich, vibrant, colorful, unique. And *look* at this," I added, referring to the ashes themselves. What could be more generic and less colorful?" She gave me a baleful look and I put the lid back on the jar. "What are you holding?" I asked her.

Izzy opened her fist and dumped a couple of loose pieces of jewelry onto the table. "These were out of the box, just sitting on her dresser. I don't know what you want to do with them."

I picked up a small ring: gold vermeil studded with tiny seed pearls. "This was her surrogate engagement ring," I said, examining it.

"What happened to the real one? Didn't she ever have a diamond?"

"She did, Dorian, but she sold it. Decades ago. After Grandpa Danny left her and she needed the money to take care of their kids. He'd given her this one when they were courting. Apparently, the pawnshop owner told her he couldn't get much for it anyway, so she might as well keep it. And she wore it ever since, as her replacement engagement ring."

"I wonder why she wasn't wearing it the day she . . . you know," Dorian said.

"You can say 'died,' Dorian. It is what she *did*."

He shrugged. "I'm superstitious. I guess I'm just not comfortable saying the word. It just seems so . . . I don't know . . . *final*."

"She went to the hairdresser that day. Which means she also got a manicure. And she always left her rings at home on the days she had her nails done. She was afraid someone would swipe them when she wasn't looking."

Izzy chuckled. " 'Swipe' is a fun word. It's like from another era."

"Hers," I agreed.

"And it's so expressive."

I slipped the ring onto my finger and admired it. It was a perfect fit.

"Ever tried it on before?" asked Dorian.

"Nope. It was the one piece of jewelry she wouldn't let me play with. Nice, huh?" I held out my left hand to the ginger jar. "May I?"

"I think she would want you to wear it. Certainly tonight," Izzy concluded.

"For luck," Dorian added.

Everything we'd done so far had taken more out of me than I'd expected. "I can't go through the rest of this stuff right now," I said, gesturing to the jewelry box. "I don't think there's much in there that isn't just costume jewelry anyway. If you want one of the pieces, Izzy, you may have it. I think Gram would like that."

Dorian neatened some of the piles of papers on the dining table while Izzy selected a brooch from the jewelry chest and brought the box back into Gram's bedroom. "We should give

you time to take a nice long bath, followed by a nice long nap," Dorian said, giving me a hug.

I looked at my best friends. "Would you two please do me a favor? Come backstage right before the show tonight. We're supposed to start mingling with the audience at half-hour, so get there at seven-fifteen if you can, and tell the house manager that I asked you to stop by the dressing room."

"Absolutely," Dorian agreed. "Break a leg!"

"And knock 'em dead," Izzy added, joining the hug.

"Take that back," I told her. "I'm getting superstitious, like Dorian. The last person to say that to me was Gram . . . and it was the last thing she ever said to me."

Izzy jumped back a step. "Eeek! In that case, *merde*."

"Alice Finnegan, you have visitors in the lower lobby." I heard the stage manager's voice over the speakers in the dressing room as I was putting the finishing touches on my makeup. I went out to greet Dorian and Izzy.

Dorian handed me a bunch of yellow roses. "These are from both of us."

"You two are angels."

"They wouldn't let us come back to the dressing room because it's communal," Izzy told me, "though personally I wouldn't have minded. I can say that because Dominick is waiting upstairs. Anyone cute back there?"

"Not bad, but everyone seems—the guys anyway—to be either a decade or so younger than I am or considerably older, and I do mean *considerably*. Actually that's not true, but the ones in the appropriate age range and sexual orientation for me are already taken. So I won't be meeting Mr. Right at this wake. Which reminds me. Stay there a minute."

I went into the dressing room and came back with a little brown shopping bag. "Which one of you wants to hold this on your lap during the show and schlep it around during the meal?"

Dorian looked into the bag. "She does," he said, pointing to Izzy. "I'm superstitious, remember?" Izzy took the shopping bag from me, peered inside, and saw the ginger jar.

"Gram promised to come to my opening night if I got cast in this show," I said. "She just needed a little extra help with the transportation."

Izzy burst into tears, which set me off, too. "Oh, I'm sorry, honey," she wept. "You'll have to redo all your makeup, and you've only got five more minutes till you said you're supposed to mingle with the audience."

"And this is supposed to be a *comedy*," I sobbed. I gave them a little shrug and a smile. "Oh, *well*."

"Go for it," Dorian said. "We'll meet you outside on the street after the performance."

I went back into the dressing room, did a quick repair to my makeup, and grabbed a teeny slice of the "welcome to the *Wake*" cake that the producers had gotten for the six new cast members.

My first performance was something of a blur. All I remember is that it went without incident (meaning "disaster"), and that I had a tremendous amount of fun. It was hard work doing a show that was so largely improvisational; you had to constantly be on alert to keep the ball in the air. I had to create decades-long relationships from scratch and out of thin air. I'd never before worked with, nor had ever *met* until this evening, the man who was playing my grandfather, for example. And yet, over two and a half hours of time together, it was as though he'd known me since my baptism. *Grandma Finnegan's Wake* was very different from any scripted show I

had done, in that without a hundred and ten percent teamwork from everyone in the cast, the show would collapse like an underdone soufflé. I recalled Dorian's remark about family. In some ways I felt more bonded to this new, loud, close-knit, ever-squabbling, insane family of fictional Finnegans than I'd ever been with my real-life clan, contents of the ginger jar being the sole exception.

There were hugs and kisses, smiles and tears in the dressing room after the show. I was invited to join the cast at their usual post-performance watering hole, an Irish pub called Mustang Sally's up near Madison Square Garden. "I'll try to get there," I assured them, "but I've got some special guests here tonight, and I need to spend some time with them first."

"So bring them along!" said the actor who was playing my grandfather. I don't think the noise would have been much to Gram's taste . . . although she had a way of surprising me. I graciously declined the invitation.

"So, did you have fun?" I asked my friends.

Dorian nodded and patted his knapsack.

"He's got breakfast for a week," Izzy said. "One good thing about being a dog owner in New York is that you've always got plastic bags stuffed into your purse. So I sneaked one to Dorian and he loaded up on dinner rolls and pieces of fruit."

My hand flew to my mouth. "You didn't!"

"'Fraid so'," he admitted.

"Well, I think she loved it!" Izzy said brandishing the brown shopping bag.

"She would have been proud of you, Alice," Dorian said.

"Would you three be pissed off at me if I just went on home?" Dominick asked his wife. "You were wonderful, by

the way," he said to me, giving me a quick peck on the cheek. He said goodbye and headed off, leaving the rest of us standing on the sidewalk in front of the theater.

"My antisocial husband," Izzy shrugged, watching him walk up the street. "I'll give him hell about it when I get home. So, are you up for a celebratory drink?"

I nodded. "Let's head uptown." We stopped at a Korean deli, where I bought three bottles of Harp beer, since Izzy said she was allowed to have one alcoholic beverage per month and hadn't yet filled her quota. I shoved them in my shoulder bag and took Gram from Izzy, then led them downstairs to the Sheridan Square subway station, where we waited for the uptown local, taking us to Times Square.

"Where are we going?" Izzy asked, as she and Dorian followed me up to the street.

"To Grandma Finnegan's wake."

Dorian looked confused. "Weren't we just there?"

The lights of Broadway flashed ostentatiously in every shade of neon. Despite the mass gentrification, the area still retained an aura of magic and glamour.

"Follow me," I told them, and headed for the triangular-shaped block that stands at "the crossroads of the world," where Broadway and Seventh Avenue meet Forty-second Street. "This is where we start." In a shadow cast by the great bulk of Number One Times Square, I opened the beers and handed them around. "To Gram," I said, raising my bottle. My friends joined the toast, each of us taking a huge swig of beer.

"We've got to stop meeting at memorials," Izzy said soberly.

"Do you call that *acting*?" we chorused, in three dead-on imitations of Nick Katzanides, our big, fat Greek drama teacher.

"And now, a little song," I announced. "Feel free to join in if you know the words."

"Can you drink beer right out on the street like this?" Dorian asked.

"Shhhh. Of course not," Izzy hissed. "Start singing, Alice."

"Come and meet those dancing feet . . . on the avenue I'm taking you to . . . Forty-second Street!" I sang at the top of my lungs. "Oh, shit, I don't remember any of the rest of the words. Do you?" I looked at Izzy and Dorian, who looked back blankly. "Oh, well." I repeated the only verse I knew and they joined in. Loudly. Dorian did a little soft shoe routine as he sang. "You're right," I teased him, "you're totally tone-deaf and you have *almost* no rhythm! But she would have been so proud of you. Look how far you've come. My grandmother's got you singing and dancing on Broadway after all! Oh, wait. Hold this a second." I tucked my beer under my arm and removed the ginger jar from the shopping bag, handing it to Izzy. Then I opened my purse and pulled out two brand-new boxes of Playtex plastic gloves, the kind my mother used to wear when she washed dishes. "Medium for you," I said, giving one box to Izzy, and "a large pair for you," I added, handing the other box to Dorian. "Put them on."

My friends complied, and I tugged on a pair of lightweight leather gloves that had belonged to Gram. Then I took another swig of beer, returned the bottle to my armpit, and opened the ginger jar.

"You do realize that what we're about to do here is probably totally illegal," Izzy said. "They could arrest you for littering or something."

"So if the cops catch me, I'll just plead temporary insanity."

"At least put down the Harp or you'll end up dropping

something and it'll probably be your grandmother," Izzy suggested. "I'll hand it back to you when you want a drink."

I rested the beer bottle on the sidewalk, took a small handful of Gram's ashes, and was about to scatter them when Dorian touched my closed hand. "Shouldn't we say a prayer or something?"

I looked at him thoughtfully. "Like what?"

"The Twenty-third Psalm, maybe? You know, 'The Lord is my shepherd . . . ' "

"You begin it," I suggested.

Dorian and Izzy each took a handful of ashes. " 'The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want . . . ' "

"Goodbye, Gram," I said, tossing my handful into the night sky.

" 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . . ' " Izzy murmured, as she and Dorian sprinkled the ashes on the pavement. " 'He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.' Since your grandmother was a dancer, I figured she'd want to touch the ground," she said.

I led my friends across the street, where we scattered some more ashes at Forty-second and Broadway, took a few more drinks of beer, then continued our progress uptown. " 'He guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake,' " I said, quoting the next line of the psalm.

"Remember the day I was over at your apartment and your grandmother collapsed? She said not to forget Shubert Alley," Dorian said.

I nodded. "That's where we're headed." We turned onto Forty-fourth Street. It was darker than Broadway; the theater marquees were dimmer now that the performances were over for the night.

“ ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,’ ” Dorian continued, as we each scattered another fistful of ashes by the southern entrance to Shubert Alley, “ ‘I will fear no evil’—oh, shit, there’s a cop!”

“Where?!” I closed the ginger jar and we tried to hide our beers from the mounted policeman trotting toward us across Forty-fourth Street.

“Go distract him, Dorian,” Izzy encouraged.

“Me? I don’t do so well with cops, remember?”

“ ‘I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.’ ” Izzy sighed in exasperation. “Fine, then. Turn around so I can get into your backpack.” She pulled off her rubber gloves and handed them to me, then reached into Dorian’s bag and pulled out an apple, one of his pieces of contraband from the *Grandma Finnegan’s* free dinner. She tossed it into her purse. “Now go, you two,” she whispered, pointing to the northern end of the alley. The mounted policeman had stopped and was talking to a couple of tourists. He hadn’t yet seen what we were up to, so Izzy pretended she’d been strolling across Shubert Alley and had suddenly noticed him.

“Oh, he’s so beautiful,” she gushed loudly, pointing to the chestnut-colored police horse. “I used to ride. I miss it so much. What’s his name?”

“Luke,” we heard the officer tell her.

“Luke. What a cool name. He looks like a Luke.” Out of the corner of her eye, I saw her toss her head to and fro as though she were flirting with the cop. “Is it okay if I feed him?”

“ ‘Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies,’ ” Dorian recited. He and I were now at the Forty-fifth Street end of Shubert Alley and I made sure that we had

a good view of Izzy and the policeman while I peppered the steps of the Booth Theatre with Gram's ashes. I saw Izzy take the apple from her purse and feed it to the police horse, and as Luke gobbled the last of it, she turned toward us and I gave her a thumbs-up sign. Mercifully, she saw me, thanked the policeman for letting her play with his horse, and watched him *clip-clop* down the street toward Eighth Avenue before joining us.

I congratulated her on her performance. Then we polished off our beers and tossed the bottles in a nearby trash can.

"Where next?" Izzy asked.

"What about Duffy Square, with the George M. Cohan statue, and the half-price tickets booth?" Dorian suggested.

"Perfect!" I agreed. "Gram actually *knew* Cohan, you know."

We walked up to Broadway and Forty-sixth Street. "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over," Izzy recited as we each anointed the sidewalk from Forty-sixth to Forty-seventh Street with Gram's ashes. "How much is left?" she asked me.

I peered down into the jar. "Probably just enough for one more location. I think it would be appropriate for Gram to play the Palace one last time." We crossed the street and stood in front of the legendary Palace Theatre.

"She's liking this," Dorian said. "I can feel it." He reached into the ginger jar for a handful of ashes. Izzy did the same.

I rested the jar on the sidewalk and pulled off the leather gloves, tossing them in my purse. "I'm a little scared to do this . . . but I want to touch her with my bare hands. Flesh to ashes." I picked up the jar and took the remaining handful. " 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . . ' " I turned to face the entrance to the

Palace, followed by Izzy and Dorian, who stood on either side of me.

" 'And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever,' " we chanted in unison, tossing the last handful of ashes into the air as we finished the final sentence of the psalm.

For maybe a minute, none of us spoke. The night was suprisingly, almost shockingly silent. No sirens, no car horns, no drunks. Then, as the three of us continued to face the theater, we heard the sound of hoofbeats. We froze, expecting the return of the mounted policeman. I turned slowly to see an empty horse-drawn carriage coming down the avenue. The driver on the box was an elderly man who wore an old-fashioned coachman's duster and a shiny black top hat. Stuck rakishly inside the band above the brim was a bright green four-leaf clover. He tipped his hat to the three of us and winked at me.

"Did you see that?" I marveled softly.

"See what?" Izzy asked.

"Oh, please tell me you were kidding," I said to her.

Dorian touched my arm. "We even saw the shamrock," he assured me. "Kind of neat, to happen just then, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

He looked at me. "You know, this is a silly question, coming now, I mean, but I never knew your grandmother's first name. You always called her Gram. And when I was at your apartment looking through her photographs, I didn't see it anywhere."

"Irene," I said. "Her name was Irene."

"Irene Finnegan," Izzy said quietly. "You know there's another old song in that. If you know the tune?"

"You know, I should . . . but I don't," I confessed.

"Well, we all know I'm no musical theater performer, but

I'll give it a whirl," Dorian said. He began to sing in a bold, clear voice. "Irene, goodnight . . . Irene goodnight."

I looked down at the sidewalk in front of the Palace, noting where a bit of ash had landed. I picked it up and balanced it on the tip of my index finger. Then I held up my hand, looked skyward, and blew the dust away. "Goodnight, Irene," I whispered.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my fabulous agent, Irene Goodman, and my wonderfully perceptive and gifted editor, Lucia Macro, who encouraged and enabled me to dig deeper and reach higher; and to Sylvia Goldsmith, Norma Carroll, and Carroll Carroll, as well as “Auntie Deb”—Deborah Kay Evans—for helping to make me who I am. Huge hugs to Cecilia Vanti—with whom I first shared this idea over pizza and root beer at Big Nick’s on Broadway. Thanks to Jen Criswell, and to Meir Ribalow, for always being so dear; to d.f for many, many reasons; and—a quick disclaimer to my friends and family—this is a work of fiction; any resemblance the characters herein may bear to real persons is, of course, purely coincidental.

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Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader February 2007 ISBN 978-0-06-135923-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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