

"Sassy Jane Cooper's delightful showdown with corporate America makes for a lighthearted, fast, fun read!"
—ROBIN GOLD, author of *The Perfectly True Tales of a Perfect Size 12*

slacker girl



ALEXANDRA KOSLOW



A Novel



A PLUME BOOK
SLACKER GIRL

ALEXANDRA KOSLOW graduated from Kutztown University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, with a concentration in photography. She has worked in advertising, mixology (aka bartending), and publishing.

ALEXANDRA KOSLOW

Slacker Girl



A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

Published by Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Mairangi Bay, Auckland 1311, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Plume, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Copyright © Alexandra Koslow, 2007

All rights reserved

® REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Koslow, Alexandra.

Slacker girl / Alexandra Koslow.

p. cm.

ISBN: 1-4295-4187-3

1. Chick lit. I. Title.

PS3611.O74918S56 2007

813'.6—dc22

2006035791

Set in Horley old style

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

For Wolf and Stefany with love—
Thanks for making growing up a trip!

PROLOGUE

In Defense of Leisure

Leisure *noun* [from old Roget's thesaurus] *Synonyms:* ease, freedom, rest, recess, liberty, pause, interlude. *Antonyms:* work, labor, employment, toil, drudgery, exertion.

No doubt about, leisure in springtime in New York City is premium leisure. The weather is great, everyone is dusting off winter, feeling renewed and invigorated, feeling horny, getting social, and *best* of all, I can once again sit at the outdoor tables of the café. My café; my little slice of heaven, my home base, my church.

My café is Italian. This is important. Italians corner the market on (along with many other things) leisure, coffee, and pastry. From generations of cultivating quality leisure, they *expect* you to sit around all day at their café, so not only are you never rushed, you're actually supported and made to feel like family. My little café, with its red awning and tiny round tables that are crammed together and bursting out of the café doors onto the busy sidewalk of Prince Street in SoHo, is my favorite place in the world.

Admittedly it's a little bit unique how much I've been missing the outdoor tables here. But as a self-proclaimed (and no one would argue) leisure connoisseur, my senses are heightened to things of this nature. I mean, look, winter is still great because inside the café you get music pipin' overhead, your tasty treats are illuminated in pretty display cases, you have more bonding time with the café staff, and it's toasty warm, an oasis from the harsh cold city winter. I get it and I like it. But it doesn't beat an outdoor table, in perfect spring weather, in Manhattan. It's the positive vibe . . . it's vibe-

eriffic. It's like, anything can happen. Raw potential. And for me, nothing is better than living the café life in New York in springtime right now, on a Tuesday morning, when I'm supposed to be at work. To be at the café on a Tuesday and still gainfully employed is the kind of stuff that makes me want to make out with life. The Universe has bestowed the gift of leisure unto me and I am accepting said leisure and hugely appreciating it as much as humanly possible. *Thanks, Universe!*

The pursuit of leisure is surprisingly unpopular these days. I actually have to *defend it* and explain to friends and family why I pursue my own personal interests as much as possible, and yet somehow they don't have to explain why it is that they're working all the time, and for someone else, doing a lot of stuff they don't want to do. There's some kind of disconnect happening. These days, focusing on one's career is normal, while focusing on one's personal interests is not. This is why, right now, at the café, I'm only one of three people. Sometimes, when I'm hormonal, it makes me want to weep for humanity. Let me liberate you: there is no virtue, none whatsoever, in working your fingers to the bone day in and day out. As a matter of fact, when I'm feeling lawyerly, I like to quote a little something called "The Declaration of Independence." Our foxy, Freemason-loving founding fathers *did* mention something about the "pursuit of happiness," a.k.a. leisure, as something that is fundamentally and profoundly important. So potentially, pursuing your personal leisure goals is not only a rockin' good time, but a patriotic one as well . . . nice!

I think I can blame the 1980s for this confusion. The 1980s were a decade of formidable and twisted horror films such as *Working Girl* starring Melanie Griffith and *The Secret of My Success* starring Michael J. Fox. These propaganda films, now considered "classics," were further supported by the hit TV shows *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. This "entertainment" of the 1980s made office jobs and corporate takeovers seem like the absolute hottest thing a girl could do. This is

because back then corporate takeovers were typically done by women in high-powered/highly tailored suits with gobs of glamorous makeup and chunky accessories. And most takeovers, if not all, could be capped with hot sex with the local tennis pro directly thereafter. Who can resist this kind of scenario? If I had been a teenager at the time of these productions, you better believe I would have *run* to college with a major in business so I could do whatever it took to get to a fucking boardroom a.s.a.p. Unfortunately it was all false advertising, but no one knew it. When this sexy, sassy stuff hit the air, it was all over for leisure in America. The work ethic just spread around the country like genital crabs in a strippers' locker room with just one towel; fast and nasty.

Now, all this time later, the market is practically *flooded* with working women who love to tell people, "I work *so hard* . . ." like it's a badge of honor (or a brooch or Hermès scarf, I should say). If a female New Yorker says to you, "Oh, my God, I have to go into work on *Saturday* . . ." and she sounds upset about it, don't worry, she's really not. What she's really saying is "Check this out, I'm *so* important to this company they need me to come in on a weekend . . . aren't I ambitious and motivated? I'm going places." It's really bragging cloaked in whining, and it's fascinating to me because it's so outrageous and confused. Do they not realize what they're doing? Has anyone noticed the lack of highly tailored suits, excessive makeup, boardroom antics, and after-meeting sex in the workplace? I fear not. All this crazy activity just adds up to a lot of . . . *work*, and that's it. That's not something anyone needs exposure to.

Rebecca, my best friend, doesn't agree with me. She's already been brainwashed and there's no turning back for her. When I try to explain it, all she says is, "Jane Cooper, you are so fucked in the head I don't even know where to start." Really, she can be so vulgar. But what can I expect from a person who has an enormous trust fund and still works *every single day*? Between us it's a battle of who's more delusional (her).

Working like crazy is so ingrained into the system that we all believe this is just how it is, it's not our fault, it's "the fabric of our lives" or some bullshit like that. And of course, New York City, my home, has to be better than everyone else, even at workaholicism, so you can imagine the state of affairs around here, and why no one else is at this café right now. People so identify with their jobs and careers that working hard in a particular industry is now the sorority or fraternity to join after college, and we are a very Greek town. Everyone wants to be branded by his or her place of employment. In college I didn't join a sorority, and after college I didn't join a fucking company, at least not initially. What's so great about it? So at a cocktail party I could confidently say, "I work with Gasbag & Gasbag?" I think not.

If you are conscious of the fact that you hate working and that it's making you sick to your stomach, there's a reason for that: it's going against your nature and therefore your system is rejecting it. My advice? Hold a job like I do, but simply *don't go to it*. It does take some finessing, I won't kid you. But I've been working this system since college graduation so I now spend approximately 50 percent of my Monday thru Friday workweek at the café, and the other 50 percent working toward paying rent and taking care of business (staying employed). I think twenty hours a week of working at a job that pays a salary plus 10 percent commission with benefits is acceptable for now.

That said, just to be clear, when I am on the job, I'll give the job my all, definitely a quality work performance if I may say so myself. I'm not a cheat—I'm not going to just take their paychecks and not provide the agreed-upon service. But I will provide said service when I'm good and ready; I'm not going to let a company dictate or in any way influence my opinions on what I should provide. It's fair enough. Bottom line, the work is getting done and I'm still gainfully employed. Give it a whirl!

Alright, one more thing—uh . . . oh wait, here's Marisol, who is my favorite waitress and my friend.

"Jane, you have a call."

"Who is it?"

"Some freak named Sheila, says you know who she is."

"Did you tell her you saw me?"

"No, I said I would look for you."

"I bet she knows I'm here, shit. . . . Fuck it, please say that I'm not here and no one's seen me."

Marisol was laughing, "No problem, girl. She sounds like a tough bitch."

"You're so right. Be strong, Mari, don't let her bully you."

Sheila, a.k.a. Piss & Vinegar, is the receptionist/office manager at my job. We have a history of Sheila trying to bust me for my café time, and me bribing her with hush pastry to keep quiet. I think she wants me fired, though I'm not sure why. I think she considers it sport or something. So now I'm blackmailed into providing her with muffins, scones, or other café pastry, and if I don't give her something one day (like yesterday) I get a warning call like this one at the café, reminding me that she can bust me at any time. So degrading.

Anyway, I still have a little time. So basically what I do at cafés, aside from consuming the obvious refreshment, and embroidering constantly (I have a touch of OCD so this is mandatory), is ponder my own thoughts and life ad nauseam and ad infinitum. True. Mental masturbation, folks, that's the name of my game. I have found, through extensive lollygagging at cafés, that many other parts of life can come to fruition with a really good, concentrated, yet leisurely (enjoyment is key), pondering. No reason to lift a finger or run all over town, let it all just come to you. That's how I got my present job. I thought while sitting right here, "I really need a solution to my current leisure/work problem, I'm just too broke," and next thing you know, I meet my boss's sister at a bar, and she tells me my new career path. Not kidding you. So what I do now is contemplate my life and future in fabulous scenarios and then just

wait for the Universe to deliver them. Here's what I think about, to give you some ideas:

My Current Top 5 Ponderances

(In no particular order and these can change at any time)

1) Okay, this one is kind of common for us single gals: I'm in love with the foxiest guy ever, who worships the ground I walk on and we always hold hands and stuff and he loves cafés as much as I do and hangs out with me at them. I am talking true, big love. He will be motivated yet understand my need to not be at work every second of the day. He's a star. Oh yeah, and Rebecka will actually respect him.

2) I somehow acquire a huge lump sum of money (lottery?) and divide it up between my parents, some friends (but not Rebecka, she's richer than everybody), and starving people and everyone is super psyched.

3) Rebecka and I become best friends with Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, or Pam Anderson or Gwen Stefani . . . Drew Barrymore? Maybe the singer of X-ray Spex or Lara Flynn Boyle, or one of the Selmas. I have to get clearer on this one, but one of these people. Christina Applegate?

4) My OCD expressions (a.k.a. my embroideries) are discovered and I become a hugely celebrated artist and the darling of the NY art scene, which enjoys a renaissance and becomes cool and intriguing once again. This will help me to justify my art degree to my mother, shut Rebecka up, and give me legitimacy and free license to make a lot more embroideries in peace, which is all I really want.

5) Last but in no way the least: that my life is 150 percent pure leisure. Meaning, I'm not working *ever*, I am doing my own thing *all the time*. (This one can come hand in hand with

the large income, but not necessarily. I'm just saying there's strong domino-effect potential.)

So that's the general idea. It's important to have goals in life and be clear on what you want out of it. So it's café, scone, tea, and a ponder. I am really looking forward to my little wish list being fulfilled and I can feel that it's on its way. I have, like, butterflies in my stomach because it's going to get wild with all the changes in my life.

"Jane, your girl Sheila is on the phone again, and she said she knows you're here."

"Thankfully I don't work for her, Marisol, please tell her you didn't see me."

"I will. Girl's got a problem," she said as she turned to go back inside.

"Thanks, Mari." Fucking Piss & Vinegar . . . *shit* . . . "Okay, Marisol, can I get a muffin to go?" Time to go to work.

Slacker Girl

Café *noun* 1. A den for mental masturbation and lots of it. To be done with a side of caffeinated beverage and baked item necessary for sustaining marathon zoning. 2. My spiritual office. 3. Embroidery OCD workout center.

Strolling to work wearing a suit while the sun is shining makes me want to hurl and it wreaks havoc on my intestines. I call it gastrointestinal “expressions” because it’s like my intestines know that I’m going to work and are expressing their displeasure by sending me to a bathroom as a way to punish me or to delay the inevitable. No need to fiber up when a job can keep you more than regular.

I have a job in the financial investment world if you can believe it. You don’t have to because I’ve been there for several months and I still can’t. I am a junior relationship manager for Leetsmann & Stone. I have the corporate job and all the accoutrements: I wear a suit and carry a briefcase (I call it my griefcase even though it’s really cute and from Coach because Rebecka bought it for me). I have business cards (that honestly have come in handy as coasters under my office drink or under my candles at home so the candle wax doesn’t stick to surfaces). I have stationery. I go to offices and events and lunches around the city schmoozing Leetsmann & Stone clients so that they keep investing and feel happy doing it. It’s a fucking trip.

There’s Katie. She works at my favorite store, a ’40s-inspired vintage, secondhand clothing/antique shop, and she’s one of the coolest girls around. “Hey, diva, how are you, gorgeous?”

“I’m just perfect, Janie, love your suit! We just got the best bustier in to wear under that jacket with no shirt.”

“Nice! I’ll be back around five thirty!” A bustier . . . intriguing.

Anyway, Leetsmann & Stone is a decrepit, anal-retentive, mon-eymaking whorehouse of an institution, riddled with materialistic deviants of the worst kind. Deviants, I might add, who are extremely confident in themselves and everything they do, and sorely disappointed in the rest of society (i.e., me). I’m thinking about doing some kind of cinematic exposé on these crazy douchebags, sometime down the road. Once they let their guards down. We are talking big box office attraction, tapping into the “watching a train wreck” phenomenon.

Besides me and Sheila, it’s mostly men at L&S—98 percent men who work there, and 98 percent men who are our clients that I have to talk to and take out. I know, it sounds very, very hot, but it isn’t. Even though it’s my job to be friendly and a go-to person for clients, I see my job as being more like a financial psychologist, because really all I do is listen to a bunch of crap about how genius this particular client thinks he is with his money, how much he spends on things, how he knows everything and everyone, or why he was right to think a particular investment would work, and then agree with him and tell him how his feelings are valid. My clients (and most of my coworkers) just want a platform to talk about themselves nonstop. I’m the captive audience. Not captivated, but captive as in hostage. Now, I’m usually on board with shop talk: I like when people really get into their thing, whatever it is. I like to learn. I like enthusiasm. But these guys take things to a whole other level. Braggetty brag brag brag. At first I was genuinely interested in them because I’ve never been in such close contact with the mon-eymaking culture. Then that wore off, because they all say basically the same thing. But then, I was fascinated by how boring they were, how passionately dull they could be, so I would still hang on their every word and watch their expressions. When I realized that I was in this job for longer than expected and that there was no end to this bullshit, it just got hard. Dead hard. And what sucks is that I

really do have to listen to them because I learned quickly that if they noticed I wasn't paying attention, they'd get good and pissed fast, and then start sulking. Like, who the fuck am I not to pay attention? I know they're not the worst people in the world, but they are the most boring and might be the most condescending. This is how I get through appointments now: when a client makes a joke and we're both laughing, we are both laughing at two different things; he his joke, and me at him. I will actually store up humorous things about him in my mind while he's talking and not let myself laugh, so if he tries to say something remotely humorous I can genuinely burst out laughing. It just works.

I don't know how Rebecca or my mother can say I'm irresponsible when I force myself to do this every day in order to be fiscally responsible, I really don't. Just because I'm not there *all day* . . . Anyway, as bizarre as the job is, it was fate that I work there and who am I to argue with fate? I'm sure the job will prove to be fruitful even though there are absolutely zero signs of that now except for my marginally improved lifestyle.

From college graduation until about five months ago I was living the life with my strictly leisure-friendly jobs, and I had done them all: dog-walking, waitressing, bartending, messenger service, nannying (part time), personal assistant (part-time)—jobs that allowed for a lot of loitering at bars, cafés, lounges, parks, at friends' jobs while they worked, etc. These jobs were good for me not only for the leisure, but because I worked with people I liked to hang out with socially, I wore whatever I wanted, acted however I wanted, etc. I didn't have to wear a suit and didn't have to behave conservatively and "office-friendly." Life was very relaxing.

But one day I realized that I had a kind of yucky, gray feeling that I couldn't identify. Once I acknowledged it, I realized that I'd been feeling that way for a couple of months. Not one to panic, I chalked it up to the "malaise of my generation" and tried to ignore it. But it persisted.

So I tried the usual distractions (dancing, boozing, partying, kissing a few frogs) to get through it and doubled them up for greater effect, but nothing changed. Rebecka, our friend Yuki, and I roundtabled the situation. Still nothing. It was a brutal time. I knew I would have to do some soul-searching to get through this. So I finally took a good, hard, objective look around and then in the mirror, and I found the problem right there: I was sick of being broke and now looking broke down. It was weighing on my subconscious. True, I could afford the café all I wanted, but rent, clothing, and personal maintenance were another story. New York can be expensive. And I was fine with it up to this point because I'm not particularly materialistic. But, if I'm to be totally honest, my apartment in the West Village on Sullivan Street was a mess: everything I had in the apartment was cheap, flimsy, and made of smelly plastic. I'd been eating chips and salsa and pasta and sauce forever because it was budget-friendly. And then my looks went from cool/vintage to downright cheap and depressing: cheap hair color, makeup, just bad. Then I asked Rebecka how I looked and she said, "Like shit, probably the worst I've ever seen you. I didn't say anything because really, who cares? You're still hot. Do you want to look like a Barbie doll? Like a flight attendant like half the girls around here? No, I forbid it." That was the final straw. I just completely avoided my mother because I knew she would have a fit if she saw me. It's hard enough to date when you look great; just ask Yuki (she's a model). There was no way I was going to dismiss my hot chick vibe, not a chance. So the bubble burst: being low-budget was getting on my damn nerves. I had to get the hell out of the whole living-in-squalor scene.

To fix the problem I understood that I had to be brutal with myself and take my balancing act to another level: I had to get a more offensive job that would pay more than my current waitressing gig and yet still somehow preserve my leisure. I would have to accept a real change. But what could I do that would afford me all

the free time I was accustomed to *and* would pay me more and was still totally legal? After some good concentrated café ponderings, the answer revealed itself to me at Nancy Whiskey Pub, where I was having a “session.”

I was just sitting by myself at the bar because my date was talking to some ancient and inebriated NYU professor about literature. The woman sitting next to me was by herself because the friend she was out with claims “allergies” when she’s not being hit on by random men and then goes home. Somehow we struck up a conversation. Her name was Valetta and she turned out to be my leisure angel.

“So what do you do for a living?” she asked me.

“Currently I’m waitressing in Union Square, but I’m looking for a new gig because I need more moola . . . any ideas?” I asked, stirring the ice in my drink.

“Yes, I do, actually! Have you considered working in sales?”

“Is that what you do?”

“Yup.”

“Hmm . . . I don’t really know if I can do sales.” I know I can’t.

“Yeah, people think it’s lame but I have a car and I make more money than most of my friends that graduated college with me.”

“Sweet.” Not a fucking chance.

“Yeah. And the best part is that we make our own hours, it’s like we’re self-employed.”

My head snapped up. “What?”

She laughed. “Yeah, I tell my friends they should think about it even though it’s not that glamorous, but they all say ‘no way’ because it’s not a ‘cool’ job. Screw that, I’d rather get *paid* and do my thing.”

“You make your own hours?” Drool was forming on my bottom lip.

“Oh, yeah. Yesterday I didn’t get to work till about eleven thirty because I had a ‘sales call.’ ” She told me doing the quote signs with her fingers.

“Goodness . . .” I was stumped. The wheels started turning drunkenly in my mind. *Make your own hours, Jane. . . .*

“Listen, if you’re interested, my brother’s company is looking to hire a salesperson. Well, it’s not exactly sales, it’s a relationship manager gig, which is kind of sales, but more like schmoozing, but it’s a similar structure to sales. You could probably do the whole ‘client call’ thing and I’m sure you get plenty of free meals. Ray—that’s my brother—tried to hire me but I like where I am. His company is stuffy—they are moneymakers over there and those guys suck—but the base salary is probably decent even though you’d mostly get commission.”

“I don’t know if I should have a commission-based job. . . .” Judging by my work track record, that might not be wise.

“I think you should give it a shot and see what the salary is. Since you’ll be junior they can’t expect you to just live on commission so it will probably be just as good, if not better than waitressing. And I bet you can handle those finance guys, too; you seem like a people person. You never know, maybe you’ll meet someone. There are a lot of single guys at that company, so Ray says.” I looked over at my lame date. So did Valetta. It was obvious that I needed a changing of the guard, so to speak. *Finance guys . . . hmm . . . a company full of single guys who have jobs . . . intriguing.*

I was definitely drunk, considering a job with finance frat boy assholes. “Alright, couldn’t hurt to go to an interview, right? Keep an open mind, expand my horizons, if you will.” Famous last words.

“My thoughts exactly. And now my brother can get off my back about this, so it’s a win-win. Truthfully, he’s been a nag. Let me buy you a drink, Relationship Manager.”

“Um, just so we’re clear, I don’t have any experience,” I told her.

“I love it! I may be sauced, but I know you’re qualified. I’m a great salesperson and I have *the eye*. I know Ray will hire you because

you look like the kind of girl he would hang out with socially, like you guys would listen to the same music or something, so I'm sure he'll love you. You'll be great. Come on, what are we having?"

"If I'm working at an adult frat house, I'm gonna need some kind of whiskey . . . Jameson?"

"My kind of girl. Bartender?" she called.

This girl was playing me like a virtuoso. She ordered and then picked up her brown leather sack and started digging around while she spoke. "Again, my brother's name is Ray, Ray Bowen, but you have to call this woman . . . here it is." And she pulled out a scrap of paper with a number and the name Sheila. "You just call and sign yourself up there."

"Oy." I must have looked very unsure about it.

"Listen, you work when it's comfortable for you. Little baby steps," she said, completely unconcerned.

"I'm telling Ray you said that!" I said, teasing her.

"Hey, he's going to be thanking me, whatever you do. You need a job, they need a relationship manager, I need Ray off my back, everyone's happy. Believe me: if it turns out you suck, they'll just fire you."

"Alright, darlin'," I said, standing up. "Now I gotta go before I do any more damage to my life. Thanks for the gig."

"You're welcome, Jane Cooper. I bet I'll be seeing you at the company Christmas party!" And she smiled and nodded with self-satisfaction.

The next day I was contemplating the job and contact number while consuming one cheeseburger, one Coke, two aspirin, a chocolate milk, leftover Chinese House lo mein, a glazed doughnut, three bottles of water, and some Raisinets.

Let's think this through. *The Universe might want me to take this disgusting job—how else could this have landed on my lap? Both me and Valetta are stranded at the bar so that we have no one to talk to*

but each other. And she offers a job right when I need one. It's fate. I just don't understand why the job has to be at this company. Is this karma as well as fate? Am I being helped and punished simultaneously?

Okay, let's look at the positives. *The office is downtown, not far from my disgusting apartment, which is good because it keeps me close to café headquarters and cuts back on commuting costs. I'll probably have sweet benefits—I could use a doctor checkup. If I stay focused, I can train these frat boys into ideal bosses and coworkers who appreciate leisure, so there is that charitable aspect. . . .*

I consulted Dana, my mother (who I am not allowed to call Mom). She was ecstatic and got into her wheeling and dealing mode. "Jane. This is what I have been talking about: a good job at a real company, with young men for you to date; very nice. Now you're using your head, good girl. About time you grew up. Go for it—you will be hired, I know this for a fact. Now let's get you a corporate makeover for your fabulous new job, I'm thinking something like . . ." and that's where I stopped listening, but you get the idea.

Then I told Rebecka. "Jane, good for you, Leetsmann & Stone has been around forever. Give it a try."

"But you know the environment is wrong for me. I don't know if I can take it. Can't you think about my needs for a change and give me a thorough analysis?"

She wasn't having it. "I'm not catering to your bullshit. You will go on the interview, you will get the job, and you will stay there for a minimum of six months and that's final. This is a nice opportunity that we both know you don't deserve. Investigate it. Grow up. Earn some money for a change and clean up your act. You never know, you might like it. I can't believe *I'm* telling *you* this, but try to be open-minded and positive."

Well, that sort of did it. If for no other reason, this job might give me piece of mind from Rebecka and Dana, my nags. And, I

hoped, I might not even get the job, so no need to panic just yet. I grabbed the bull by the horns, no pun intended. I called the number on the scrap of paper and scheduled an appointment with an incredibly irate individual named Sheila who I now know as Piss & Vinegar. I braced myself for Monday, ten a.m.

Blush *verb* [from dictionary.com] 1. To become red in the face, especially from modesty, embarrassment, or shame; flush. 2. To become red or rosy. 3. To feel embarrassed or ashamed: *blushed at his own audacity*.

When Monday came I admittedly didn't have an ideal attitude. I didn't have that "eager candidate" hat on (snort). I never have a good attitude when I have to do something annoying or weird like wear a suit, go to an office I've never been to before, meet a person I've never seen before, and then try to impress said person while he or she grills me for information, all to do something I don't want to do. Why not include a cavity search while we're at it? Most people might kiss ass in this scenario but I can never be that full of shit. Anyway, I really felt like I was doing them a major favor by even applying for the job.

But I did look fetching for the interview and felt pretty buttoned up as far as the whole "candidate package" goes: The brown suit I borrowed from Rebecka was cut to perfection. When she feels like looking fab, the girl can dress. With my long brown hair and white skin I looked period-piece hot if I may say so myself. The suit fit with my own personal style back then, which was feminine with a retro feel. I always went for the '40s or '50s film star look—I just thought it suited me and was fun to wear. I wore a lot of '40s tight pencil skirts with tight jackets and sweaters, or '50s feminine capris with tight sweaters, and I always wore high heels and carried little beaded purses. A little fetishy, sexy and feminine. It was fun and original, and affordable, which was the key word, because I could shop in vintage and secondhand stores for it. The

skirt of the suit for my interview went down to my knees with a little flair. Under the tailored jacket I wore a cream blouse that emphasized my pale skin, and I added an antique pin at the bottom of the low V neckline. I wore Mary Jane shoes that had a tiny flower detail on them by the buckle, and high, high heels. For makeup I went subdued with the eyes, so I just wore mascara, and had planned on going subdued with my lip color because I have really full lips and sometimes a normal color can attract too much unwanted attention, but then I figured what the hell . . . score the job, right? I had a good-looking resume that was made by one of the regulars at the restaurant where I was still employed as a waitress. Only my attitude left something to be desired, but who really gives a shit about that? I was perfectly poised and confident, practically swaggering to the offices of Leetsmann & Stone down in Manhattan's financial district.

The first thing that happened upon entering the building was that I experienced décor shock. Only a true sociopath/egomaniac could have come up with this snooty, self-important, military clean, corporate abomination of a lobby. It was hideous and as an artist I'm visually sensitive.

Leetsmann & Stone was the only company in the entire building, and they were not going to let anyone forget it. The walls were dark, lemon-scented, superpolished mahogany that I could almost see my reflection in and everything else was marble, also polished to the hilt. Every desktop had fresh-cut flowers in sparkling crystal vases. The company insignia for Leetsmann & Stone was in the wood, the marble floors, on the vases, on the sign-in pad at the security desk, and the initials were even on the caps for the doormen and security guards.

The biggest offense was the "artwork." Prisoners on death row don't deserve these kinds of visuals: huge hideous canvases full of Day-Glo-colored splattered paint, which I think was a nod to Jackson Pollack. *Universe, there better be a good reason for this.*

Anyway, if the lobby was meant to intimidate, it worked. I was more than intimidated; I was scared shitless.

I was given a visitor badge.

I went to the fifth floor and pushed through the glass doors to the reception area. The first person I saw, the only person in reception, was Sheila, a.k.a. Piss & Vinegar. She was perched at yet another marble desk with more mahogany on the wall behind her. I knew who she was as soon as I saw her because she absolutely reeked of attitude. She was an African queen with a huge chest and dragon nails complete with gold stripes, studs, and palm trees; her hair was braided and up in an intricate twist; and she was wearing a plum-colored suit. A good-looking woman with a lot of glamour, but perpetually pissed off. I walked over to her desk ready to have some pre-job-interview chitchat, when she raised her eyebrow and slowly said, "Uh-huh?" So I explained who I was and why I was there. She checked her calendar and then directed me to the conference room to interview with my soon-to-be boss. I knew from personal experience with my own diva mother that P & V was a queen bee who was not to be ignored, so an offering must be made. I handed her my muffin from the café. Suddenly she had a big bright smile with perfectly straight, whiter than white teeth. "Girl, you know I forgot my breakfast this morning, thank you." I guess you have to be fucking Satan not to like a muffin. Little did I know that that would be the first of many, many free muffins.

I sat and took a good look around. Jesus Christ. I gave a low, long whistle and just sat there staring at the giant, polished, Big Brother-style conference room table checking out the setup. I bet the room was bugged. There was a glass wall facing the office and three gray fabric walls. Outside the conference room I could see a lot of cubicles with walls of this same gray fabric. People were running around, obviously very busy. *Not a lot of privacy*, I thought, *I'll have to change that once I start*. I started wondering about the potential meetings I could hold in there: "*I object!!!*" I would yell to the

room. *Oh, wait, that's a courtroom. Okay, I got it: "Ladies and gentlemen, if we can turn our attention to the numbers on the chart, you'll be pleased to see significant growth in the northeast sector. We enjoyed the most profitable month ever in the history of Leetsmann & Stone. . . ."* Or, dare I imagine, a corporate takeover? Oh yes. *If I'm going to be here, that's going to have to happen. I'll have to get more tailored suits, of course. And more makeup. And find a tennis pro, definitely. Okay, note to self: secure tennis pro before corporate takeover. Let's try this out, channel Joan Collins, be Joan, think hard: "You're all fired, every last one of you . . . I own this company now . . ."* And then I started tapping my fingers. *Alright, I've been here long enough, I gotta go. How long am I supposed to sit here in this kind of toxic environment?*

After ten minutes of trying to decide what I would say to Piss & Vinegar if I just walked out before the interview, I saw Ray Bowen walking over. I instantly felt a wave of relief. If there's one niche of men I know it's the downtown NYC male: the creative, cool-geek contingent. I wasn't fooled by his attire. Ray looked like he read *The Hipster Handbook* and committed to memory and (at least) to personal fashion "The Loner" chapter. Fine by me, I love those guys. Historically my people and his people do in fact intermingle socially. He was holding a paper coffee cup with I ♥ NY on it from a local vendor in one hand and a pad with a badly chewed pencil in the other. I guessed he was about thirty, thirty-one years old, with hazel eyes, black thick-rimmed glasses, purposely disheveled dark brown/black hair (looked like an expensive cut), and beard stubble. Everything else he had on was corporate spewage: expensive conservative suit with tie, etc., but the impression had been made from the neck up—you can't hide the downtown hipster. I was surprised I hadn't seen Ray around town; I figured he liked to stay home a lot.

Since I could relate to this guy, I figured I was getting the job, no problem. All that was left to salvage that day was to kick back and watch corporate culture unfold in all its hideous glory before me like a show. Like *Dynasty*, if you will. If I couldn't be at the café

living my life, I might as well try to salvage something of entertainment value.

Ray walked into the conference room, took one look at me, and stopped and stared. Seemingly tongue-tied, he just moved his mouth a little with no sound coming out. I looked at him out of the side of my face, confused and trying to figure him out. He looked around. He tried again. Again, mouth movement, no sounds, eyes now unfocused. This went on for several seconds too long. Not to be picky, but we were bordering on awkward. Then my brain went into overdrive with a realization: *Fucking great; this guy has Tourette's syndrome, like that podiatrist I visited a couple of years ago! I am so out of here, I am not going to sit here while this guy, my "boss," calls me the c word and every other word in the profanity dictionary like that guy did, not a chance. Not that I have a thing against profanity, I fucking love profanity, but coming at me in a package where I don't expect it and can't retaliate, I don't think so. I would have appreciated Valetta giving me a heads-up on her brother's neurological disorders, surprises are for family gatherings and—*

Just then Ray cleared his throat. "Hi . . . Uh, I'm Ray Bowen. Nice to meet you." He sounded a little shaky and smiled weakly and then blushed, looking at me like he expected me to hit him.

"Hi, Ray. I'm Jane Cooper." I stood and smiled and shook his hand. *Okay, his Tourette's seems under control for the time being. Let's see how he does. . . .*

"Did you find us okay?" he asked politely.

"Oh sure, no problem, I live close by so . . ."

"Okay, great, very good . . ."

"I met your sister Valetta. She referred me to you. She's very nice."

"Oh yeah, she is. Where did you meet her, at a pub?" he asked jokingly.

"Um . . . do I answer that?"

"Actually, I don't want to know. But I trust her judgment," he

said smiling. He sat down. Then he was staring at me again. Finally he blinked, shook his head, looked down for a second with his hand on the bridge of his nose like he was trying to shake something off, I don't know if it was a sneeze or what. What I do know is that when he looked back up, he looked at a spot just to the right of my head on the wall. I turned to see what he was looking at but there really wasn't anything there. But he just focused over there and hardly made any eye contact with me again till I was leaving. *(You know, Tourette's is tough. He hasn't called me the c word yet so he's alright. . . . I support you, Ray!)*

He went into his spiel: "I see from your resume that you haven't had direct experience with this kind of firm, so let me give you a brief rundown: Leetsmann & Stone is a company of financial advisers, analysts, and traders. My job as relationship manager is to build and maintain relationships with current investors, be their contact person to the entire firm, and maybe bring in new clients where possible."

"Right . . ." *This is tragic.*

He continued, "Your job would be to do what I've been doing but on a smaller scale. I'm also managing the trade floor and I'm wearing too many hats. Our company is in a state of . . . transition, if you will. I will still deal with clients who we've had a relationship with for years, so your investors slash clients will be overflow from my position and many will likely be newer accounts who won't mind a new name and number to contact. Lately we've had the traders doing this for us but it hasn't been as fruitful as possible because it isn't their area of expertise and they're too busy to give clients enough attention. So this is a newly created position. We also want someone to cater to female clients because we believe some may be more comfortable learning about services from another woman, and we expect some growth in this area."

"Gotcha." *This job is going to suck. Ray should have just said, "This job is going to suck some ass. And when it's done sucking ass, it's*

going to go and suck some more.” That would have been a lot more direct. Although, maybe he doesn’t think it sucks? Nah, impossible.

“Right,” he continued. “The kind of investors we have are in government, sports, corporations, private millionaires, hedge funds, et cetera. That’s just a brief summary, but really, the sky’s the limit as far as who our clients are and could be. If you feel there’s a niche that we should explore with current or new investors we’d like for you to inform us and pursue it. We consider everyone’s input of value. We are trying to think outside the box and be a little more revolutionary in our thinking, and that includes welcoming suggestions from all employees.”

Are you hearing this bullshit? I’m, like, zoning in and out. I thought this interview would be like an entertaining or amusing piece of theater but I was dead wrong. I just stopped listening and started pondering all kinds of things. I couldn’t help it. I could tell these weren’t his words; he was just being the company jerk-off. I guess you can’t knock a person for doing his job, but holy shit. *You know, his voice sounds kind of like Christian Slater’s . . . hmm . . . maybe Luke Wilson’s. I don’t know . . . who am I thinking of? It’s fuzzy. . . .*

All of a sudden I realized he was looking directly at me and not speaking. I have no idea what the expression was on my face. Sometimes when I’m thinking about something my face registers every thought. *Oops.*

He gave me a weird look and then started to describe what the culture of the office was like: “very friendly, very outgoing.” *Maybe I will actually meet some great people whose lives forced them to go corporate like mine did . . . ? I mean, the fact that Ray doesn’t look like a typical conservative corporate guy is a relief (and he has the Tourette’s, which isn’t corporate) so maybe the people here will be cool . . . ? Okay, whatever, I’m here, I’m taking the job.*

When he talked about himself he started this blushing phenomenon like I have never seen before. Blushing away, he said, “I’d

be your supervisor, we'd work together." (blush blush) "I am in charge of tracking your numbers, thinking of investment strategies, which client you should go to, who the traders/salespeople should keep, what district, industry, or client, and just making sure the relationships with clients are as strong as they can be, and seeing what area can be developed with each client." His face was a tomato now. Since listening to him was out of the question, I was literally coining terms for his complexion right then and there: "power blushing" was one, or "blizzard blushing," or for a German edge the "Wonderblush," or "blush-errific" or "philoblusher" for his love of blushing, when I got busted zoning yet again.

"So," he asks with a cryptic look on his face, "what do you think you can bring to Leetsmann & Stone, Miss Cooper?"

I decided to have a spiel of my own, you know, for fun. I decided to work the infomercial/shopping network angle: "Well, Ray, I think I can bring a lot to L&S, I really do." I cleared my throat. Ray is still blushing and I think kind of smirking. "First of all, I *love* the services L&S provides and I *love* being around people who think outside the box." (Oy.) "I see myself as a trailblazer of sorts and I thrive in that environment." Heaping on the bullshit, folks, keeping my eye on the prize. "I am a people person. I love people, all of my jobs thus far have been working with people, I get along with people well, and I have a good feel for them. I think I'm just very *relatable*." (I'm proud of this, nice touch, right?) "Waitressing and bartending are service industries that really are about relationship managing, I don't need to tell you, Ray, so I feel that I have a lot of experience to bring to the table. And of course, I'm a quick learner."

"Glad to hear it." Was he being sarcastic? He really did look like he was smirking.

He spoke about a few more things that I didn't pay any attention to. Then I said out of nowhere, while checking my hair for split ends, "I'm *so* into getting the team's numbers up, like, for

real. . . ." I just want to go home and shower off this experience. He gave me that cryptic look again. *What? I'm being a team player.*

"Do you think you can really maintain and expand our relationships for us?" He was looking somewhat skeptical yet hopeful off to the corner.

I resented this question. I looked at him wondering what the hell he was thinking. Seriously, questioning my overall pursuit of the position is rude. "Well, I just sold you, didn't I?" I snapped. *Enough already, this is overkill, I gotta go.*

"Yeah," he said as he blushed and chewed his pencil.

My reaction might seem harsh to the naked eye but a) I wasn't in the mood and b) I can tell this mad blusher appreciates a dominant female and who am I to deny him his needs? And c) snapping at him was not just self-gratifying but also a test, for which he got an A+++ . It confirmed that Ray Bowen did indeed have a flexible and accommodating demeanor, a must in any of my employers. He wasn't just interviewing me, I was interviewing him as well. Realistically speaking, I needed a boss who was on board with my personal agenda, and I thought that Ray, with his Tourette's syndrome, his power-blushing, trendy hair, and Luke Wilson voice, would be just that boss.

"Okay, great!" I said and gave him a big smile and then starting going through my purse for a Tic Tac.

Ray cleared his throat. "Okay, Miss Cooper, we'll get back to you."

Huh? Get back to me? "Sounds good, Mr. Bowen, I look forward to discussing our working relationship further." *Ugh, choking on my own bullshit.*

"Likewise." Was there a smirk again? What the fuck?

I left the conference room, said good-bye to Piss & Vinegar and gave her a wink, to which she just gave me a look that said, *I know your bullshit, just remember that.*

I have to admit that I was irked that I didn't get the job on the

spot. Is he crazy? I interviewed like a champ today. He must be lower on the company totem pole than I realized.

So I did have to sweat things out for a day. Just because I didn't think much of him or his crack company didn't mean I didn't want the job. I realized that I totally wanted the job, and all the leisure the company and Ray's demeanor had to provide. Plus, I can only take so many of these interviews; I'm not going to jack-ass around town searching for a job I don't even want. I'm taking the first one I can get.

Luckily, he finally did offer me the job when he called me at home the next day. I thought it was a telemarketer because when I picked up the phone there was that long pause. I was about to hang up when I heard, "Um, hi, excuse me, may I speak with Jane Cooper, please?" It was Monsieur Fuzzy-Voice! I could feel Ray blushing over the phone.

"Hi, Ray, it's Jane. How are you?"

"Uh, hi, Jane, I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks . . . do you have some good news for me?"

"Yes, I mean, I hope so. I'm pleased to inform you that after careful consideration we are pleased to offer you the junior relationship manager position with Leetsmann & Stone."

"Great, thanks! Sounds good!"

"Yeah, so we'll send you an offer letter to sign, but I want to talk to you about the terms before I do that." He offered what I guess he considered to be a low salary plus 10 percent commission from new clients I bring in. He seemed apologetic about it. I felt like I won the lottery. Plus it came with full benefits. So, like the savvy businesswoman I was, I did not negotiate any of the terms or even think to ask for more money. Take the job while it's hot!

"Ray, sounds good, write up the letter, I'm totally on board."

"Okay, great"—big exhale—"we are very happy to hear that. I'll messenger the letter to your apartment. You can just bring it in when you come in. When can you start?"

"How about Monday? What time should I be in?"

"Monday is fine, let's start at nine a.m."

I choked on my tea. *It's starting already, my skin is crawling. Nine a.m.?*

"Are you okay?"

"Sure, nine a.m., sounds great."

"Okay, great, I'll see you then, Jane. Welcome to Leetsmann & Stone. I think we'll be a great team with your contribution."

"Thanks, Ray, thanks for the job."

So that day I quit my waitressing job, and that night Rebecka and I created my personal business strategy for Leetsmann & Stone: Work like the dickens for the first few months. Actually learn the business and its ways. Meet with said clients. Land more business. Be the star employee, don't let them regret hiring me. If I have to quit after six months, so be it. Then privately, I added this annex to the plan: *Come in on time for the first month or so, feel it out. Then gently introduce leisure back into my life bit by bit. Discretion is crucial, patience a must.* I might be leisurely, but I'm not dumb.

The premies 1. *noun* Female intuition of bad news on the way that has yet to show its face, but you know that it's coming.

“**G**ood Lord, what is that little diva thinking over there?” Rebecka asked, nodding to a woman in a tight and revealing outfit. “She’s out of her skull! Whatever happened to public decency, Jane? Or women’s liberation, for that matter? Uck, I am blinded right now.”

“I don’t know, I think she’s channeling Pat Benatar, circa 1980 . . .” I said, impressed.

“She’s insulting Pat,” she said and went into her “female objectification” speech that is too dull to remember, but it’s something about women showcasing themselves correlating with their “value.” Rebecka herself was doing her part for women’s lib by not emphasizing her feminine allure *at all*. As per usual, her long, dyed-black hair was twisted up in a Chinese clip and she wore no makeup. Her tomboy wardrobe was in full gear: a black tank and green cargo pants and black flip-flops. She doesn’t care about her appearance at all. Then again, she doesn’t have to: you could probably roll Rebecka in mud and garbage and she’d still be one of the most beautiful women you will ever see. And she doesn’t even care. She might not even know it.

That night we were sitting in the courtyard at Luca Lounge in Alphabet City. Everyone was out and in a good mood, so every table was occupied. We were all dressed in our warm-weather finest, you know, when you’re still interested in that season’s wardrobe, not

toward the end when you couldn't give a shit about what you're wearing and you're just waiting for the next season. We just relaxed and enjoyed the light breeze, letting the red wine work its magic, with me waving to a few people we knew from the neighborhood.

I turned to Rebecka, who was lighting up a cigarette. I watched her suck the daylights out of it. "You know, Rebecka, for a little girl you smoke way too fucking much."

"Yeah? Well, that's not changing anytime soon. Anyway, Jane, for a little girl you curse way too much."

"Really?" I was surprised. "Well, what do you expect when my home state's word is 'douchebag'?"

"New Jersey has a state word?"

"Practically."

"Huh."

Rebecka and I have been best friends for about ten years now so sometimes we have nothing to say to each other except total bullshit. After that brilliant exchange we just sat back and stared at the little white bulb lights strewn about the courtyard, soaking up the scene. Then a busboy interrupted our reverie when he came to fill our water glasses. He spilled water all over the table because he was gawking at Rebecka, which was typical.

"So what's your new embroidery like?" she asked me. She was referring to my OCD, which I mentioned earlier. I compulsively embroider these little tiny colorful images; I call them string paintings because they could be actual tiny paintings, except they're made with embroidery floss (string) and not paint. I embroider different shapes and textures on old napkins and stuff, anything linen that I can get my hands on. I've been doing this since college, when I took a nonloom weaving class and learned about embroidery. It was fate. I've been hooked ever since. So probably for at least three hours every day I go crazy on a piece, and then I'm done and I feel pretty good and relaxed. I embroider at the café and in my apartment. Any free time, really. My pieces are little neurotic nuggets of

goodness. Since it was just the two of us out, I had brought my portable kit with me in case I could work it in.

"This one is in burned gold, mostly. I'm all about texture this time. I put in a lot of French knots, which I love, see? And I double-threaded it so the knots are really thick. It's not bad, great texture, very satisfying."

"You're insane," she said approvingly, "and that is gorgeous. I have to come by soon and check out your home supply; we haven't hung out in your apartment in a while. How many pieces do you think you have now?"

"Let's see . . . I have about three fifty. I would say twenty-five of them will be new to you. I don't keep them all, as you know, just the ones I really like."

"Are you kidding me? You have three hundred and fifty pieces that you really like? Jane, why don't you sell them?" Rebecka asked, her eyebrows practically hitting her hairline.

"Don't wanna . . . that sounds like work. You know how I feel about that."

"You know what? Sometimes I just want to shake you. You make these gorgeous little things which no one sees and you don't do anything about them. Maybe you wouldn't have a shit job if you started selling them. And aren't you the girl who is supposed to be the embroidery queen of New York's art scene? How's that going to happen with them hidden?"

"I don't know and I don't have to know. The art scene will come to me, it is not for me to go to it. Everything happens as it should." I have to tell you, Rebecka calling my embroidery "gorgeous" was really flattering.

"Jesus Christ, I don't know how you get by in life without around-the-clock adult supervision, like a nurse or someone. You really are whacked."

"Thank you for the blind faith. I'm telling you, I'm very focused right now. You have no relationship with the Universe so you

wouldn't understand. There are going to be some changes around here and they will unfold like a flower. Then I will shove 'I told you so' fifty feet up your fucking ass."

"Looking forward to it. I'm not going down this road with you again. All I'm saying is stop waiting for your life to happen to you and get off your ass and make it happen. You're wasting time."

"I'm not waiting for my life to happen, my life is happening and it's fucking phenomenal. Please keep your disgruntled mentality to yourself and stop projecting. Do I ever complain about anything to you?"

"No. But you do have a wish list. If everything is so perfect, why do you need more?"

"I'll always have goals."

"Oh, those are 'goals,' Jane? Are you serious?"

"Of course I am." Then I put my drink down on the table and looked at Rebecka. "Have you been talking to Dana? Because we had a conversation suspiciously similar to this one. . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous. Like I'd ever take a call from that lunatic."

It would not surprise me in the least if my mother got on her rhinestone-encrusted cell phone and cajoled Rebecka into doing her bidding. That's Dana's standard *modus operandi*. And once Dana has someone in her sights, she always gets what she wants.

Dana, just so you understand what we're working with, is a one-of-a-kind, larger-than-life real estate agent and the unofficial mayor/star socialite of Cliffside Park, NJ, where I grew up. She's larger than life both in looks and personality: thin and good looking, overly made up, flamboyant, bejeweled, high-heeled, pantsuited, perfumed, and super glamorous in a distinctly New Jersey kind of way. She knows everyone, everything, and everything about everyone. She's unofficially in charge of all social and cultural life. She is both loved and feared.

Officially, I call her a sophisticated meddler. She's not a gossip; but through her charisma and *chutzpah*, she is a quite the little

manipulator. She's a good person, I think, but she's not looking for sainthood anytime soon. She just wants what she wants and hates interference, even if it means getting her hands a little dirty. If you're lucky, what she wants out of life is something for you, which is always possible and which is how she has such great, loyal friends. But if she's on the opposite side of whatever you want, or you have something she wants, be it boyfriend, car, job, whatever, it's not your lucky day. Grown men have thrown in the towel on business deals in town because she's opposing it.

Strangely, she's not motivated by money. Actually, she doesn't like to do things that earn her money, but she's on her third husband now and he has that covered. She's about socializing, networking, and powermongering. She just builds power and socks it away for a rainy day. Which is why being a real estate agent is great for her.

It's clear that my natural flair for leisure comes from her, because my super cute father is a workhorse. And my mother recognizes this. She knows I'm my mother's daughter. I'm also a people person like she is, but thankfully, my father's influence has tempered that a bit.

As you can imagine, for a girl growing up, a mother like this has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of being the only child of Dana Cooper was that I could get whatever I wanted out of the town as long as she agreed with it. For example, when she caught wind that I had a crush on a popular kid in school, she got me a date with him by talking to (cajoling) his mother (I didn't realize that's how it happened at the time, but it did raise my dating stock in high school nonetheless), and when I realized that I wanted to pursue some kind of art, she talked the principal into creating the school's first art class. (Legend has it that she had something on him, but that was never confirmed because Dana would never admit that.) Either way, she was highly effective and I benefited from her wiles. The excellent art class became available halfway through my junior year and really helped me get into SVA.

The disadvantage is that you are constantly being manipulated for something. She can't help herself, that's just her. She's on auto-manipulate. She has to have her own way. It's a survival instinct in her to win every battle, and it's her reputation on the line. I think when I get married that will get her off my back a lot, but I don't see that happening anytime soon.

My dad, William Cooper, is the opposite of Dana. He's the strong silent type. He is a plain, quiet, hard-working, salt-of-the-earth kind of man. He is a mushy face and he's the greatest, always has been. All he wants are his Heinekens and a meal that has red meat in it, and for me to be happy. And maybe watch some sports with his friends. He was sanity in our crazy household with a crazy woman. My aunt Lynn once said that my parents got together because opposites attract: Dana loved Bill's integrity and manliness (and he was hot), and Bill loved Dana's dynamic personality and glamour. I never saw my father in awe of my mother, ever. Anything Dana said or did was met with looks of either genuine, dumb-founded confusion or, "What the hell happened to me that I am with this crazy person?" or "Woman, your mind is *gone* if you ever had one." And then he would shake his head.

My parents got divorced when I was in high school, which was a blessing for all of us. For a couple who never should have married in the first place, sixteen years is *way* too long. From what Dana says, their union was based upon carnal considerations after a few too many cocktails at a local club, and enough was enough. After the divorce, Dana took a one-bedroom apartment that was one of her real estate listings. I stayed with my dad in the house.

I think some of my creativity and imagination came from spending time at home by myself as an only child and as a teenager, and having to come up with my own activities, and also just express myself. I would be home in my room with the door shut listening to great music and drawing, painting, or coming up with photography projects. I loved those times because it was so solitary and so

rewarding. I felt great working on these projects, like I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. When I wasn't home, I'd go out into Manhattan exploring; going to shows, going to caf  s, and eventually meeting other artists my age, and realizing my need to create art full-time. It was liberating, because while the kids I went to high school with were great, I learned there was so much more out there. When it was time to go to school in Manhattan, I couldn't get there fast enough. Home sweet home.

This is another thing that Rebecka and I have in common: being only children and finding art in personal upheaval.

Anyway, I told Rebecka, "Alright. It's just that Dana's been on my case lately."

"That woman will never be happy, Jane, pay no mind. But speaking of parents, I do think you could use some couch time with one of John or Francesca's colleagues . . . just to get perspective or maybe a necessary grasp of reality."

"Like you could recognize reality. Leave your parents out of this."

Rebecka's parents couldn't be more different from mine, and are still very much together. John and Francesca Garber are a psychology power couple. John is a successful psychiatrist and Francesca, her mom, is an art therapist. They are a couple of hemp-toutin', dope-smokin', granola-makin', leaf-crunchin', sandal-wearin', tree-huggin', "right on"–sayin', brain-analyzin' hippies . . . stinking-rich hippies. One of them inherited a lot of money and then John made a lot from his best-selling psychiatry/self-help books. Rebecka grew up on Central Park West in a huge duplex that John and Francesca kept full of art, psychiatry, books, philosophy, music, social awareness, and their friends (who apparently were "hairy vegans in dire need of a shower," to quote Rebecka).

Rebecka couldn't relate to her parents one bit. Then, during the day, Rebecka would go to school at one of New York City's best private schools, where her classmates were totally materialistic,

critical, aggressive, and competitive. Rebecka couldn't relate to them either, so she was lonely a lot of the time. One day she got so frustrated trying to adapt and frustrated at not having anyone she could relate to, that she decided to find her own way to deal with life: First, she put up a defensive wall around herself that only a teenager could build. Then she double-teamed both groups by cutting off her hair and dying it black, started buying clothes that were expensive yet Goth, and barked at anyone who came too close, even John and Francesca. She got into darker music and books, started drawing, and just put her headphones on and tuned out the world. Mission accomplished, I think: today there is absolutely nothing hippy, free-lovin' or New York City princess about her.

Because of her salty disposition, Rebecka and I couldn't stand each other when we first met, over ten years ago. We were freshmen in college and were working at this art supply store called Artist's Corner downtown. I went to School of Visual Arts for fine arts and Rebecka went to Cooper Union for graphic design, so it was natural for us to work where we understood the products and could get discounts on school supplies. I'm not sure why Rebecka worked there since she didn't need the money, but I know her parents were good friends with Hans, the owner. The store never had any business because it was hidden on a little side street, so Rebecka and I had nothing to do but dust off the products, shoot the breeze, and play with Hans's cat, Cobalt. Our initial animosity toward each other was entirely Rebecka's fault. She was (and still is) the kind of girl who loves giving people a hard time first, then maybe liking them later. She's improved greatly since we've been friends, but a cynic is a cynic. She perceives most people as "shallow morons" and is very slow to see the good. So when she met me at the store she thought I was a "poser punk cheerleader, all downtown-looking with a bullshit over-the-top cheery disposition" that she didn't think she could relate to or trust. I thought she was a Janeane Garofalo wannabe but without Janeane's charm or humor. Just a tired old

cynic who was full of her own virtue, loved being down on things, and bitching nonstop all the while believing she was so very clever. Yawn.

The only reason Rebecka decided that I was okay to talk to was because one day I got sick of her snide remarks and housed her. All that week she had been spewing her usual smart-ass remarks like I was too stupid to understand them or she just didn't care if I did or not. Finally it came down to David Bowie.

"Young American" came on the small store transistor radio. "I love David Bowie. He's so hot," I said absently while unpacking a shipment of enamel powder.

"David Bowie is a poser, Jane. Granted, he's the most successful poser of all time, but a pussy poser nonetheless. How can you like him?"

"This is a great song. I like a lot of his stuff."

She was worked up so she pulled out a cigarette even though she knew she couldn't smoke in the store. "If you read any books of the punk era and learned how he came into the scene, which obviously you haven't, you would know how he ripped off the true artists of that era, either by taking their fashion or their musical influence. He can't think for himself and has absolutely zero integrity. He's just a geek that recognized a good thing and latched on like a fucking parasite."

Is nothing sacred to this one? I thought. "That might be true, but his songs are his and they're really good. And he's beautiful; did you see *Man Who Fell to Earth* or *The Hunger*?"

"He was beautiful in *Man Who Fell to Earth*," she imitated sarcastically. "Who gives a fuck, are you planning on dating him? 'He's cute' . . . give me a break."

She was starting to piss me off. "Rebecka, you do your thing and I'll do mine. Forget I said anything. I don't have to overthink why I like someone or something, I just like it. I don't have to explain my home entertainment—"

Interrupting me with the unlit cigarette in her hand and her hands at her ears like she can't listen to me another second, she yelled, "Jane! You go to school for *art*. You're supposed be a critic of pop culture and society. Artists are supposed to raise the bar of human experience in culture. 'I just like it' . . . do you get away with that in your class critiques?"

"I'm not in class right now, Rebecca."

"But it's like you're just a factory art major, just in it to say 'I'm an artist' to people. Obviously, if you had integrity, you wouldn't accept someone based on appearance. You're a poser like pussy poser David fucking Bowie, for real." She started chuckling/snorting at me like I wasn't even there. That did it.

I walked over to her so she stopped laughing and just looked at me quizzically. "Who do you think you're laughing at right now?" I asked.

"What?"

As calmly as I could I said, "I'll ask you again slowly so you can understand: who the fuck did you think you were talking to just then?"

"Jane . . ."

"Who are you, darlin', the cool police?" Every now and then I have to break out the Jersey. "Do not *ever* speak to me in your rude, judgmental, condescending tone ever again. I might be friendly, but I will still take your pseudocool, uptight, narrow-minded ass outside if I have to." I realized I was really in her face. I backed up and started walking away.

"Look . . ."

I turned around. "I would be *very* careful with what you say to me right now. Oh, and by the way, Rebecca? Artists are *open-minded* individuals. You should think about that." And I turned around and went back to my box of enamel powder.

She went outside and smoked the cigarette that she'd been holding. I guess she was surprised to get her bitchy attitude thrown

back at her. Truthfully, I didn't like talking to her like that; it felt wrong while it was coming out of my mouth. I knew she was a good person even though she *was* gut-wrenchingly irritating. I was just tired of this cranky bitching all the time and the lack of respect. And I didn't like the fact that it took me threatening her to gain her respect, that she couldn't be cool just because I was a nice person. It made me lose some respect for her and it peeved me for a couple of work shifts.

Finally she said, "Look, I'm sorry I was a bitch, it wasn't cool, I don't want you to be mad. I don't think you're a poser. Actually, I saw your photography in a display case at SVA and your work is great. . . ." Nice touch, her mentioning my work, I'll admit. "I was probably just PMSing; it's not an excuse but . . . I'm sorry." Since she was being nice I had to remind myself that it's Buddhist to forgive. At least she took responsibility for her behavior, which is more than what most people do. Later she told me that she felt bad that she made a nice person go psycho. So that was how we became friends. She stopped attacking me and I would take more time to express my opinions and from that came a friendship of mutual respect. When the fight was over we started having some very cool in-depth conversations about life and art. She started to respect an opinion that was different from her own and I started to understand how she perceived things.

Eventually she became my personal guru, because after I caught on to how she thought, I would run boyfriend/school/life problems by her. Her advice worked a lot of the time. In retrospect she really saved me from a lot of bad by ending my naiveté early.

I also became her guru in a sense because sometimes she needs to see the more positive possibilities in life. That is how she got to live with Dwayne, her boyfriend. It was three and a half years ago that they got together, but it took a lot of coaxing and little baby steps. I could tell there was a love vibe and she was just being defensive girl. So I showed her that instead of the highly suspicious

greasy pig she was seeing him as, he was genuinely interested in her and nothing bad was going to happen. She started to see that Dwayne was human and that it was okay. So she put her guard down and gave him a shot. They've been living together now for three years and they are *the* couple in our group of friends. Those two funky monkeys will probably get married one day.

The truth is, Rebecka is a very, very nice person, it's just kind of against her will. She's, like, hard and crunchy on the outside, soft and squishy on the inside. She's really been like the sister I never had these past ten years. Now I almost never see that bitchy side anymore, although I know it exists because other people complain about it. It's not even bitchy so much as overly direct. This will always be the biggest difference between us—her disliking people, and my overall interest in people . . . well, that and the working hard all the time/leisure thing. . . .

Back at the courtyard, Rebecka was saying, "Maybe John and Francesca aren't the answer, but just think; you could be medicated. . . ."

"Rebecka, you are a spiritual desert and it makes me sad for you. How you live without any kind of spirituality is beyond me."

"You think the Universe is fucking Santa Claus, Jane." Thankfully we were interrupted by the busboy, who gave us a new tablecloth from spilling water all over it, and another round from the waitress.

Changing the subject, I asked Rebecka, "So what are you working on?"

She lit another cigarette. "A new business pitch for Vespa. I really like those scooters, I think they're hot. I'm doing some sample work to see if they'll give me their business." Rebecka is a graphic designer who does advertising and designs for companies—it's her own little business and it's very prosperous. Because she doesn't need the money, she only takes accounts that she finds interesting. At twenty-eight she's already made a name for herself as a hot creative shop.

"That's so cool. I love them too and they come in the best colors."

"I know, I love the orange. I think if their colors are so funky, their ads can be at least that funky. So I have four different styles of print advertising to show them, all laid out and ready to go, and this time I'm going to pitch for their online business too. I'm just trying to find out what they've been paying their current agency, and if that agency is here or in Italy. I want to get their business *and* a free scooter, that would be ideal. Then I would get a matching helmet too, for some Devo coordination." Rebecka and I love the '80s band Devo.

"So cool, you're so genius! Can I borrow it? You and Dwayne should get matching scooters and helmets, or you wear the helmet color of his bike, and he wears the color of yours, something like that. That would be so funny, you two riding around . . ."

Kind of tensely Rebecka said, "I don't think he'd go for that." Dwayne is Mr. Cool—he knows everyone and everything. He's a music historian, but for cool genres, so sometimes he's on MTV discussing the origins of music. It's true, he would never do a matching Vespa thing because he takes himself way too seriously. That said, he's a really interesting guy and is really into Rebecka. And he's hot in that bad boy kind of way: model features, strong bone structure, piercing blue eyes, but greasy longish hair that's blond on the ends and dark at the roots, sleeves of tattoos, wears undershirts and kind of looks like he'll get a girl into trouble or at least steal cars. But he's really a pussycat who loves women. And when you talk to him you learn he has a lot of pride in his intellect. So it's unlikely he would do something goofy like ride a Vespa and color-coordinate it with his girlfriend.

I looked up. "I was kidding. What's wrong?"

Rebecka gave me a weird look and then looked down, trying to be nonchalant. "I have the premies. I think there's a problem with Dwayne and I think it's bad."

"What do you mean?" Great, here we go.

"I don't know," she said, still looking down, picking a cuticle. Rebecca's premonitions are unfortunately accurate. She had this look on her face that I'd never seen before and it was disturbing. It was vulnerable and childlike. "Just very recently there have been certain actions and conversations that are not sitting well with me."

"Shit . . . are you sure?" When she gets the premies about anything we both freak. It's usually bad news all around.

"No, actually I'm not." Suddenly she recovered herself and became brisk and businesslike. "So let's just drop it now, but when I know something more solid I'll let you know. No reason to panic."

"Okay . . . but I've got my eye on you now, Garber. And I'll have my eye on Dwayne. I will reopen this subject if need be. Your premies are not to be trifled with. Let me know if you want me to snoop around for you."

"Okay, I will. So how is your 'job' and Mr. Bowen?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Job is fine, boss is fine. Ray's just blushing and shuffling to my desk as always. He only socializes with me because I'm the only person he can relate to. The other managers are either traders who he has no relationship with or they are older, more traditional salesmen of the bleached teeth/fake hair/fake smiles/fake tans era. They still tell jokes that begin with 'A priest, a rabbi, and a lawyer walk into a bar . . . '—not kidding you. Ray still doesn't talk to me about fun stuff, only business. I think he's worried about his blushing and socializing. But he comes over so I can tell him a story, that's the drill. Today I told him about the 'Lazy Stripper' last weekend."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. Good times."

The Lazy Stripper is my personal dance move that is derived from the dive strip clubs I've been to on two or three occasions with some guy friends of mine. The guys really liked to go to the dives

because they say the breasts are real and the girls are closer to the customers than in the big places. I hugely enjoyed my visits with them mainly because the strippers onstage were utterly bored and made no bones about it. As a heterosexual female onlooker, it was highly entertaining to watch. The contrast of attitudes between the dancers and the audience was priceless: the guys in the audience, my friends included, of course, were worked up into a lather, practically foaming at the mouth ogling these ladies, just going ballistic. The ladies looked like they were utterly unconcerned about their surroundings. I remember one time a stripper was so blatantly unimpressed by the club (a sentiment I also heard her express in the tiny ladies' bathroom, which doubled as their changing room) that she *yawned* on the stage. She was just swinging her hips and yawning and covering her mouth while standing in front of an audience of crazy horny men, all the while wearing nothing but a G-string. And then kept going like she didn't even notice she was yawning. I got up and put a twenty in her garter belt and told her "Great show." She winked at me with a little grin. Fucking brilliant.

This inspired me to learn a few moves while I was there, hence the Lazy Stripper. It wasn't a real move for the dancers, it was just something they did. But I appropriated it and made it work for me. It's just lazily swinging your hips. You move down, you move up, but you're casually throwing your weight from side to side, utterly unconcerned. You never look at your dance partner but off to the side. Your lips could be parted.

Since then I do the Lazy Stripper whenever I can. I think as a layman there's some serious hotness to it because people don't really read it as a stripper move if you're not naked in a strip club. So if I'm dancing with a guy and I do the Lazy Stripper, it's like, they think it's hot but they don't know why. It subconsciously reminds them of their favorite strippers, without them actually making the stripper connection, see? There's discretion and it's sexy in a stealth kind of way. Sneaky hot.

"Do you think it's wise to talk about that kind of stuff with your boss?" she asked incredulously.

"Wahooo, Lazy Stripper! Yeah, of course, I had to, it's a great story with a happy ending. I never thought I could have a good time on the Upper East Side, I swear, and Ray was surprised, too. I wonder where he hangs out. . . ."

"Jane?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath and looked at me, trying to be patient. "I know you're new to corporate America, but you probably shouldn't tell your boss that we did a dance you call the Lazy Stripper on top of a bar in some dive in the Upper East Side for a bottle of champagne from sketchy Long Island guys. I think that's considered work-inappropriate."

"He doesn't care. What else should I talk to him about?"

"I don't know, what Snowball is up to—"

"You want me to talk to a guy about my cat?"

"It doesn't have to be about your cat but if you had more corporate jobs, you would know that you talk to your boss about very innocent, simple, noncontroversial items, not about whoring it up for a drink."

"Not a drink, but a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, dahling. . . . Okay, I get what you're saying. But I have to say that Ray enjoyed the story. He seemed highly entertained."

"How could you tell—did he actually speak or smile?"

"I'm learning to read the signs. He was power blushing. That usually indicates an active interest in his current situation, good or bad. Since the corners of his mouth were slightly turned up and his left eyebrow was slightly raised, he was amused. I think I'll stick to my subject matter with him; if he didn't like it he wouldn't come back for more. Now he ambles on over to my desk every day with his cup of coffee, waiting for this daily Jane entertainment. Anyway,

I don't want to get too corporate and I enjoy shocking him to see how much I can activate his blushing."

"That's wild. I bet he has a thing for you. I think he does."

"Please. Don't start that shit. Just because he's male and we get along does not mean there's a vibe. He just wants a little socializing in his day and who doesn't? I have no problems providing his entertainment because he provides me my leisure."

"Okay."

"He just has no one else to talk to because everyone else keeps talking to him about their fucking pets."

"Touché."

"Anyway, are we going to the Strokes show or checking out the High School Sweethearts at Lakeside Lounge next week? I talked to Dwayne about it last Tuesday—both shows are supposed to be really good, I can go to either. Just let me know so I can make sure we get on a list."

Hesitation. "Um, we still have to decide which one we can go to."

"Got it. Well, work out that and your premies and let me know about both. What time is it now?"

"Twelve thirty."

"Okay, honestly, we blew the cow, I gotta go. I think a bottle of wine each is enough for a school night," I said, taking out my wallet.

"I got the tab."

"No, we're splitting it."

"Jane, I know you're broke now because it's close to your next paycheck. I got it, no problem, you're a cheap date."

"You're the best, Rebs. Next time we go out, I'll earn us another bottle of champagne."

"Ha-ha! I know you will!"

"Okay, smoochie, I appreciate it." I looked up at the sky. "I have

been keeping an eye out for the lovely lads. It's springtime so there's going to be some summer lovin' around here."

"Cool, you need a man."

"C'mon," I said while walking out.

"You know I think you're the best and it's my job to look out for you."

"No, you're the best, and good lookin' out, thanks. But everything is cool and it's spring . . . not a problem."

"Alright, you lunatic."

"A'ight."

On that note we gave each other a hug and off we went in two different directions, with men on the mind.

Roundtable *verb* 1. To analyze the daylights out of a negative situation till it becomes completely void of all meaning. 2. To fix a problem while simultaneously boosting the ego of the injured party to all-new highs (this requires at least three people for ultimate effectiveness; vices are involved).

After work the next day, Ray got on my elevator, so we rode down together.

“Hey, where are you headed?” I asked.

“Um, just up to Washington Square.”

“Cool, I’m headed in the same direction.”

The weather was great, it wasn’t too humid—just perfect walking weather. It felt like the whole neighborhood was outside. It was just really happy.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you outside the office before,” I told him with my hand shielding my eyes from the sun.

“Nope, this is the first time,” he said and looked down.

“Huh. So I heard you talking to Sam today. You were really laying down the law.” Sam is one of the older traders at our company, who is also a relationship manager for a few clients. It’s always interesting to see Ray interact with others.

“Yeah, my man Sam was practically giving our services away to the client,” Ray started, forgetting himself and his shyness. “You can’t promise *anything* for some business—we’re here to make money. You can do something special for a client now and then, but not to the extreme that Sam did. He was buying him ridiculously expensive gifts, which is illegal, and it made us look bad. We do

have a very good service that people want. He—uh, never mind. I shouldn't be talking about this to you. . . ."

"Yes, you should, actually. I'm the one who always tells the stories; it's about time you stepped up to the plate," I said, playfully elbowing him.

"That's true." (blush) "Well, it's just that our numbers haven't been looking too good this quarter. Some clients complain about the service they've been receiving from the traders. I just have to restructure our department, it's a priority now." He was very commanding just then.

"I hear you, boss. And to make up for Sam's mistake, I'm going to bleed my clients dry. Okay, new rule: double normal trade rates, for anyone and everyone. Not a problem, I got this."

He smiled. "That should make you employee of the month."

"Excellent."

We walked along, me chatting away while he went back to his usual blushing and staring-at-the-ground combination. Out of nowhere, Rebecka screeched up in her car, wearing a black trench coat with her collar up, her black-rimmed reading glasses, and a black hat. She was blasting Incubus on her stereo. What the fuck? Through the passenger window, all crazy and intriguelike, with her lit cigarette in her mouth, she said, "Get in, Jane. Now."

I turned to Ray, who looked very confused by Rebecka's behavior. "Let's go."

"Uh . . ." He hesitated. He had concerns, which I completely respected.

"In the car, Ray, let's go." Okay, maybe not *completely* respected.

"Your friend seems upset." I forgot that Rebecka scares people.

"I know. . . . Do you want a lift?" I opened the door to the backseat for him. In hindsight, bringing the boss along could have been disastrous as far as my in-office professional persona was concerned. But I figured Rebecka would control herself long enough to drive Ray to where he was going. I was wrong.

Ray got in the back and as soon as I got in the front, Rebecka hit the gas, screeching off before I even had the door shut or my seat belt on. Rebecka was driving, smoking, and flipping out. "Do you know what I just fucking saw?" she asked.

"What?"

"*Dwayne* talking to fucking *Cynthia*!" she screamed.

"Who?"

"The whore Cynthia, Jane. You know, Nancy Spungen Blond Hair Girl."

"Oh, oh, yeah . . . Tart Girl." Cynthia is the girl who everyone knows just hangs out at the clubs and hooks up with anyone. It's sad, she's really insecure. She doesn't have any girlfriends, just hangs out with the boys, and you know they're not really "getting to know her."

I heard Ray say, "Um, Jane?"

I turned around to fill him in. "It's Rebecka's boyfriend, who she lives with. She saw him talking to this kind of promiscuous girl we all know. Oh, this is Rebecka! Remember, I've told you stories about her, my best friend?"

"Hey, Rebecka," he said tentatively.

"Rebecka, this is my boss, Ray. Remember, I told you about him?"

"Hi, Ray, pleasure," she said into the rearview. "He's pretty hot, Jane. What are you two doing together?"

"We were just walking uptown, and you know what, gorgeous? He's not deaf. He can hear you so let's just not kill anyone or talk about my boss while he's still in the car. Now what is your issue with Dwayne? He would never do anything with *anyone*, let alone Cynthia. I think it's okay."

Rebecka is smoking, pulling her hair behind her ears, shoving her thick-rimmed glasses up her nose, and speeding like a maniac. "This is not okay, Jane, this is sooooo not okay. . . ." Then she screams, "She's a fucking whore!" into my adorable little ear. I was

now deaf. "Jane, remember I had the premies at Luca, remember? I totally had the premies. . . ."

"You totally had the premies, I know. Nooo. . . ." *Oh, shit.*

"So I did some snooping around."

"Uh-huh. . . ." *Here we go.*

She lit another cigarette with the last one. "He had sex with her. Dwayne, my boyfriend of almost four years, had sex with that slutty troll Cynthia. I just found out today. I found an e-mail, and now I just saw them talking together, out in the open, flirting like he's single—"

"No!" I was really shocked. "I can't believe it! Holy shit, I'll fuck-ing kill him!" I was scandalized. Dwayne seemed to be a really great guy and so into Rebecka. *He will pay*, I thought, *oh yes, he will pay.*

"So I saw them, got back to my apartment and got my car and some stuff, and then came to get you so we could both run them the fuck over!"

"Let's go. Slam on the gas, girl."

Ray again piped up from the backseat. "Um, Jane?"

I turned around. "Do you want us to pull over and let you out? It's not a problem."

He sat back in his seat and shook his head slightly. Just as I thought: some guys like to complain when really they want to stay in the action. I don't know why they do this, I think it's so they can say "I told you so" when things go wrong. Fine, I was warned. Coincidentally, there are certain people I like to drag around to all of my activities. Lucky for me (yet not so lucky for Ray), he was one of those people.

At this point, Rebecka was practically foaming at the mouth. She was definitely going to get a few of those auto-tickets in the mail from the cameras on the traffic lights. We got to the bank where she first saw Dwayne and Cynthia and there they still were, chattin' it up, leaning against the wall of the bank. Cynthia was twirling her hair while hanging on Dwayne's every word, and Dwayne seemed

like he was trying to be cute and enjoying hearing himself speak. Un-fucking-believable.

Rebecka pulled the car over to the side and yelled out my window to them with a big fake smile. "Heeyyy! Whatch y'all doin' over there?" They spotted Rebecka and separated, visibly uncomfortable. She threw the car into park without even attempting to straighten it out against the curb, then jumped out and confidently strode over to them.

"You two look terrific, isn't this weather just perfect?" She shook her head and looked up at the sky with her hands in her back pockets like she didn't have a care in the world. Their mouths hung open and they were staring at her. Honestly, you couldn't find two guiltier-looking people. Talk about not thinking on your feet.

"You two look pretty snug, pretty cute together. . . . Don't they look cute, Jane?" I honked the horn.

"You look real cute. Now, confidentially? I was going to kill the two of you just now, that's why I'm here, to run you both over, heh, but I figure: it's *such* a nice day, and Dwayne, you do owe me this month's rent, and really, why ruin my car? But as you know, I do reserve the right to change my mind!" She gave a big smile and Dwayne and Cynthia looked at each other like *What should we do?* Rebecka popped some gum in her mouth, taking her time, crunching up the wrapper, acting like she's just tickled pink.

"Rebecka . . . ," Dwayne attempted.

"Don't say a word, Dwayne, I know." She started to walk away. I guess she just wanted to make it clear to them that she knew everything so that everyone was on the same page. She had just turned her back when Cynthia, moron of a lifetime, chuckled. And Rebecka heard her. Before I could even register what was going on, Rebecka pinned her to the wall of the bank by her neck and was breathing some (what I can only assume was) crazy shit into her ear. Let me tell you, that shut Cynthia up fast. She wasn't chuckling now! I didn't hear what Rebecka was saying but both Dwayne and

Cynthia were dead silent and Rebecka's fake-smile act had been replaced by a look of sheer menace. Honestly, it was a very attractive side of Rebecka. I'm not gay but she was running the show and it was hot. She walked away slowly with her chin up and a look on her face like she was waiting for someone to give her a reason to go back there and express herself more clearly.

Then she turned around and said, "Oh, and Dwayne? You can move the fuck out at any time now." Now Dwayne and Cynthia really had something to talk about. The power of rage: when you're dead serious, you have no fear and can scare anyone. Rebecka got back into the car. She slammed her door and sat there for a second staring at the steering wheel. Then she lit yet another cigarette. She started driving us west.

I was in shock. I mean, we have all been cheated on and unfortunately it's usually a surprise. But I really *never* saw it coming from Dwayne and that relationship. I didn't think he had it in him as a person—I thought he was completely in love with her. I could never imagine him going for a Cynthia type because he's kind of a snob. And Dwayne was always all eyes on Rebecka. It was just too weird! Now she wasn't talking, wasn't saying one word, but she was trembling.

She pulled up in front of the Hog Pit in the meatpacking district. We all got out of the car and went inside. She ordered us shots of Powers whiskey and a round of Pabst Blue Ribbon from the bartender. Then she went to the bathroom. I wondered how I was going to pay for all of this because I only had about twenty-five dollars on me. But just then, Ray walked over and took out a Harley wallet, which was attached by a chain to his navy Brooks Brothers pants, and gave the bartender thirty dollars. (Guys aren't doing that chain thing really anymore with their wallets, but I still think it's hot, especially attached to hideous Brooks Brothers pants.) "Thanks, Ray," I said, clinking our cans.

"No problem, Jane." He looked me in the eye. I don't think he's ever socially called me by my name or made direct eye contact. *You know, he really has the Tourette's under control.*

"I'm sorry. I guess you got sucked into some drama. If you don't want to stay, really, don't feel like you have to."

"No, actually I've heard so many stories about you two that this is interesting. I finally meet Rebecka and I'm in on a situation that you won't have to tell me about over coffee tomorrow. Anyway I could use a shot of whiskey *and* a Pabst Blue Ribbon." He smiled.

"Who couldn't, right? Yeah, this is certainly saving me a story tomorrow, which is a relief. I don't think I could have done this one justice."

"Don't underestimate yourself."

Rebecka came back and sat down. We did our shots and settled in. I can see why Rebecka picked the Hog Pit. It's a hard-core drinking bar with no frills. Small brown square tables in the front, a bar, a pool table in the back, and the only décor is hog/boar heads stuffed and mounted on the walls. So not politically correct but definitely an ideal bar when you're drinking like you mean it. No ordering white wine spritzers here. . . . I got up to play the jukebox to set the ambience, though I could still hear Rebecka saying to Ray:

"Okay, Ray, so I have heard all about you."

"Really? I've heard all about you too, I think."

"I know. And I want to thank you for keeping our Janie on the payroll and off the streets."

"You're very welcome." He chuckled.

"You know, you're not how I imagined."

"Oh yeah? How was that?" He sounded somewhat amused.

"Nothing bad. Jane just said you were very shy so I was expecting a different type." She was studying him.

"I'm not shy all the time."

"Apparently. She also thinks you have Tourette's syndrome." *I am going to kill her! Outer!*

"What?"

"Whatever. She was right about the Christian Slater/Luke Wilson voice, though."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Where did you go to school?"

"Brown University."

"Very nice. Your major?"

"Business economics major, minor in history of art/architecture. I really wanted to major in art/architecture but my parents wouldn't allow it."

"Gotcha. You know Jane was a fine arts major at SVA for photography."

"I didn't know that."

"She was, and she was very good. I wish she'd kept it up but she didn't because she doesn't have a darkroom and it's expensive."

"I had no idea. I would love to see that." He sounded intrigued.

"You'd love it. Jane is a lighthearted person but you see her depth when you see her photography. But she doesn't do that anymore. Luckily she has the OCD."

"Obsessive-compulsive disorder?" He laughed. "What do you mean?"

"She's driven by the OCD gods to embroider. She makes embroideries compulsively. *All the time*. She *has* to do it. If you want to know the truth, I don't know how she gets through the workday without doing it at all."

"Embroidery?" He laughed. "That's unusual. I like that. I wouldn't really think that's something she would do."

"Embroidery indeed. And I hate to wax poetic, Ray, but they are stunning and magical. Her embroideries are little gems. I know it sounds weird but I'm really not exaggerating. You wouldn't believe the intricacy, the detail, and the color. She calls them tiny paintings

of string and doesn't think too much about them. But they are something to see. She's a true artist to me, like Van Gogh. And she'd probably cut something off if she couldn't make the little things."

"That is really wild. I had no idea," he said in awe. "She should give them to a gallery, or a museum or something. People should see them!"

"I know." Then Rebecka sighed. "And Dwayne was a music history major and is now a music historian." Now she needed to start talking about Dwayne. As soon as I heard that I started flipping through the choices faster to get back over there.

"Wow, that's interesting."

"Yeah. But honestly, anyone can have a cool job if they're not getting paid."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Anyway, I'm intrigued by you, Ray, and I'm a tough sell, believe me. Especially right now when I hate men and life."

He looked sympathetic. "Yeah, I'm sorry about Dwayne, Rebecka. Geesh. I've been cheated on before too, so I know it royally sucks."

"Fuckers. What is wrong with these people? I just can't believe it. You just make sure you don't cheat on anybody," she said, giving him a pointed look.

"Alright, leave Ray alone, he's had enough," I said when I came back. I had to save Ray. He may be male but that gets canceled out by the boss thing. "Yeah, we've all been cheated on and there's nothing worse."

Rebecka took a deep breath and got lost in her thoughts. Ray and I just gave each other concerned looks.

I turned to Rebecka. "Reb, we need to roundtable this. This is just too big."

"Fine."

"Ray, you are about to learn the rare and complex art of roundtabling."

“What’s roundtabling?”

I put on my professional sales voice of knowledge: “Roundtabling, my good man, is derived from the noun *roundtable*, which is a group of professionals and ‘authorities’ who gather to give their opinions on a certain subject. Kind of like a panel. I reappropriated the word as a verb to name the action we take to get control over acute drama, usually, but not always, regarding love. When one of us sustains a blow like our Rebecka did today with the Dwayne infidelity, we gather to help our injured party with listening, advice, support, providing personal testimonials, and trashing the parties responsible. We roundtable it. It’s about breaking it down to make it manageable. A decomplication process, if you will. By the end of a full-scale roundtabling the injured party should feel simultaneously drained, yet empowered, empty, yet invigorated. She should be equipped with a plan and a strategy and have a whole new outlook on the future. You’re getting a precious glimpse of this ritual.”

“Hmm, very interesting, very interesting indeed . . . let’s get another *round* first for the *roundtable*. Ha-ha.”

“Good call, Ray. Roundtabling is not for the viceless,” I said.

“Yes, we are the vice squad,” said Rebecka.

While he was at the bar, Rebecka turned to me, hissing, “Before he gets back, let me just tell you that you are out of your skull. Ray is awesome and we will be talking about him in the future, so brace yourself.”

“What? You like him?”

“Of course I like him! He’s good people and he seems cool. He is nothing like how you represented him. He seems intelligent. And by the way, he does not have Tourette’s syndrome, even though that’s not the worst thing in the world, you numbskull.”

I started talking a mile a minute to get my point out before he came back: “I always said he was nice and that I liked him, that’s why I talk to him every day. And he gave me a great job. Just because he has Tourette’s syndrome doesn’t mean I have an issue with

him as a person, but just because you like him doesn't mean what I said isn't true. Don't question me!" I looked to see where he was, then continued, "He's a little geeky. Wow, I'm surprised by you—"

"He's not a geek by anyone's standards but yours. No one would find him geeky. He's actually kind of hot with those big hazel eyes . . . I can't believe you're not more into him. What's the matter with you?" Then she stopped herself. "Then again, what do I know about anyone?" Her eyes filled with tears.

My poor friend. "You know a lot, that's why I rely on what you know. Just because Dwayne turned out to be a deviant doesn't mean you can't trust your instincts. Actually, it's your instincts that figured this out and got us here, right? Okay, Ray's coming back." Ray sat down with our beverages.

"Jane loves her processes," Rebecka told Ray.

"So true, muffin," I interjected. "Okay, let's start to round-table. I guess I'm the moderator and first speaker. I would just like to say, first and foremost, that I am in *shock*. Dwayne not only shocked you, Rebecka; I am shocked as well. I've liked him from day one. What the fuck is happening? How long has this bullshit been going on?"

"I have no idea . . . I just don't know," Rebecka said in a monotone.

"Okay, fine, not important. Let's start with Cynthia because she's easy."

"In more ways than one," Ray said. He's such a punster.

I kept going with the initial analysis. "Cynthia is not the main problem because she's a helpless troll whore, I think we can all agree on that. She is a symptom, not the disease. But, that said, she will be made to pay. Nothing too severe and it's not a rush, and we don't have to think about it right now, but she knew you two were together and still she participated in this. She broke the code when she simply accepted Dwayne's advances."

"Definitely. Amen." Rebecka and I clinked cans.

"Now as for Dwayne . . . this is tricky. He didn't just cheat on you, he cheated on me. Who got you two together? Who welcomed him into our world? I'm devastated. Now, one thing we know is that he's not settling down with Cynthia, no way. She's *crazy* if she thinks he's giving up your life together to settle down with *her*. I can't wait till the other shoe drops and she's left out in the cold.

"I think this is just about the free cheap sex for Dwayne. You know how men are (sorry, Ray) but after having quality sex with a quality girl, they sometimes go for something grossly cheap for variety or for comparison purposes. So *gross*. I think we can all agree that he's going to come crawling back."

"Yeah, he probably will," said Ray.

"Really?" Rebecka asked.

"I think so, from how it sounds," he continued. "Cynthia sounds easy and it sounds like Dwayne is taking a break from his committed relationship, which *some* guys unfortunately need, *not all* guys. Let me be clear on that. The truth is, we really don't like change that much, that's why men always go back to their wives even if they cheat all the time. If he's a guy living with his girlfriend for three years, he's happy where he is. He probably temporarily wanted something different and couldn't resist it because it wasn't something he looked for but it landed in his lap."

"Good call, Ray. So what we need to decide is how you are going to handle his return. I project this happening sometime late this week, early next."

"I say he'll be back in two weeks because you were scary back there," Ray replied.

"I think I'll kill him if I see him," Rebecka said, downing the rest of her Pabst.

"Fair enough," I said. "Now here's what I'd like to see happening: You don't see that douchebag until you are good and ready. You are going to deny Dwayne of Rebecka so he can fully understand what life is like without you. Let him see the empty shell of his existence.

During this period he will experience a deep regret like he's never imagined. It will wear him away day by day. Only when he is completely broken and stripped of his dignity, like he tried to strip you of yours, will you bestow your presence unto him. Not a second sooner. What's good is that he is going to suffer in silence because he has no one to talk to about it. He had you and he fucked that up. He has no real guy friends, just a ton of acquaintances, and Cynthia doesn't want to hear about how he misses you. He will suffer.

"Okay, he comes back in approximately two weeks, so that's how much time we have to strategize the homecoming. We're going to do whatever you need to do to feel better. In the meantime, I'm going to shake the grapevine and investigate the situation, see what happened so we have all the facts before his return."

"Cynthia is definitely going to have to get hurt, not just Dwayne. Something must be done about her," Rebecka said.

"Whatever you want, but let's take care of Dwayne first. Once he's squared away, we deal with the whore. And the reality is Dwayne still loves you, that I know. It's not like you were fighting or anything went wrong, he just couldn't resist the free booty. I'm sure he wants this relationship. It's a matter of what *you* want after this. It's not for me to judge you if you take him back, and, depending on the circumstances, I will understand. I'm assuming you do want him back. But promise me you will make him go to a doctor to get hosed down before you take him back—swear!"

"Jane? I very much appreciate you saying that but I don't think I'm taking him back. . . ." Rebecka says this with wonderment, as if she can't believe it herself.

"Really? Wow."

"Yeah, really. I can't take him back. It's over. Our relationship is over. He's sickening to me. I can't be with a liar and a cheater."

"Amen. I think that's the better way to go if you think you can handle it. There are going to be too many trust issues down the road if you take him back now."

"I feel nothing for him right now; I just feel really pissed off."

"Well, that could just be the whiskey talking, but okay, good, if that's how you feel, be done with him, and kick him out of your apartment."

"I'm going to. This is going to be a new beginning. God, I just can't believe it. All this time with him, all these feelings and experiences, and this is how it ends. It's so undignified, some cheesy *betrayal*. Why can't anyone just break up first? Why do they have to cheat on your time?" Rebecka asked Ray this one.

"Some people have no backbone and there's nothing you can do about that, unfortunately," he said, full of wisdom.

"And I gave him the best years of my life, my prime years!"

"Oh, please, you think the years of twenty-four to twenty-eight are all you have?" I said. "We're not even at our prime yet! Anyway, I know you won't believe this and maybe we don't see it now, but things of this nature happen for a reason. I think that down the road you will be pleased with the 'why' of this situation. You're a good girl; this isn't karma coming to you, so it has to be a gift or an improvement of some sort. I'm looking forward to seeing what's in store for you. In the meantime, I will be here and we will do whatever it takes to get you through this, that's a promise. It's totally under control."

Rebecka turned to Ray. "See why I'm best friends with this one?"

"Yeah." Ray gave me a mushy look.

"Okay, I'm putting more songs in the jukebox. I think this was an excellent start for our future roundtabling needs," I informed the panel.

We hung out till around midnight, just drinking, talking, shooting pool, playing darts. Rebecka's car got towed but she didn't care. She wasn't going to drive it home anyway. We jumped into a cab.

At Rebecka's building we both hugged her and she said, "Nice meeting you, Ray. Sorry about the circumstances, but hopefully we

can hang out again soon." So weird. Did this breakup make Rebecka nice to strangers?

"I hope so too. Good luck. I'm sure Jane will fill me in on your progress with everything," Ray said.

"Okay, good. 'Bye, Janie."

"'Bye, Reb, love you."

"Love you."

After she left, Ray said, "She's cool. I can picture all the stories now."

"She liked you too, which is unusual; she never likes anyone when she first meets them."

"That's cool. I can't believe her boyfriend cheated on her."

"I know, she's great and she's really beautiful. It's like, if she gets cheated on, there's no hope for the rest of us."

"Yeah. Plus, they were living together for a while. . . . Anyway, she seems like she's taking it pretty well, better than expected."

"She's still in shock. It's going to sink in soon and I'm not looking forward to it."

"Uh-oh."

"Yup. It's going to be all uphill for a while, but that's the way it goes."

"Well, this is my building," he said, stopping at a new-looking loft building. "So, thanks for the interesting evening." He was looking down at me intently.

"See you tomorrow, boss. And thanks for being cool." I put my hand out to shake his.

He shook my hand and then held it so I couldn't go. "Okay, so I'll see you at nine?" he asked, looking at me with a half smile.

"Absolutely, not a problem. Well, I might be a *little* late because I might have a breakfast meeting with a client. . . . but I'll definitely be in by . . . eleven thirty?"

"Alright, I'll see you at eleven thirty." He smiled and then remembered himself and looked down really fast. "'Bye." Ray is still

the Meister Blusher. One hard night of drinking didn't change that.

"Good night, Ray." It's funny but I never liked that blushing bullshit until that night, and then it became somehow endearing.

As it turned out, Rebecca's premies and all events pertaining to them would have quite the domino effect for both of us. It's a cliché because it's true: your life can change on a dime from one day to the next, and you never know what's in store for you or what's going to trigger it. Well, except for me. I kind of knew.

Real estate *noun* Strategic and desirable places to sit at a bar or club.

For the next three weeks nothing changed with the Dwayne situation: he and Rebecka didn't talk, he didn't come home, we didn't know what was going on with any of it. During those three weeks there was absolutely no venting, bitching, crying, roundtabling, or analyzing of any kind. This is because Rebecka embarked on a honeymoon of denial that, honestly, was a rockin' good time. Denial consisted of going to every bar we usually frequent in the East Village and Lower East Side (with a splash of SoHo) and sampling their entire drink menus. The phrase of the day was AA: Aggressive Annihilation, soon to be Alcoholics Anonymous. The best part was how Rebecka adopted this deranged I'm-so-fake-happy persona where she actually socialized with acquaintances for the first time in years. It was wild. I'm still annoyed that I didn't place any bets on how long that would last; it would have been easy money in the bank. Anyway, I'm proud to say that we weathered that relationship purgatory much better than expected. Then again, if we can't have a good time in the face of impending doom, then I'm ashamed of us.

In support of my best friend, I felt that I should not really go to work too much, to be available to her in case she needed me. Ray would understand. Seriously, if you're working with a client, you can't just up and leave to accompany Rebecka to a bar, that's just unprofessional. And it wasn't like I could bring the client (which I

personally wouldn't have a problem with but Ray would) so it was better just to not see those clients at all. Those days were filled with leisurely café ponderings in the morning, a slight smattering of work in the afternoon just to say "Hi, I still work here and I *totally* like you guys," and then excessive drinking and socializing at night, with Rebecka playing the lunatic at the helm.

The last evening of the honeymoon started at Swift on Fourth Street, pub of many, many beers. That night we decided to drop the façade of actually consuming nutrients and eating dinner, and just went straight for the beverage. It was a little gross because Swift actually serves food, so it's not like it was an inconvenience to eat.

We sat at two dark wood tables by the front door and saw some folks from around the neighborhood. Everyone knows everyone since we've hung out in this area for years.

"Hey, Thalia! Long time no see!" yelled the newly social Rebecka.

"Hey, Thal!" I said.

"Hey, Rebecka! How're you doin', darlin'? Hey, Jane!" Thalia yelled back.

"Never better, thanks! Love that skirt!" Rebecka said.

So of course, Thalia called Rebecka over while she ordered a drink because everyone was fascinated that Rebecka was being social with them and wanted to get a read on her breakup state of mind. Rebecka definitely had the mystery and intrigue of the new girl in town, with the added fascination of the hot girl getting screwed over. Everyone was sniffing around her.

Vincent came swishing over to me while Rebecka and Thalia were chatting it up. "What is up with Rebecka? What is that girl drinking and let's get her another!"

"Believe me, Vincent, she's drinking enough on her own."

"What's the deal?" he asked, sitting down conspiratorially. "Is she actually having a hard time with the Cynthia incident or did

she just get her Get Out of Jail Free card?" Vincent is such the gossipmonger.

"Right now it's the latter. Every day she's having the time of her life . . . as am I, by default. I wonder how long it will last. . . ."

"Well, the word is out about the situation, that is *for sure*. I mean, they were *the* couple. As much as everyone thinks Rebecka is a bitch—sorry, Jane—everyone feels bad about it. But our beauty queen should be fine because I alone have heard about five men talking about waiting to fill Dwayne's shoes as soon as Rebecka's available. I'm sure they're not the only eager candidates."

"I believe it, Vin. She's a beauty queen and a bitch, and now she's vulnerable. It's a highly potent combination."

"So true. Do you think they're really over, though?"

"You know, everything is still unofficial, I really couldn't say. We're still in the discovery/transition phase—anything can happen."

"What do *you* want to happen, little miss best friend?"

"I want her to dump him, naturally."

"Oh my God!"

"Of course. Don't sound shocked about it. He cheated on my best friend. I know they were a likeable couple, but it's finished. If you've ever been cheated on you know there's nothing worse than that and there's no fixing it. People might not get Rebecka's personality, but she's a great person and has been extremely loyal and very supportive to that stupid dickhead. And you know what, Vin? She might not be the most social person around, but she would never do this to anybody."

"Well, it's probably for the best. I always felt Dwayne wasn't a full-blooded heterosexual anyway, like he might have a pinky toe in the closet. . . . Gavin and I have always considered cracking that code for sport," Vincent said, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Really? Are you serious?"

"No, I'm just fucking with him! That would be so funny! Ha-ha!"

He is hot, though . . . ,” he said while twirling his drink straw in his glass.

“Vincent! You’re so bad. Anyway, as I was saying, I want Rebecca to dump him because once a cheater, always a cheater. Unless she can live with infidelity, which I don’t think she can. She should cut her losses and be done with him.”

“So when is this going down?”

“There’s no plan, but there’s always the drill: First she and Dwayne have to have a discussion (fight) where there will be jockeying for position on who has the upper hand. Either he’ll kiss ass and she’s going to torture him (which is what I’m hoping for) or he’s going to want to just break up (which will take Rebecca months of recovery). Whether he kisses ass or not, chances are there’s also going to be the requisite breakup sex, which could happen at any time and which you know will prolong the drama by who knows how many additional weeks of back-and-forth. And there still might be a nauseating, yet genuine, reconciliation attempt. No matter what, it’s going to be a while before she can even *think* about another man, so your five friends are going to have to wait a little longer to fill Dwayne’s shoes even if he dumps her cold tomorrow. I think we’re looking at approximately a six-to-eight-month transition period before she’s ready to date.”

“Oh, shit, that girl will be worse than ever and brittle with a capital *B* if he breaks up with her. . . . Scared of that . . .”

“Yeah, that’s true; but for real, Vincent, it has been almost four years total of serious relationship.”

“Well, at the very least they should go for the breakup sex, that’s the best perk of a breakup. I’ll be right back, Jane. There’s my man.” He headed off.

“Later, gorgeous.”

Rebecca was coming back over. “Thalia, that is brilliant! So funny!” I heard her saying.

"I know, so I'll let you know what happens," Thalia said, walking away.

"You have to!" Rebecka turned back to me.

"Hi, Social Butterfly."

"Hi. You know, I should talk to people more often—this is fun."

"See? People aren't so bad, give it a whirl."

She stretched and thought for a second. "Naaah. It's too tiring. Thalia and I were having some laughs about your sales pitch, though."

"It's good stuff." I like to do my sales pitch when I've had a few drinks. I mean, I have to laugh at my job, or I'll just weep openly. Since our friends aren't very corporate, it's good for a chuckle.

"Let's get another round. I've been dying to tell you what the fucker did before I got here."

"Do tell."

She came over with this raspberry-flavored beer. "He came by to pick up some more clothes and stuff."

"Really? Dirtbag needs clean clothes? What did he have to say for himself?"

"He said, 'Hey, Rebecka. I know we need to talk but I still need time before that happens. I don't want to leave you hangin', but I don't want to get into this until I'm clear.' Are you hearing this? Hey, Gavin!" She waved. Gavin just looked at her confused and waved slowly, totally unsure of himself.

"Enough," I said, lowering her hand. "What did you say?"

"As you know, this was the first conversation we've had so I'm pissed. So in a baby voice I said, 'Oh, do you need time? Oh, sweetie, do you need something? Is there something that I can do for you?' Then I yelled, '*Go fuck yourself, Dwayne!*'"

"Yeah, really."

"So he left, just walked out. I guess I wasn't very mature. . . . But what does he expect from me? To be happy and accepting,

whatever his agenda is, where I'm obviously not even the slightest consideration? This is surreal. Anyway, his disposition indicates that there will be a breakup because he was not in a kiss-ass mode. What I would like to know is if the time he needs is for more sex with the whore Cynthia—and then he's coming back to me? Or is he really going to make a go of it with Cynthia? Or does he just need time alone? That's what I need to know."

"Who cares? Are we considering taking him back now after all this time? Because if so, I'm going to need advance notice for that, you can't just spring that on me."

"Please. Look at me. Some guy just asked me out back there. I have options. I don't have to wait around till whenever Dwayne is finished with Cynthia. But I have to know what's going on, it's imperative. I need closure. I need no rock left unturned. I'm too much of a control freak to just let it go and accept it."

"I hear you. Let me ask around. And you totally have options; Vincent told me he knows five guys who already said they would love to fill Dwayne's shoes."

"Really? Cool! What did you say?"

"I told him the breakup wasn't official yet and you guys haven't even had breakup sex, so there's still a lot of stuff to do."

"I'm not having sex with that fuck-monkey ever again, not after where he's been," she said, completely appalled.

"Kudos, my friend." And we clinked glasses. "Onwards and upwards." I hoped she was serious.

"I need to go for a cigarette. In the meantime, do you want to go to the blue light place?" she asked, forcing a smile.

"Sure, we've been drunker. Stop smiling, you look uncomfortable." She let her face fall immediately.

Out on the street, Rebecca lit up and quietly smoked as we walked. The only thing she said was "This sucks."

"Totally." Okay, maybe this denial period was ending. I was going to miss it but it was for the best.

6

The Lazy Stripper *noun* Jane's homemade dance move. Will sweep nation.

As we approached the door of the club, which we called the “blue light place” because there was no sign out front, just a blue lightbulb, Rebecka stomped out her cigarette and we gave the dreadlocked Jamaican door guy ten dollars each. He gave us approving looks so I gave him a wink and Rebecka looked down demurely. We stepped inside through the curtain and luckily got two crucial prime real estate seats at the bar.

“Yes, ladies?” asked the femme fatale, nightmare-hot, possibly Brazilian, skinny bartender. Note to self: do not bring date here.

“Mojitos, Reb?”

“Let’s go for caipirinhas for something different.”

“Good call. Two caipirinhas, please.”

The place was small and super foxy, like sexy, exotic, hot jungle sex where you just want to hook up with anyone and everyone. It had a kind of bamboo theme, but in a cool way, not overdone, but hot. The DJ was spinning his own blend of I don’t know what, but it was primal and getting under my skin. God, I was hard up. Everyone looked like they just rolled out of bed because they’re so good looking they don’t have to make an effort at their appearance. Or maybe they all did just get out of bed because they had to have sex listening to this fucking horny DJ.

“Man, this place is foxy,” I said.

“You got that right.”

"I feel like I want to have rude sex with someone in some exotic outdoor area, like in an oasis or a hot spring or something." Oy. Drooling.

"Yeah, or in a jungle someplace with someone who's really manly and commanding. With this DJ spinning," Rebecka said dreamily.

"Oh yeah, we definitely need this fucking DJ—he's an aural lubricant!"

"Ha-ha! Okay, we need a cold drink."

"Luckily there are two right here."

"Cheers," we both said.

Then Rebecka sighed and said, "I just can't believe me and Dwayne right now. I don't know how long I can take all of this weirdness. I just want everything back to normal."

"I know. And unfortunately this is probably the calm before the storm. The shit is going to hit the fan soon. . . ."

"I know! And I know it's going to be bad no matter what, so I'm procrastinating dealing with it. Me no likey."

"You can avoid it for a little while. But soon enough you'll just have to face it. Don't internalize it; that's really unhealthy because it will never go away."

"You're right. I guess you would know," she said, looking at me while sipping her drink.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what about your love life?"

"It's warming up—what?" I asked while picking some lime out of my teeth.

"It's nonexistent, Jane, that's a fact," she said dryly. "And at the risk of pissing you off, I believe it's because you never fully got over Marcus. There. I said it."

"You are the rudest bitch, Rebecka."

Marcus: my learning experience about the dark underbelly of the male sex. The shady, cheating, lying side of certain men. Every girl's got a Marcus, unfortunately.

Marcus and I met on the E train, I guess it was about five years ago. I noticed this godlike six-foot male with dark brown hair, luminescent white skin, and huge dark brown eyes staring at *me*. I couldn't believe it, I was absolutely blinded by his appearance; he was so gorgeous. We started seeing each other regularly on the E train. In a few weeks we were dating. Of course on top of his beauty he had to be the most romantic person I have ever dated. I fell in love really quickly. Within the first week of dating he insisted on commitment and monogamy, which at that time was not something I would ordinarily rush into, but figured, *What the hell? I'm gonna go for it*. So we did and at first it was bliss. Every day he would give me flowers and say all of these beautiful, romantic, sexy things to me. . . . Once he drove in a rainstorm to spend five minutes with me. He made me dinner a few times, the only boyfriend that did. He was so incredibly focused on me when we were together. And he was a phenomenal hookup. I just wallowed in the stellar romance of it all, I thought that I finally understood what all the songs, poems, plays, movies, books, wars, etc., about love were all about.

Unfortunately, it was bullshit. Let me tell you something: when a young, hot man insists on commitment and monogamy after knowing you for a week, take it as a red flag and run for the hills.

What happened was the eight months of romantic Superman were negated by eight months of romantic Kryptonite. Unfortunately, Marcus was a panty-chasing sociopath. After the first eight months he started to not show up for plans, literally standing me up. I was confused by it but accepted any and all excuses and blew it off. Rebecka, of course, got the premies or just saw his bullshit for what it was and was slamming him as soon as he started acting up. But I was blinded by love.

Finally it all came to a head one day when Rebecka and I were hanging out at this vegetarian place that used to be on my corner. I don't remember all the details now, but it was late afternoon and so one of the bored waitresses hung out with us. She and I started

comparing notes about our boyfriends (Rebecca was single then) and how romantic they were. Another waitress spotted this one's new boyfriend outside so they both waved him in. In walks Marcus. Rebecca and I just looked at each other. Then Rebecca turned on Marcus and started in with "I knew you were a cheesy prick the moment I saw you. You're pathetic. You couldn't even do Jane the courtesy of two-timing her outside our own neighborhood, could you?" And then this whole shouting match ensued between Marcus, Rebecca, the waitress, and me. Finally I yelled, "Enough!" and quietly told the waitress what was going on and that she was welcome to Marcus and I wished her luck. Then I got my stuff and left.

After that it was rock-bottoms-ville. *How? Why? How did I mess this up? Why did I accept his bullshit behavior for so long? Is my self-esteem that low?* I think these manipulative men, such as the cheaters, the beaters, the liars, whatever, know exactly when they have you under their thumb. First they are on their best behavior until their sixth sense tells them that they've got you utterly bamboozled and then *bam!* They relax into their real heinous selves and go into torture mode because they know you are going to suck up whatever it is that they dish out. I should have been more responsible for myself.

The worst part was that when my big emotions cooled, I realized that we didn't have much in common as people. When Marcus wasn't romantic, he was actually kind of boring. He made the same dull conversation and never really had much to say. How did I not notice? And we didn't have any common interests like music or books or movies, or even have similar senses of humor. The hard truth was that Marcus was just a fancy hookup but not a friend or a partner in crime like a boyfriend should be. It was horrifying to find out that I'm blind to basic, fundamental personality differences like compatibility. I don't really think it affects me now except that it makes me avoid the same big mistake.

I turned to Rebecca. "You know what? I knew Marcus would come up because I knew that you'd want to compare notes, which is absolutely fine. I remember that I had to talk to everyone about cheating when he cheated on me. But we are not reopening anything; that's done and put behind me, lesson learned."

Rebecca continued, "I don't think it's behind you, Jane. You haven't had a real relationship since then and that was over *four years ago*. Four years! It's gotta be because of him. I think you just shut down then and haven't opened up since. Right now you are literally a cautionary tale for me because I'm not going to be alone four years from now over Dwayne, because *he* was the asshole. I'm going to fight that."

"Don't start bragging about how well-adjusted and healthy you're going to be when you haven't even *begun* to accept your situation. When you start acting like your three-and-a-half-year relationship is over and not like a fucking homecoming queen, then we'll talk about who deals better than who."

"Okay. That's true."

"The only caution my tale teaches is to not form relationships on public transportation, especially the E line, where I met Marcus. I really don't think I'm closed to relationships. I've made no secret of the fact that I want and am ready to have a relationship and I will have one when it's supposed to happen and with the right person. I'm just careful. In the meantime I will continue to enjoy myself and my life. Hey, and what about Rich from a couple months ago? That was dating. We even hooked up."

"That guy was a dick. You're now attracted to emotionally inaccessible dickheads to avoid something real with the possibility of getting hurt." Turning to the bartender: "Can we get another round?"

"Rich wasn't a dick, he was an asshole."

"I wasn't aware there was a difference," she said while stirring the sugar in her glass.

"A dick is someone who is consciously rude and offensive. They're obnoxious almost on purpose. An asshole is someone who's offensive unwittingly. The difference is in the intention. Rich isn't a bad person, he's just an asshole."

"Thank you for the distinction. Anyway, going forward I am going to hand-select your next boyfriend for you because you are clueless. At least Dwayne took over three and a half years to act up. Kidding aside, Jane, you're alone a lot and it's sad to me because you're so awesome. Don't get me wrong, I know your life is great; you have a ton of friends, you have a great place, a lot of good times, you're a happy person . . . but I don't want to see you alone forever. You're missing a big piece of life. You're right that I need to accept my situation, but I still think you need to deal with yours too."

"You're getting on my fucking nerves."

"And there we have it." She sat up and looked around. "Well, well, well, look who's here," she said, nodding down the bar.

"Who?"

"Right at the opposite end of the bar, facing us. . . ."

This slinky, bony, and (unfortunately) exquisite woman in a halter top got off someone's lap and walked away and there was Ray Bowen, the lap she just got up from. My shy, blushing boss. Ray was wearing a black metal T-shirt with a white thermal long-sleeve underneath. The T-shirt was ripped but you knew it was expensive; it was probably vintage, genuine article. And he was wearing four-hundred-dollar jeans and flip-flops. His hair was its typical product-disheveled, sticking up on top of his head. His geeky thick-rimmed glasses were in place. He looked like he could be in a band. He looked expensive in a cool/hot kind of way.

"What the fuck . . . ?" I asked, stunned and fixated by the sight before me. Ray was there with this friend who was some kind of Brad Pitt lookalike. The two of them were holding court. Everyone in the place seemed to know them and people kept passing them and talking to them, like they were trying to impress the two of

them. The Brad Pitt guy didn't seem to give a shit about anybody. Ray was talking to everyone in a relaxed manner. My jaw dropped. This was weird. Ray looked over and I automatically looked away really fast. I couldn't say hello. Rebecka smiled and waved—I was going to kill this prom queen.

What was I missing? How in the hell was the Blush Meister big man on campus? I can't believe he's social like this. And just when I looked back over, the rude hot bartender walked over to him and started chatting him up with her ass sticking out, all flirty and seductive.

"What the fuck is happening here? Can't she see he can't handle this kind of intense social stimuli?" I asked Rebecka.

Just then Ray threw his head back and gave her a big hearty laugh, not some nervous chuckle like I always get.

"Wow, look at him go . . .," Rebecka said with wonder.

"Yeah, I don't see any blushing. Actually, he seems incredibly at ease making social conversation. I get this bullshit shy shtick every fucking day to the point that I think he has Tourette's syndrome, and this guy is workin' the room . . . what a fucking liar. . . ."

"He's probably shy at first with people and then relaxes once he gets to know them," Rebecka said, chewing on her straw while watching him. "I'm actually not surprised by this, considering how cool he was when we were at Hog Pit. I mean, he handled two crazy irate females like us in drama very well. I never saw the side of him that you told me about."

"Well, Rebecka, that side exists and I get it *every day*. He's even been shy with me ever since Hog Pit night, like that evening of socializing meant nothing. And I am not a scary person! I don't have high standards of socializing, I'll talk about anything! I'm friendly!"

"You most certainly are, no argument here. Maybe he really is into you. . . ." Then she gasped and grabbed my arm. "I bet that's it! Jane! He's so into you he can't even talk to you. Aw! Oh, my God, you have to go out with him. I told you that I am handpicking

your new boyfriend so I'm doing it now: I bestow Ray Bowen unto you. He's good, he's the anti-Marcus, and he's hot! He looks like a brunette Michael Vartan. He's totally your type. And look how well he plays with others . . . you two can be little socialites together. . . . Cute!"

"Uck, Rebecka, fuck off. I'm not going near Ray, he's insane. We can't even have a normal conversation. How are we supposed to have sex if we can't even make superficial chitchat? Anyway, he's my boss." I sucked down my beverage.

"You don't give a shit about that job."

"I don't give a shit about any job, gorgeous, but now that my leisure time has improved tremendously, I'm not trifling with this one if I can avoid it. Especially not to date someone who fakes Tourette's syndrome with me. Honestly. And what if we date and he makes me come to work? Have you thought about that? What if he wants me to quit because he's the boss and our dating is against company code and I'm forced to take a job that makes me work? No, I'm not having it or him. I am flabbergasted right now. His duplicity is disgusting me. I can't believe you're so bamboozled by him."

"I'm not bamboozled. I clearly see that he emanates good things. He's good people and was very nice when I was very down. Plus, he made a lot of good contributions when we were roundtabling and played good music on the jukebox. He's cool. And he keeps you on the company payroll, so thank God for that. You know what? We should have discussed this three weeks ago when I met him; I'm mad that we didn't. But we both know he stuck around that night because of you. He has to like you. Holy shit, Jane, hello? Focus: he's smart, he's interesting, he's well educated, he's fucking hot, he's super nice—"

"Then you go out with him."

She gave me a look and kept going. "—He looks like he makes good money and we know he's your type and he seems totally into you!"

"Well, he's also making me feel like a fool because he's happy to be around everyone else and can't talk to me or treat me like a normal person. You know what? You're annoying me more than my mother tonight. You really need to fuck off."

Just then the slinky bartender came over looking a little miffed. "Ladies, Raymond would like to buy you another round of caipirinhas," she said with her foxy Brazilian accent. Bitch.

Rebecca gave me a look that said, "I told you."

"We're leaving after this round, but thanks anyway," I told the bartender.

"You're being a freak," Rebecca said.

We finished our drinks, got our stuff, and I walked out. I didn't even look at him.

Rebecca came outside after me. "I'm so right about Ray—that guy is totally into you. When I was walking out, I looked over at him and he was looking over at you really eagerly and you just blew him off. His embarrassingly cheesy Brad Pitt friend raised his sunglasses and was looking at you. Model girl was pouting. Ray just sadly raised his drink to me. . . . You know, I don't know how Ray, who seems so cool, can be friends with that Brad Pitt bonehead who wears sunglasses in a club. They must be childhood friends or something . . .," she said, squinting while wondering.

"Or maybe because Ray *isn't cool*. You don't know Ray like I do." I got a shiver just then. "I can no longer socialize with Ray at the office; I am appalled. I can't even think right now. I will just treat him with the respect of being my boss and controller of my leisure job and that's it. I want no part of his game and his manipulations."

"You know, I would think if anything you would be amused by this side of Ray. I mean, it's certainly unexpected. Regardless, now that it's confirmed that he's into you, how can you not take advantage of hot conference-room sex at work?"

I pondered that visual for a minute. Maybe two. Then I had to shake my head to get the image out. "Enough. I already told you,

I'm not dating Ray or spending time with someone who leads a double life and enjoys false advertising, someone who can't even relax and have a normal conversation with me, someone I have to talk to super gently because he is so nervous and yet he's the belle of the ball everywhere else. Fuck it, I need to date a *man*. Someone with a fucking *backbone*. If that means I have 'issues,' so be it, I don't care."

"I don't think we should have talked about Marcus and pondered Ray in the same evening," Rebecka said calmly.

"That doesn't matter."

"Okay. I'm going to grab a cab. Are you walking?"

"Yeah," I said totally distracted.

"And I'll do what you said about Dwayne and try not to internalize everything but let it out. I bet John and Francesca would approve of that advice."

"Okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow." And I just walked away. Somehow I felt like shit.

Sickotic *adjective* A layman version of the word *psychotic*. Sickotic has a multitude of meanings, none of which need be used clinically or accurately. Use irresponsibly to identify a person with strong emotions, someone who is funny, maybe irreverent, or for something that you approve of, whatever.

I was nursing quite the little grade A hangover from that evening of mixing beverages. Rum will kick you in the head like a mule if you're not careful. *Let me just rest my head on the table for a minute . . . nappy-nap . . .* "Aahhh!" What was François doing in my face at this hour?

"Jane, why do you come to this café all the time?"

"What?" I was barely awake.

"There are excellent French cafés right down the street. Why can't you try one of them?"

"François, spare me your bullshit, it's like, eleven a.m." I laid my head back down on the table.

"It's noon, and I will spare you just this once if you buy me a scone."

"I will buy you a scone if you then fuck off."

"Fair enough, mademoiselle."

Fran-fucking-çois. I have never known a ruder fucking mooch than this French import. How he insinuated himself into my world is still a mystery, but I know he's here to stay.

Of course he plopped himself down at my table.

"What?"

"Jane, why do you speak to me in this tone when you know I've always had feelings for you?"

“François,” I snarled, “it is eleven in the fucking *morning*, I’m hung over, you’ve criticized my café, you mooched a scone off me, you reek, and now you are sitting at my table complaining about my tone?”

He stopped and seemed to be weighing what I said. Then, looking sheepishly at my cell on the table, asks, “Can I make a quick phone call?”

“No!”

“*Ça va*, mademoiselle.” He took a bite of his scone. My café time was now polluted. I didn’t even have three seconds to ponder with the Universe today. Was it going to be this kind day? *If so*, I thought, *I might as well go the fuck to work*. I stood up and looked at him with all the disdain I could muster. “I’m going to work now, François. Thanks a lot.”

“I didn’t know you had a job,” he said with his mouth full of scone. Gross.

I went inside the café to get Piss & Vinegar her hush pastry.

“Mari, I need one of these big cheese Danish and a tiny favor.”

“Name it.”

“Dwayne, Rebecka’s boyfriend, is cheating on her with Cynthia.”

“That fucking bitch.”

“Yeah, and Dwayne needs to be castrated immediately. Anyway, I was wondering if there were a discreet way you could find out how long this bullshit has been going on, without anyone knowing that I’m asking.”

“You got it, chica.”

“Cool, I owe you one. I’ll talk to you later!”

“Don’t work too hard!” she yelled after me.

“I never do!” And I waved over my head.

“What the *hell* happened to you?” Piss & Vinegar asked when I got to reception.

"Went out last night," I croaked and handed her the Danish.

"No shit."

"No."

"And you're here?"

"Contrary to your opinion, Sheila, I do work here. I'm always here if I'm not on a sales appointment."

"You gonna go for that?" she said with her left eyebrow raised and her lips pursed. "You must still be drunk, girl."

"Thanks for my messages." Beyotch. I didn't have the energy.

"Maybe I should tell Mr. Ray what kind of condition his staff comes to work in in the mornin'," she said while I walked away.

Without turning around I said, "Ray was there, Sheila. Enjoy your pastry." That shut her up.

I went to my desk and put my stuff down and just sat there holding my head for about ten minutes. I was about to doze off for some much-needed R&R when I heard someone clear their throat.

"Huh?" My head sprang up and I squinted. It was Ray.

"Jane, we have the group meeting at four fifteen. I'm glad you made it to the office today."

"Of course I made it. I'm a professional," I said crisply, discreetly wiping drool from my cheek.

"Of course." Blush. Smirk. Liar!

At four ten we saw each other in the hall on the way to the meeting.

"So how are you feeling today?" Ray asked.

"I feel fine, thank you." *Fuck this guy.*

"Did you like the lounge last night?" he asked.

"I did. The music was great."

"I'm glad you liked the music," he said excitedly, "I'm actually friends with DJ Ven and I got him the gig because I'm friends with the manager of the club. That's why I was there. I think Ven has the best sound in the city right now. We know each other from Brown; we both had radio shows."

"Huh. Aren't we talkative today."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing. It's not like I know anything about music anyway," I lied, "but he does seem to be very talented. I always like the music there."

"Cool. How long were you two there for?"

"A while, I guess. We were at Swift before, so we just stopped in."

"Oh, I was there all night but I didn't see you until you were leaving."

"Well, it was a busy place, so . . ." Ironic; just when I'm through talking to him he finds his voice.

"How is Rebecka doing with everything?" *Now he's never shutting up.*

"She's doing very well, best as can be expected, of course. Thanks for asking." I'm working the fake garden-party conversational tone to be professional.

He looks at me like he's trying to figure me out. "Bad hang-over?"

"Nope. How 'bout yourself?"

"I'm okay."

"Contrary to popular opinion, Ray, I'm not a drunk. And why aren't you more hung over if you were 'there all night'? What's your sneaky secret?"

He pushed the conference room door open for me and said quietly into my ear, standing very close to me, "My secret is that I'm wearing what was on the floor of my bedroom, which I think I wore on Monday. I haven't showered or shaved." It was true; he did smell strongly of Febreze. "The only reason I can function is because I went to McDonald's and had a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich and a large black coffee and then took Tylenol with Codeine that was leftover from oral surgery."

"Hmm. Interesting . . . got any more of the pills?"

"No."

"Huh." I looked around for a seat.

Still speaking quietly but firmly, he continued, "Jane, I know you're not a drunk, but I saw you last night *drinking*, and now you are not your usual cheerful Jane self. Actually, last night you weren't yourself either; my friends wanted to meet you and you split and didn't even come over to say hello. Now this morning you're mumbling stuff under your breath and seem annoyed. What's up? Are you mad at me?"

"Why don't you *talk* about it with all your friends that you *talk* to."

"What?" He looked totally confused.

"Where was your blushing last night, Ray?" I hissed.

Just then our client management team filed in. Saved by the sales team. And what a team we were: cheesy older guys with bad toupees, young aggressive hot shots, and everything in between. I'm the only woman in the department. We all looked like hell for any number of reasons.

"Okay, everyone," Ray says, "I'm going to keep this brief, and I'm sorry to end your day with this, but I'll get straight to the point: Leetsmann & Stone is in trouble financially. We are doing poorly. For the last four months our numbers have been lower than the previous month and lower than the same month last year. The company is not generating income and we cannot afford to let our revenue continue to drop like this or there will be consequences. I had a meeting with upstairs and they want to see changes. They are suggesting that I start client management seminars as a refresher on procedure, services for our investors, and business growth opportunities for everyone involved with investor relations. You know, to remind us all about all of our departments, all the people we can discuss with clients to encourage more spending, et cetera." Everyone groaned. I looked up—Ray was looking right at me. "I'm not going to start that for a month or so. But be aware that upstairs is watching us now. They are watching our numbers and the kind

of revenue everyone is bringing in. We need new investors—you can't just keep sticking with the ones you've spoken to for years, you have to pursue new young guys that want to make a mark for themselves, who aren't afraid to take risks, and have money to invest. We will have trouble if we don't turn things around; jobs will have to be cut if this situation doesn't improve. I can't be any more direct than this. The door to my office is always open; please stop by if you need any assistance or advice. Any questions?"

The team started asking him questions like "How are we supposed to entertain clients if we can only take a client to a steak house, not a strip house?" As soon as I heard that, I acted like they insulted my female sensibilities and left. Not that I care what these old goats say, but really: do you want to be a cliché? Is that your goal?

So I went to my desk and set up appointments and did some schmoozing for about an hour. I researched each department of the company and jotted down new angles to pursue in the future. Whatever.

This day is incredibly bad. In addition to the items this morning, I can now add being accosted by a staff meeting, and Ray—who-does-not-speak suddenly finding his tongue to grill me about my attitude. Obviously I need to go home and just lay low and avoid any more human interaction. I collected my stuff and headed out, only to bump into Ray.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to go meet one of my clients." Hey, if he can lie, so can I.

"When will you be back?"

"Umm . . . hard to say, you know? I want to give this meeting my all, maybe I'll take him to a 'strip house.' I think I have some singles on me," I added, patting my pocket.

"Jane. Did you listen to what I said in the meeting?"

"Absolutely, and you were very, very clever. Okay, off I go."
Hitting the down button for the elevator now.

“Do you want to maybe tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Ray. Let’s not spoil our professional relationship with new-found conversation.” I walked into the elevator and hit L for Lobby. He stood there watching me with his hands on his hips as the doors closed.

Playing stereo *noun* As good of a game as you're gonna get. Someone plays your CD collection, or your MP3 player, resulting in you hearing songs you wouldn't think of or forgot about in your own collection, giving you a new and improved appreciation for it. Then, you show same someone the songs you like, which turns that person on to some really good music and reminds you again why you love your CDs. And then you move on to their collection. Usually ends with music swapping.

I went home immediately. Work really had been a challenge on several fronts. I just landed on my couch and stayed there. I ordered special hangover food for me and fed Snowball, my cat, a jumbo-sized portion of beef in gravy and did some domestic bonding. Snowball is super fluffy and laid-back. After I ate I started working on a new embroidery piece. I was thinking about the night before and just sewing sewing sewing. Around seven p.m. the phone rang.

"Jane?"

"What's up, Reb?"

Suddenly I heard gasping and sobs over the phone.

"Rebecca, what happened?"

"Dwayne" (hiccup) "came over, and he took all his belongings, and he said stuff to me, and he's gone now, he left! We're broken up, we just broke up, he moved out. I am freaking!" Her voice got progressively higher and then she started crying really hard.

"Okay, I want you to get out of there right now and come over here and sleep over."

"Okay."

When I hung up with her I called the café to see if Marisol was around. Luckily she was.

"Mari, any word on what I asked you this morning? I know this is short notice, but now would be a good time to tell Rebecka the bad news since she already got some other nasty news. I want her to deal with everything at once."

"Lemme call Natalie. I'll call you back."

"Thanks."

The phone rang one minute later.

"Jane?" It was Marisol.

"What's the damage?"

"Six weeks."

"And they're still together?"

"Yup."

"Shit, great. Okay. Marisol, you're awesome, thank you so much."

"See you tomorrow, chica."

Rebecka arrived a half hour later with red swollen eyes, wearing her super fuzzy slippers. She made herself a big cup of café au lait, lit a cigarette, and opened a big bag of crunchy cheese doodles and sat down on my couch while I continued with my embroidery.

"He came over with his friend Matt downstairs in his car to move him out."

"Fucker."

"I know." And she started crying again. "The doorman called up and was like, 'Dwayne wanted me to let you know that he's coming up to retrieve his belongings.' So now the whole building will know. He took his chair, his CD collection, his games, all of his clothes, and some stuff from the kitchen. He was making several trips, up and down, up and down. Matt just stayed downstairs; he was probably scared to come up. I just sat there watching him, like holy shit. At first Dwayne wouldn't even look at me. I didn't even know if we would talk at all, I couldn't believe it was all happening

today, like *this*. He kept stuffing stuff in garbage bags and just walking it out to the car.”

“Uck.”

“Yeah. When he was done he came back and put his keys on the kitchen counter and looked up like he was irritated that he even had to address me and was like, ‘Look, Rebecca, I know I haven’t been cool. I know that I should have shown you and our relationship more respect than I did. But everything just happened. I’m sorry. The thing is’”—and here she paused for me to wait for it—“‘*Cynthia and I really think we love each other and are going to try to make a go of it.*’”

“What?”

Tears streamed down her face. “He loves the whore Cynthia. He said it. I can’t believe it. I don’t know what I’ve been thinking the last few weeks, but I am really shocked. I can’t believe this, I guess I didn’t think it was real. He even said, ‘Cynthia is everything you’re not.’” And she started bawling.

“Well, he’s right about that. You’ve never been a vapid, trashy whore.”

“So he goes, ‘But that’s not to say that our relationship wasn’t important to me because it really was and you’re an amazing person.’” And she started sobbing again but continued, “So I asked, like a normal person, ‘If I’m so amazing, why did you do this, how could you?’ And he goes in that same annoyed kind of way, ‘Like I said, it just happened. But I realized while knowing Cynthia that what you and I have is too serious and not really me. Cynthia has shown me that I can be in a committed relationship but it can be fun and light and yet still very mature. I’m sorry, Rebecca, and believe me, it wasn’t an easy decision. But honestly you’re too negative and everything feels so heavy all the time and I can’t spend my life with someone like that. I need a break.’ Do you believe this shit?”

“This is sickening. Can I tell you one more thing while we’re on this?”

“What?”

“It’s been going on for six weeks now. Which isn’t too bad, considering, it’s not like it was months. . . .” This was not going to go down well.

“He was living in my home—*my home*—not paying for shit because he’s broke, and he was cheating on me for *three weeks* without me knowing, having an affair with another woman? Blowing off plans with *me* to be with *her*?”

“I’m super sorry.”

“How? How? How can this actually happen?” She lit another cigarette. Exhale. “I’m down and out right now, but I’m going to kick his ass as soon as I’m back in action, and that’s a promise.”

“He’s a sick fuck.”

“Ugh, I never want to be in a relationship again. I’m going to be single forever!”

“You won’t be alone for long. Remember all those guys waiting to fill Dwayne’s shoes.”

“I can’t even think about another man. I gave that loser the best years of my life!”

“Drama queen, you’re twenty-eight, this is just a glitch. Totally temporary. Eventually you’ll see that you’re better off.”

(Sniff) “Jane,” (hiccup) “please, I can’t take your Universe bullshit, not today.”

“Okay, sorry. So how did it end? How did he leave it?”

“He literally goes, ‘Okay, see you around.’ ‘See you around,’ Jane, that’s what I get for *three and a half years of my life*! Oh, my God, I can’t do this, I just can’t take it, I can’t . . .”

“Rebecka, you can, you are, and you are letting it all out, which is very good. It won’t be so bad soon. And we’re going to do whatever it takes for however long it takes to get through it. If I have to get drunk and watch you fake-socialize every fucking night in some bar I will do that. Maybe you can get a happy pill from John or Francesca.”

Sniff. Blow nose. "That's a thought. Although, I don't want to talk to them about this; they never really liked Dwayne. I can't believe I spent years with that dick . . . amazing."

"I can believe it. You guys had a very good relationship—it just imploded in the end, but it wasn't a waste of time."

"I would have *married* him, not even kidding. I wasn't going anywhere, I was *happy*. But it turns out I'm not 'fun' enough."

"Or a whore."

Sob. "Or a fucking whore!"

"Well, the whore part we can work on, absolutely. I totally don't agree with dick Dwayne about the fun part because I think you are lots of fun and totally fabulous. And Dwayne's not one to judge with his intellectual snobbism. Secretly I always thought he was a pill. You're the fun one, Rebecka, that's for sure."

"You swear?"

"Of course I swear. Come on, what about that vacation to Tahiti we took? Who else, *on our first night*, would get *all* the cabana boys to steal that crazy rum from the hotel bar and party with us? Who else could then make all of us skinny-dip after that absurd booze cruise? Who, I ask you, conned us into that premiere party in midtown where we partied with celebrities all night long? Who was the most fun girl in town these last three weeks and partied like it was 1999 in the face of disaster? Who is it that entertains me every week of my life when we go out for drinks? You, that's who. Do you think I could hang out with someone who's not fun? You are totally fun, and sickotic. Unfortunately, Dwayne is a confused moron experiencing a midlife crisis at age twenty-seven. There's no fixing that, but just know that it's not you. I can't wait till he comes crawling back, it's going to be fantastic."

She started crying all over again. I grabbed Snowball and put him on Rebecka's lap. Snowball can take anything. Rebecka started chain-smoking.

"You know what? My relationships will never last because I'm always meant to be Tortured Girl and that's all there is to it."

"You are not! That is not the case, I assure you. We loved these guys. If the breakups weren't so bad, we'd still be with them. Sometimes you need to be chewed up and spit out to know that you really do have to move on. You are experiencing this pain of separation with Dwayne to free you to find the kind, totally hot soul mate that you are meant to be with. Those foxy guys are out there and waiting for us. Good things happen to good people. Nice girls finish first. Boys are good. Dwayne just got cock-blocked by the vapid whore. . . ."

"Wow."

"Yup. Dwayne was just a learning experience but not *the one*, so learn all you can from this. There is someone coming. Or maybe a few people coming. You might as well enjoy playing the field with all of your new options."

"I find your cute and fuzzy logic strangely consoling right now."

"That's because it's true so it feels right. I can't wait to say 'I told you so' really soon."

"Thanks, Jane. How do you do it? How do you seem happy no matter what?"

"You mean even with the singleness that's ruining my life?" I smiled.

"Yeah." And she blew her nose.

"Well, I'm still happy because I'm grateful for everything I have and I enjoy my life in general. Maybe I'm just a happy person. I have a lot of interests and friends. Life in general is fun. I'm also not into that victim 'poor me' mentality. But, that said," I said, throwing my embroidery on the table and looking at her, "I have to admit that you are right; I have been alone for too long. Since your brutal and tactless confrontation at the blue light place, I've been wondering about my own love life. It's the only thing about my life

that bugs me. I'm not sure why I'm single, maybe it's Marcus, maybe I'm a little messed up . . . but I'm going to deal with it starting now."

"You're not messed up. You're perfect. I didn't mean to sound so harsh the other night."

"It's okay, I probably needed the reality check. And I believe that you're going to be okay sooner than you think. I'm positive you're going to get a much better boyfriend than *fucking Dwayne*. Maybe go out with Dwayne's opposite next: some nice, sweet, down-to-earth, super hot guy. One who's into personal hygiene for a change, ha-ha. Yeah, look who the whore won: a guy who she knows is a liar and is unfaithful and greasy to boot. Congratulations, Cynthia, you won a fucking cheater. You'll see."

"'Kay." Rebecka took a deep breath and hiccupped, then popped some cheese doodles into her mouth. She blew her nose and got up and then headed for my iPod.

After that we had a (thankfully) nonalcoholic evening of getting back to our roots. First Rebecka had to play the Bonnie Raitt cover of Richard Thompson's "When the Spell Is Broken" so she could feel sad and vent; but then it was fair game. Some of the bands we listened to were the Kaiser Chiefs, Needle, Wolfmother, the Stills, Franz Ferdinand, the Wrens, the Pixies, the Killers, our new best friends Karen O and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the Ramones, Travis, Duran Duran, Minor Threat, Bad Brains, Lush, and Massive Attack, to name just a few. It was a great round. We talked about people we knew, shows we've been to that were great, burned incense, played with Snowball, I embroidered and Rebecka checked my work, Rebecka smoked and drank her café au laits . . . you know, simple, good stuff, which is necessary during troubled times. Very comforting. If Rebecka hadn't just been betrayed, that evening would have been perfect. Phase one of the acceptance process had commenced.

Overserved *adjective* Understated term describing the state you're in after a licensed mixologist serves you all the alcohol you requested. Intoxicated.

“**M**arisol, can I have a slice of that marble cake with my tea?”

“You got it, chica.”

Okay, Universe. (Deep breath.) *Things are getting a little icky around here, I'm not sure what's going on. I'm speaking for two today. As you know, Rebecka and I are both in a transitional state; our love lives are not as they should be. Okay, fine. But I know we're both ready to meet our soul mates. I know I told you that I was looking for mine before, but now I really mean it. And I really mean it for Rebecka as well; don't let her be alone like me for four years. Show her the reason why this all happened as soon as you can. As for me, enough is enough. I'm ready, I'm cute, and I'm totally appreciative and receptive. Thanks. Oh, and when you can, I'll take the rest of my wish list too, let's just do it all at once. Just a quick refresher because I know you're busy: 1) lots of leisure, 2) lots of cash, 3) true love, now for me and Rebecka, 4) something big on the artistic/creative front, and 5) Reb and I befriend Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, or Pam Anderson, or Gwen Stefani, and maybe Selma Blair or Salma Hayek. Let's try Lara Flynn Boyle too. Or whoever else, the more the merrier, honestly. Thanks.*

When Marisol returned she asked, “How's Rebecka doing?”

“She's okay. Not great. Actually she's probably better than she was last week because she's over the worst of it, which is the first conversation when you learn what you're dealing with.”

"I hear you."

"*But*, as per usual, Rebecka does nothing wrong yet everyone is talking about *her* and she has to experience embarrassment, whereas Dwayne acts like an ass and experiences no repercussions and gets to have sex with a very giving female. Where's the justice?"

"It's always like that, always."

"I know, it sucks. But, it's all for the best. And Dwayne's dick is microscopic."

"No shit."

"Nope." Let's watch that go through the grapevine . . . ha-ha!

"Well, tell Rebecka to hang in there and that I got her back. Actually, also tell her that I have a few Latin lovers from my neighborhood who will be *happy* to restore her faith in mankind when she's ready." She gave me a wink.

"I will, thanks!" It was great; the possibilities were endless.

A few minutes later Marisol waved at me. "Jane, your boss is on the phone for you."

I jumped. "What? How do you know it's my boss, what's his name?"

"His name's Ray and he said he's your boss. His voice is like . . ." She tried to snap her fingers to help remember but her nails were too long. "Who's that guy, that actor from that movie?"

Oh, *shit*. "Luke Wilson? *Charlie's Angels*?" I asked weakly.

"Yeah, exactly! How did you know?" she asked, amazed.

"A hunch . . . I can't take that call, Marisol . . . just tell him there's no one here by that name." Deny everything, that's the key. If I'd admitted I were there, I'd never have been able to come back.

"No problem . . . your job is jacked up."

This was not good. Not good at all. I realized I couldn't leave now or he'd know I'd been here to get the message. I had to switch locations and give it forty-five minutes. I decided to call *Piss & Vinegar* on my cell to get the vibe of the situation.

"Sheila, I'm in between appointments, do you want something different or is a doughnut good?"

"Girl, you better get your ass into this office. Didn't you get my messages?"

"I haven't listened to voice mail."

"There's a big company meetin' goin' on. Leetsmann is gonna talk, he's here now!"

"Really? The owner? What do you think that means?"

"It means that heads are rollin', girl, everyone's gettin' fired."

"Okay, don't panic, everyone isn't getting fired."

"We don't know that, Miss Jane."

"How do you know it's bad news?"

"Numbers are down, profits are down. Remember that meeting you had the other day with your department when you were still drunk? It was a warning about this shit. Don't you listen?"

"Oh yeah, that sounds familiar. . . . Why do *we* have to go to the meeting? This is going to be so *boring*, Sheila. I feel like we're being punished for something."

"Girl, you *are* being punished for something, are you dense? You're not bringing in any *money*. That's your *job*."

"Nice attitude. Okay, I'm coming in. See you soon."

"Bring me a doughnut with chocolate frosting, none of that fruit shit."

"Got it."

Numbers numbers numbers, God these people are obsessed! On the bright side, maybe we'll lose some of those odious strip club aficionados who have been getting on my nerves.

"Has anyone been fired yet?" I asked Sheila when I arrived, putting on a scarf to look more professional.

"Not yet. It's not gonna happen till after the meetin'. So if I was you I'd lay low."

I stopped and looked at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She just looked at me with her favorite Jane expression of a raised eyebrow and pursed lips.

"You know what? I don't want to know. But if I go, you go. I never heard anyone rave about your job performance."

I walked over to my desk and sat down. I continued to work, business as usual. I thought, *There is no way I am getting fired. Not me, not a chance. I'm kickin' ass, taking names. Work work work . . . Sure, my attendance isn't ideal per se, but I don't think that's a problem. No one really notices except P&V, and she's been bribed. . . .* Suddenly I was elated with my daily bribes to Sheila. It was like saving for a rainy day.

Everyone was clustering around each other's cubicles speculating about what would happen. I said hello to everyone but just went to my desk and went through my e-mails and made a few calls. Some of my clients seemed to know about the meeting. I guess word was spreading on the street. Anyway, grace under pressure, I always say. I didn't even hear Ray come over.

"Jane, um, have you heard about what's going on?"

I remembered that I'm still not feeling his double life.

"Yes, Sheila kindly filled me in."

"Okay. Well, the company meeting is at four o'clock, and then I'll be having individual meetings with everyone in our group right after it."

"Okay, got it."

He seemed like he wanted to say more, but he just said "Okay" and walked off.

I spent hours killing time by doing my work thing and considering the mystery of this exciting new development . . . heads a-rollin'. . . . It didn't sound like the end of the world but I knew some people must be freaking. Suddenly you're out of work having to do the whole job search/interview bullshit all over again. I would be annoyed by that. I decided to offer my newly out-of-work compadres any help that I could provide. They may be the cheesiest

fuckers on God's green earth, and drunks, and perverts, but they didn't deserve this kind of fate if they really wanted to stay.

Somewhere around three fifteen a nasty thought sneaked into my brain: *What if the boys upstairs think my stupid numbers are too low?* Truthfully, I had no idea what good numbers were or how my numbers added up. *What if those assholes want to fire me because my numbers aren't up to par? Holy shit!* I suddenly broke into a cold sweat. Just when I was about to lose it, I remembered that I was still a new, innocent little relationship manager, and a woman. *I'm the only woman . . . are they going to fire the token female?* I didn't think so. I exhaled and made myself relax.

At ten of four most of the company filed into the main conference rooms, where the dividing wall between them was opened, and a lot of us spilled into the reception area, standing around like a bunch of goons, trying to hear and look interested. In came King Gasbag himself, Mr. Julian Leetsmann, owner and proprietor of Leetsmann & Stone. I'd seen him once before. He looks like a football coach, a man's man. I bet he goes hunting. This was starting to get exciting. It would be another opportunity to watch the corporate machine in action. I'd seen this kind of thing in a movie or on the news, but never in person had I witnessed a good old-fashioned corporate-American sacking. I magnanimously decided to grade him on a curve. *Let's see what he's got. . . .*

At four p.m. on the nose, Leetsmann tapped a microphone to get started. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention. This won't take long. Thank you. To cut to the chase, as most of you know, Leetsmann & Stone has fallen behind in revenue this year by 18 percent from last year, which was already lower than the year before." He sounded bored when he said this. "This is the nature of our kind of business, these things happen, there's fluctuation because it's high risk." He cleared his throat. I could tell this kind of hands-on tedium was not for him.

"But, as you know, a business can't remain as is with those kinds

of drops in revenue. Therefore, I regret to inform you that there will in fact be layoffs from every department.” There were gasps all around and murmuring. “This is the downside of taking risks. I regret having to do this,” (lie) “but we will provide severance packages for each of you” (*Score!*) “and of course good references for you upon request.” (*Alright.*) “You will each be meeting with your department heads this afternoon to have a review of your job performance and see what your employment status will be going forward. We wish you all the best of luck. We still believe that Leetsmann & Stone is a great company and look forward to a prosperous and fruitful new beginning.” (*Oy, stop.*) “Thank you. And if you have anything you’d like to discuss, please feel free to go to your department heads and to human resources with any questions or concerns you might have.” (Translation: do not, under any circumstances, come to me with your bullshit.) “Thank you.”

That was it? Oh, he could have done so much more with that. No wonder the company’s going down; this guy’s got no flair, no oomph. I guess it’s true that life does not imitate art. Everyone started moving slowly back to their desks like a herd of cattle, trying to talk about their jobs and who’s responsible for the failure without getting busted by Leetsmann. Like he fucking cared.

I went back to my desk again and proceeded as usual. I was corresponding, I was fielding calls, I worked the calendar, I was schmoozing . . . overall I was just making it happen. Someone had to hold down the fort. *See, this is what I mean when I say “quality job performance.” Not worried about this job, that is for sure.*

After that inspirational meeting, one by one the shiny players and the hacks filed in and out of Ray’s office with their hearts on their sleeves, either in sheer joy or sheer devastation. Not that I could relate to either of their emotions, but I went over to some of the devastated ones and told them that they should contact me anytime for any help with a new gig that they might be pursuing.

"Jimbo, you have my contact information. Please call me if you need anything, if you want me to do your resume, make some calls, be a reference, whatever. Don't hesitate, I'm here for you."

"So you think you're staying, little lady?" sneered the usually jovial Jimbo.

"Oh. Well, Jimbo, I haven't been to Ray's office yet, that's true, but—"

"I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. Your numbers are shit. We all know it. If you think you're helping this company in any way, you're gonna have a rude awakening within the hour." And with that he grabbed his box, chuckled, and started walking out the door.

I just stared at him for a couple of seconds and then yelled "Nice working with you!" He just waved his hand over his shoulder, he didn't even turn around.

I walked away trying to figure out what he meant about my numbers. *How would he know? I mean, I'm part of the team . . . sure, I don't work most mornings, but that can't be helped. What's important is that the work I do is stellar, contrary to the perverts around here. . . . Oh, my God, am I getting fired? I just got here! Okay, I have to tell Ray that I have a lot of clients lined up right now, potentially big investments about to be made. I'm here for these people! Maybe I haven't brought in lots of money, but when you're working with quality clients, it takes finessing, right? Okay, I need to sit down now, deep breath, deep breath, omigod . . . think think think, breathe breathe breathe. SHIT!! What if I can't get another corporate job like this one? Noooo way, my leisure cannot be affected, I am going to scream . . . I think I'll put my head down before I pass out. . . .*

Just then I heard Leetsmann say, "You're thinkin' with your dick, Ray." I looked up to see Leetsmann walk toward reception shaking his head. You know, I'd never considered Ray's dick before.

Then Ray came around the corner and curtly said, "Jane, please come to my office now for your review," and immediately turned and walked back to his office in a cold sweat, not looking at me, not checking to see if I'd follow or if I heard, just turned and put his back to my face. It was turning out to be some fucking day. Apparently no one needs to be polite when they are about to fire you.

I grabbed my list of numbers, my sales leads, a pad and pen, and went to his office in a cold sweat. Strangely enough, Piss & Vinegar whispered "Good luck, girl" as I passed.

"Thanks, Sheila." And I gave her a wink.

I entered Ray's work haven of tricks. His desk was littered with sleek top-of-the-line computer equipment, three Bloomberg screens to watch the markets, CDs, an iPod hooked up to speakers, a few plants, Palm Pilots, pie charts, coffee cups, courtesy chairs, a shaving kit, just stuff. It was very work-related and very dormlike at the same time.

"So. This is your office." I sniffed.

"You've never been in here?"

"I wasn't invited."

"My door's always open, Jane, this isn't my home. I'm here to help."

"Well, good information now that I'm leaving."

"Jane, what has been up with you lately? You've been standoffish and snippy for the last week, what is the deal? It's getting a little tiresome." Look at Ray being assertive now that he's kicking me out.

"I'm not getting into this with you, not on my last day."

"Okay, first of all, you're not getting fired."

"I'm not?" I tried to contain my smile and my relief by faking nonchalance.

"No, you're not. Now shut the door and have a seat." I scurried to the door and then to a chair, trying to be on my best behavior. "Listen, Jane, I had to fight Leetsmann to keep you. He said you

had to go based on your numbers and your contacts, and the fact that you're the newest hire. But I told him I thought you have a lot of potential and showed him how you've been improving slowly but surely."

"Really? That's so nice of you. Why would you do that?"

"*Because* I think you have a lot of potential and you've been improving slowly but surely. And we got you cheap, and I think you're good for the culture of this company—you're a little more polished-looking, a little bit more sophisticated, which is good for image, and it balances out the old guard." I wish you could see Ray, he was all business and I totally forgot I was mad at him.

"Wow. I can't believe he let you keep someone."

"Well, he just got rid of most of my team so he had to give me something. . . ."

"And I was your something?" I asked gleefully.

"You were my something." He went quiet and just looked at me. Then he blushed and looked down.

"Well, boss, I applaud your decision. I won't let you down." I stood up and adjusted my skirt, ready to wrap it up. *Wahoo! Still employed!*

"We're not finished." He was back in authoritative mode.

I sat back down. I can't say that I had a good feeling about his tone.

"Yes?" I smiled hopefully.

He leaned over his desk and looked at me directly. "We both know that you've been slacking. We both know that you can do better and that your numbers are total bullshit. You've been lazy."

"But you just said—"

"I know what I said and that's all true. But your numbers could have been significantly better than they were with just a normal effort, and you were significantly lower than the rest of the group. Technically you should have been fired. Jane, you're smarter than this, you can be an excellent relationship manager, but you don't

show enough initiative. That will have to change. You're fully capable of doing better so I want you to start doing so. I didn't want to tell you this, but if your numbers don't at least double in the next three months then I have to let you go. That's the deal I cut with Leetsmann."

"Ray? What exactly are 'the numbers'?"

He looked at me in awe. First wide-eyed, then squinting, then he unconsciously stroked his five o'clock shadow while he stared at me like he was trying to figure me out. My gut instinct told me that the question was a mistake. I thought there was no such thing as a stupid question.

I glossed over it. "Not a problem, boss, I love a challenge." (Yes, I totally said that.) "My numbers will be doubled." *Whatever*. "Is the company really that broke?"

"Yeah, pretty much," he said, leaning back in his chair. "A lot of it has to do with the fact that we've made some mistakes with big clients that hurt our relationships and our reputation. It also has to do with the fact that competition in financial companies has increased. Also, a huge problem—which I've told them upstairs—is that L&S isn't shelling out salaries for real talent to want to join us."

"Can't we hire one star and pay a competitive salary?"

"That's exactly what we're doing now. Which is confidential, by the way. We are courting one famous analyst who we are hoping will accept our offer. A woman named Evelyn Duberone."

"Female analyst, nice work! We could use a little more estrogen around here."

"That's right. And I'm sure you'll appreciate this: her specialty is hotels and cruise lines. She's what's known as a leisure analyst," he said, smiling at me.

"A leisure analyst? I didn't know that existed! That is amazing, I can't believe it! Ray, I have to tell you, you are exhibiting some real leadership qualities here today. I am impressed."

"I knew you'd like that." He smiled. "Once she is officially signed on, I'll be filling you in on how to promote her role here. She should be a very strong selling point; people will want to work with her."

"I love it. I want to work with her! Wow." *Could this be a future for me? Note to self: check out her workload.*

"Great. So, this hire is part of the reason for layoffs from our group. I imagine the only reason she's considering Leetsmann & Stone is because we're doubling her current salary. But for us it's worth it. New, strong personnel is our only shot at rebuilding our company and image."

"I didn't think Leetsmann wanted this company. He's never here."

"He doesn't, but his sister does and she has say in it because she's a major investor and helped him buy out Stone."

"Ooohhhh, so that's it. . . ."

"Yes."

"Okay. Well, I'm on the job; I'm going to pursue some leads, hold some hands, throw some ideas around . . . ," I said, packing it up.

"One more thing: I think you should consider showing up in the mornings."

I relaxed back in the chair. "Ray. If we are to cut the bullshit let me tell you that that is never going to happen."

"Jane . . ."

"Ray. I'll have to get my numbers up another way, and I will, I promise. I don't know how yet, but promising I'm going to be in in the mornings is too much."

He looked at me hard a couple of seconds. Then he shrugged and said, "Okay, you have three months."

"You're the best!"

I walked out of there with some strange mixed emotions. For one thing, I know I looked as happy as the other folks who were staying. Wow, could it be that I really do like this job and want to

stay? It was almost too crazy to think about, so I didn't. Second, Ray was a pleasure to talk to back there. Command mode really works for him.

I saw Piss & Vinegar at reception. She saw my face and, eyeing me up and down, shook her head. "What did you do in there? Take dick-tation?" she said with a grin.

"Skills that pay the bills, gorgeous."

"Alright, girl, I'm glad you still here."

"Thanks, Sheila. It's good to still be here."

Misfire *noun* Just missing getting fired from your current job.

A few hours after my meeting with Ray, I was celebrating my misfire with Rebecka and Yuki at Max Fisch on Ludlow Street.

“Cheers!”

“*Kampai!*” said Yuki. Yuki is our friend from the neighborhood. She’s originally from Japan, but moved to New York to pursue her modeling career about two years ago. She’s a really popular model now. She has a heavy accent, which is sometimes hard to understand, and still bows a lot without realizing it, which everyone loves. She is super fun: she smiles all the time, is very polite, and always wears cool T-shirts. She’s very lighthearted and high energy and ready to do anything. I think of all of our neighborhood friends, Rebecka and I hang out with Yuki the most.

“Ahh, what a day. The highest of highs and the lowest of lows. I have prevailed yet again,” I said.

“Dat’s because you are lucky girl,” said Yuki.

“It’s not luck, mon ami, it’s skill. All skill. Those people need me.”

“Bullshit, you got luck!”

“She’s right, Jane, she’s got your number,” Rebecka said.

“Alright, alright. Uck, I am so emotionally drained I can’t argue.”

“If Ray didn’t like you, you’d be on da street!” Yuki yelled and then cackled.

"Holy hell, what is going on here? Yuki, where's the faith? Where's the confidence, the support?"

"Kidding, kidding. I know you're good, I know."

"That's right I'm good. Listen to this: Right now, Yuki, I can think of four people from my firm who will put together a model portfolio for you to create your very own beauty empire. Leetsmann & Stone can make your temporary egg your nest egg."

"Oh no, here she goes . . .," said Rebecka.

"I need more jobs!"

"You may just need someone to work the money you have."

"Ooohhhh," she said, intrigued.

"And for you, Rebecka, since you're a graphic designer, we will take your graphic art and put you in touch with analysts, brokers, or private equity partners at L&S who know everything about the tech markets globally and maybe even some specialists who know about the entertainment industry as well, to capitalize on markets where you have an innate understanding. Investing in areas of interest are what it's all about. This is why it's important for me to get to know my clients personally. See? I'm so good at this."

"Janie, you really are good," said Yuki, looking at me in awe.

Rebecka told Yuki, "She does her sales pitch more with us than with actual clients."

"I'm honing my skills. And it is amusing as well. At least I think it is. Amusing in a scary, train-wreck kind of way. Anyway, I have to get my numbers up. I have to double them to be exact."

"The numbers! So funny to hear you talk like that. So should I invest with some of the guys there?" Rebecka asked.

"I don't know yet. Let me see how the dust settles."

"Okay, cool. Keep me posted about your new hot-shit analyst."

"Will do. Anyway, the real beauty of today's misfire is that I secured my morning leisure. It's out in the open and on solid ground. A very positive step forward," I said, draining my glass.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Rebecka said dryly, "I

don't know how you get by in life, I really don't. But somehow you just do."

"Thank you. Do you guys want another round or go someplace else?"

"Okay, good night, I gotta go home for a five o'clock shoot," Yuki said, abruptly standing up, giving a tiny bow in our direction.

"What's your job?" I asked.

"Tomorrow I model sunglasses for Broomingdale. I wish I could stay longer!"

"You can be hung over if you're wearing sunglasses," Rebecka said.

"I won't get up if I'm still drunk . . . five a.m. verry early!"

We couldn't argue with that so we said our good-byes.

"Good luck with the shoot!" I told her. I turned to Rebecka. "I love her, she's so much fun."

"I do too, but I'm glad she left. There's something I have to talk to you about," Rebecka said mysteriously.

"Ooh, sounds cryptic and intriguing. What is up?"

"Do you want to go back to the blue light place and get mojitos?"

"Okay. If Ray's there I'm buying him a drink for my misfire."

"Are you kidding? I'll pick up his entire tab! I'm glad you're not kicking his ass anymore for socializing. . . . Have we moved past that?"

"Definitely. He saved my leisure job so he can be a lying two-faced sack of shit for all I care."

"Your morals are so grounded."

"I know."

When we arrived our friendly door guy with the long dreadlocks was back in his spot. He recognized us. "Hello, laties, nice to see you here tonight, how are you feeling?"

"Very well, how are you doing?" I asked.

"Never betta, never betta. You two look very fresh tonight."

"Thank you!" we said in unison, as we dug for our door charge.

"They're good, Samual, no charge." It was Mr. Socialite himself.

"No charge den for da lovely laties," said Samual.

"Hey, Ray, thanks," I said.

"Hey, Jane."

"Yeah, we both need a drink tonight, right?"

"Definitely," he said and smiled.

"Hey, Ray, how are you?" asked Rebecka, rubbing his arm in a friendly manner. I can't believe she likes him so much.

He smiled at me for a second and then turned to Rebecka. "I'm good, Rebecka. How are you doing?"

"I'm good, I'm doing a lot better, thanks."

"Okay, let's go in." I gave Samual a wink and then walked into the sex pit of mojitos. God, the place was sexy.

Rebecka and I sat at the bar and Ray said he had to meet someone in the back of the club.

"Who?" I asked.

"What?" he asked.

"Who are you meeting in the back?" I asked innocently.

"My friend Sara and my sister Valetta, who you know."

"Oh, I want to catch up with Valetta, tell her I say hello."

"Is Sara a friend or special friend?" asked Rebecka.

"Just a friend," he said, looking taken aback but smiling a little.

"Excellent. Well, bring her on over, we'd love to meet 'Sara' and your sister, of course," instructed Rebecka the way only she can. I laughed.

"Okay," Ray said and walked to the back.

"Ray probably thinks I'm digging him, now that we just grilled him," I told her.

"Don't care. I'm digging Ray for you. We need to know what he's all about."

"Oy. Anyway, you seem back to normal," I told her. "The prom queen has left the building."

"I am, I think. I hope. You put things into perspective. Let's get our drinks so I can tell you what's going on."

"Definitely, I'm intrigued."

We got a round of some kind of berry drink that tasted like hard liquor.

"Right," Rebecka started, "so I've been thinking: You know how we're both down in the dumps?"

"Yes, thank you for the reminder."

"And you know how we feel like shit?"

"Yup."

"Do you know what we need?"

"High colonics?"

"No. We need a vacation," she said with a little smile while sipping her drink.

"We do?"

"Uh-huh. We need a break and a change of scene. You know it; I know it. It's *obvious*. Neither of us are doing exceptionally well, me especially. We are not functioning at maximum capacity. We need to recharge. Take a step back."

"This is true, but I can't take a trip now, I almost got fired today. Shit. I also don't have money and I'm not even sure if I have vacation days yet anyway."

"Jane? Please. Leave the negativity to me. *We are taking a vacation*. We are asking Ray tonight since he's here. We will wait an hour so hopefully he'll be drunk and receptive. But the time is *now*. As—"

"Rebecka. I don't know about this. . . ."

Ignoring me, she continued. "—As soon as I realized that we should take a vacation, it felt like the absolute right thing to do, I feel it in my bones. We are going to have an amazing trip. We'll make it a long weekend, okay? You definitely have vacation days—you get at least a week in the first six months of employment. As for money, you know I have more than I can spend so it's on me, of course."

"You feel it in your bones?"

"Yes. My instincts are acting up. We must go. The time is now."

"Hmm . . . I wonder if the Universe is sending me this vacation through you."

"I'll say yes if that means you're coming."

"Maybe this is my fate vacation. Maybe I'm to overcome a hurdle—i.e., my job—to take this destiny vacation to get my wish list!" *Could it be?* "Oh, my God, Reb, is this it?"

"I don't know, Jane. I just think we couldn't need it more than we do now."

"I do have three whole months to raise my numbers, and this is one itty-bitty weekend. . . . Oh, my God, are we really going on vacation?"

"We sure are, darlin'."

"Oh, my God!" I squealed. The skinny bartender eyed me so I mouthed, "Sorry!" I turned back to Rebecka. "I can't believe it, yayayayayayay! I haven't been on a vacation in forever! What gave you this idea?"

"You mentioned our Tahiti trip the other night. That was a great trip and also a very long time ago. It was before Dwayne and I were even dating so we may have taken that trip after your Marcus disaster. I was thinking about what I was like as a person back then and how much fun that trip was: the carefree, anything-can-happen kind of fun. I realized we both could use another trip."

"So awesome, Rebecka. I am freaking! Where are we going?"

"You're gonna love this: South Beach. Miami."

Shopping *noun* Inviting opportunity through new wardrobe.

“South Beach—Miami? Whoa! Why there? I mean, will they even let us in there? I think we may be too New York, too downtown, too pale, and frankly too negative to go there. Cheery tan people with perfect bodies in Day-Glo thong bathing suits go there. I’m confused. Did you pick it so you can laugh at the people? For the camp factor?”

“I know it’s unlike either of us, but that’s the beauty of it! That’s what we need, I’m sure of it. I think in a place like that we can really be out of our own skins, and live life completely differently and not think about anything for a few days . . . and just have fun! Nothing too meaningful or cerebral. A little fun in the sun, more drinking, poolside action, some flirting, and being somewhere where I don’t care what anyone thinks and I can do whatever I want. It’s a place where anything goes, so I hear.”

“What about Las Vegas?”

“Vegas peaked.”

“Oh.”

“But South Beach still has people from all walks of life, not only bathing beauties, going there, just partying it up. It’s perfect. And it does have a definite camp factor that we’ll appreciate. Think about it: some sun, some cocoa butter, cabana boys, pool time, and dancing on bars in a different town . . . it’ll do wonders for us, I know it.”

"Hey, I'm happy to go anywhere, I'm psyched." I started to giggle. "This is crazy enough to work!"

"Exactly. We love New York, but we don't have to be New York, East Coast crazy at all times. I think we need a break from here. And I need to goof off. I need leisure! This is how I want to do it."

"I would never argue with a girl and her leisure."

"I haven't even told you the best part."

"What's that?"

"You know how you just mentioned we're too white to go there, too downtown?"

"Yeeesss?"

"Well, I thought of that too," she said, giving me this mischievous grin. "We're getting makeovers . . . South Beach style. Get this." She paused for dramatic effect. "We are getting fake tans, haircuts, highlights, we are bleaching our teeth, we are getting glamour makeup and party girl clothing! We're even getting belly piercings for waist chains. And yes, tiny bathing suits! If we're going to South Beach, even for a day, we're doing it right. When in Rome!"

"You are a *fucking genius*! That is hilarious! Brilliant!" I was cracking up in amazement.

I was doubly happy because Rebecka looked excited about something for the first time in months. "And we're also getting the best rooms in the hotel, and flying first class. We are going first class *all the way*."

"This is insane. Oh, are we going to have tiny dogs to carry as accessories?"

"No exploiting animals in the name of fun."

"Good point," I said and then had another realization. "We're going to play with boys, aren't we?"

"You better believe it, gorgeous."

"You're right, we really do need this. Destiny is being delivered to me by my best friend in the whole wide world!"

"It's certainly possible."

"When are we going, where are we staying?"

"The Delano Hotel. I hear it's the best. We're going Thursday through Monday in two weeks. So we're going to have to pack in our makeovers quick and then go."

"Holy shit. I can't believe this!"

"Oh, tell Ray now, he's heading this way. Let's just get it over with." Ray was weaving his way over to us with that fucking model friend of his from the last time we were here, and his sister.

"Valetta!" I yelled to his sister.

"Hey, girl, how are ya?" She gave me a hug.

"I'm good, loving my new job!"

"Awesome, I hear you're kickin' ass, Jane. Ray thanked me for the referral," she said, smiling.

"I don't know about the kicking ass part, I was almost a goner today, but I'm still there, giving my 150 percent!"

"I bet. I told you I'd see you at the Christmas party."

"Well, it's not that time yet, but it's possible!"

Then she whispered, "Are you taking a lot of sales calls?" She asked with a grin.

I laughed and said quietly, "I'm definitely doing *quality* work, if you know what I mean. . . ." As opposed to quantity, which was left unsaid.

"Got it." She winked.

"Let me get you a drink or two for the job. I really appreciate it," I said and had the bartender back them all up with another round.

"Hey, Jane? This is my friend Sara. Sara, this is Jane," Ray said. I had a pit in my stomach just looking at her.

"Hey, nice to meet you," I said, totally lying.

"Nice to meet you too, Jane," she said, staring at me. I think she was lying too.

"Speaking of jobs and such," I said as I turned back to Ray, "I have something to ask you."

“What’s up?”

“Well, Rebecka here, my best friend in the whole wide world, is buying the two of us a trip to South Beach! With makeovers and everything, it’s going to be wild. So I know I haven’t been with L&S that long, but would you mind if I take off Thursday through Monday in two weeks?”

Looking uncomfortable he said, “Jane. You can’t go on vacation; you just can’t do that right now.”

“Well, what if I just called in sick?”

“And come back with a tan? And a makeover?” He looked around restlessly. “Do you understand how close you were to getting fired? If you’re out of the office on vacation do you know how that will look? For both of us? You’ll get us *both* in trouble. No, I have to say no, that’s a very bad idea.” Then he turned to Rebecka. “I mean it, if Jane wants to keep her job this is a really bad idea. She should wait till the dust settles.”

Rebecka turned to me, saying, “Okay, Janie, let’s put it off till things at work cool down. South Beach isn’t going anywhere.”

“Rebecka, are you crazy? You said the time is now and that you feel it in your bones. That’s a sign, that is not something to take lightly. And you already made the reservations.”

“There’s no reason to lose a job over a long weekend, no matter how much we want it.”

“I disagree,” I told her. Suddenly the idea of not going was intolerable. I remembered my priorities in life and divine intervention. I turned to Ray. “Look, Ray, I am grateful for what you’ve done for me, I genuinely like working at Leetsmann & Stone, which surprises even me. But if you feel that you need to let me go then you should go for it. I understand. But I am going to South Beach, Florida, in two weeks.” I was superenunciating the words so there would be no miscommunication. “I’m going to have *fun*. I’m going to support my best friend who is in the midst of drama right now. And I am going to meet my destiny.”

“Jane—” both Rebecka and Ray started.

“Look,” I continued to tell Ray, “if it makes you feel any better, I will scout and schmooze potential investors while I’m there since we’re staying at a major hotel.”

“That’s true, the Delano is the best,” Rebecka offered.

I continued with Ray. “Whether you fire me or not, I will work and I will land your company a fucking great new investor who will knock Leetsmann’s shorts off.”

“Jane, cut the crap,” he said impatiently. “You don’t know anyone out there; you can’t just land an investor and you know it.”

“I can and I will.”

“I can’t believe you would actually feed me that crap. I thought we were—” And he stopped and took a breath and said quietly, “Do you realize how much I put on the line to save your job? Are you *trying* to make a fool out of me?”

“We *are* friends, Ray, we are,” I said, finishing his earlier sentence. I really meant it and that was the first time I fully realized it. As quirky as Ray was, he’d always been really nice and I sort of had fun with him. And he just saved my job. “I don’t want you to be mad at me, but I think I *have* to go. Even Rebecka had the vibe that the time is now, and now I do too. I’m sorry. Do you want me to quit? Because I will and we’ll still be friends, definitely, if you want to be. I’m sorry to piss you off, I really am.” I tactfully decided to leave off the fact that work will never be my priority. I’m not sure it helped.

Ray just stood there glaring at me, his hazel eyes showing how much turmoil his brain was in. He either didn’t know what to say to me, or was afraid that if he started talking things would get really nasty. It was obvious that I had pushed him too far—he was going to explode.

Finally he said in a really tight-lipped way, “Sounds like you made up your mind. I guess I’ll see you at work tomorrow.” And turned around and walked away with Sara and Valetta following af-

ter him. Sara raised an eyebrow at me and Valetta just looked at me, shaking her head.

“Oh, Lord,” said Rebecka.

“Yeah, that was bad,” I replied. We sat there quietly sipping our drinks, letting it sink in.

“But, dude,” I said, turning to her, “we’re going to *South Beach!*”

“Wahooo!” We high-fived and were laughing and hugging. Then we both looked around really fast, remembering Ray, to check if he caught us, which of course, he did. He looked even more pissed off than before and Valetta just mouthed “Stop” with her eyes bulging out of her head as a warning to me. Sara just rolled her eyes. Fucking Sara. *Okay, note to self: set up luncheon with Sara and Piss & Vinegar. They’ll get along nicely.*

It definitely sucks having a really nice person mad at you, believe me. Ray was nothing but great, so my guilt was significant enough to make me question my need for leisure. Fortunately, my priorities were firmly intact so there was never a real issue as to whether or not I would go. And thank God for that, because I was so right to go. It’s really true; timing is everything.

Scathing sarcasm *noun* Ray's weapon of choice.

The next day, Friday, was all about the wrath of Ray, no big surprise. God, he was pissed. “Here’s the paperwork for the Teel Company Fund” were the only words he spoke to me that day, and tossed the file on my desk and walked away. I said “Thanks” to his back. Later I e-mailed him asking if he wanted me to make him a spreadsheet for this month’s new contacts. He wrote back, “Yeah, sounds good, and while you’re at it, make sure you include all those South Beach contacts from your trip so we have a complete listing.” Holy sarcasm!

That night, Rebecka picked me up in her car service to start our South Beach transformation.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this!” I said as soon as I got in. “This is totally insane, it’s like we’re getting Halloween costumes. You know, I don’t even remember the last time I went wardrobe shopping of any kind . . . probably with my mom in high school. Now I just buy pieces here and there.”

“I know, this is wild, we’re going to look phenomenal.” She lit a cigarette. “And you never know, we might keep our new looks permanently—crazier things have happened. I think the last time I went wardrobe shopping was in high school too, because you know how I hate to shop. But I think I’m going to like shopping now because this is like a science experiment. Total image overhaul, my friend.”

"TIO!"

"We have to go for it, we cannot do this halfway."

"No way, we have to look legitimate. Like we live there or always go there," I said, giggling.

"Precisely. Okay, so here's our projected schedule," Rebecka said, efficiently checking a small leather-bound pad. "This weekend, starting tonight, we do all the clothes shopping, including shoes, bathing suits, sunglasses, et cetera. Next weekend is hair, belly piercing, makeup, tanning, teeth bleaching. Oh, and manicure/pedicure."

"I am blown away by the sheer magnitude of this makeover. Maybe we should do the piercing this weekend for more healing time?"

"Oh yeah, good call. This weekend, clothes and piercings. Tonight we hit H&M and maybe Bebe or Arden B if we have time. Tomorrow it's Bloomingdale's and wherever else. Sunday we pierce. So how was Raymond today with the news?"

"Totally odious. You should have seen how pissed off he was. This is going to take a lot more kissing ass to fix than I initially anticipated."

"Small price to pay. At least you're not fired."

"You know what's weird?"

"What?"

"When I thought I was getting laid off on Company Downsizing Day, I freaked out. Not kidding. Now, I'm provoking Ray to *fire me*, and I don't give a shit. I just don't want Ray to actually be so mad at me."

"You can't have it all. You freaked out during the misfire?" she asked, surprised.

"It was shocking, I'll admit. When I was at the office and it dawned on me that I might actually get laid off, I seriously started hyperventilating and freaking out. *And* they were giving out severance packages to the people that got laid off! What is wrong with me? I'm an enigma sometimes, I swear."

"Maybe you just want to be fired on your own terms. Maybe you'll accept a firing for leisure purposes, but nothing else."

"That must be it."

"Do you want to postpone the trip?"

"No way. It's life before work, *always*. You know that. Plus, our instincts are instructing me that the time is now."

She grinned. "I love that you're, like, *militant* about your leisure. Thank God you're genuinely nuts and not just faking it. Okay, let's just ignore Ray."

We arrived at H&M, so we jumped out and stood staring at the large entrance. Rebecka lit another cigarette and chewed a nail. The store was big and shiny. We were both suddenly feeling a little intimidated. "Just remember," Rebecka said quietly, "it's like we're putting on Halloween costumes, just like you said. Nothing to be alarmed about. Take a deep breath, and let's embrace our inner bimbo." We did a big inhale and exhale. "Anyway," she continued, "it's not like our clothes right now are so great, I mean look at us." We looked at our reflections in the doors of H&M: She was wearing army pants and a High School Sweetheart T-shirt, and I was wearing a brown pencil skirt and a lacy shirt, both secondhand and well past their prime. "Alright enough, let's just go in. No time like the present." Rebecka stomped out her cigarette, grabbed my arm, and dragged me in.

The place was like a shopping nightclub: brightly lit, music playing, lots of shiny stuff, lots of excitement. There were a lot of aggressive women of all ages rushing around the racks like their lives depended on it.

Since we weren't used to these trendy styles or actually shopping in general, we needed time to acclimate to our surroundings. Slowly we walked around just looking at mannequins and racks of clothes in wonder. We did experience some confusion as to how certain items should be worn; there were some very complicated pieces. But we caught on soon enough.

* * *

"Rebecka, what do you think?" I asked, holding up a tiny white halter top. I was sort of showing it as a joke, although it would show off a belly piercing. . . .

"Oh, Jane, you have to get that. That is perfect!"

"You'll need a gold bag and shoes with that," said a salesgirl.

"You are so right!" said Rebecka, grinning.

And then off we went. We even separated for a while; we were both so totally absorbed in the task before us. Only when we could hardly carry any more did we go to the dressing rooms.

There we helped each other figure out the clothes and judged each and every outfit we tried on. It was beautiful. Most women will change something about themselves after a bad breakup; it's our nature. The first thing to go is usually the hair because it's the easiest and highest-impact change to make. I would say next is probably a weight adjustment, whether it be a gain or loss. But Rebecka is thorough, and she's been down this road before. This must be how she was in high school when she rebelled and went Goth: good and thorough. That night we said good-bye to her semi-tomboy-wear—I had a feeling this change wasn't just for the trip. It was good-bye to her usual cargo pants and loose-fitting cashmere sweaters and T-shirts. It was a big change, but I also thought it was a happy one. Just seeing the clothes on hangers, they looked more cheerful than Rebecka's usual wear; instead of her usual colors of black, green, maybe some chartreuse, and gray, she was looking at white, fuchsia, orange, and metallics. I couldn't wait to see how this played out.

Rebecka, in her current incarnation of breakup rebellion, became the woman that she has always deplored: a sexy, feminine, fun-loving sex kitten of the highest order. It was incredibly ironic. She always thought that women who dressed sexy "allow themselves to be objectified, and perpetuate the superficiality of men" and would give this horribly boring speech about style and feminism. Now she was embracing the look in mind, body, spirit, and

wallet. She stepped over to the other side, and the other side was a fucking party. I was relieved that I'd never have to hear that bullshit "women's objectification" speech ever again.

Personally, I never went for foxy clothes like these either, but I never had a moral or ethical problem with them. I've always thought they were hot but just not really me. When I see women like Lindsay Lohan strutting her stuff around, I think, *You go, girl!* you know, because it's like they are really enjoying themselves and celebrating their youth, even if it is borderline cheesy. But it never occurred to me to try to dress this way myself. Also, truthfully, I couldn't afford to; trendy clothes can't be worn for more than a season. I needed more longevity from my clothing (at least till I got my finances straightened out in South Beach).

Taking off my vintage blouse and skirt and putting on a stomach-baring halter top and short shorts was *a trip*. But I knew it was part of the Universe's plan. Maybe I needed this look to attract that particular special someone? Or maybe this was part of the abundance that was coming my way, and who am I to judge my gifts?

"We are going to be South Beach—appropriate and it's awesome. We're hot!" said Rebecka excitedly, wearing a short kimono dress. "Let's go there and take over the town. And we can turn back into pumpkins when we get back—you are in no way committed to wearing these clothes before or after the trip, even though I think you should. You look hot!"

After probably three hours, I left with two large shopping bags full of clothes, and Rebecka left with three. Considering the clothes were somewhat small, it was a lot of clothes.

The next day was more of the same at Bebe and Bloomingdale's. We got everything else we needed, even luggage.

"You know, we can't dance on any bars because these skirts are obscene," I said, putting our bags in the trunk of the car.

"You're probably right, although we'd get like a *keg* of champagne if we did that."

Rebecka dropped me off at my apartment. I put my new loot directly into my new suitcases because it was already folded. Now I was really looking forward to hair and makeup because I felt that things were just going to get better and better.

I called Dana to give her the news about the makeover and trip. She was actually rendered speechless.

"Mom, uh, Dana, are you there?"

"I'm here, Jane. I just can't believe it! Rebecka is paying for all of this?"

"Yeah. Isn't that awesome?"

"How is she doing that? Where did she get that kind of money? You don't know this, but makeovers are very expensive. And first class?"

"Rebecka's worth about eighty million dollars and her business is very successful."

"*You have got to be kidding me.*"

"No, I'm not."

"Oh my God I had no idea; she really doesn't look it."

"Yeah well, not everyone needs to wear their wealth."

"You're not kidding. I have to tell you, Janie, I am *so pleased* that you're getting a gorgeous makeover, you have *no idea*. I love where you shopped, and I can't wait to see the hair. You know I think you're gorgeous, but you could use a little glamour. But couldn't we all? You have to come over, we'll do a luncheon, just the girls, and you'll tell us all about South Beach. . . ."

Dana was in heaven. This is the kind of crap she and her friends eat up. Now there would be a social event with a theme for them to plan, which was guaranteed to be a nightmare. I immediately blocked it from my mind and went to my happy place.

After I hung up I plopped onto my bed for a power nap because shopping is an incredible cardiovascular workout. Not that I know about workouts firsthand, but I've heard.

When I woke up I got some food and embroidered with Snowball

lying next to me, purring like a champ. Then I had a stroke of genius. *You know, I thought to myself, Rebecca is really doing me a huge favor with the makeover and the trip. I wish I wasn't so broke all the time because I really want to contribute more. I need to buy her a present, just a token of thanks . . . hmm . . . what to buy someone who is really rich? It would have to be very unique, something she can't find herself. Ooh, this embroidery looks good, this is getting gorgeous . . . I think I'm going to put in some leather pieces from those old leather boots . . . that would be hot . . . Oh, my God, I'm going to make us handbags for the trip! That's it, that's my contribution! I can't buy Rebecca anything that she can't buy for herself . . . I already know Rebecca likes my embroidery so I bet she'll love little handbags, and we didn't buy any for ourselves!*

For the rest of the evening I made handbags like a demon possessed. I got out my box of leftover fabrics from a project from years ago, the leather pieces, my mom's sewing machine, and my extensive OCD embroidery collection. I selected the best ones for the bags. It was a creative blitz, I could not be stopped. I took the embroidery pieces and sewed them onto different backgrounds, one on an animal print background, one on a solid bright pink, and two on tan suede and two on black fabric because tan and black go with everything. We would each get a black and a tan, and then Rebecca could pick whichever she wanted of the animal print or the pink. I took handles from old handbags I don't really use anymore and attached them to the bags. I even put in inside pockets. I didn't know I could make bags. I hoped they wouldn't fall apart.

I also decided while making the bags not to embroider in South Beach. It's been getting to be too much lately and I hated the idea of being so obsessed that I couldn't go on a brief vacation without my embroidery. I thought I might be okay without it; since I would be in a new location, I wouldn't have the usual triggers, like, "Oh, there's my couch, it would be so great to just sit and embroider for an hour and a half." I also thought a break would improve the quality of

the embroideries as well. It would be an experiment in OCD, if you will. Can one take a break from a compulsion? Anyway, it didn't seem like the coolest idea, looking hot at a pool but then sewing away in an OCD frenzy.

Rebecca and I met on my corner early Sunday to walk up to the place to get our belly piercings. We didn't want breakfast because we didn't want to be bloated while someone dealt with our stomachs.

"I think waist chains are going to make our wardrobe," she said as we headed up Broadway.

"Personally, I've been having mini heart attacks about our new image. I *love* our new looks, and I think the whole 'total image overhaul' is highly amusing, but every now and then I cringe when I think of people's reactions to us. But then I remember our high foxy factor and that it's unhealthy to be fixated on a certain physical appearance, because everything changes, and then I feel better. It's just going to take some getting used to."

"You'll be fine in no time, I promise, especially when you get a lot of positive feedback. The people who don't like our look or the change are gaseous losers anyway. You should never be afraid to be the best Jane you can be, and no one should stop you from pursuing that. There's nothing wrong with improving yourself or trying something new. Anyway, ignoring other people's opinions of you is the most liberating thing you can do for yourself. Oh, here's the place."

We spent the next hour picking stomach jewelry and having Jason, the piercer, get intimate with our belly buttons. It was quick and painful.

When we got back out into the sunlight we started giggling.

"That was awesome!" Rebecca said, lighting up.

"I know, I love procedures! What else are we doing?"

"Just clothes and piercing this weekend. Next weekend we get laser hair removal, which we have to do before the tanning. And don't forget teeth bleaching. Then, of course, skin care, makeup,

manicure/pedicure, and hair. The Wednesday before we leave we tan. We're on a roll!"

"I still can't believe this."

"I know, it's shaking things up, that's for sure."

"Okay, give me a hug. I'm going to go home and eat and look at my new wardrobe."

"Good idea, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Be nice to Ray at work."

"I will! Thanks again Rebecka, this is great. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Later."

I walked back toward my apartment with a skip in my step. Everything seemed so much rosier. Things were really getting riled up. Since it was early, I decided to stop by the café, which was packed because it was the weekend. Marisol wasn't working, but that was good because I wouldn't be distracted by conversation and could just concentrate.

I settled in and just focused. *Hi, Universe! I know it's been a little while since I touched base but as you know I've had to go to work full-time lately and it's been brutal. I guess it's a small price to pay for the upcoming trip.*

I can tell my wish list is on the way. I can't thank you enough; I am really excited about it. I even wake up excited, and you know I'm not a morning person. I know, I need to be patient. As you know, I'll take anything from the list, it doesn't have to be romance or money. The more leisure, more art, or new best friend wishes are fucking superb too. Oh, sorry for swearing.

Oh, if I may be so bold, feel free to send Rebecka a man on this trip too, although it might be too soon for her. But maybe someone to cheer her up to give her the love vibe back . . . ? Oh, also (I know, I'm pushing it), if I can land an account for Leetsmann & Stone in South Beach just so Ray doesn't kill me that would be great. Maybe you can also send Ray a high colonic so he can relax a little. He's acting like he's backed up.

Just so you know, I'm totally receptive to these changes. I know I always thought I was ready in the past, but now I know I wasn't, because now I really am ready. Thanks, Universe, and of course let me know if you need anything. And thank you for everything I have already and everything that's coming. So cool.

I spent the afternoon just bonding with the Universe and feeling happy. That session was potent. Then I finished my tea and went home to embroider something quick, before I broke out into a sweat.

Nine a.m. *noun* Dawn of the dead.

The next week, business started at the ungodly hour of nine a.m. Eastern time. It proved to be as counterproductive and fruitless as I always thought it would be. When I started showing up to work “on time,” I began *destroying* the delicate relationship manager–investor relationships that I had so tenderly and lovingly cultivated those past few months: I mixed up clients, mixed up products, made pointless meetings, and just generally alienated anyone at L&S who still liked me. What sucked even more was that I wasn’t even sure Ray knew that I made this special effort of punctuality, because he was squirreling himself away in his office and avoiding me like the clap.

Another twist in the fetid affair was that it seemed Piss & Vinegar and Ray switched roles: while Ray was ruthlessly blowing me off and making me feel like the devil incarnate, P&V was delighted to see me even though she no longer received her hush pastry. Apparently, my being on the company shit list was all the sustenance she required.

On Monday I saw Ray heading to the men’s room.

“Mornin’, Ray!” I said hopefully.

“Jane,” he mumbled curtly without looking up.

“Mm-mm-mm. Girrrl, I don’t know what you did this time, but you are in the house . . . the dawg house! And I don’t mean that in a good way! Ha-ha!” Piss & Vinegar laughed while slapping

her knee and shaking her head. The expression on her face was of genuine satisfaction and contentment. I stopped and gave her a look and then headed back to my desk. She just kept right on laughing.

By the end of the week I'd given up on talking to Ray so we just avoided each other. It sucked. Just three more workdays till South Beach . . .

After work on Friday I met Rebecka for phase two of the make-overs. That night consisted of laser hair removal and laser teeth bleaching. We went to Brite Smile on Prince Street last for our teeth bleaching. It was great to have all of my beverage stains removed. Rebecka's teeth showed a bigger difference than mine because she's a smoker. Now we both had pearly whites.

"I'm just going to smile all the time now," said Rebecka. "I didn't realize how much my teeth prevented my smiling till now. This is awesome!"

"I love the teeth. I feel like we look so much healthier and cuter with whiter-than-white teeth, like we should be on commercials or something. Like cheerleaders; just healthy and perky."

"I totally agree," she said while lighting a cigarette.

"Way to go, Reb, light a cigarette right after the bleaching."

"What? I'm still better off than I was an hour ago."

I rolled my eyes.

The next day we met at eleven a.m. at Bumble and Bumble's downtown location in the meatpacking district. We sat at the café/lounge drinking smoothies and staring at the view of downtown Manhattan while waiting for Devon for our cuts and Shelby for our color. We were quiet at first because I think we were both really apprehensive. Everything else we did was funny because it could be changed or covered up, or was temporary. This was not so simple.

"Okay, Rebecka, I have a rule," I finally said.

"Let's hear it."

"This leg of the makeover is a doozy. Hair is the highlight of any makeover and very important."

"This is true."

"So I think we have to do what we did outside H&M: take a look at ourselves, realize that we don't look so great, and then put ourselves in the hands of these hair professionals. We cannot give them any 'guidance' whatsoever. We can only tell them that we're going to South Beach and we want a whole new look to fit that place. But they are the professionals so I think we should let them do *whatever they want*, even if it means they're cutting off all our hair. This is why you're paying good money, for their expertise."

"You're right. I need to release all preconceptions of what my hair should look like. This is scarier than the clothes. I've had this hair for fifteen years now!" Rebecka's hair was just long. I think it was all one length, it's hard to remember exactly. And it was dyed really dark brown or black. My hair was its natural medium brown color and long and I had bangs so I could give it a '40s look when I put it up into twists and buns. Also boring.

"I know, me too. We look the same as we did ten years ago when we met in *college*. That is weak. I feel like we're doing what we're supposed to be doing right now, so the results will only be beneficial. I have faith in—who?"

"Devon and Shelby."

"Devon and Shelby. And the Universe. So, while I feel so nervous I could throw up, we must let them proceed."

"Agreed."

In the end, we were there for about four hours, and it was really tiring and really annoying. But holy shit, was it worth it.

Shelby, the colorist, made my hair five different shades of blond. Blond! She said she did "hairpainting" on the ends for a beach look, keeping my light brown hair as a base and putting in beige blond highlights. She did some other stuff I can't remember, but basically, it was flashy, shiny, crazy blond. And Devon, who was too

cute, cut it in layers and made it wild by shaking it out and putting in a wax/texture product. It had that “just rolled out of bed” look I’ve always admired. So totally different from what I had. But he did say that it would be easy for me to smooth out and put up in a twist if I wanted to. I was shocked to see myself but I *loved* it! My cheekbones were, like, popping because of the layers. I wanted to scream because I was so psyched. But I didn’t. I played it cool.

Rebecka and I didn’t see each other the entire time. I was done first so I was waiting for her up at reception. When I finally saw her it was just as shocking as my own hair. Rebecka’s long black hair was now a chocolate brown base with caramel-color painted ends. Our cuts were similar in that hers was wild too, but her hair was left longer, maybe to in between her shoulder blades. She looked like one of those Brazilian models that are so popular now. Her green eyes somehow looked bigger and greener than ever.

At first she was looking around because she didn’t recognize me. When she finally saw me, her jaw dropped. We stood there dumbfounded and staring at each other’s hair and then we started laughing. I started getting a little misty-eyed. Devon and Shelby came up to say good-bye and I hugged them like they saved my life. We got in the elevator and walked outside into the sunlight and we weren’t even talking. Rebecka took out her cigarettes.

“Holy fucking shit, Reb.” I took out a pocket mirror to look at myself.

“Jane. I can’t even put it into words. You look like Blondie or Gwen Stefani. Not typical blond, but funky or sophisticated blond.”

“No way . . . and you look like an exotic Brazilian model girl who just got laid.”

“I love it. Gimme the mirror.” She moved the little mirror all over her head. “Seriously, Jane, how can you possibly have anxiety with this total image overhaul when we look this good? Please, embrace the new Jane.”

“I do, jackass. Give me the mirror back,” I said, grabbing it. “I

told you, I love it, I just cringe at the new every now and then. It's a transition." I adjusted the hair around my face.

"I need that." She grabbed back the mirror. The only communication we had was demanding the mirror. We then went to our makeup appointments, where Rebecka bought every single item that was used on our faces: makeup, brushes, cleansers, etc.

"Jane, we're going out tonight."

"Yeah, we should get use out of this. Anyway, if people are going to freak, no time like the present to deal. I hope no one recognizes us because we're that transformed. Let's not talk to anyone and see what happens."

"Oh, definitely. I think we should get a refund if we're recognized right away. Should we go to the blue light place?"

"No, we need to avoid Ray as much as possible. No need to pour salt in the wound—our makeovers will piss him off even more. Let's go to our apartments and recuperate and stare at ourselves to get used to it. Maybe eat something. I'll call Yuki and we'll meet up around nine."

"Cool."

Recycling *noun* Going back to an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend when lonely, horny, and/or uninspired.

We ended up going to Orchard Bar. I wore the most conservative and covering of my South Beach tops with a cardigan and I still wasn't at all conservative. But I didn't want to overdo the shock value, and I wanted to break in the real stuff out there. We sat on the couches in the back with Yuki.

"You both look beautiful! You always beautiful, but you look so different, I can't believe . . ." She reached up and touched our hair with her mouth open in awe. "I almost didn't recognize you!"

"You didn't recognize us. You walked past us twice," Rebecka pointed out.

"You know what, Yuki? I feel different, it's amazing," I told her.

"Me too. I feel like I'm becoming the perky girl I look like. Oh, but Yuki, don't tell anyone we know that it's us. Let them figure it out for themselves . . .," Rebecka warned.

"Rebecka, don't be so antisocial, crazy girl!" Yuki told her.

"She's not, Yuki, we're just testing out our makeovers to see how different or how recognizable we are to everyone."

"Oooh, good idea! I should have done that when a client dyed my hair red!"

"Totally. Okay, there's Thalia and her friend. . . ." Thalia walked by, squinted at us, confused, and kept walking.

"That was great!" said Rebecka.

"She can't tell!" yelled Yuki, laughing.

"Rebecka—Total Image Overhaul: confirmed!" I said and raised my glass.

"It was a lot of work, but definitely worth it," agreed Rebecka and we all clinked glasses.

When I saw Thalia again I yelled over the music and she looked over and then jumped.

"No way!" she said with her mouth open. "I saw you guys before and thought you looked familiar! You look amazing, what did you do?"

"We got makeovers for our trip to South Beach."

"Dey look like models," Yuki told Thalia.

"Thanks, Yuk, that's so nice. You would know!" I told her.

Thalia gave us a thorough once-over.

"Change is good," I said. "We've looked the same for about ten years now, so it's time."

"Wow, so what are you doing in South Beach?"

"Just hanging out and partying. Checking out the scene. Oh, and I have to try to somehow land an account for my job because they so want to fire me for taking a vacation."

"No way. Don't you have vacation days? You sure you're still going?"

"Of course I'm still going, you know how I feel about work. I guess I don't really have vacation days yet. . . . Oh, Rebecka? Yuki? I think we have a little lady here who hasn't heard the Leetsmann & Stone sales pitch . . . you're going to like this, Thal."

"I heard it a week or two ago at Swift!" she said, laughing.

"Oh yeah, that's right!"

"Leetsmann & Stone needs its own reality show, that place is so jacked up and ready for ridicule," said Rebecka.

"What do you expect from a company that employs Jane?" asked Thalia.

"Snap!" exclaimed Rebecka.

"Hey, I do a stellar job for those people—they're lucky to have me!"

"Hear! Hear!" said Rebecka. "Just kidding, Jane."

"Uh, Rebecka?" Yuki asked nervously. I looked over at her. "Rebecka?"

"Yeah, Yuk?" she asked.

"Is dat Dwayne over by da bar?" She pointed across the room.

"Fucking great," I said, spotting Dwayne and Cynthia ordering their drinks.

Rebecka turned around and then looked back at me with a nervous look on her face.

"Rebecka, you look spectacular. You got this. He's going to see you and he's going to shit. Not that you should care, but you totally got this, *I promise*. Don't worry."

"Thanks." She relaxed a little.

"In contrast," I observed, "Cynthia looks like she's been through a meat grinder or a blender or something, I can't quite put my finger on it. . . ."

We attempted to go about our business but Rebecka was having no part of it and was totally distracted by Dwayne and Cynthia. Finally I asked her if she wanted to leave.

"Look, we should go, he's ruining your good time. Do you want to go to the blue light place? I'll risk bumping into Ray."

"Yeah, we gotta go."

I asked Yuki and Thalia, "Do you guys want to go to a lounge with us? We have to go, Dwayne is making Rebecka sick."

"I'm actually meeting people here so I have to stay, but you hang in there, Rebecka," Thalia said.

"I'm coming to da club," said Yuki.

So we gathered our stuff, adjusted our South Beach outfits, and headed out the door. On the way out Rebecka stopped by Dwayne.

"Well, well, well, look who's here. Dwayne, how are you?"

Dwayne looked up blankly and then his eyes got wide and he almost spit out his drink.

"Rebecca? Wow, oh wow, what did you do?"

"Nice greeting. I got my hair done, Dwayne, bought an outfit. What are you two up to?"

Cynthia stared at Rebecca in both wonder and malice. Her face read: *wow/bitch/wow/bitch/wow*, etc.

"We're just hanging out . . . you look so different! So do you, Jane, I can't believe you're a blond."

"It's called a makeover, Master of the Obvious. Okay, enjoy your evening, you two, off I go," I said and walked out. No need to waste time with that humongous douchebag. Still staring and gaga over Rebecca, Dwayne just said, "'Bye."

Rebecca lit a cigarette as soon as she got outside.

"That was awesome!" I said. "I particularly liked Cynthia, with her tired, dried-up, dead-end hair and ill-fitting clothing, looking highly agitated. Sometimes envy is your friend."

"Rebecca, how did you go out wit dat guy?" Yuki asked. "I never understand. You beautiful and he's too yuck! What is up wit da girl?"

"I know, Yuki, I'm starting to wonder that myself. Seeing him next to Cynthia was a real eye-opener. Uck, still, that sucked!" she said, bending over. "I just want to be over it."

"Come here, little Reb," I said, putting my arm around her as we walked down the street. "I know that sucked. Dwayne is . . . warped. He's clearly in a self-destructive phase and you've been victimized by it. But think about how things are changing for you for the better, while his life is changing for the worse. It's the ultimate revenge. I bet he calls you sometime this week, looking for that breakup sex we talked about."

"Yeah . . .," she said weakly.

"The breakup sex that you are not to touch." An ever-so-gentle reminder.

"Shoot."

"That's the spirit."

Just then a group of guys walked past us on the street, whistling and saying hello.

"See? After two weekends and a ton of cash, we have greatly widened our dating pool . . . anything can happen now," I said, gesturing to the stars. "Someone to replace Dwayne is right around the corner."

"I guess if you shell out the cash, you get the results," she said gloomily.

"Cheer up!" yelled Yuki. "You're nice girl, Rebecka, don't worry about that greasy Dwayne."

"Yuki!" I admonished, laughing. She's crazy. I mean Dwayne is large-scale greasy, but I think I'm the only one who can admit that openly aside from Rebecka. We started weaving down the street. "Let's go have some fun, Reb, so you can be your little diva self."

"'Kay," Rebecka said.

"Good girl!" said Yuki in agreement.

Blunt *noun* Marijuana stuffed into a hollowed-out cigar.

We got to the blue light place and greeted Samuel at the door. “Hey, Samuel, how are you?”

“It’s da lovely laa-ties! I almost didn’t recognize you, you look extra vibrant tonight. . . .”

“Thanks! Is Ray in there?”

“No, Mr. Ray ’as not been ’ere for a week now.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, feeling relieved, but somehow also a bit disappointed.

“Samual, this is our friend Yuki.”

“Yuki, it’s a pleasure.” He grabbed her hand in a warm shake.

“Nice meeting you, Samual.” She gave him a small bow.

“I like your traditional vibe, Yuki. Enchanting,” Samual said, smiling, and Yuki blushed. “Step inside, no charge tonight for da lovely laties.”

“Thanks, Samual!” we said as we stepped in.

“Rebecka, what’ll it be?”

“I don’t know, let’s let Yuki pick.”

“Uhhh . . . white sangria okay?” she asked.

“Good enough.”

Skinny bartender looked at us with raised eyebrows and took our order.

Just then, Ray’s friend Sara looked over at us from her and Ray’s

usual spot. She did a double take, then her eyes got wide, and she just stared.

"Jesus, that girl's a moron," Rebecka said. Sara got on her cell. She was probably calling Ray.

"Whatever."

Just then Samual came over and put his arms around all three of us. "Lovely laties, come to da back wit me and my crew. Let's 'ave a party." Behind him were two very baked-looking individuals who were wavering where they stood.

"Samual, is it?" Rebecka asked. "There is *no way* I am going back there and smoking your fucking blunts. I can just tell right now that one hit will be an eight-hour trip."

Samual and his friends were cracking up. "You tree *are* a trip . . .," Samual said. "My bud is kind; clean and pure. Very refreshing. Come to da back."

Yuki whispered, "Janie let's go back, I want to go."

I turned to Rebecka quietly. "Rebecka, Yuki seems desperate for a buzz right now and she can't do it alone. I say we go to the back with these lunatics to see what happens. Increase our partying stamina, if you will."

"Alright. . . ." Rebecka was not at all sure about this idea.

"Look, worst-case scenario, it will take your mind off Dwayne."

"Good point."

We grabbed our drinks and our bags. Walking to the back, Yuki said to us quietly, "Samual is nice, right?"

"Totally. And really cute and social," I said.

"Although his friends leave something to be desired," said Rebecka.

"Maybe we ignore da friends?" suggested Yuki.

"Let's let love rule. Let's investigate the vibe," I said. Now that I was a blond, I was sassy.

So we followed Samual and filed past Sara to the back courtyard.

She looked like she was having a fucking brain hemorrhage just staring at us.

"Don't you think it's weird that Ray hangs out with Sara?" I asked Rebecka.

"I do, but he's also friends with that cheesy Brad Pitt-lookalike person, so he's not very discriminating."

"True . . . I wonder where that Brad Pitt has been."

Rebecka sighed, bored. "Probably at home, experimenting with hair gel."

We walked through curtains to the back room, where it was all low cushions and low square tables. Very dark. Moonlight came in because the back wall opened up to a yard and there were votive candles on every table, but I think that was it. We took a back table to enjoy our illegal activity. Samuel unceremoniously dumped his cigar tobacco out and rolled in the pot. Oh, Lord, here we go. . . .

"Samual, hang on," I said. "If we are to smoke an unprecedented amount of herb, you're going to have to talk to the DJ about setting the mood. Where's the sexy DJ from last time, I think his name was Ven?"

"Ven could set a mood, it's true. He's Mistah Ray's friend. 'E won't be back till next mont," he said, shaking his head regretfully.

Rebecka said, "Yuki, you should have heard this DJ . . . all me and Jane could talk about was jungle sex just listening to him."

"Oooohhhh . . ."

"Let me speak wit tonight's DJ and see if he can give us something trippy and sexy," Samuel said and went back inside. I took the opportunity to do some digging for Yuki. I turned to Samuel's two friends.

"So how do you know Samuel?" I asked one of them.

"Oh, we go way back, from the L.A. days. . . ."

"That's cool! You too?" I asked the other one.

"This DJ is off the hook!" And he started aggressively shaking his head to the beat and pounding the table. I could tell I wouldn't get much from these two.

"Gotcha. . . ."

"Fuckin' Cheech and Chong," noted Rebecca.

Yuki said in my ear, "I like Samual," while staring at the front room where Samual was talking to the DJ.

"That is brilliant, Yuk, get up and sit on this side of me next to his spot before he gets back."

"Okay."

I turned back to Samual's friends, trying a more direct approach. "Hey, is Samual in any kind of relationship right now?"

"Samual has love for everyone. Heh-heh-heh."

"Oy. Yuki," I whispered, "we're not going to find out tonight what his status is so just get stoned and go for it. I double dare you."

"Okay!"

And so the evening progressed. The DJ started playing some trip-hop, a waitress lit two more votive candles on our two little tables and brought us drinks, we got comfortable and just sat or lay on the floor cushions, and passed around the party. The hits were monster. After about fifteen minutes we were just sitting around, zoning. I couldn't move an inch so I just listened to the music.

I don't know how conversation started but soon I was laughing my ass off with everyone, with tears streaming down my face. It was great. Samual and his friends were highly entertaining. Great music, great buzz, great company . . . unbeatable. Yuki and Samual were in quiet conversation with each other by the end of the night.

When we left, Rebecca and I and Samual's two friends just stood out on the front sidewalk looking around, dazed.

"Let's go to the diner," I croaked. God, I needed snacks. Specifically, french fries, melted American cheese, side of gravy.

"We have to, it's imperative," agreed Rebecca, looking how I felt.

Yuki tripped outside. "Yuki, do you want diner?" I asked her. "We're going to go."

She looked away demurely. "No thanks, Janie-san" . . . and she snuck a look at Samual, who just popped out behind her.

"Wow, Yuks. You came, you saw, you conquered . . . I am impressed. Samual is a doll."

"Thank you," she said shyly.

I gave her a hug. "I will talk to you tomorrow, darlin'." I then warned Samual, "Samual, take care of my girl. Don't forget I know where you work."

"Don't worry, I take care of Yuki like she my mum."

"Okay, not that good, gorgeous." I gave them a wink.

"Thanks, Samual," said Rebecka. "I was right about that pot, by the way. I'll call you in about five hours when I start coming down." She grinned, then chuckled, and then gave a big hearty laugh. Then she couldn't stop herself.

"Oohhh, ha-ha, dat's not my treat trippin' you!"

"Alright. Thanks again. . . ." She turned and wandered up the street, wavering and lighting a cigarette.


"Yeah, thanks a lot, Samual, you are too cool for school," I said and turned to follow Rebecka.

"You're welcome, Laty Jane, we'll do it again soon."

"Rebecka?" I said, catching up with her. "I think this evening was highly constructive. You saw Dwayne and got that over with, we got initial reactions to our TIO, and we tested our partying stamina. Aside from some minor details, I think we're ready for South Beach this time next week."

"Well done," Rebecka said and then fell off the curb.

Slacker *noun* 1. A relaxation superhero. 2. One who is never really in the mood to work, like, ever, under any circumstances. It's about scaling down or downsizing, not working for more.

 n Monday I walked into reception at Leetsmann & Stone with dread. Getting through these last few days was going to be torture.

"Just what in the *hell* did you do to yourself? Are you crazy?" Piss & Vinegar asked me as soon as I got to reception.

"Sheila, you're a woman of glamour," I said while picking up my messages. "I'm sure you can recognize a makeover when you see one."

"And you paid good money for that? Girl, you been robbed," she said with her studded nails tapping the desktop.

"Interesting point of view," I muttered while trying to read a message.

She was quiet for a few seconds and then demanded, "What are you up to, Miss Jane?"

"Change, Sheila. I'm up to change."

"I can see that, I'm not blind. Mm-mm. Well, what's done is done, no point cryin' over spilt milk. . . ."

"Great," I said absently and went to my desk. I think she's starting to miss those pastries—her blood sugar level is dropping.

I got situated. I had a Venti-sized Awake tea from Starbucks with five packets of sugar and half-and-half. I started checking e-mails and doing some correspondence.

At about ten a.m. Ray passed my desk with his coffee cup and just stared and gaped. It reminded me why I thought he had

Tourette's syndrome and made me yearn for the early days when I was so idealistic and didn't realize the sweatshop I was signing up for.

"Good morning!" I said. Blond and perky!

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not on a 'sales call' and your hair . . ."

"Right, I do not have a sales call scheduled for today so I'm here—ma bad. I'll just be scheduling appointments today. And yes, I got my hair done over the weekend."

"Uh-huh . . ." Blush blush blush. The Wonderblush was back in action.

"I don't know what's so unusual."

"Right. Of course. Righto . . ." I guess he heard about the hair from his little friend Sara and decided to come take a look.

Not knowing what to say, I just said, "Okay, well, I'm going to get back to my e-mailing. . . ."

"Sure. Okay, good job, talk to you later. . . ." Spaz. The power of a makeover. Ray started talking to me again due to an incredibly powerful bleach job. I shouldn't have been surprised. Or maybe the Universe sent him that high colonic we talked about. . . .

I thought I'd ask him to lunch to see if I could mend fences before I went away, now that he was somewhat receptive. "Hey, Ray?" I called after him. He spun around. "Do you want to grab lunch with me before Thursday?"

His face clouded over at the reminder of my trip. "I'm not sure I can this week, Jane, but I'll let you know if my schedule frees up." He abruptly walked away.

"Okay." I guessed the makeover was not that powerful. By Wednesday he never suggested lunch. We actually never spoke again, even about business, so when it was time to go home on Wednesday, I stopped by his office and knocked on his door. He looked up and jumped a little when he saw me.

"Can I talk to you?" I asked.

"Sure, come on in." He was all business.

I was nervous to start. "Look, Ray, I don't want you to be upset with me about this trip."

"Jane, I'm not getting into this with you again; we both know how we feel about it. I'm not going to miraculously think it's okay." He started shuffling papers on his desk.

"I know, but I just don't understand why you're as mad as you are. You said I have three months of probation to improve my numbers, which I fully intend to do. So what if I'm taking three days off for a free vacation?"

He sighed. "Did you see the people I laid off? Do you really think you're a better asset to this company than they were?" I started thinking, *Yeah, I do*, which he could read by my expression and continued, "No, you're not. You are not a more valuable asset to this company than they were. They brought in investors and more money than you have, and everyone, including Leetsmann, knows it. But I put my ass on the line for you, my reputation. Truthfully I'm angrier at myself for saving someone who treats this job with blatant disregard, doesn't do their best, and who doesn't care what sacrifices I've made on their behalf, who goes on vacation right when the company is in turmoil, and who obviously doesn't . . ." His voice broke so he raised his hands in the air and let them drop on his desk helplessly.

"Ray, I really do appreciate it—"

"Are you going to South Beach tomorrow, Jane?" he asked, cutting me off.

"Yes, I am."

"Then you don't appreciate what I did for you." He sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head and glared at me.

"I wish you would save this for the end of the three months, if my numbers are still down," I said quietly.

"I wish you would save your vacation for the end of the three months, after your numbers improve."

"I can't."

"You can but you won't." He turned to his monitor.

I just stood there, dismissed. Then I got annoyed. "No, I said I can't. Okay, I really don't want you to be mad at me, but honestly, Ray, a) I will never see three vacation days as any kind of job threat or deal breaker, and more importantly, b) I didn't *ask* you to save my job. And I never would have. As a matter of fact, I remember trying to make you feel comfortable at the blue light place about firing me if that was something you had to do this week."

He grumbled.

I kept going. "Maybe you should have spoken to me first before 'putting your ass on the line' for me in such a big way because I would have discouraged you from doing so. Really, I don't get why you did that in the first place since you don't think I'm very good."

"You don't know why I did that? Are you *kidding me*?" His voice cracked again and he was getting pissed off again.

"No, I'm not," I said calmly.

"Well, it doesn't matter now. . . ."

"If it's going to be a situation like this then maybe I should quit or you should fire me."

"Maybe I should," he said quietly, looking up at me.

"Okay, why don't we both think about what we're going to do while I'm away and come to some kind of agreement for when I get back? Something that you'll feel more comfortable with. Actually, I'll put it in your hands and whatever you decide, we're still friends, no hard feelings."

He mumbled something under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Fine, when you get back we'll come to a decision."

I just stood there nodding my head. Then I said earnestly, "For the record, I am grateful for what you did even though I never expected you to do it. It *was* really nice of you. I really *do* consider

you to be a friend and I do care what you think. Believe me, I'm not doing this to piss you off."

"Okay, I got it." He just looked down at his papers.

"I'll see you next week. . . ." He was now reading his e-mail. I stood there for a moment to see if he would say anything else, but he just shut down. I closed his door behind me. One thing was clear: Ray the spineless deviant with Tourette's syndrome was long gone, R.I.P. I never thought I'd say this but I kind of missed that guy.

On my way out, feeling really bad about Ray, I went to reception to explain to P&V what I needed from her while I was away, such as what to do with messages or when certain clients call, etc. She just raised her eyebrow and shook her head.

"Sheila, what's the problem?"

"Nothing."

"Why the look?" Was she listening outside the door? Probably.

"If you don't know *I* ain't gonna tell you. I'm not here to school you."

"Then don't give me some rude look if you're not going to back it up," I snapped. I'll take this shit from Ray but not from fucking Piss & Vinegar.

"Fine." Fine again. Everyone is "fining" me around here.

"So here's my cell. Call me with anything and I'll call to check in."

"Okay."

"Thank you." And I started to walk away, but then I stopped. "Do you want anything from South Beach?"

Her face lit up. "That's where you're going? I've always wanted to go there. Yeah, I'll take anything that says 'South Beach.' Now I get the makeover—I knew something was up." Bribery works so well with her, it's like bribing a baby.

"You are very astute. A T-shirt it is. I'll see you next week."

Out on the street I exhaled. I walked slowly to meet Rebecka, feeling drained. A supernaturally bad day. I had a weird, new sensation, something like regret, or self-consciousness, something . . .

I'm not sure, but it was negative. I shook my head to get the feeling off of me. *Fucking corporate job.*

What I learned today:

1) You do not mess with Ray Bowen, because payback is a bitch.

2) While I could have lived without the tongue-lashing, Ray was somewhat attractive back there. He's always done well with the commanding and authoritative vibe. I just don't like it pointed in my direction.

3) His anger was a pointless exercise in negativity, because I'm going to land him an account in South Beach or I'm going to quit. Or he's going to fire me. It's a win-win. Not a problem. Frankly, waitressing again is sounding really sweet right now.

Rebecka and I met at Smooth Synergy in midtown for the final appointment: the ubertan. While sitting around the waiting room, I gave her all the gory details.

"You know what else?" I asked. "I don't think I see Ray as a freak anymore. Well, I mean, maybe an itty-bitty one—he is still kind of geeky—but truthfully, I kind of, like, respect him now, even though he yelled at me."

"I told you he was good."

"I know. When I was standing there trying to defend myself I realized that I don't really see the person I thought he was a few months ago. And we have had some good times. This sucks. Am I a dick for doing this? I had a weird feeling when I left his office."

"It must be confusing for you to actually have a boss that you like," she laughed. "And you do owe the man some serious work, but no, you're not a dick, and I mean it. Let's break it down once and for all: It's three days of vacation that is part of your annual compensation. You probably have ten days. And like you said, you *didn't* ask him to do anything for you and I know you would have dis-

couraged him from saving you if he had. This trip is just *really* bad timing. I would have rescheduled it till the dust settled at your job, but you're determined. And truthfully I do think the time is now.

"But just so you know, Jane, Ray should have laid you off with everyone else and that's a fact. It's Management 101—slacker employees go first—"

"Hey! I'm good at my job—"

"Don't bullshit me. You're being paid a salary to work a certain number of hours a week and you're not doing that. Other people work hard and they put in *all* the hours. He knows you should be gone, but *he* wants you to stay. That's why he 'put his ass on the line' and now he doesn't like that you're not drooling with gratitude. He did it for himself as much as he did it for you. He's so cute, I love him for you. But a person can't unilaterally do something for someone and then expect things from them in return. So I don't think you're a dick; you're just being the consistent little slacker you've always been and he can't really expect you to just change on a dime even if he might deserve that."

"Wow . . . I'm a slacker? Ray thinks I'm a slacker! Maybe I do suck at this job! I mean, I've meant it when I've said that I'm good at it . . . but maybe I'm really not! You know what, Reb? I think it's time for me to quit corporate America. I don't think it's working for me. This is too stressful."

"Forget it, I'm not letting you. Anyway, if we're to blame anybody, it's Dwayne and the whore Cynthia. Those two crack addicts provoked this vacation and triggered Ray's anger. We will strategize how you can make it up to him poolside in South Beach."

"Okay." My head was hurting.

A staff member called Rebecka's name so she got up to follow her to the back rooms. "He's adorable, Jane, I really wish you were into him."

"I know," I sighed. "I'm going to kick ass when I get back. I'll be all business."

Smooth Synergy was a trip. I had to strip naked for some woman there who airbrushed a tan on me. It took about forty-five minutes. She even made certain parts darker so I looked more “sculpted.” I don’t know how these girls do the beauty treatments for a living. This one laid the tan down on my boobs and inner thighs without a moment’s hesitation, focusing hard to get it right. It was nuts.

Afterward, while we enjoyed our glow, I asked Rebecka, “How are we getting to the airport tomorrow? Are you getting car service, or are we taking a taxi?”

“Limo, Jane, *limo*. I told you, first class all the way. We’re picking you up at nine a.m. to go to Newark airport.

“Okay, I’m ready!”

“Great, me too. See you tomorrow, it’s going to be great!” Just getting ready for this trip has been so good for her.

I went home and put my house in order. I set up five days’ worth of buffet spread for Snowball and left a note for my neighbor to check in on him. I fed whatever plants I had, cleaned dishes, and made sure I had everything in my suitcases. Then I went to bed early but I couldn’t sleep.

Frivolity *noun* Leisure's girlfriend.

So we jetted to Miami Beach . . . just kidding. I mean, yes, we flew to Miami, but I was kidding about using the word “jet.” I got that from Dana. After I received almost a dozen “bon voyage” messages from her friends, I asked her if she’d put an ad in the local paper about it.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was with Barbara at the salon and so I told her about it. I can’t help it if she couldn’t wait to share the good news. All I said was ‘Jane and her girlfriend are jetting to Miami this weekend, just the girls, first class, Delano.’” Knowing Dana, she probably paused for dramatic effect and let the information penetrate. I noticed that she conveniently left out that Rebecca was footing the bill. “I just said, ‘Jane’s been working very hard at the financial firm so she and her little friend are taking a break. Girls do that these days, they take care of themselves. Like *Sex and the City*.’” That did it, I’m sure. As soon as she made the *Sex and the City* reference the trip became the talk of the town. Judging by the messages, I’m expecting a welcome home parade for Rebecca and me when we get back. I made a mental note to call my mother from time to time from South Beach to give them something to talk about.

Anyway, on Thursday, to start the trip, we were in the limo by nine, and Rebecca was wrestling a bottle of champagne that she found in the limo’s refrigerator. The car was so luxurious: everything was shiny and spacious and stocked.

"Mimosas without the orange juice?" I asked.

"Exactly. Champagne at nine a.m. is a perfect start to a fabulous long weekend," she said, ripping off the foil and popping the cork.

"This is insane."

We got to Newark airport in no time. Rebecka took some plastic glasses from the limo and poured us the rest of the champagne. We got out with our cups, totally ignoring the open container law. I said to Rebecka, "This totally looks like ginger ale."

"Oh yeah, we are not wasting good champagne," Rebecka said, unconcerned. That's one of the great advantages of being very rich: you never care about getting in trouble because it's likely you can buy your way out. Rebecka couldn't care less if she got a ticket or a fine because she can just pay whatever the damages are and forget about it.

We enjoyed a superb flight. We were in first class, of course, which is the only way to fly. It was fantastic! I ordered whatever they had on the plane and it was graciously provided. And other people in first class nodded hello at me because I was "one of them." I was in the elite club. I am now ruined for all other forms of transportation that I would ordinarily take, because I took this one short journey.

Aside from the service and the new friends, the flight was excellent as a Universe-bonding session. Since I was that much closer to the Universe and had the window seat, I couldn't resist. Afterward I felt utterly refreshed and exhilarated. That lasted for about five seconds, until Rebecka started acting up and we got into a heated debate over the finer aspects of New York vs. British punk, for which Rebecka had to be "shushed" by another passenger.

When we landed at the Miami airport, we headed down to baggage claim and saw our savior holding a big, big sign with our names on it in big block letters. The limo to the Delano hotel.

"Rebecka, I can't believe how awesome first class is!"

"Get used to it, Jane!" She smiled.

We gazed out the window of the limo. We were seeing Florida for the first time. It was not very impressive. We forgot that airports aren't necessarily located on prime real estate.

"Ugly, ugly, ugly . . .," Rebecka said out her window.

"Hideous. This is Miami? People flock down here? If it weren't for the two palm trees back there, I would have thought we were still in Newark. Where's the Miami hotness?" Then right after I said that, bam! It was hot mansions and yachts on this little area on our right. "Okay, here we go."

"This is what I'm talking about . . .," Rebecka said.

We pulled up to the Delano Hotel, which was hidden behind high hedges from the main strip of hotels. The entrance had big white lanterns and flowing white curtains. Clean and chic. Men dressed in white—the hotel staff—were all over us, giving us a hearty welcome. They grabbed our bags and gave us directions to check-in.

We were taken up a pink illuminated elevator to our rooms on the fourteenth floor. The top floor before penthouse.

"Look how high up we're going," I said.

"Oh yeah, by the way, I really wanted to get us a bungalow or the penthouse, but this is the best I could do on such short notice as far as rooms go."

"Please, I'm happy at a Best Western. This is amazing."

"Well, we still have our own rooms; luckily I could get them next to each other."

"Cool!"

I entered a very white, very chic hotel room. The floors, walls, ceiling, curtains, furniture, and bed were all white. Every tabletop was white marble. Even the bathroom sink and shelves were white marble. The only color in the room was on the bathroom walls, which was a light blue, the green orchid stem on the white orchid that was on a table, and a light peach-colored throw on a white chair. It was the coolest room I've ever seen, but I think the hotel

was flirting with disaster with the white; our partying style isn't known for keeping it clean. Then I saw the big white king-sized bed and my mouth watered. The bellboy showed me the TV and a stereo, and the minibar: vodka, vermouth, olives, regular champagne, pink champagne, small liquor bottles, soda, juice, water, Orangina, Snickers, gummy bears, etc. I started to giggle.

I tipped him, plugged in my iPod to set the mood, and started to unpack my bags. When I found the handbags I'd made, I brought them over to Rebecka's room.

"Knock, knock!"

"Come on in."

"I made us something for the trip."

"Really?"

I spread out the bags on her bed. "These are a 'thanks for the trip' kind of thing. . . ." I was a little nervous; this was the first thing I'd ever done with my embroidery pieces.

"No way, Jane, these are incredible! Wooow . . ." She gasped as she slowly held them up.

I continued, "We each get a black and a tan, because they'll go with everything, and then you pick whichever of the two alternates that you want, and I'll take the other."

"Wow, I don't know if I can choose. . . ."

"You can take both the alternates if you want to, I just might borrow one a night or two, whichever you're not using." It was nothing compared to what she'd given me.

"I'll take these three."

"Cool."

"Jane, these are amazing, thank you so much! I know you don't want to hear this, but it kills me that you don't sell these! People would pay big bucks for one of these!"

"Well, I'm glad you like them. Enjoy."

"Thanks. And you know, it's brilliant you provided bags because we didn't get any, like morons."

"I know, we really are the worst shoppers. Okay, cool, all set. Should we hit the beach?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely; let's see what it's like to wear pasties in public," she said with a mischievous grin.

I put on a chocolate brown string bikini and laughed out loud. It was *great*; with my chest, it barely did the trick covering it, it was almost pointless. Then I put on the waist chain. I looked in the full-length mirror. My faux tan looked good and dark. I guessed there was a hotness factor, but there was definitely a cheese factor that I couldn't ignore. Hilarious! If our friends back home saw us, I thought, they would have coronaries. I sprayed on SPF 45 and thanked God we didn't bring cameras.

I met Rebecka and we headed back downstairs, this time in a green-lit elevator. For the record, she looked just as hot and cheesy as I did.

"Now, Rebecka, we haven't talked about this, but we are now entering my realm."

"What realm is that?"

"The realm of *leisure*, my friend. This is a *vacation*." We left the elevator and said hi to a few guests. "I know it's going to be a challenging adjustment from your absurdly hectic workday, but since we both know that I know how to enjoy free time surplus with no scheduled agenda, I think we should defer to my judgment as to the pace and tone of this vacation."

"Okay, psycho. And I'll be in charge of your meds."

"It's important that we relax and revel in this fabulous place, and move slowly. Cleanse the mind and spirit—"

"I'm sure your mind and spirit are spotless."

"Of course. So we'll work on yours. First rule of vacation: we will not jackass around town to see whatever stupid tourist traps this place came up with. We will keep it simple: beach, pool, restaurants, clubs. Streamline the fun. Relaxation and partying. Perfect for a long weekend. We have museums and stuff to look at

back home. We do not have this kind of nature. Avail yourself of my talents, and let me bestow the gift of leisure unto you." And then I started rummaging around my bag looking for my sunglasses.

"Holy shit. You are actually getting worse."

"Aahh." Deep breath. "I can smell the premium leisure."

"Christ."

I just patted her arm and asked the restaurant hostess out the back door of the hotel how to get to the beach. I made a mental note to try the restaurant out in the morning to see if it could be my café away from café. As we walked through it and on the way to the beach we passed all of this interesting, groovy stuff. Holy topiary! There were bushes and shrubs shaped in Edward Scissorhands style, a larger-than-life chess set, a marble conference table set on mosaic tiles in the grass, a ladder leaning against a tree for no reason, a pretty hammock, and a few other random items, all intriguing, all frivolous. I approve of frivolity as a rule: one cannot love leisure without loving frivolity; they're dating.

We had to pass through the pool area to get to the beach, so we saw the other hotel guests. This place was hipster central; cool and trendy Miami, New York, L.A., and Europe, all wrapped up in one area. It was quite a scene. This is what fabulous rich people do during the day: lounge at this pool in gajillion-dollar sunglasses and stare at each other.

Rebecka said, "Jesus, if you haven't had enough attention and feel like you've been going unnoticed and ignored, then you should come here. It's people watching like I have never seen it in my life!"

"I know. You're staring at everyone and they are all staring back, equally curious! It's more extreme than New York City."

"That's because in New York, people want to believe they're too cool to be curious about other people, like they've seen it all." They did seem like a nice bunch of folks, even though Rebecka kept looking around mumbling, "Enough already, we get it. Okay, yes, I see you, hi."

I finally told her, "Look, if you get a makeover like this, people are going to look at you; you have to get used to it. Anyway, everyone is looking at everyone here, so when in Rome . . ."

It was like the hotel had its own private beach because we had to show our room cards to enter that area and the hotel had its own little hut or cabana for towels and chairs and another one for refreshments. It was perfect. We figured out the beach system and started a two-and-a-half-hour spell of lolling around on chaise lounges with beer and cheeseburgers, reacquainting ourselves with the beach scene. Small two-seater planes flew overhead with long signs trailing behind them, advertising bars and parties. We also noticed that bathing suit tops were totally optional. I would say 40 to 50 percent of the women were topless and I would say that about 95 percent of those topless had implants.

"Some of the women here are really giving your new best friend Pam Anderson a run for her money in the rack department. Fake boobs a-go-go."

"Yes, Pam is highly influential on this beach," I noted, watching these *Playboy* bunny types frolic and splash in the ocean. "I guess if you lay down the cash, you should display 'em . . . get your money's worth. This hotel is probably sponsored by the local plastic surgeon."

"Nipples." They were at attention on all the fake boobs.

"Big time. Anyway, I think I'm going to brazenly ignore the two-hour rule after eating and go for a swim," I said, standing up and picking a wedgie.

"Good luck. I can't even get off this chair."

"Nailed down by a burger. Back in a few."

I'd forgotten how much I love the ocean. Once you're in the water you can just lie on your back and ride the waves; it's not like you have to do any kind of hard-core swimming to enjoy it. The ocean is nature's answer to the massage chair or the waterbed, some of our brightest inventions.

After about twenty minutes of floating I decided to head back. I plopped back down on my towel, wiped out.

"How was the water?" Rebecka asked.

"Perfect except for when it tried to eat my bathing suit while I was trying to get out. Hang on to yours and get in there."

"Be right back."

I lay back and looked at the multicolored South Beach skyline from the beach, while warming up. There were mostly pastel-colored, art deco-styled hotels and it was surprisingly foxy, just because it was really happy looking. I rolled over to my side and observed the wonder and spectacle around me. Between the booze and women dying to bare it all, I now know how productions such as *Girls Gone Wild* get made.

Rebecka came back with a trail of men behind her. She made some small talk and then "politely" encouraged them to leave by literally shooing them away. She lay down on her chair.

"You know what, Reb?"

"What?"

"You definitely made the right choice. We are exactly where we are supposed to be right now."

Fully dressed *adjective* A loose term generally meaning that you are covered up enough to be out in public. This is defined by location and circumstance; there are no set rules.

At eight that night we were in our full South Beach evening regalia and ready to head out on the town. The wardrobe was off the hook; I was feeling a breeze on my butt and I was supposedly “fully dressed.” But we didn’t look any more risqué than anyone else, we fit right in! Privately, I was relieved that the tan washes off and the clothes can be changed. You can take the girl out of New York, but you can’t take the New York out of the girl. The only person I knew who would approve of this look would be my mother, who would smack me on the back of the head and yell, “It’s about time! *Now* you look cute!”

But it was crazy wearing the full getup for the first time; we finally had hair, makeup, tan, bleach, and clothing on all together.

I was only able to ignore that my ass was hanging out after the first round of drinks for the evening. “This place is fun,” I said. We were in the lobby of the hotel, in this little nook, lit pink with a big white chandelier, that was just a bar and about fifteen seats.

“Yeah, it’s not bad . . .,” Rebecka said, sounding skeptical.

“I think I’ll get the champagne martini,” I decided, looking at the cocktail menu. The list showed advances in the cocktail arts, I was pleased to note.

“I’ll get the raspberry mojito.”

Then my eyeballs rested on the hunky, gorgeous bartender with big muscles, black hair, brown eyes, about 6’2”, probably twenty-

four years old, and wearing the uniform of tight white buttoned-down shirt with a golden tan that I bet was real.

"Goodness gracious," I cooed under my breath when he started walking over, "look at him. . . ."

"Yeah, he's good," Rebecka agreed. "Although he's a little too coiffed . . . not a hair out of place . . . I'm suspicious of men that put together. What's he trying to hide? What's he compensating for?" she said, squinting at him.

"Stop it!" I hissed. "Let's ask him what to order." When we made eye contact I asked, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Julio," he said with a little grin while slowly walking over. He was making a lot of eye contact. Hunk!

"Of course it is," Rebecka said dryly under her breath.

"Hi, Julio . . .," I drooled, with my head tilted to the side. "Um, we're not sure what to get, I'm thinking we need martinis and mojitos."

"Let's see if I can help," he said while slowly leaning down on the bar and picking up a plastic stirrer to chew on. "Who's getting the martini and who's getting the mojito?" He asked this as if it were a very important decision and he had all the time in the world to consider it. Cuteness!

I was reduced to enamored schoolgirl and I giggled. "Um, I'm getting the martini and Rebecka's getting the mojito."

He put out his hand. "And you are . . . ?"

"Oh, right, I'm Jane. And this is Rebecka . . . again. . . ."

"Rebecka," he said, and shook her hand while giving her a look like he was very happy with what he saw. Hey!

"Julio, it's a pleasure," she said dryly and pulled her hand away.

"Well. As long as you're getting the martini, Jane, I think it's okay," he said, grinning, still leaning on the bar, looking at me, chewing away. Rebecka just rolled her eyes. Slowly he got up. "Be right back, ladies."

"Thanks, Julio. . . ." Meltage.

"You know," Rebecka said, "I'm not ready for flirting. I'm sure I will be in a day or two, but not yet, so I don't like some fucking stranger pawing me. Julio's cute but he can fuck off."

"Gotcha. He can touch me, though."

"Yes, he and I are both aware of that." She smirked.

"Heh-heh." Good stuff. "You know what I love about vacation? The way that everything seems so exciting and new, like you don't do the same thing at home all the time. Flirting and ordering drinks is refreshingly different here."

"This is true. For example, we wouldn't have even acknowledged Julio if we were back home. But since we're in Florida, it's like we've never heard cheesy lines before and he's the coolest bartender in the world."

"Ow, Rebecka, snap!"

"I'm sorry, that was too rude. I didn't mean it about you, just him."

We enjoyed a couple rounds and then I switched to the raspberry mojito and Rebecka switched to beer. I was blitzed in no time. Every now and then Julio and I would look at each other with longing. Well, at least I was longing . . . longing and drooling.

"I think I should hook up with Julio. . . . It shall be done," I said, slamming my hand on the bar like a judge with a gavel. "I think that would be a perfect activity for this trip. He's fabulous and shiny. Maybe he's my foxy new boyfriend from the Universe," I wondered, looking up, considering the possibility.

"Not unless the Universe is trying to screw you."

I lowered my voice. "You know I speak sarcasm. You are out of control. I'm going to house you in a minute. Get yourself under control."

"Jane, seriously," she said with a look of disgust, "look, we're on vacation so you should screw whomever, whenever, you want. But this is what I've been talking about, case in point. *Look* at this guy: a *blatant* womanizer. He prides himself on being a womanizer; he's

completely open about it! And this is your hookup of choice. Honestly, it's embarrassing. Doesn't his slutty look make him at all unappealing to you?"

"Don't blame a man for being popular with women. Anyway, I'm on *vacation*. I just want a hot hookup. Womanizer is fine." *He's not a womanizer!* I told myself.

"Okay, fine, if you want to screw a womanizer, that's your business. But then don't wonder if he's your 'foxy new boyfriend from the Universe.' And if you start that weepy shit because he blows you off after you hook up with him, I'm not listening to it."

"Fine. That's your business. But I have one request of you."

"What's that?"

"That you take a fucking laxative next time we go out because I can't take your cynicism for another second. I know you're a little nervous being out here, and I know Dwayne crawled up your ass and died, but enough is enough. We came to a happy place to try to get happy. Work with it. Go to the spa and see if they have colonics, because your constant nagging is getting on my last nerve."

"Alright, I get the hint."

"Not hinting. If I need to rephrase that for you, you let me know."

"Okay, okay."

We hung out and soaked up the scene. People were pouring into our hotel lobby, which we learned was *the* place to be. At night the hotel was open to the public. To get into the hotel you either waited on line behind a velvet rope to get in, or you had to show your room card. The entire night people paraded down the "runway," which was the center path of the hotel lobby, to head out back. You could party at several bars or play pool or get waitress service at various individual little living rooms or go to the pool, which was transformed into a love den where the lounge chairs were changed into mattresses.

A little while later Julio came over with another round for us without us even having to ask.

"These are on me, ladies."

"Julio, that's so nice, thank you," I gushed.

"Thank you, Julio." Rebecka made it clear she was just saying it because she knew she had to.

"You got it, Rebecka."

"So Julio, tell me about you . . . ," I said while taking a sip and keeping eye contact.

"What do you want to know, cutie-pie?" he said as he leaned back down on the bar to gaze deeply into my eyes with that shit-eating grin. Flirt!

"Let's start with—"

"Hey, can we get shots?" this girl next to us asked, for what looked like a bachelorette party.

Julio rolled his eyes at me. I just mouthed, *I'll talk to you later*. And he smiled and nodded and went back to work.

I left Rebecka to go to the ladies' room. When I got back, she was giving the brush-off to a couple of men. Her "Brazilian model" look was making her a huge magnet, that was clear. And she didn't like it one bit.

"Hey, popular girl," I said.

"Uck. I want to send back my makeover. I don't know how I ever liked men; they're all gross, disgusting creatures who would be just as happy humping a tree stump as they would a woman."

"No, only Dwayne's like that," I told her.

"The *D* word again!"

"Sorry."

"Wahhhh," she fake-cried. "I probably should have put off the makeover till I was ready to socialize."

I put my arm around her. "Don't you worry, it is all under control. No time like the present to jump back into it. And I am never ever saying that disgusting *D* word again. We're going to take a look around and find a little special someone for you to hook up with while you're here. The world is our oyster."

"I don't wanna . . .," she whined.

"You have a whole new look and attitude to live up to; no false advertising! Embrace your inner bimbo. We can't leave Florida anyway until you at least shed some of your bitchiness and sort of respect men again. Practice! Cleanse your spirit."

"Alright. . . ."

"Ladies—welcome to South Beach," said Julio, who had just materialized beside our bar stools, holding a bottle of champagne and four glasses.

"See, Rebecka? Things are lookin' up already. We haven't been out for two hours in this town and we're already scoring champagne, and we didn't have to do a damn thing for it. It's a sign."

"Jane, Rebecka, this is Eric Johnson," Julio said. "The champagne's from him." Eric stood a few feet away waiting to be invited over by us. I said hello and waved him over. He was a distinguished-looking man: salt-and-pepper hair, meticulous light gray suit, a nice pair of rimless glasses, big watch . . . expensive-looking. He didn't look like the type to come to South Beach—or talk to us, for that matter. He seemed too elegant or serious or something. He was carrying a briefcase that had a handcuff or something like that on it to connect it to his wrist if he felt like it. I wondered what was in there.

"Hi, Eric," I said. "I'm Jane, and this is Rebecka."

"Jane, Rebecka. Nice to meet you both." He smiled and we all shook hands. "Is it okay if we join you two ladies?" He seemed like a nice guy. I like meeting new people, and he seemed nonlecherous, which would work for Rebecka.

"Of course, Eric," I replied.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want company, but you seem a lot more interesting than that bachelorette party. Heh-heh. So we risked it. I come bearing champagne."

"Champagne is the perfect ticket. This is great, thank you," I said.

"Thank you, Eric," Rebecka said politely.

Julio said, "Eric is here on business; he's staying here too." Then in a low voice he said to me, with a wink, "Be nice to him. He's a great guest here *and* a nice guy." In a normal tone he added, "And this is his colleague—what's your name, bro?" Julio asked.

"Carl Sutker," the colleague practically spit out at Julio. Rebecka laughed with approval. Then he gave Rebecka and me an obviously fake smile that he dropped as quickly as he offered it. Rebecka laughed louder. "Carl, it's a pleasure," she told him and shook his hand enthusiastically. The man looked pinched. He was a bland-looking guy, with pale, white skin, light brown hair, and brown eyes, wearing an expensive-looking tan suit with funky, stylish little glasses. He was standing there looking miserable while tightly holding a pen and a leather-bound folder with the Burberry plaid on it. He shifted his weight to his other hip, sighed loudly, and looked irritated, impatient, disgusted, and in dire need of the men's room. Pussy.

"Carl," I acknowledged briefly.

Rebecka whispered in my ear, "I like this guy Carl. Finally someone I can really relate to."

"Maybe there's a two-for-one colonics special up at the spa for you two."

"You're genius," she said and went over to talk to Carl.

"So, Eric," I asked, "what have you been up to? I see you have your briefcase on you."

He chuckled, which turned out to be his trademark. "We're here on business. We had a sportswear convention in another hotel and then we went straight to dinner. I haven't gone back to my room yet."

"Gotcha. We just got in today."

"Well, you ended up in a good spot. I love this hotel. I've been here several times but this time I'm actually staying an extra couple of days to enjoy it. We're here till Monday or Tuesday."

"We're leaving on Monday, I think. So are you two together?" I asked, gesturing to Carl.

"No, he's my assistant. I'm not gay. Are you two together?"

"Nope, best friends. I'm not gay either. Anyway, yeah, this is our first trip to South Beach, so we're very excited. Unfortunately it's because Rebecka here got dumped—"

"Hey!" she yelled.

"—well, not exactly *dumped*, Eric, but due to her ex-boyfriend's 'behavior,' they are no longer together."

"I hear you." He chuckled.

"God damn it, Jane . . .," Rebecka said with her hands on her hips. Carl finally perked up to listen.

"Rebecka, we have all been down this road. Especially Carl. There's no shame in it."

"What?" asked Carl, hearing his name.

"Nothing," I said. After that Carl looked at me suspiciously every five minutes, waiting to catch me at something.

Eric just laughed. Every now and then he would look at me for a second or two. I have to admit, he was a really likeable guy, but I wasn't feeling his vibe one bit. There was nothing wrong with him, but that's how it was. Especially with Julio prancing around like he was: buff, foxy, confident, and looking like he was ready to make it happen.

"More champagne, gentlemen?" I asked. "Allow me. Rebecka and I love Veuve Clicquot, we really needed this." I filled our glasses. "Usually we have to dance on a bar or something to get it, but I guess this is the magic of South Beach."

"What?" Eric asked.

"Um . . . nothing." Why scare him? "You know, Eric, I call my briefcase my 'griefcase.' It's just a little more accurate than 'briefcase,' don't you agree?"

"Don't like your job, huh?"

"Jane doesn't like any job. Ever," Rebecka volunteered.

"It's really true."

"Okay, then let's toast to not working for the next few days," Eric said and raised his glass.

I raised mine. "Or talking about work. Let's not talk about work at all while we're here; let's keep it clean."

"Cheers to that," said Eric and we all clinked glasses. Then Rebecka picked a cheer and then I did, and next thing you know, we cheered away the bottle. So Eric promptly ordered another and we moved it to one of the small living rooms that littered the lobby. We relaxed around a table in big, comfortable stuffed-leather chairs.

Eric had a very laid-back, unassuming, yet highly entertaining personality and he seemed to know something about everything without seeming arrogant. He was also a good listener and he had that easy chuckle, which was too cute. We had a lot of laughs and told stories of growing up, first dates and first jobs, the differences between our city and his (Philadelphia), college experiences, etc.

Carl, his assistant, was the Antichrist. Needless to say, his name, Carl Sutker, became Cocksucker. Childish, yes, but no getting around it. I passed it on to Rebecka. After that I couldn't look at him without laughing, and Rebecka had to control herself to continue talking to him. He became a lot more likeable then.

We ordered a cheese and fruit platter to go with the champagne. God, I was *loaded*. After a while I could see that Rebecka was relaxing into conversation, or probably a bitchfest, with Carl, and I was really enjoying talking to Eric. I did consider maybe giving Eric a whirl later that night, but Julio kept stopping by from behind the bar, which snapped me right out of it. I wish I could say he was coming for me, but it seemed like he was really schmoozing Eric, who I'm guessing is a great tipper. Anyway, I felt so much more relaxed than usual, which surprised me with all of my experience in relaxation. God, I love Florida. Around three a.m. Eric and Carl

called it a night. We exchanged our cell phone numbers and decided to catch up the next evening if we were around.

Rebecka and I finished up our drinks and then headed up ourselves. On the way back to our rooms, I stopped by the pink bar to say good-bye to Julio. "'Bye, Juliums . . .,'" I said with my head to the side, waving with my finger. How did he do this to me?

"Jane, you come visit me again, I mean it," he said, grabbing my hand. You know he says "Come see me" to a lot of girls, but I'd like to think this time was special.

"If you insist . . .," I said, still cooing, ogling, and drooling. "Let me give you my cell number, just in case we're apart for too long."

"Great," he said with a look that said, *Brace yourself, we are going to have a good time.*

"'Kay." And then I just gazed and drooled.

"C'mon, Jane," Rebecka said, pulling me away.

Then he turned to Rebecka. "Good night, lady. Great meeting you," he said with a big amused smile. I think he knew she hated him.

"'Bye, Julio," she replied dryly and headed toward the elevators. She wasn't even going to humor him.

I gave him a wave and let her pull me out of there. "I love South Beach!" I announced when we hit the elevator.

"I'm sure you do, ho bag," she said, pulling out her cigarettes.

"Ha! And I like our new friend Eric."

"Me too. He's really nice and easygoing," she agreed. "And Carl is insane; he is too funny. He's actually rudier than I am."

"He is. Only you would like him. I wonder why Eric puts up with him. . . ." We got to Rebecka's room so I started pulling my heels off while sitting on her bed. "I wish Julio didn't have to work . . . we could be enjoying my king-sized bed right now and the 'intimacy kit' that the hotel provided."

"I'm sure Julio could find that intimacy kit blindfolded and hog-tied, from the number of times he's come in contact with them. I'm kind of hungry, are you?"

“Yupper. Let’s have minibar snacks.”

We spread out various delicious and expensive treats from the minibar on Rebecka’s bed and began to partake.

Finally I said, holding up the pink champagne bottle, “Well, I think our first night in town was a splendid one, and I expect nothing less going forward. Here’s to all of our nights being so enjoyable, and here’s to you being the genius you are for bringing us here.” I clinked it against Rebecka’s chardonnay.

“Hear, hear.”

When I finally went to my room the sun was rising. I dove into the huge plush bed and I thought about my day, which led to thinking about Ray again. When I thought about him I felt guilty for already having such a great time here. I went through everything over again in my mind about what I did and what had happened between us both professionally and personally with our friendship. I sincerely wished things were different between us, and I again vowed to ask the Universe for a client for Ray and to do much better when I got back to New York.

Antitvity *noun* The opposite of activity.

I started the next morning trying to simulate the café at the hotel's outdoor restaurant unsuccessfully. While I loved the restaurant, it can't be my café away from café. It just missed something. It could have been because I didn't have my embroidery, my Marisol, or my particular brands of drinks, all of which I missed, but I wasn't sure that was exactly it. Later I realized that although it was great, it didn't have the spirituality potential like my café does. I think that was it: the leisure was there, but the Universe was not. Or, the Universe was there, absolutely, but not communicating, like her phone was shut off. To be fair, I was experiencing a mighty hangover, so my judgment may have been skewed. But I don't think so. I just finished my tea, said a little baby thank-you in my mind to the Universe, and left it at that. I signed the tab and hit the pool.

I still couldn't figure out how this place made *lying out by a pool* a hip social scene, but it clearly did. We were not in New York anymore! I figured that getting on the list at a great pool in South Beach was like getting a reservation at a popular restaurant back home; it was just as sought after, and just as impossible to get. Rebecca somehow took care of it. If you weren't on the list, you were banished to the beach.

In attendance were your stock bathing beauties, pimp daddies, young starlets, young wives with old executives, frat boys, models

both male and female, sorority girls, bachelorette parties, hipsters, rappers, Europeans, boy's boys, sophisticates, families, honeymooners, and more. Everyone, including us, broke out their best pool wear. I remembered that I would try to land a client for Ray. *There have got to be clients here, absolutely. Money everywhere.*

The pool itself was like a fountain—the water continually overflowed and streamed over the sides of it, and it was as warm as a bathtub. In the shallow end was a table with chairs in case you wanted to sit at a table actually in a pool, and somehow, someone always did. You could hear faint music being played under the water, while some kind of club music played above. In the water were floating beds anyone could just grab and float around on, which I did a *lot*. Float should be my middle name. Jane Float Cooper. I think I'll name my first child Floatation Device if it's a boy. And Leisure Suit if it's a girl. I heard it's good to name kids after what you're passionate about. Anyway, the place was hoppin' without anyone actually moving, except for the hotel staff, who were constantly scurrying, getting everyone whatever their little hearts desired. It was great.

"Holy shit," Rebecka said, scrutinizing the pool area. "The women here don't know when to stop with the cosmetic surgery. Everyone is extreme Barbie."

"It's the land of bathing beauties."

"It's disturbing . . . look at that one! I've seen people who look like her on TV but never believed they really existed. She looks like a schizophrenic blow-up doll . . . yikes!"

"She may have gone too far with the treatments," I agreed, yawning. "Oh, hey, Frankie!" I waved to our waiter from yesterday who passed by and said hello. "Anyway, *this*, my best friend, is premium leisure." It was about eighty degrees, clear, with a gentle breeze. We had an assortment of treats to munch on and a couple of hotel spa specialists were getting us started on poolside manicures and pedicures. I went for red. My heart swelled with the

knowledge that we had no agenda except to be spoiled. "So what do you think, Rebecca? Can you get used to the leisure lifestyle?"

"Fun in the sun while being pampered, or cold winters and sticky smelly summers . . . hmm . . . tough call . . .," she said, smiling. She looked like she was in her element and not missing New York one bit. "It's something to consider, getting used to this lifestyle in this town."

I was suddenly hit with a wave of nausea. "Uck, I am sick. Mixing martinis and champagne and wine is really just asking for reverse peristalsis. What were we thinking?"

"We've been overserved. We drank like amateurs," Rebecca agreed.

"We were a little overly enthusiastic. But at least, due to extensive dehydration, we're skinny as rails in our bathing suits."

"Always seeing the silver lining."

"I know."

I started to doze again. I was polluted, to say the least. My stomach would lurch about every ten minutes or so . . . cramp/lurch, cramp/lurch. Then gurgle. I had no idea what it was going to do next.

When I woke up, I thought about Ray again and mumbled, "I wonder what Ray's doing now."

"Miss him already?"

"Smart-ass. No, I'm just concerned. I really hate him being mad at me, it's making me nuts. I keep hoping he's cooling off but I know he's not. I keep forgetting that I really have to find him a client. I know I can get one here . . . God, this is really going to pollute my vacation. Why must he be so bossish?"

"Because he's your boss, and he's adorable, that's why. Hey, what about Eric from last night? He definitely looks like client material."

"I think he's our friend here now. And you know I can't pollute friendship with business."

"That's probably wise . . . we'll keep looking. Just don't befriend everyone, so you can get the job done. In the meantime," she

sat up and adjusted her chair, “let’s not roundtable your job there, but your *romance* there, the Ray and Jane romance. Let’s figure out how to get you two lovebirds to start dating. That would be fun. Now—”

“Come on. Not this shit again.”

“—Oh yes, my scared little bunny friend. This shit again. Now, step one: I think the only course of action for you to take when you get back would be to just fuck the anger right out of him, plain and simple.”

“What!” I was shocked—shocked! Although it did sound effective.

“Get that great love *and* job security. Kill two birds with one bone. Damn, I’m good. I should consider working with John and Francesca.”

“You are such an *ass*.”

She ignored me and started shimmying in her chair while she spoke. “You go to the blue light place, you get sauced if you need it, work the dim lighting, wear a little somethin’ somethin’, and then bam!” She clapped her hands. “Magic . . . no more ill will—and foxy new boyfriend.”

“Enough.”

“What?” she asked innocently. “You liked that visual, admit it.” She wore a sly little smile.

“So rude.”

“You don’t deny it . . . interesting.” She looked over with a raised eyebrow. “Are we finally getting somewhere with Ray? Does distance make the heart grow smarter?”

“Fuck off. You never let up! I’m sorry I brought him up, okay? I regret it. I wanted to talk about my *job* and the friendship I may have destroyed with my great *boss*, and all you can do is campaign for a hookup that is not relevant right now, or what I want. I can’t talk about him without explaining myself one hundred times over!

I thought you'd be happy that I'm concerned about my job for a change."

"I am," she said, unmoved, "but I want you to be conscious of the fact that you're interested in Ray as more than a friend. In this instance I think the love is more important than the job." She lit a cigarette, which she started pointing at me. "And I'm not listening to any more of your denial crap. I can tell you like him too because of how you act around him."

"Bullshit."

"Don't forget that I've known you for a long time and I've got no one else to look after but you. I'm incredibly focused. Let's review the facts: He's the man you spend the most time with and you talk about him frequently and positively. Actually, you talk about him more than anybody else in your life. And you're always happy around him, and you never talk or look at any other man when you're with him—"

"That would be rude—"

"Don't interrupt. Especially not with stupid bullshit. You also watch him a lot when you're together, like you're trying to figure him out—"

"That's because I am trying to figure him out."

"Stop interrupting! In addition, you don't care about that job enough to put it before a man, and getting pissed off at him for being social the other night at the blue light place looked and smelled a lot like jealousy. You were jealous that he wasn't just 'your little Ray' like a pet. That he's a grown man with his own friends, who can stand on his own two feet and doesn't have to worship you like some lost puppy."

"I never think of Ray as a puppy! That is not true and that wasn't the point—it was the simple fact that he doesn't talk to me but does to everyone else! I think Ray's great—"

"Then you should go for him. I'm really unclear as to why you won't. You like him; he's classy, nice, smart. What else do you need

from a person? I think your emotions and your brain have a major disconnect. It's like, you don't process your emotions correctly or something. Maybe you suppress them. Or you just don't understand them at all. Anyway," she continued, shaking her head, "the 'why' doesn't matter. Let me tell you what's going to happen if you fess up and go for it: you're going to date, hook up, and have a great time. And be happier than ever and in love. Don't forget, Jane, you can always break up with him; you are not committed for life. But he's the one you should go for; *he* is your foxy new boyfriend from the Universe."

"If it's been Ray all along I would have been given the signs a long time ago. The Universe certainly wouldn't let me believe for one second that my foxy new boyfriend had Tourette's syndrome, or any other kind of syndrome, and would have let me know that he is the man I am supposed to be with. What about that?"

"I don't think the Universe anticipated your level of stupid. Fix your antenna."

I swatted her with my magazine and then sighed and said in a bored monotone, because I've told her this fifty times, "I don't understand why my thoughts and feelings are never valid in this discussion. Once again, and then we're closing this subject forever: just because I'm good friends with a man does not mean he has to be my boyfriend. Ray and I have work issues, I don't think he's for me, he's not someone I would just hook up with, so I wouldn't enter this lightly unless I were sure. I still have residue from when I thought he had Tourette's syndrome. We're enjoying a burgeoning, blossoming, yet very wounded friendship that I would like to repair and maintain for the long term—"

"I'm warning you, Janie, one day he's going to give up on you and you are going to know regret. I don't want that to happen. One day we're going to go to the blue light place and he's going to be making out with some dunce like Sara, and you are going to be pissed. We both know that for a fact. You are taking his affections

for granted. The only thing he's done wrong is not treat you like shit. That's it. You probably like him more now only because he got mad at you. It's very dysfunctional. Be conscious of this. And he's hot, which is something we never talk about. Hello? Ray looks like a brunette Michael Vartan. . . ."

"His voice is fuzzy. . . ."

"Very fuzzy! Super fuzzy! And, for the last time: *he never ever had Tourette's syndrome so get over it*. You really are sounding like a schmuck. Finally a guy I can respect and you can't step up to the plate."

"You respect him?" I asked.

"Of course, how could I not? Think I'm going to harp on about a guy I have no respect for?"

I was temporarily stumped. It was too hard to even consider.

Rebecka finished with, "Keep in mind I'm only doing for you what you did for me and Dwayne. You and I both know that Dwayne and I wouldn't have been together if it wasn't for your incessant nagging—"

"Coaxing, Rebecka. Guiding."

"Coaxing, of course. This time, I know what's best so cut the shit and do as I say."

Rebecka lacked my certain delicacy, or *je ne sais quoi*, with highly sensitive subjects like love. But she did have a point: I didn't like the sound of Ray with someone else one bit. But it's still not enough to make me experiment. "Well . . . you're not entirely wrong, okay. But let's just consider Julio the bartender for now since Ray's in New York anyway," I said, closing the subject.

"Julio the bartender is just a half step more worthwhile than a vibrator. *Maybe*."

"God, you're brutal. Anyway, ease up off the cocoa butter, you are actually getting darker."

"Okay. At least you're admitting something about Ray, it's a start." She rolled over to get her bottle of sun protection.

Some time lapsed as I experienced new waves of hangover nausea and considered Ray. It's not like I don't find him attractive, I do. But I'm not attracted to him, not really. I don't know, he's my friend! And boss! He's apparently an outgoing person with *other* people, he goes to cool clubs, likes interesting music . . . and he really is so so nice. And smart. I get it. But I still feel that goofy vibe. Maybe like he's the brother I never had? I don't know, that blushing bullshit has got to go. I just don't know!

Rebecca offered, "As far as the Tourette's thing goes, maybe the geek thing at the beginning was a test from the Universe, to get a man of Ray's caliber, to force you into changing your mentality, which has proved in the past to be highly destructive."

"Hm. I hadn't thought about that. . . ."

"Well, think about it," she spat out, turning over onto her stomach. "I'm going to be on my fourth husband by the time you get your shit together."

"Oh, my God, listen to you referencing your future marriages . . . very good! That's a great first step! You're on your way to breaking your crusty, bitchy, counterproductive shell! Okay, enough about me, let's do a status check on you and the D situation. Do you feel any better now that you're out here?"

"Absolutely. Definitely. I still feel really sick about everything, and I wake up feeling sick, but the change of scene is definitely helping. I love it out here, it's great."

"Yay! Right, since you're removed, you can just look at the relationship, without the clutter of friends, or places involved, and so on. Just the bare bones of the thing. I bet it's clearer."

"Exactly, and I have been thinking about it. I know Dwayne's an asshole, but I really miss him. I still can't believe it. Though I know I don't want to get back together with him. So I guess I'm just going to have to feel like shit for a while. Luckily I have you and my trusty cigarettes to keep me grounded."

"Fucking gross, Rebecca. You need to take a look at that smoking

habit and what that's all about. Anyway, it's all just a matter of time. Soon you will have a stellar boyfriend who will value you and not run off with crack whores like Cynthia."

"Ugh. I'm sick of this, I would like to just move on now."

"You know, you could wake up tomorrow and just be over it. There's no set grieving period. You never know. Just let it happen. If you need to grieve, then grieve, and when you're over it, go with it, it's done. No virtue in hanging on to bad feelings and negativity unnecessarily." Sometimes I'm like a sage. Plus I know her tendency to hold a grudge and stew. "Let's drink to you being over this tomorrow."

"Okay. No, let's drink to it being over right now!"

"Even better! Let this next drink be a happy elixir, so that as you drink it, it collects the negativity of your relationship and love life and flushes it out of your system, leaving behind a wake of happiness and horniness."

"Flag down the waitress."

"We'll make it a double— Excuse me!"

Jail *noun* A government-run club of booze, cigarettes, and hooking up. Must commit crime to get on guest list.

When my stomach finally stabilized, we went back to our rooms for a couple hours of extensive sprucing. It's weird how we were wearing so much less, and yet getting ready took so much longer. I decided to wear these black lowrider short shorts that let my waist chain hang out (which I love), a tight black uniform shirt, and four-inch black peep-toe shoes. Rebecka wore my white halter top with the chains that went down the back and a camel-colored suede miniskirt that hung low on her hips and these rhinestone shoes with kitten heels. She didn't have to wear high heels because she has amazing long legs. We were suited up and ready to go.

After dinner we were standing at the outside pool bar trying to figure out our evening's agenda, when I saw a pink flyer on the ground for some bar that had a band playing called the Babydolls. I picked it up.

"Rebecka, what do you think?" I asked, handing it to her.

"Why not? Let's see where the night takes us." Famous last words.

"Sounds good!"

The bar from the flyer was off Lincoln Road somewhere, I don't know where. I never really care where I am, I just get out of the car when someone tells me to. Since I didn't see gang members, desert cacti, or coyotes, good enough.

We walked into this small, dark club. We saw a group of women wearing extremely sexy, yet punk outfits. Short flared plastic skirts, corsets and bodices, a nurse uniform, a cop uniform, all the feminine girlie stuff that's fun and glamorous, but with a very sexy, funky edge. A lot of platform shoes, a lot of clear high plastic heels.

"I guess it's a chick punk band," I said.

"Yeah. And they have quite the following." The place was packed.

I whistled. "These chicks really know how to push the wardrobe envelope. I thought we were daring."

"We're ready for Sunday school compared to them," Rebecka said, lighting up a cigarette.

"I know. I wonder when they start," I said, looking around for a sign.

"Me too. Let's get a drink."

We got a couple of beers and took in the scene. "What's weird about this place is that the women are these sexy types, while the men look either really creepy or like frat boys. None of them have a punk or metal edge or anything. It's a weird mix," I observed.

"I know. It's definitely not a punk band, with this audience."

"I know. Maybe they're like the Pussycat Dolls. More burlesque. Well, we can just leave if it sucks, but since we're already here . . ."

"Right, might as well check it out. Let's see how Floridians party."

So we hung out, talked to the bartender, and had some laughs. Three guys passed us, giving us lecherous psycho smiles and extra-long once-overs. "God, the guys here are all pervs," Rebecka said with a disgusted look on her face. "The way they check us out makes me want to shower."

"I know, and that's not the first time this has happened at this place. Let's finish this round and go. No need to perpetuate this."

"Amen. Let's go to the Shore Club."

"Love it."

We stood around, people watching, while finishing our full drinks. Suddenly I heard a hot southern accent.

"Hey," he said to Rebecka.

"Hey."

"You don't work here, do you?" he asked her.

"No, I do not," she answered dismissively, which is when I looked over at him.

He was totally and utterly *hot*. Like, universally attractive, as in, there is no way anyone anywhere would say, "I just don't find him attractive," because it's just not happening. He was movie star hot: tan, around our age, maybe a little younger, with whiter-than-white teeth, big, dark brown eyes, dark brown hair, in a white T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, talking to Rebecka. Super manly, but not overdone. He was like an unbelievably hot, healthy, blinding beacon of light in this crack den of cheap, hideous wardrobe, pasty skin, and perverts (Rebecka and I not excluded). And he was southern! God, I love it down here!

"Oh. Sorry." Small giggle, big smile. He could totally do tooth-paste commercials. "It's hard to tell the difference between the staff and the clubgoers around here." He took a sip of his beer and leaned back on the bar. He's probably really relaxed with women because he's never experienced rejection.

"Really?" Rebecka asked over her shoulder sarcastically and rolled her eyes. She turned to face me and with a hand up to shield her face, mouthed the question, *Who the fuck is this guy?*

"Yeah . . .," the guy said, looking at Rebecka. He started to realize that maybe he was striking out and shouldn't be talking to her.

Time for me to intervene. "Rebecka? Turn the fuck around," I said under my breath.

"What?"

"I said turn the fuck around, and talk to that beautiful man, or I will never speak to your disgruntled, anal-retentive, man-hating ass again. Do you hear me?"

"I'm not talking to Pretty Boy, Jane. Fuck that. He looks like—"

"Clean? Whatever, don't care, not listening. We talked about this: make *polite* small talk with a member of the opposite sex. It's good practice and will give you positive feedback. Turn around. I'm not talking to you until you talk to him." I turned my back on her to shut her up. I heard her say "God!" like a whiny fourteen-year-old. But she started allowing the poor guy to talk to her, so that was a start.

I leaned back on the bar to continue drinking and surveying the crowd. On my other side was this incredibly glamorous red-haired girl (I think it was a wig, though). I was about to say hello when a few of the club's frat boys passed us and gave us their disgustingly lewd stare-downs. I had pretty much had enough of this shit. I looked over at the woman next to me, about to commiserate, when I saw her just staring them down, with a little smile on her face, looking like she wanted to lick her lips. Jesus. When the guys kept walking she looked a little miffed. I wanted to tell her she could do so much better than those douchebags, but she just turned around to get a lot of twenty-dollar bills from the bartender with her smaller bills.

I made small talk with her to kill time. "God, how do you carry all that cash in your little bag?"

"I can't, that's why I need the twenties."

"Oh, right, gotcha . . . hey, I love your eye makeup." It was black with big shiny fuchsia sparkles in it.

"Thanks, sweetie, it's the Royale line. The sparkles are in the makeup. It's a liquid liner that has a brush to handle the sparkles."

"No way, that's so cool! Do you have it on you, can I see it?"

"Sure, take a look. Try it on if you want to."

"Okay, cool!" So I took out my compact right there and administered this hard-core glamorous eye makeup. It was wild. It was like bang-pow! You could feel the big square sparkles clinging to your eyelids. I put on some more of my lip gloss to balance it out.

"You should put a little mole or beauty mark above your lip," she told me.

"Good idea!" And like Cindy Crawford, I put a little mark over my lip. The glamour action on my face was through the roof. It was smoky and mysterious. I put on just a touch more powder blush.

After that, we did a couple of whiskey shots with the bartender. He was bored so he started pouring.

Then in my ear I heard, "Can I please stop now?" Rebecka pleaded.

I turned to her, said, "No," and then turned back around. I hated being the disciplinarian, but what can you do?

"Jesus, Jane, what did you do to your face?" she asked over my shoulder, sounding appalled.

Before I could respond, the shit hit the fan. What happened next was all a blur. All I know is that I really wish I'd had a bag of Dunkin' Donuts on me.

Basically, we got arrested. Me, Rebecka, Friendly Red-Haired Girl, Hot Southern Boy, the frat boys, the sketchy men, sex kittens, everybody, including the staff. The lights were turned on, some people scattered around, some ran for the bathrooms, while some two-bit douchebag cop who could have starred on *Reno 911!* identified himself, held up his badge, told us that we were all under arrest, started mentioning some codes we had supposedly violated, and then said we had the right to remain silent, blah blah blah. All the while some other officers ran around cuffing us. Apparently we were part of some sort of sting operation. The South! Their cops do love their version of the law! You'd never see a New York cop this thrilled to bust people at a nightclub. If anything they'd be apologetic.

In all the craziness, Rebecka asked the officer cuffing her, "Officer, what are we under arrest for?"

"Prostitution, angel, what do you think?"

"What?!"

"You heard me. Section blah blah blah, code blah blah blah. Prostitution."

"Officer, what am I getting arrested for?" Southern Boy then asked.

"Solicitation, buddy. Not that I blame you," he said, nodding at Rebecka, then caught sight of me, did a double take and gave me a weird look, then turned back to him. "We received word from the DA's office that we had to crack down on this sort of thing because the prostitution around here has gotten somewhat out of hand. This club in particular, blatant disregard for the law. Look at these girls."

"Officer!" I said. "We are not prostitutes!"

"Yeah, right," he said sarcastically, eyeing me up and down. "Save it for the judge." Goddamned glitter makeup!

"Jane, don't say another word," advised Rebecka, "we'll be out of this in no time."

"Are you," Hot Southern Boy asked Rebecka, looking confused, "a lady of the night? A prostitute?"

Rebecka turned to him and gave him the most withering look in her arsenal. "Do you pay for sex, jerk-off?"

Southern Boy turned beet red. "No, ma'am. Sorry, I just—"

"Don't you ever address me again in any way, shape, or form, ya got that, pretty boy? Jane, are you hearing this shit?"

He looked crushed. "Hey, no, it's not that you *look*—"

"Shut up."

"Yes, ma'am." I felt sorry for him and gave him a sympathetic look, although I may have looked menacing in my drag makeup because he jumped when he saw me.

"Okay, let's go," said the cop and he led us away, all of us linked together on one chain.

"Well, I'm glad we had a big dinner," I said behind Rebecka.

"Shut up, Jane."

We got stuffed into a white police van out front. It was embarrassing because you really waddle around and need a lot of assistance when your hands are cuffed and your shoes are like . . . hooker shoes. Anyway, in the van was me, Rebecka, the hot southerner and glamorous redhead, and two other people we didn't know.

"You and your fucking flyer, Jane," Rebecka hissed in my ear, which the whole van heard.

"You and your fucking makeover, Rebecka," I hissed back. "And you decided we should come here. I asked you," I answered defensively.

"Hey, I saw that flyer, too, I thought a band was playing," said Southern Boy, shaking his head, embarrassed.

"So did we!" I said. "This is obviously a simple misunderstanding, totally manageable . . . they can't arrest us for horrid makeovers."

"Jane!" Rebecka warned.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right," Southern Boy answered. "For me it's just weird. I just moved into town about two weeks ago, so it's, like, 'Welcome to South Beach, folks.' Heh-heh. My family is going to love this story." He smacked his knee and chuckled. "Soliciting a prostitute . . . good Lord."

"Well, if it's any consolation," I said, "we're on vacation, and we're only here for a long weekend."

"You guys don't work at the club?" the red-haired glamour girl asked. "I thought you did. . . ."

"You are not alone in that thought, but apparently we just like the fashion," I said while eyeing Rebecka, who sat back.

"Ooohhhh . . .," the red-haired girl answered as if that explained everything. She was the only one unconcerned about our circumstances, and she was the only one who was guilty.

I said, "Not that I'm really complaining, because to tell you the truth, I've always wanted to get arrested. You know, eat doughnuts, have some cop talk, smoke in a cell—trading stories with convicts, everyone telling their tale . . .," I said dreamily. "I just didn't think it would happen like this on a four-day vacation. But what can you do? The Universe works in mysterious ways."

"Um . . . right . . . well, I'm Jake," Hot Southern Boy offered.

"I'm Jane. And this lovely lady is Rebecka." Since I knew that's who he really wanted to talk to.

"Hi, Jane. Hi, Rebecka . . .," he said shyly and gave her this long mushy look. This cutie-pie was in love.

"Pleasure," Rebecka answered dryly. "Jane? Please stop talking . . . please? I'm begging you now."

"Fine."

At the station we were seated in this kind of waiting room still all linked together. We sat there for about an hour and a half while one by one we were unhooked from the main chain, taken to another room to give our personal information and mug shots, and then fingerprinted. It was cool, except I really needed the bathroom from the beer, and I couldn't go.

After we got booked we were put into the holding cell. It was way bigger than I imagined it would be. I thought it was going to be literally one little cell, but no. It was like fifteen cells or something. There were about thirty-five people in there already, so it was full. I guessed the whole nightclub was going to be in there. Anyway, I was first to go in from my group. I got a lot of whistles. "Hey! Thanks guys . . . and gals." This is gonna be fun. My people.

I found a large number of drunks hanging out so I made myself comfortable. I was glad I had had those whiskey shots. I whiled the time away (before Rebecka and Jake showed up), by listening to slurred stories of arrest, sharing my own arrest shocker, trading

crazy drinking tales, and smoking some guy's clove cigarettes. What was great was the trust and faith among us; everyone knew that everyone in there was innocent. They knew I wasn't a hooker. I appreciated that. Overall I gave the experience an A-/B+ for entertainment value. The A- factor is for the dream of temporary imprisonment coming true, but the possible drop to a B+ mark was for the reason for my arrest and my aforementioned hooker outfit, which wasn't the least bit comfortable on a cold cement floor.

After about thirty minutes, in came Rebecka. "Jane, don't worry about this, it's all under control . . . are you *smoking*?"

"Fuck, yeah, I'm smokin'. *I'm in prison. That's what we do.*"

"Oh, gotcha. . . ." And then she pulled her pack out of her pocket. "I guess that's why they let me keep these," she said lighting up.

"So thoughtful." And I introduced her to all the guys in my group.

She took a drag and exhaled. "Hey, guys, nice to meet you," she said and she turned back to me. "Anyway, as soon as they let me use the phone, I'm calling my stoner parents to get the family lawyer's number. Don't worry about it, we'll be out of here in a jiff, their lawyers are good."

"Okeydoke," I said, checking on my manicure.

She eyed me suspiciously. "You don't care if we stay or go, do you?"

"I care in the long term, but for tonight I'm fine."

"You are such a freak."

"Anal queen, would you feel better if I pretended to be traumatized? I see it as an opportunity to get a glimpse of the inner workings of the law."

"What other way is there to see it? Okay, I don't think I should let you drink alcohol," she said eyeing me and stomping out her cigarette. "By the way, your makeup is a fucking travesty. What did you do to yourself?"

"Why?"

"You look like Mötley Crüe after they've played, like, ten shows without showering in between. Like the worst drag queen in the West Village at the end of Halloween parade night. What do you have on?"

"It's from one of the girls at the club. The girl that was in the van with us."

"Right, so you put on hooker makeup from a professional using your tiny compact mirror in a dark nightclub. Nice going. I can't wait till you see your mug shot or a mirror because your reaction will be priceless. I am so sending it to the Smoking Gun for their collection."

"Fuck off, Garber. Go find yourself a salad tosser or something; they have plenty of those in the pen."

"Nice language. Maybe—" She was cut off by the cell door opening to admit Jake.

"Jake!" I called, waving. "Yooahoo! You sit right over here. . . ." And I scooted over to make room between me and Rebecka. Rebecka gave me another of her withering looks so I smiled and tweaked her nose.

"Thank you, ladies." Jake said, sitting down. "Wow, this station works a lot faster than ours back home. I thought we'd be sitting in that waiting room for hours."

"Oh, really? Where are you from?" I asked.

"Just south of Austin."

"So you've been arrested before . . . I should have guessed," Rebecka said.

He looked at her earnestly. "I was arrested before, but just for kid stuff. In high school, my friends and I went cow-tipping and then we were caught drinking beers in the back of my friend's dad's pickup nearby. Of course we got pulled over and arrested. Let me tell you, we were in that station *all night*. It sucked, excuse my language. Since we woke up the sheriff and he had to come to

the station, he was pretty pissed off. I think he made us sit there for hours on purpose. That was no fun."

"I can imagine," I said.

"Goodness, that's exciting," Rebecka said, "playing with livestock and drinking cans of warm, cheap beer on the open road . . . where do I sign up?" I gave her a look to tell her to cut it out.

"Jake," I said, changing the subject, "I love your name, it's so *Sixteen Candles*."

"Oh, God, Jane," Rebecka said.

Jake chuckled. "Yep, I get that a lot. It was a good movie."

"It was the best! Actually, Rebecka and I had John Hughes Day just a couple of months ago, where we watched all of his movies."

"You two have been friends for a while?"

"Yeah, about ten years."

"That's great."

"Usually," I said, giving her a look. "So what brings you to South Beach?"

"Well, I take care of the plants and flowers at the Delano Hotel now."

"Oh, my God, that's where we're staying! Wow, that's so interesting. Rebecka and I were just commenting on the bushes in the garden out back and how awesome they look."

"Thank you."

"Rebecka, isn't that amazing? Jake takes care of them."

"Truly amazing."

"Where are you two from?" he asked Rebecka.

"New York City."

He whistled. "Two New York City girls . . . I shoulda guessed. . . ."

"How so?" Rebecka asked.

"Just the attitude, the personality—"

"If you think we have an attitude, you don't have to sit with us," Rebecka bitched.

"Rebecka!" I yelled. She was out of control.

"I didn't say you had a bad attitude, I just said that you had a New York City attitude." And then he stood up. Oh no, here we go. "But now that you mention it, you do have a bad attitude. I have been nothing but polite to you, back at the club and here, and you've been nothing but nasty. You're beautiful, but no one needs that chip on your shoulder that's the size of a hog. Obviously you just need to be left alone. I'll go 'find my people.' Jane, it's been a pleasure. I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit here."

"Thanks, Jake, good luck with your new job here, and I'm sorry!" I implored to his back as he walked away, "Rebecka just needs a laxative, but really, she's a pussycat!"

He called back, "I bet you're right, I just won't wait for it." He sat down on the other side of the cell. We couldn't see him because of all the people.

I turned to Rebecka, who looked at me guiltily. I didn't say a word for a couple of seconds, I was so appalled. Finally I stood up and said, "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"What? He was annoying! And we're in jail, and I'm not in the mood. The dickhead asked me if I was a prostitute, Jane."

"The 'dickhead' was flustered because he too was under arrest. The cops also called you a prostitute *and arrested you* and you didn't say anything to them! Jake has been nothing but polite and you can't even be polite back? What is wrong with you, are you really letting Dwayne get to you so much that you can treat a kind, decent person like that? Don't forget, he's in jail because he talked to you, and he's not giving you any shit about it. You've gone too far this time . . . a nice, polite person . . . get up and apologize."

"No way! I'm not—"

"Bitch, yes. You are. You had to be rude. *Get up.*" I started dragging her up.

"Uck. Do I have to?"

"Yes. *Now.*"

"Okay, fine!" She got up and tiptoed around people to the other side.

This is what I mean. Rebecka does push the envelope, but she also owns it when she's wrong. At least she's not so stubborn that she won't clean up her own mess. I shook my head and looked down to see this disheveled, slurring drunk staring at me from the floor. "You two shiztahz?"

"Nah, we're just best friends."

"Ack. Fight like catz."

"Sometimes."

So I went back to smoking cloves and trading stories with the guys. After a while I figured I'd see what Rebecka was up to, make sure everyone was making nice-nice.

My concern was unnecessary. When I walked over to do a status check, the two of them were making out and groping each other like they were the last people on earth and they hadn't had sex in, like, five years.

"Well, looky here," I interrupted, shaking my head. "Look who likes prison now."

Rebecka looked up all giggly and smiley and Jake sat back looking like he was taking a break in the middle of an amazing steak dinner.

"We made up," Rebecka said and Jake put his arm around her and looked at her with a grin.

"I can see that! Alright . . . I'm just going to go back to my crew on the other side," I said, stepping over people to walk away.

"Okay, be careful!" Rebecka said, all gooey.

"Thank you." I stopped and turned around to make sure I really saw what I thought I just saw. There they were, goin' at it.

Eventually, Rebecka unglued herself from Jake long enough to call her parents. We were released an hour or so later, after her family's lawyers sent someone from their firm's Miami office to come

down and speak to the police officers and Rebecka and me in person. Back at the hotel, we went to our room to shower off prison and then went downstairs in comfortable clothes to have a drink and relax and to wait for Jake's release.

"As much as I did enjoy and benefit from being arrested," Rebecka said while we were at the bar, "there's just one thing I don't understand: If I'm innocent till proven guilty then why was I cuffed and part of a chain gang sitting in a cramped little van with at least seven other adults and getting yelled at? And then put in a jail cell. Because I don't know innocent people who get that treatment. To me, that seemed like convict treatment. You know? I just thought the treatment should be better."

"I know, I kind of agree. Being shepherded around in a dirty van in our new outfits was uncalled for. But I guess it's the guilty people that established this kind of treatment. Either way, they could have at least provided us with doughnut holes if they didn't have entire doughnuts to give us," I said with a wink.

"Doughnuts are for cops, not the criminals."

"Oh yeah!" We laughed.

It was another hour before Jake was released. As soon as he saw Rebecka they started making out immediately so I went to use the ladies' room. When I came back, Rebecka said, "Jake and I are going to hang out on the beach. Wanna join?"

"Of course I would, thank you! Joining a romantic moment with a new couple is *exactly what I had in mind* . . . let's hit the sand!"

"Smart-ass."

I laughed. "Hold on, I'll be right back." I ran to the front desk and asked about Jake, making sure he did in fact work at the hotel and wasn't a psychopath. After being assured that he was a stand-up individual, I ran back over to them.

"Sorry, guys, checking the weather for tomorrow. Anyway, Jake, take care of my girl," I said, and gave him a hug.

"I sure will, Jane. Good night," he said, grinning. God, he was hot. She really scored.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, darlin'," I said to Rebecca with a smile and gave her a big hug. I whispered in her ear, "I won't wait up."

"Okay!" And she giggled.

Je ne sais quoi *noun* An expression only the French could make work. Direct translation: “I not know what.” It’s used to describe the unexplainable essence of something. Example: *That guy is not my type but he has a certain je ne sais quoi, meaning, he has a little extra somethin’ somethin’ I can’t define.*

Saturday morning, after we’d settled into our usual poolside routine, Rebecka was thumbing through one of her magazines while hummin’ a tune. I just sat there listening to it, highly amused. I couldn’t figure out what song it was.

“Rebecka, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you hum before.”

“Was I?” She giggled. “I didn’t even realize it!”

“You were indeed. So what happened in jail last night that you guys made up so utterly?”

“I love questions that start with ‘What happened in jail.’ Um, I went over and apologized to him for my attitude, like you told me to. Then he said nicely, but firmly, ‘If we’re going to be friends, you have to control that attitude. I believe in mutual respect with everyone I know, and I’m not changin’ now, even for someone as special as you.’”

“Wow,” I said.

“I also told him that I was sorry that he got arrested for talking to me, for which he said not to worry about it, that it wasn’t my fault. So I said, ‘Alright, thanks for being cool.’ I really felt like a dick; I know I acted like an ass.”

“You really did. I don’t know why you can’t just start off liking or at least respecting people.”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Anyway, I asked him if we could start over and I introduced myself and shook his hand. Then I explained

a little of what happened with Dwayne to explain my attitude, and it turns out he too just ended a relationship in Texas where he too was cheated on, which is why he moved to South Beach. We had this conversation about relationships that was just really good and enlightening. His attitude about his breakup, as you can imagine, was much better than mine. He wasn't at all bitter; I don't think it crossed his mind to lose trust in women in general. I learned a lot from him. But he still didn't want to see his ex anymore and was ready for a change, so he took advantage of the timing and being newly single, and came out here to try what he always wanted to try: working with exotic plants and living by the beach. It was a really good conversation. He seems like a great person." And then she looked down and laughed and blushed.

"Both of you moving on in South Beach . . . coming here to cleanse the spirit. I'm intrigued."

"I know, me too. Then we started talking about other things. I started thinking he was really cute and nice. And you know I like a man who's not afraid of me. He was nice, but he laid down the law, which you can't help but respect. And then somehow we started making out, I don't even know how it happened. I knew the guy for about forty-five minutes, and I was sober, and we were smooching. It was nuts. I blame South Beach. I think the sea air, the palm trees, and the rampant horny vibe played tricks on me."

"Or the self-tanner."

"So it was weird yet also very natural. Last night on the beach we continued to get acquainted again and again and again," she said, looking mischievously at me.

I got her point. "You have got to be kidding me. Where's Rebecca? Where the fuck is she, you fucking clone?"

Giggle. "I know!"

"Well, I for one completely approve of the man and the activity, and I must say that I am thrilled by the brevity of your grieving period."

Her face clouded over for a second. "It's not like I'm totally over it, who are we kidding? *But*" (giggle) "I'm in *much* better shape than I was yesterday! I think I'm over the hurdle, I really do. Dwayne is not worth the ubergrieve . . . especially since he's with the whore Cynthia and I can have fun with gorgeous, adorable cute boys like Jake!"

"Onwards and upwards. I love it! He's the anti-Dwayne."

"I mean, Jake's not my type, you know," Rebecka said, backtracking. "Holy rebound guy: no intellectual conversation, and no edgy literature or anything, he listens to country music, but he's so great. And yeah, he is the opposite of Dwayne. This is just for a long weekend anyway so what the hell, right?"

What have we here? I thought to myself. *She's really into him. No way.* . . . Not wanting to scare her off, I said, "Absolutely. He knows you're here only for a weekend, just have fun. You never have to see him again if you don't want to. Although maybe you'll see that your 'intellectual conversation' isn't the be-all and end-all. Who knows? You decide."

"Maybe . . . anyway, I love Miami!" Rebecka said.

"This is a happy, happy town. I mean, where else can you get arrested for prostitution, end up in a holding cell for hours, and still say you had a pretty good night overall?"

"Amen."

Rebecka decided to leave the pool for a little while to talk to the hotel's concierge about tonight's plans . . . no way were we picking up another random flyer. I stayed to lunch and doze. I wondered while I was awake what mind-altering substance I was on that I thought I could go on a vacation and not embroider for four or five days. In retrospect that made no sense. It's called a compulsive disorder for a reason. Shit. I felt like a junkie.

Stack *noun* [from dictionary.com] 1. (*plural*) The area of a library in which most of the books are shelved. 2. A stackup.

About an hour later Rebecka came running back to the pool, calling my name. She was panting like she'd been running for hours, and just stood there breathing hard and holding my arm to recover.

"Dude. You have got to cut back on the smokes, like, for real. You are embarrassing."

"Wait." She was doubled over trying to catch her breath. "You're not going to believe who's here."

"Who? Dwayne? Ray?"

"No." (pant) "No." And she just handed me a flyer. Great. Another flyer.

Ooh. It appeared the Universe had chosen Pamela Anderson to be our new best friend! The flyer said she was making an appearance at another hotel to promote a men's fashion magazine that she's on the cover of! That very afternoon!

"Do you know what this means, darlin'?" I asked Rebecka.

"Yes. The Universe is bestowing Pam Anderson unto you."

"Unto *us*. Pam is obviously meant to be our new best friend! I can't believe it, this is great! Okay, this is only for this afternoon, let's buy the magazine issues now to get them signed."

"Done," Rebecka said, pulling two out of her bag.

"Look who's brilliant today!"

"Let's go!"

And we both ran to the front desk, got directions to the hotel where Pam was promoting the magazine, and ran to the event. There were signs everywhere about it and paparazzi from all over running around like mad. We were in line for about an hour behind this guy with a very “broken-in” issue of *Playboy* with Pam on the cover. He and other guys in line were talking about their favorite Pam *Playboy* covers because apparently she’s been on eleven covers for that magazine alone. There was enough Pam spankervision on that line to supply all of the United States armed forces. Gross. We killed time talking about Jake until finally it was our turn to meet her. We just ran up and squealed.

“Hi, Pam!” I said, giggling. It was overwhelming.

“Hey, girls, what’s up?” she asked with a smile.

“We’re huge fans,” I gushed.

“Actually, she thinks you’re supposed to be our new best friend,” Rebecka told her.

“That wasn’t necessary,” I said to Rebecka.

Pam smiled. “I think my best friend might have something to say about that, but thanks!”

“That’s okay, we’re best friends. We were just going to add another.”

“Oh.” She laughed politely.

Rebecka handed her the magazines to sign. I continued, “So, Pam, I love your show *Stacked*, it’s hysterical. You’re such the diva.”

“Thanks! It’s been really fun so far.”

“And you’re the producer, I noticed; very impressive. Girl power!”

“Thank you!”

“I haven’t read *Star* or the sequel, but I have read your column in *Jane*. Really good. I was glad to see you back after you took some time off.”

“It’s good to be back, I love that gig. I’ve just been so busy!”

“Well, I love how you’re anti fur,” Rebecka said. “Just so you

know, I don't even wear fake fur because I think it promotes wearing real fur."

"Me too! Good, keep it up." And then she looked down at the table. "Wow, I love your bags. They're really beautiful. . . ." She touched the embroidery with a long nail.

I squealed again and looked at Rebecka in shock. *Can you believe Pam loves my bags?*

"She made them," Rebecka told Pam.

"Really? No way. . . . They're amazing—do you sell them?"

"No, I just made these for fun. . . ."

"And because she has OCD," added Rebecka. Apparently when she's nervous she likes to out me for various things.

"Rebecka! Yeah, I have a touch of OCD, so I have to embroider these little things. I know, weird."

Pam started laughing. "Whatever it takes, right? I bet people would pay top dollar for one of these. You should consider selling them."

"Rebecka, we have to give Pam a bag."

"You're absolutely right."

"Pam, we are going to send a bag to you if you want to give us a mailing address."

"Wow, that's really cool, thanks, I would love one!"

"It would be my honor."

"You know," Pam continued, "it's nice to see a couple of female fans after all the men on this line. There's only been about a dozen women so far."

"How long have you been here?"

"About four hours so far."

"No way."

"Don't you get breaks?"

"Not really, it's always pretty grueling like this, but what can you do? It's not like I have to do it every day."

"I think Pam needs a drink," Rebecka said to me for Pam to hear.

"Pam could definitely use a drink," I responded.

"What?"

"How about," I said, "you don't 'take a break' per se, but you accompany your *fans* to look at something that they *really* want to show you, that happens to be in that itty-bitty bar right over there. . . ."

"And," continued Rebecka, "if you should happen to come across a tiny adult beverage while we're in there, no one would be the wiser. . . ."

Laughing, Pam protested, "Um, well, unfortunately I'm not really drinking now. Anyway, it's only four in the afternoon. I don't think I can take off, but thanks, girls."

"Pam, we would in no way ask you to consume alcohol if that's not something you want to do. But I think you need a break from this and I think we need to facilitate it."

Chewing her lip, she said, "I actually really want to, but I don't think I can. There's my publicist over there." She pointed to a woman in a gray suit wearing a tag around her neck. "I think she'd have a heart attack if I left. She just gave me a lecture on how it's important to sit here no matter what."

"See that lounge over there?" Rebecka said, pointing across the floor.

"Yes."

"Doesn't that look very inviting? Relaxing? Come on, off we go, no more chitchat. . . ." She grabbed Pam's bottle of water and some other personal items on the table and started nodding her over toward the lounge. Rebecka really does not take no for an answer, even from world-famous celebrities.

While walking away, Rebecka called to the woman wearing a tag, "Excuse me? Pam is going to take ten." And then she turned to the men in line. "Pam will be right back, just stay right here so you don't lose your spot." Then she turned to Pam. "Okay? Do you want your bodyguards?"

"Yeah, definitely." Pam waved them over. "Okay, girls, nice work!" she said as we scurried away.

After that we spent an incredibly magical hour talking about local spots we've all been to in Manhattan (Pam is very rock 'n' roll; she's been around), nasty breakups with boys that we've all endured (focusing on Rebecka), and beauty treatments and all the freebies Pam receives. When we talked about music, I was pleasantly surprised to learn we even liked some of the same bands. We laughed a lot and were in perfect agreement with each other except for when we touched upon the Ray subject, where both Rebecka and Pam ganged up on me about it.

Pam was like, "Oh, my God, he so loves you, it's so cute."

"And," Rebecka told her, "he's *hot* like Michael Vartan. I'm not kidding you."

"No way. What's the problem, Jane?" So that went on for a while, where I just mumbled a lot. How does one argue with Pam Anderson? You just don't.

As a thank-you to Pam our new best friend (I love saying that), I made Rebecka dump her items from her pocketbook into a plastic bag from the bartender and give it to Pam right on the spot. Then we all exchanged e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers to hang out again next time Pam's in New York. We even took pictures of each other. Thank God we did or we might not believe it later ourselves! It was so exciting and happy, even Rebecka was thrilled.

We walked Pam back toward her table and saw that the line had quadrupled. We all hugged good-bye.

"Okay, you guys, I'll be seeing you in New York. If I have to go to that CD release party we should definitely meet there."

"We're there!"

"'Bye, Pam!"

And off she walked, back to a very pissed-off PR person. I gave a silent "thank you!" to the Universe. I can now take the "New Best Friend" category off my list.

The Antichrist *noun* Carl Sutker, a.k.a. Satan's janitor.

After dinner, around eight thirty, Rebecka and I went to the Shore Club to meet up with Eric and Carl. Rebecka was going to meet Jake at nine thirty, so she kept me company till then. We found ourselves sitting on mattresses around the pool waiting for Eric and Carl to show. Does everyone in Florida have beds around their pools?

"You know," Rebecka said, popping gum in her mouth, "Juicy Fruit isn't what it used to be. I just don't feel it the way I used to."

"I was thinking the exact same thing the other day. I got that jumbo pack at the airport and on the flight I was like, This used to be my favorite? What happened to it?"

"I don't know, I used to—"

Then I heard Carl's voice. "Ooh, quiet, shush shush . . . the ladies are trying to have an *intellectual conversation*. . . . Let's not interrupt them when they're trying to piece thoughts together . . . shhhhhhh . . ." He was holding his finger up to his lips.

"Good God, *what* is that awful stench?" asked Rebecka. "Jane, Satan is here. I can smell his breath. Holy halitosis— Oh. Hi, Carl."

"Shut up. I don't have halitosis," he said as he sat down, pouting.

"Do so. Here. Have some Juicy Fruit."

Ignoring Carl I said, "Hey, Eric, how are you, darlin'?"

"Good, Jane," he said, sitting down. "Hey, Rebecka."

"Hey, Eric! OK, I hate to cut out of here, but I have a date."

"Wow, who's the lucky guy?" asked Eric.

"Jake the exotic plant guy at the Delano."

"Oh, that sounds nice. Heh-heh."

"Wow, she's fucking the gardener. That's one I've never heard before," drawled Carl.

"Yeah, wait till you hear how they met," I said to Eric, deciding that Carl just wasn't there.

"Yes, it's quite a story," Rebecka concurred, turning red. "Okay, see you later!" She waved excitedly and ran off.

I filled the guys in on the whole jail/arrest/prostitution thing.

Carl was of course disappointed in our release. "And they let you out already? See, this is what I'm talking about: 'Law enforcement' today, I swear. 'The system.' This is why everything's falling apart," he said, gesturing at me with both hands.

"Yes, I am a blight on humanity," I replied, already bored.

"Well put," he said. "And that's the last compliment you'll ever hear from me, hooker."

"Jane," said Eric, breaking it up, "I'm glad you had a good time in prison, but here's my card in case you ever find yourself in a jam like that again and you can't get Rebecka's lawyers."

"Thanks, Eric, I really appreciate it," I said, pocketing it.

"No problem, glad to help."

By about eleven I was pretty inebriated and had told Carl to fuck off about five or seven times.

"So, Jane, you never told me what you did for a living, just that you hate your job," said Eric.

"That's because we're not talking about worky-poo." I signaled a waitress for another drink. "Ohhh, but here's a little fancy-pants who hasn't gotten the Leetsmann & Stone once-over, so I can make an exception this once, really fast," I said, poking his knee.

Eric laughed. "Uh-oh, oh, no. I don't know what you just said."

"Uck. Please. Will someone *please* get drunk girl a piece of bread or something? Or maybe just a muzzle?" whined Carl.

"Carl," Eric said and Carl shut up. I realized that Carl is like a loud, yapping Chihuahua that only listens to its owner. "Jane, you were saying?"

"Thank you, Eric," I said while I eyebrowed Carl. "As I was saying, I'm a relationship manager for a company called *Leetsmann & Stone*. Sounds fancy, doesn't it? But it's not! I like to do my personal sales pitch for friends while I'm drunk—you know, put together a working game plan for them as if they were new clients."

"I know L&S," Eric said quickly. "I didn't know you worked there! That's interesting. I wasn't sure they were still around, but they were big in the nineties for a while."

"Yeah, we hit a 'rough patch,' if you will. But we just reorganized the company and are hiring a new little pit bull of an analyst, a woman, thank God, so we should be good to go."

"A woman? Just one analyst is going to make you good to go? Who's the analyst?"

"This is top secret, deal? Actually, we don't know if she's on board yet, it's just a strong possibility."

"Sure, no problem, I won't tell a soul. And neither will Carl."

"Okay." I started squinting and putting my fingers on my temples, trying to remember. "Let's see, her name reminds me of that chocolate, Toblerone chocolate . . . Duberone, Evelyn Duberone, that's it. She's superb, apparently; everyone knows her. She's going to come on over and stir things up a little. Get us all back on track. Make us respectable again. And one person can do it because major talent can bring in more major talent, so that's important."

Eric just looked at me blankly. "I know Evelyn very well," he finally said as he looked over at Carl, who actually kept his mouth shut for a change and just listened.

"Eric, you know everyone! It's wild. . . ." I should stop drinking.

"Um, not to offend, but how did L&S get her?"

"We fired some people and offered her gobs of cash."

"Heh-heh, I bet."

"Yeah . . . working in corporate America has been quite the eye-opener. Anyway, I like that Evelyn is coming on board because she's an analyst for leisure investments: hotels, cruise lines, gaming, things of that nature. I'm going to pick her brain; she is going to be my guru. A leisure analyst is an analyst I can really get behind. Plus she's a woman, and Lord knows, L&S needs as much estrogen as it can get."

"Interesting . . . she didn't always do hotels and cruise lines," Eric said and Carl wrote something down in his pad.

"Really? I guess she learned over time that that's the way to go. Another enlightened spirit such as myself. I'm curious to see what her work ethic is all about. Anyway, enough about me. What's your job?"

Eric looked at me like he was caught up in what I was saying. Finally he said, "I own a sports gear and clothing company. We design and manufacture the clothes and we have retail stores that carry our line with some other sports lines."

"Like Foot Locker?"

"Sort of, yeah, but with more fashion. My line is more like sporty street fashion, and then we carry more serious sports lines. And we don't carry shoes."

"Nice, Eric. What's your company called?"

"EJ Sports."

I spit out the sip of drink I'd been about to swallow. "EJ Sports? You're E. J.?" I ripped the card he gave me out of my pocket to look at it. "Eric Johnson! Oh, my God, Eric, Rebecka's ex-boyfriend *loves* that stuff! He's into music and he's a DJ and he said a lot of hip-hop DJs are wearing that gear!"

"Yeah, it's true, it wasn't a direction I had planned to go in, but there you have it." He chuckled.

"Wow, Eric, I'm impressed! Holy shit, Dwayne would *die* if he heard about this. Rebecka is going to freak!"

"Thank you."

"Very exciting! Wow."

"Do you have your business card with you?"

"Not a chance."

"Oh, right."

"Eric," Carl interrupted, "*how* can you take this person seriously? I have to know. . . ."

"Oh, Carl," I said, my head tilted to the side with a look of mock concern. "One day you'll find some baller in assless chaps to beat you into submission if you pay him enough, I'm sure of it. I know you're frustrated. Anyway, as we all know, I'm not on the clock—I'm on *vacation*; I don't *have* to carry my business card. *You're* the one who's working."

Eric ignored both of us. "Jane, you seem to like your job enough. You seem to know what's going on over there. If you like to do your client pitch while drunk, I don't think you hate it as much as I thought you did, I'm happy to see."

"Well. You're right to a degree. I do think all employment is bad for me and that my current job is funny, but I guess it's as good as I can get it. I mean, I like my boss, Ray. He actually treats me with respect. He's really the only reason I can tolerate working there, and that's the truth. He allows me extensive leisure time. He just looks the other way, you know? He's really nice . . . he blushes a lot and likes to come over and talk to me just about whatever. I thought he was a geek at first but he's actually really cool. Even Rebecka likes him, and she's a tough sell, *believe me*. She actually wants me to date him! That's not going to happen, but that's how cool he is. And, when they had company layoffs a couple of weeks ago, he saved my job at the risk of his."

"He sounds like a great guy," Eric said with a small smile.

"Oh yeah, he is. Ray's great. We get along really well. Except for right now, we're kind of in a fight, which sucks, but usually it's smooth sailing."

"Why the fight?"

"He just saved my job, so it's just bad timing to take a long weekend in Florida. He thinks I'm making him look bad."

"So then why did you take the vacation?"

"Because Rebecka is buying this trip for us and she already planned it and I've made my leisure my priority in life. I very strongly believe that enjoying life should get the top billing. I work to live not live to work, so if, to preserve my job, I did not take the gift vacation I would be going against the grain of my very being. Also, I believe the Universe wanted me to take a vacation here to fulfill my destiny. I believe in the Universe and fate and stuff."

"Uck," said Carl with disgust. "I can't believe you have any job. That Ray has to be either in love with you or mentally retarded to employ you. For his sake I hope it's the latter."

"Yeah, you pissed him off alright," said Eric. "I hear what you're saying about making sure your life outside of work is worthwhile, but I think you're a little stubborn about that leisure. I scratch your back, you scratch mine, that's how it works: he saves your good job, you make him look good as a boss. You did say you liked the job."

"I know that now. Rebecka and I already discussed the plan to make it up to him that includes landing a client here, which I keep forgetting to do. I told him he could fire me at any time, no hard feelings, though."

"I hope your plan works," said Eric. "I'm sure you had good reason to be stubborn in the past, believe me. But it seems this guy really goes the extra mile for you. You probably should give him the respect that that deserves. But, as for what you've been saying about fate and the Universe, I'm starting to believe in that myself. So maybe you have a point there."

"Really? So rare to find someone who understands this. But, time will tell. One of my wishes to the Universe has already come true."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Well, like Pam Anderson, which I didn't tell you about before

because of tight-ass over here,” I said, nodding to Carl. So I filled them in on Pamela Anderson. They sat there with their jaws dropped. I finished with: “Yeah, so that’s what I’m saying. I have to be here. Maybe it was at the cost of my job, but it’s on right now with the Universe. I can’t wait to get everything else.”

“Holy shit,” Eric said.

“I know,” I said, stirring my drink.

“Not holy shit—*bullshit*,” Carl said.

I popped open my phone to show them our pictures with Pam. “Notice the time and date, deviant.”

“Holy shit,” Carl said.

“Yup.” I closed my phone and finished off my drink. “Anyway boys, I gotta go. I’m a little beaten up right now.” So we got up and stumbled to our chic rooms in our chic hotel.

Severe *adjective* Svetlana Grunewald.

“**W**hat time did you get back this morning?” I asked Rebecka as we lay on the beach the next morning. The water was a little choppy and it was a little breezy, but it was all good. We got an umbrella because we both had gotten enough sun. I was glad to be in the shade with my hangover.

“Seven thirty.”

“Why did you come back at all?”

“He has to take care of an orchid shipment for the rooms that’s coming in today.”

“So cute.”

“I know. . . . We got one of the cabanas by the pool last night. We had our own butler and had champagne and caviar. It was pretty sexy. It’s cool that Jake actually likes this stuff; it was his idea.”

“Cowboy likes froufrou?”

“Yeah, and he was soooo romantic. Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I really think I’m into Jake, Jane, like, for real. I don’t think I ever felt like this before, even with Dwayne in the beginning.”

“I think you are too. Aw, Rebecka! That’s so awesome—you guys are falling in love!”

“I don’t want to jump the gun, but I really do like him a lot.”

“And you should. He’s awesome.”

“He is! He’s so cute and so much fun, I don’t care that he’s not

my type. I actually like it that he's not, it's a real break. It's not like my type has been working for me. . . ."

"I hear you."

"And he's actually really smart, but he doesn't dwell on things and pick them apart the way we do. He's happy. He's also more of a physical and spiritual person; he's not living in his head the way we are, you know?"

"You mean he's normal."

"Yes. Very grounded, very solid, self-confident, not East Coast neurotic. He's just so *good*."

"Wow, I wonder what that's like. *And* he's so hot."

"I know, but it's not even his looks anymore. It's like, his soul . . . I know, so corny!"

"No way!"

"I mean it. I don't want to put any pressure on this; I just want to enjoy it. No matter what happens with him, if I never hear from him again, I know now what I want from a relationship."

"That's amazing."

"I know. Who would have thought?"

As we went back to our sun worship, I wondered to myself, *If Rebecca can get back on the horse so soon, why can't I? Why can't I be as brave or as lucky?* I would have to start taking more risks and just deal with things possibly not working or getting messy emotionally. There was no way around it.

That evening Rebecca and I went to have cocktail hour in the hotel lobby before we had dinner. We sat down in chairs that were right across from the pink bar where Julio the bartender usually worked.

We were just chatting and laughing away, when someone caught Rebecca's eye.

"Jane. There is a very severe, weird-looking woman staring at us right now."

"Where?"

"At the bar where Julio works—three o'clock."

I looked over to find this older woman sitting at the bar, glaring at us. She was as skinny as a rail, with dyed black hair pulled back severely into a bun and her high cheekbones popping out; and she was wearing a dramatic red kimono type of top, black capri pants, very high heels, and these huge ornate earrings. She was smoking a brown cigarette held in a mother-of-pearl cigarette holder and drinking a green cocktail like a Midori sour. Her stare was unwavering even though we were watching her stare at us. She went into her little black clutch bag and pulled out these glasses that she had on a chain and put them on and continued staring at us, but not in the face, I think she was looking at our outfits.

I turned back to Rebecka. "Oy. Would you look at that? We're tapping into the over-forty sect. Okay, one of us should tell her she's not our type . . . heh-heh . . . I think it should be you. Be like, 'I know we look good, but we are *not* hooking up with you anytime soon. . . .'"

Rebecka didn't answer and was looking up to the right of me. *Great.* So I turned around to greet the freak. I looked up and she was staring down at me, completely fixated. She reeked of Chanel No. 5. Will somebody lay that perfume to rest already?

"Hi. How are you?" I asked.

"Hello—" She seemed to have snapped out of her fog and suddenly became somewhat self-conscious. "Excuse me. Might I ask you where you got your bags?" she asked with a European accent. She sounded like she was from Transylvania; she had one of those old horror-flick accents that just drag the words out and roll them around.

"Jane made them," Rebecka offered, gesturing to me.

"What?" she snapped around. "*You* made these?"

"Yes, I did." Hello? "And you are . . . ?"

"I apologize." And she formally extended her hand to me and forced a smile. "My name is Svetlana Grunewald."

"Svetlana, I'm Jane Cooper and this is Rebecka Garber. Nice to meet you." Svetlana shook Rebecka's hand. Then she turned to me and started grilling me.

"Do you make these bags for a living, Ms. Cooper?" she asked.

"No, actually these are the first bags I've ever made. I usually only make the embroideries themselves."

"Are you an artist?"

"Yes."

"Are you exhibiting anywhere?"

"No."

"Do you make these for a living?"

"No. I have OCD, so I make these because I have to."

"I don't know what OCD is," she said dismissively. God, she *was* foreign. "Do you have more?" she continued. Every time she asked a question she would move her head to look at me out of the side of her face to wait for the answer, and then face me again to ask another one.

"Yup."

"How many of these pieces would you say you have?"

"About three hundred and fifty, right, Rebecka?"

Rebecka nodded. Svetlana looked surprised.

"What do you do for a living?" she continued.

"I'm a relationship manager at a financial company."

She just stared at me quietly for a couple of seconds, with her long fingernails tapping her chin. You could see the wheels turning in her head. Rebecka and I looked at each other.

"Have you ever *tried* to show these?" she asked.

"No."

"Would you be willing to exhibit these in an art gallery? Maybe not on bags, but in some creative format, maybe two-dimensional?"

"Perhaps."

She stared at me again, thinking.

"Where do you live?" she continued.

"Manhattan."

"Good. How long will you be in South Beach for?"

"Probably through Monday."

Svetlana nodded. "Let me 'cut to the chase,' as you say." She picked up both of our bags. "I'm not interested in the bags as much as I am these actual pieces. I am a curator at the Sienda Gallery in SoHo, in New York City. I haven't seen work like this—real, creative art—since the early nineteen eighties. These are extraordinary, extremely unique. The texture and the color . . . honestly I believe they're museum quality."

Rebecka hit my arm. "I told her they were gorgeous and that people need to see them!"

"Ms. Garber is right, Ms. Cooper," continued Svetlana, getting our names right. I always admire that in people. "People should see these." She tapped her nails on my bag. "Is all of your work as consistently powerful as these?"

"It is." I'm not bragging, but my work is consistent. I can't help it.

"If you'd be interested, it would be my honor to show this work at the gallery *and* personally represent you as an artist in the future. I don't want to speak out of place, but I think we can do some interesting things together with these and perhaps sell a good portion of them, and not just in New York, but France, Holland, Germany, everywhere."

"Depending on the terms and if I have complete creative control, I'll consider it." I wonder where my negotiating skills came from. Sweet.

"Of course. Please collect twenty-five pieces you'd like to show, preferably in some kind of series, whether it be their texture, color theme, a personal concept, you know." She handed me her business card. "Then call me to meet and review the work. We'll meet for lunch wherever you'd like to go."

"Okay, great, thank you," I said and looked at her card.

"I will be eagerly awaiting your call, Ms. Cooper." She gave me a pointed look. "Believe me, it is not often that I make this offer to someone."

"Thank you, Svetlana, I appreciate your interest. I'll be in touch," I said lightly.

She just stared at the bags. "Yes, thank you, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Garber, thank you for letting me intrude." And with that she just walked away, leaving a trail of perfume behind her. She instructed our waiter to buy us another round of drinks, grabbed her clutch in a distracted way, took out her cell phone, and left.

I turned to Rebecka, who just looked at me agape. "And *that*, my friend, is how the art scene comes to you."

"*Holy shit!*" Rebecka exclaimed with her mouth still open.

"Exactly. I have prevailed." Thanks, Universe!

When she finally got over the initial shock and closed her mouth she said, "Jane Cooper, you told me so and I stand corrected." She had one hand on her heart and one in the air like she was swearing in court. "I *never* would have believed that if I didn't see it myself. Hans used to show at that gallery—it's the big leagues!"

"I think you admitting that you stand corrected is better than the show," I said with a wink and a huge grin.

"Fine, but *I* said these bags would be of value one day. . . ."

"That you did."

"I'm going to take very good care of these little puppies," she said, petting her bag.

"No need. I have more, don't worry."

After dinner we met up with Jake. The attraction between Rebecka and Jake was obscene. They were making out on line for the taxis, in the lobby, at the bar, on one of the decorative benches, at the hotel restaurant, waiting for a bathroom, on a mattress at the pool, at the beach bar, everywhere. When it was time to meet Carl and Eric, I told them not to join me because they clearly needed time alone. Rebecka giggled. Jake said regretfully, "Well, alright. I

know we're a little much, Jane, I'm sorry. I just can't get enough of my girl, I just can't." And then he put his arm around Rebecka's neck and pulled her over and they started kissing again.

I met up with Eric and Carl. I loved that I had friends here now to call up. Since it was our last night I felt I should hang out with my buddies.

Everything was pretty much business as usual: great conversation with Eric, malicious conversation with Carl, good drinks, snacks, happy vibe, etc. Although Eric seemed like he was looking at me more intensely than usual. I don't know what was on his mind, but I decided to dodge the bullet in case it was a booty thing, and left to go to bed early at eleven thirty. I knew it was my last night and that I should probably just go for it, but I knew Eric and I could be friends for a while if we kept it G-rated.

Walking back to the elevators, I passed the hotel's bar where Julio worked and he was on duty. *Okay, I thought, I'm hooking up with Julio. It's my last night. Let's end the trip with a bang!*

I walked into the bar and there he was in his prime: jelled, coiffed, buff, and flirting with three women. I wasn't disturbed to see this because as a former bartender, I knew it was his job to be friendly.

So I walked up to him. "Hey, Julio!"

"Hello, how are you this evening?" He obviously didn't remember my name and was just being polite. Was he brain-dead? Hadn't I just met him a couple of nights ago? He looked like he kind of recognized me, but couldn't place me.

"I'm good, how are you doing?" Big smile, hoping a big drunk smile will spark his memory.

"I'm good, can't complain," he said, grabbing a dishrag and wiping his hands and the bar.

"Sure you can, but no pressure," I joked. Ugh. I was thrown off by his forgetting me.

He laughed politely and waited for me to ask him something. I

just stared at him like an idiot. My brain went on the fritz. "So, can I get you something?" he asked politely, strictly professional.

Feeling awkward and surprised, I mumbled, "Um, no, not just yet, I'm, um, looking for someone." And I looked around. Then I said, in an attempt to regain some ground with him, "Remember Eric Johnson, who you introduced me and my friend to?"

Smacking his hand on his forehead, he said, "Oh yeah, of course. Sorry, it's just been busy here lately. I knew you looked familiar." And we both stood there nodding and looking at each other.

Finally I said, sheepishly, "I guess you didn't recognize me with my hair up or something." What am I saying? "Um, I'll jump back when I find him, or please tell him Jane was looking for him if he comes in." I smiled and gave him a small wave and started to walk away, feeling like a douche. *I'll jump back?* Oy. At least I was glad I got out of there without ordering a drink; no reason to drink and extend the humiliation.

"Jane, right . . . hopefully I'll see you later, pretty lady," he called after me and gave me that shit-eating grin.

I turned around after a few steps and he was already leaning down on the bar, chewing on a stirrer, talking to the three women again. Ew.

Okay. I am not happy. I'm a loser! I always do this to myself. When something bad happens, I decide my entire life sucks and I start beating myself up about it. Rejection! Let's sum this up, shall we? I'm hard up, alone, no chance of getting laid, and forgotten by a hot guy from a mere few nights ago. Fucking great. What's wrong with me? I'm cute. I'm nice. . . . Okay, deep breath, shake it off. I'm lost. I'm going to be alone forever. I'm too crazy to be in love. I know it's just a matter of time with the Universe, but sometimes the loveless vibe can get a girl down and give her the uglies, even on a killer vacation. I guess I'm not meant to hook up on this trip. Which is fine, you know . . .

I just feel totally unattractive and dejected, but whatever. I'm positive there's going to be a good reason for it.

Why does one bad situation trigger an avalanche of negativity? *Faith, people. Faith is believing in something even though there is no physical evidence supporting your belief. Just because a cheesy bartender played me the other night, and I am too fucking naive to recognize it, is no reason whatsoever to get down.*

Back in my room I just cuddled up to the minibar. I started with a small bottle of Jack Daniel's. *Where's my love, Universe, huh? What's wrong with me? What am I not doing right? Serial killers get married on death row and I can't even give it away to a fucking womanizer? Lonely! Waahh!*

I spent the next couple of hours drinking, wallowing, and playing sad love songs on my iPod. And whining. Why? Why? Finally I drank (and bored) myself to sleep.

The uglies *noun* Randomly and illogically having the distinct feeling that you look awful, even if you look like a movie star.

When I finally got out of bed, I saw that I had a message to meet Rebecka at the pool. Then I remembered this was our last day and I felt really bummed about it.

“Julio the fucking bartender,” Rebecka said after I’d caught her up on the previous night. “Not even better than a vibrator . . . unbelievable.”

“I know. In the sober light of day, I’m relieved nothing happened.”

“Ew, you and me both, are you kidding? Jane, seriously, can you imagine giving *him* the rough and tumble? Gross, his dick is probably the size of my thumbnail and riddled with crabs or syph or something—”

“Ew.”

“—And he probably listens to the Back Street Boys or 98 Degrees while he hooks up. What a disgrace. Fucking hair wax everywhere and, like, Drakkar Noir cologne. Jesus. What are you supposed to do with that?”

“Yeah, I know, it was just weird. I was pretty bummed last night. I got the uglies, I was depressed. But you’re right, the cheese factor was through the roof. I’m over it.”

“Yeah, close call, Jane, close call . . . you should thank the Universe for dodging that bullet. Neither of us could have lived with the idea of you following through on that one.” And then she did

the thumbprint test on my arm. "More importantly, look how tan you are."

"I know! I don't want to leave! How am I supposed to start my day now without this pool or beach? I'm going to miss everything! Except Julio, of course."

"I wondered the same thing myself and I came up with a solution."

"What?"

"We stay longer."

"Hee-hee, I wish."

"I'm not kidding. I know this is crazy, but I want to see how things go with Jake. I can't leave him just yet. And I'm enjoying Miami too much."

"Holy shit, you're staying? You're not getting on the plane?"

"I am not getting on the plane," she said with a smile. "And I think you should stay too. Stay for the rest of the week, at least."

"I can't do that! Hello? I think that's so rude for you to even ask. No way."

"Look, ask to stay till Thursday. If he balks or hesitates for even a second, go back to New York. Just try it out."

"There is no way I am doing this again to Ray."

"He'll kill you if you do it against his wishes, but if you ask and he says no and you go back because he wants you to, he won't kill you. And he might say yes."

"I told you to lay off the cocoa butter."

"Yeah, but I'm right. Go call."

"Alright, I'll call Piss & Vinegar and see what her mood is. She'll let me know right away if I'm on the shit list." I got up from my chair and headed into the hotel so that she wouldn't hear that I was at a pool.

"Sheila? Hi, it's Jane—"

"Girl, where in the *hell* have you been?"

"I told you, I'm in South Beach—"

"You better get back here, Jane, we got trouble again. Actually, maybe you don't need to come back here at all. You take all the time you need—"

"What is it this time?"

"Mr. Ray's been fired."

"What?!"

"You heard me. Your boss been fired. Leetsmann just told him to go, just like dat. Just this mornin'. He's already gone."

"Oh. My. God!"

"Mm-hmm. And if you wanna do what's right for you, I suggest you get back here and stop traipsing around on vacation. Who knows who he's gonna fire next."

"Shit." I'm sure I can venture a guess but I won't. "Okay, thanks, Sheila. I'll see you soon."

I ran back to the pool and started throwing my stuff into my pool bag. "Rebecka, Ray's been fired."

"What??"

"That's what I said! Sheila just said that the owner, Leetsmann, that uber-fucking-douchebag, just fired him this morning, first thing."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm going to go back to New York today on our scheduled flight and hopefully before that I'll figure something out. I need a plan."

"You save your man's job, Janie. Return the favor," she said with a smile while squinting at me with her hand shielding the sun.

"That's the gist of the plan, Rebecka," I said, throwing on my T-shirt. "Okay, I'm going to pack and find Eric immediately to see if he has any ideas. He's in the know." He did give me his business card in case I fell on hard times.

"Since I'm staying, let me know whatever money you need to help facilitate this operation. We'll just fly you back here Friday night."

"Okay, great. Gotta go."

"Give Ray a big kiss for me," she said in a singsongy voice.

"So immature, Reb. Anyway, thank you for the trip, it was awesome!" I gave her a kiss on the cheek and ran.

"Anytime, darlin'."

I headed back to my room while trying to get Eric on his cell. It just went right to voice mail—his phone was shut off . . . shit! "Hi, Eric, it's Jane. Please give me a call as soon as you can. It's an emergency."

Then I called Ray on his cell and it went straight to voice mail too. "Hi, Ray, it's Jane. I just heard the news. Listen, I'm coming back today and we're going to figure this out, fuck Leetsmann. . . . Okay, um, hopefully you're in a bar right now. I'll talk to you when I'm back in New York."

My brain was in sensory overload. I had to calm down. I knew Ray was *fucking livid* with me. . . . I knew I was a contributing factor to his unemployment. Leetsmann, in all his odious glory, had probably got on him about his "management skills" because I took a vacation. I also knew that the longer Ray was fired, the longer he would be solidifying those pesky "I hate Jane" feelings. That wasn't a scenario I was prepared to live with.

I took a deep breath. I hit the second phase of the situation: I refused to accept the unacceptable. I decided to come up with a plan that not only saved Ray, but got him an even *better* situation than the one he had. I went to the bathroom to pack up my toiletries. *Now's not the time to underestimate yourself, Jane. Now is the time to take control and run the show.* I considered all the people I knew from all of my various places of employment. There were some possibilities in the lot, but because time was of the essence, and I had to come up with something quick, and I had to get back to New York, I felt that the only good candidate to do that was Eric, because Eric is a savvy businessman himself and he was here and he knew of Ray. I didn't have time to reacquaint myself with everyone I knew

to get them involved. There were two options for Eric but only one real choice: he could give me advice as a businessman or he could invest in L&S. I stood in the bathroom looking at myself in the mirror and chewing my lip, contemplating this. That was really it: Eric had to be a new investor. Eric had to invest, and invest big enough to save a job. What would that number be? What was the minimum amount a weasel like Julian Leetsmann would accept to keep Ray? Shit. It would have to be at least a million dollars to save Ray and maybe slightly improve his position. Such a sum is peanuts to the company, but enough probably to secure Ray's salary and *maybe* get him a little more money or a better title.

But I had to be realistic. It was very unlikely that Eric would go along with this. A businessman does not make decisions based on "Jane's really nice." And Leetsmann & Stone was not very saleable at the time, with that whole "downsizing" thing it had going on. To quote Jerry Maguire, the place was "cloaked in failure."

Okay, so why would Eric invest? I had to sweeten the deal. First off, I would give him the cheapest commission rates on his trades that ever existed. I would give him first access to the new famous analyst coming in, Evelyn Duberone. Then (and this shows how much regard I held for Ray Bowen) I would promise to be available to him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, no matter how much it killed me. I had to agree to that for one year. Meaning, I was going to commit to this job for an entire year for Eric as long as Julian Leetsmann did as he was told. I can't sacrifice much more than that, people, I cannot. Of course, I didn't know if Eric even had that kind of cash just ready to invest. A lot of these businessmen/player types have their money "tied up" somewhere, whatever that means. I walked to the bathroom counter and wiped all my products directly into my suitcase.

Suddenly, anxiety brought me back to reality and phase one. This time phase one took it up a notch with a light dusting of stomach cramps and a touch of explosive diarrhea. I went on a rant

to myself. *This is why I don't get corporate jobs, perfect example. They are just too fucking strict and uptight. What kind of person fires a cute, muffin-faced, smoochie-head like Ray Bowen? You have to be a sick twisted fuck to pull that kind of behavior. Does he also like hitting puppies and kittens? Normal people don't fire stellar individuals like Ray Bowen; they just don't. How hard does a person have to slave away to have job security? Does this room have Mylanta or something? No, it has a minibar.*

Is Ray going to talk to me again? He'll forgive me, we have a bond, a connection. . . . No, he won't; he felt betrayed. I can't blame him. Valetta—I'll find his sister Valetta! She knew I wasn't going to be a good employee—this is her fault too. Ok, maybe she'll be my last resort.

After forty-five minutes I was packed and ready. I had calmed down enough to realize that I still hadn't heard from Eric, which meant I would now have to go find him. I didn't have the luxury to be polite and wait for his call. I left him another message that I was out looking for him, and then left my stuff in the room and ran out the door. I checked everywhere that was Delano: the hotel's lobby, the front, the front desk, the restaurants, the bars. Then I went to the pool and checked everyone there and told Rebecca how the status hadn't changed. Next I ran out onto the beach shouting his name and described him and Carl to the attendants there. No luck. I stopped, completely out of breath. *What would a really mellow guy like Eric and a bitchy, prissy queen like Carl be doing at a time like this in a fancy hotel . . .*, I wondered while staring at the hotel from the beach. *Think Jane, think!* I looked at the roof of the hotel and then it came to me: That pussy Carl had the two of them up in the spa. I just knew it.

I walked into Aqua, the spa, and the first thing I heard was Carl's fucking whine. "No, push more on the lower back, not the upper back, God!" He was embarrassingly predictable. I ran in the direction of his voice, and found Carl in the middle of a hissy fit and a Swedish massage before the receptionists could stop me.

“Carl!”

“Hey Jane, what’s up?” It was Eric. He was sitting across the hall on a lounge chair flipping through a magazine.

“Eric!” I sat on a chair next to his. “You’re the man I was looking for. Okay, no time for idle chitchat, I have to catch my flight home. Did you get my message?”

“No, we can’t have our phones on in here.”

“What are you doing here anyway? You don’t seem like the spa type.”

“I actually do like a massage from time to time, heh-heh, but I’m really here for Carl. Sort of a reward for him for all his hard work. I’m going to get a massage if something opens up, though. Anyway, what’s up? You seem anxious.”

I took a deep breath. I probably should have had a stiff drink before having this chat. I grabbed Eric’s hand. “Okay, Eric, I’m glad Carl is preoccupied right now because here’s the deal. It’s favor time. Remember how I told you about my awesome boss, Ray?”

“Yeah, he looked out for you—”

“Yeah, exactly. Well, *he’s been fired*. Fired! Fucking Leetsmann fired him this morning. Now, I think you can imagine that I might be a small contributing factor to that because of this trip—”

“—probably looks like he can’t handle his team, questioned his judgment—”

“—Yes, exactly, thank you for so clearly outlining that. So I need to clean up my mess and save Ray’s job, and I need your help.”

“What can I do?”

I spent the next half hour explaining to him what I had in mind, every aspect of it. Everything I could do, the state of the company, why I thought he could still invest, the help he’d get from the big new analyst, Evelyn Duberone. He was watching me and listening very intently.

"So what do you think?" I asked nervously.

"I think it's interesting, Jane, but I need to discuss it with Carl."

"Okay." I couldn't get a read on his face. I had no idea what he was thinking. "I understand. But please, Eric, just try to think about it in a positive light, as something that could be good for you, rather than going strictly by Leetsmann & Stone's tarnished reputation. And definitely tell me if there is something else I can do for you to make this investment more to your liking. I just—" I couldn't finish; I felt helpless.

"It's okay, Jane, I understand, and we are going to think about it."

I started misting up. "I know. But we have to—I have to—I have to give Ray a chance, you know? Or get him a second one. I know this is not the way to do business for either of us, it's just that . . . he just doesn't deserve this, he is such a good person. I should never have come here. . . . But," I said, taking a deep breath and regrouping, "I know you'll be in good hands and we will make sure everything is to your liking. Just think about it. You won't get the attention and dedication I'm offering anywhere else. That much I can promise you."

"I will definitely think about it."

"Okay, well, Eric, I have to go now, my car is here, I'm sure. Anyway, think about it, and I'll call you from New York. Unfortunately time is of the essence!" I kissed his cheek and grabbed my bags and started heading out. "I had a great time with you, by the way!" I yelled as I left.

"Wait, Jane! Carl and I were going to head back to Philadelphia tonight. Why don't I give you a lift to New York in my plane and we'll go over this? We're not in a rush."

"You have a plane?"

"Yeah, heh-heh. I have a plane. So why don't we just meet for cocktails and a light snack at around five, and then be on the plane by six. We'll have something figured out for Ray by then."

"Okay, great, thanks!"

"See you at five, Cooper. Heh-heh."

Since I now had more time and was already packed, I called Rebecka to update her. Neither of us could guess if Eric was going to agree or not. It was a tough call. But I was getting a lift home from him, so if I didn't get him as an investor, I would at least be getting some great advice.

I checked out of my room, and then used Rebecka's room to relax and freshen up . . . and to sneak another bottle out of the minibar. I had become very attached to minibars.

At five o'clock on the dot I met Eric and Carl on the outdoor patio for aforementioned drinks and snacks. I had a room pad and pencil with me to take notes if necessary. Carl had his Burberry folder open with notes in it and a calculator, and seemed somewhat relaxed and a little greasy from his massage.

Eric started. "Jane, I told Carl everything you told me. We have a couple of questions."

"Of course, shoot."

Eric looked like he was trying to think of his wording. "Question: realistically, with no Evelyn Duberone as an analyst, what kind of an account would I have if you were to set me up with one? Who would you connect me with at Leetsmann & Stone?"

"Since I don't know what you would be investing in yet, I don't know who would be assigned to you. That's the important thing. If we can hash out some initial areas you'd want to invest in, I could think of who we have and decide if it's worth your while or not. It's not like we don't have *any* talent, because we do. But we'd really have to go over your interests and then I'd have to discuss it with some of the brokers and analysts back at the office. I'm not really qualified to advise . . ."

"I appreciate your honesty. But just hypothetically, how would you approach my account? I think we can get ideas from that."

"Okay, let's think of the first steps I would take with you . . .," I said, tapping my pencil. I started writing notes in my pad, just a

list of areas I thought would be relevant to EJ Sports. I stopped to think and tapped my chin.

"Do I smell wood burning?" Carl asked, watching me concentrate.

"Fuck off, Carl," I said distractedly.

"The first thing to do with a new account is to invest where your interests lie, so I'm thinking fashion, clothing/fabric manufacturers; retail and industry. Investing in these different areas will also teach you how to expand your own company by seeing what the public companies are doing and offering now. Um, I would also put you in touch with leisure with or without Evelyn, cruise ships, maybe gaming would be a good investment for you, and I would throw in someone who handles the music industry too, for the DJ/hip-hop/rap slant of your company, which seems to be growing. Maybe also something in aviation because most people who own planes have a much better than average working knowledge of them. This is just the bare bones. I would have to talk to you more. But that's the start and then once you are comfortable with your brokers and analysts, we'll start new investments.

"As I mentioned earlier, I would connect you with only the most senior or the best analysts and traders, or partners in the private equity division. New ideas and information would go to you first. Then I would make myself available to you twenty-four/seven so you can have whatever you need, whenever you need it, which is the basis of my job: to be accessible and get you in touch with whoever you want and to know who you should be speaking to. And I know that very well.

"Listen, Eric, I just want you to know that if you do give L&S your business, I will take very good care of you. We know that I like my leisure, but I will never slack on work that I have to take care of, especially work for a friend."

I tilted my head to the side, trying to get a read on his expression. "That wraps up my sales pitch to you. Oh, and of course I'll

offer you tickets to a Broadway show or a Knicks game or something. And a high colonic for Carl, for good measure.”

Eric and Carl were quiet. Then Carl looked over at Eric, who nodded.

“Jane, you said what I wanted to hear. You will be setting up meetings for me with every market you just mentioned and we have a few more.”

“What?”

“I wanted to invest with you; I was just waiting till you were back at work. I knew you were ‘off the clock,’ so to speak. Heh-heh. I was going to call you this week. Then you came to me so I needed to discuss your offer with Carl. We don’t make snap decisions when it comes to investing. What I didn’t tell you is that we’ve been planning to expand our investments to coincide with expanding our clothing line and distribution. I have three, possibly four new stores opening up just in October alone, so it would be great to get our investments sorted and worked out now, because we’ll be very busy then. Between Evelyn coming on board and my meeting you here, I believe my money is supposed to go to Leetsmann & Stone, of all places. I’m going to be your leverage to get Ray back. Heh-heh, I *knew* you knew that job of yours, I could just tell. . . .”

“You’re going to invest with us?” It was shocking that it really happened. I thought I was going to cry.

“God, you’re slow!” Carl bitched. “I told him, I said, ‘Eric, don’t work with her, she’s a numbskull and her low-level IQ cannot handle any more obstacles,’ but he seems determined, and he’s the boss,” he said, throwing his hands up in helplessness.

“Thank you, Carl,” Eric said. “Jane, I heard what you said about the business and our friendship. I appreciate that. But I would never invest with people if I wasn’t confident in them myself, so no guarantee that I will definitely invest until I meet everyone. But I will take meetings and I will seriously investigate L&S a lot more, and I most likely will invest this month.”

"Great! But, what am I missing? I'm missing something, I know it."

"Heh-heh. Evelyn Duberone. I told you I knew her. Aside from her being great at what she does, she and I have, um . . . history. She's from Philly originally."

"Uh-huh . . .," I said, absorbing what he was telling me. "So now I'm positive she will be joining us, because this is all happening for a reason: I was meant to bring you to the woman you're supposed to be with! Oh. My. God, Eric! This is amazing!"

"It is . . . and maybe I was meant to bring you to the man that *you're* supposed to be with," he said, looking amused.

"It's not like that with Ray," I said. "So what's our initial investment? Big?"

"Yeah, I think so," Eric said in his usual modest, low-key way.

Carl jumped in. "Okay, my turn. I reviewed your company's performance, which really is pathetic, and came up with what I think you can arrange for us in addition to what you just mentioned. These are not specific companies—your analysts can tell us who they are—these are just our general interests plus what percentage should be high risk, medium, and low." He handed me a chart. "It's all spread out in a little colorful chart to make it stupid easy even for *you*."

I turned to Eric and gave him a warning look to curb Carl. He said to me, "I know, but look at what he gave you. He's that way because he thinks he's the only one who can do anything. Notice that he's done his job, my job, and your job. That's why I put up with him."

So I went over the list. It was huge. I'd never seen an investor of that size; I guess the more senior guys got those. I went through the numbers. I went down to the bottom line for the total and saw . . . approximately \$50 million. And I get 10 percent commission from L&S for bringing in business. That's \$5 million. *Holy fucking shit.* Okay, can't acknowledge that.

"Eric, wow! This will *definitely* be a bargaining chip for Ray. I'm so excited!"

"If this doesn't help Ray, there is no saving that company," Eric said, chuckling.

"I am so happy! This is going to get his job back *and* get him a raise and a promotion! Thank you so much—you are a lifesaver!" I hugged him.

"Great, Jane," said Eric. "I'm excited too. You guys want to hit the road? Or the air, I should say? Heh-heh." He signaled for the check. "Anyway, I think we'll have a good working relationship. As much as I like you, I would never part with my money if I really thought you wouldn't take care of me."

"Perfect. Wow. I'm landing an account right now. . . ."

"Yeah, pretty much," Eric said, chuckling.

"So *this* is what it feels like. . . ." I looked up in wonder. *Universe, you sneaky girl . . . I love you! This is great! It's like an adrenaline rush! This is how people get into their jobs. Wow . . .*

"Eric, a word of advice?" asked Carl, ready to slam me again.

"No!" Eric and I yelled.

"Jane, how would you like to proceed?" Eric asked, while putting on his jacket.

"Ideally, I would like to make an appointment to meet with Julian Leetsmann tomorrow, for an in-person discussion of the account and the 'special provisions,' which are Ray's job plus raise and a promotion for him. The longer Ray's fired, the harder it will be."

"Sounds good to me. I would like to meet Leetsmann in person too, to see what I'm dealing with. As a safety let's also insist that your commission from my investment is paid to you within twenty days no matter what, just for your protection, in case he tries to fire you. Carl, please make us reservations at the Soho Grand Hotel or the Thompson Hotel."

"Good choices," I said.

With that, Carl got up to use his phone.

I got up and called Piss & Vinegar and got a half-hour appointment with Leetsmann for the next day, one thirty p.m.

"EJ Sports?" P&V asked. "You got EJ Sports with you? I love them, my nephew loves them, what you got going on?"

"You'll find out tomorrow. Thanks for the appointment. Have you heard from Ray?"

"No, but he ain't been back yet to get his personal stuff."

"Okay."

We flew back to New York. I was ecstatic. When the Universe delivers, she delivers.

Dynasting *noun* When your future depends on acting like anyone in the cast of *Dynasty*.

Back in my apartment, I hardly slept that night because of the following:

1) Ray was on my mind nonstop. I was really anxious to get to work and fix this mess. Now that I had a plan in place, I couldn't wait to take down Leetsmann.

2) I realized that I was participating in a *Dynasty*-style corporate takeover of my very own. Not a takeover per se, but an exciting corporate "situation" or "manipulation," if you will. Since these opportunities don't come along often, I knew I'd have to really work my wardrobe and attitude for premium results and experience. It was almost too exciting to take.

3) Snowball, the cutest kitty that ever lived, missed me and was purring and climbing all over me all night. He was literally lying on my face when I woke up in the morning. Thank God I could hear the alarm. It added an extra challenge, getting the Snowball creases out of my face, but luckily *Dynasty* is not a natural look, so loading on the foundation with a spatula was a good thing.

I hit the shower, making it steamy hot, and went to work doing every possible thing you could do in the shower as far as shaving, scrubbing, and conditioning treatments go. When I got out I put

on some expensive perfume and lingerie, and pondered my wardrobe. I realized it was the first time I actually could have used my mother's advice—Dana would have been the perfect stylist for this kind of scenario.

It was challenging to be Alexis as a blond, but Crystal was simply out of the question. I went for a totally hot black suit consisting of a short tailored jacket and a pencil skirt that went below my knees, and high peep-toe heels. Under the jacket I just wore a bustier and a scarf around my neck to make sure everything was sexy-sexy with my cleavage front and center.

Then I teased the shit out of my hair and twisted it into a French twist. I still had the fake tan, which just said "fun," but the contrast of hard, red, glossy lips, dramatic makeup, and the red manicure I got in South Beach balanced it out.

Finally I grabbed my briefcase and went to the mirror to see the results. I think I got the look down. Although to be honest, the ultimate hotness accessory that day was the power that came from having enough money behind me to have Julian fucking Leetsmann by the balls. And it made me really horny too—this explained the tennis pros of the *Dynasty* era. I savored this one-time-only moment and then left to have lunch with Eric and Carl at the Soho Grand Hotel.

We mapped out the game plan. It was actually very simple. Everything is simple when you're uncompromising.

"Jane," Eric said as we started to wind up the discussion, "you know that if it doesn't work, your job there is over, right? I mean, we can still sign up tomorrow, but you might be out the door this afternoon."

"Yup, don't care. I will miss the commission if I'm fired, but oh well!" I couldn't really comprehend it anyway.

"Believe me, if we go back another day and they take our investment, you will still get that commission."

"If I get the commission, I won't need the job. . . ." I realized for

the first time. "I could quit. . . ." I started having a sneaky realization. I didn't want to quit!

"That's true. You're safe as long as we invest."

Unbelievable. Being in this situation was amazing, and realizing that I actually liked my ridiculous jacked-up job was amazing. "Huh. Okay, anything else we need to go over?"

"Yes," Eric said leaning forward. "Tell me: what do you know about Evelyn so far? Do you know if she's married?"

"No, nothing. All I know is that she's one tough cookie."

"Okay. Well, like I said, I would need to have a meeting with her no matter what. When you were talking about Evelyn and fate, I think you were on to something. This has to be happening for a reason. It's time that I deal with the reason."

"Is it because you love her? Is it because she's 'the one'?"

"Heh-heh. Yeah, I think she is."

"That's what I like to hear . . . *amore!* And of course, even if she does not accept our job offer, I'll make sure I get you her contact information." Then I raised my glass. "Here's to saving Ray, a great guy who deserves a second chance, and to Eric and Evelyn, who also deserve a second chance." I took an extra-big gulp for the liquid courage.

"Okay, so you guys ready to take Leetsmann & Stone by storm?" I asked. "Let's do this!"

Redemption *noun* [from dictionary.com] 1. The act of redeeming or the condition of having been redeemed. 2. Recovery of something pawned or mortgaged. 3. The payment of an obligation, as a government's payment of the value of its bonds. 4. Deliverance upon payment of ransom; rescue.

At one twenty-five on the dot we pushed open the glass doors of Leetsmann & Stone's reception for our one thirty appointment. Piss & Vinegar watched us walk in and stared at us, dumbfounded.

"Hello, Miss Jane . . . ," she said tentatively.

"Sheila. How are you? Here's a muffin from the coffee cart downstairs." I handed her the bag. "And a little something from down south." And handed her another bag. "I'd like to present Eric Johnson and Carl Sutker from EJ Sports."

Sheila smiled ingratiatingly. "I love your stuff. My nephew is also a big fan, it's all he wears."

Eric smiled. "Thanks, Sheila," he said and reached into his briefcase. "Here are two forty-percent-off coupons, one for you and one for your nephew. I'd give you a T-shirt but I'm traveling light today."

"Oh, thank you! That's so nice! He will love this; he'll probably use it tomorrow."

Eric chuckled. "Okay, but let him know there's a new line coming out in four weeks if he wants to save it."

"I will!"

I asked her, "Any word from Ray?"

"He said he'd be here around two or two thirty with some boxes

to clean out his office. I told him you had a one thirty appointment but he said he couldn't get here earlier." I knew Ray was lying but it's not like I didn't deserve it.

"Anyway, we're going to go into the conference room."

"Yeah, you go ahead. And good luck!"

"Thanks."

At one thirty-eight, Julian Leetsmann came sauntering into the conference room like he didn't have a care in the world. He looked at me, then he looked at Eric and Carl. Finally he asked me, "So, Cooper, you've heard about Bowen, correct?" He didn't even acknowledge Eric or Carl.

"Yes, I have."

"Okay, Cooper, I appreciate this little meetin' here but I'm a busy man and you and I need to have a little talk—"

Eric cut in. "Is this how you treat potential investors? What is it"—Eric looked at me questioningly—"Leetsmann?" I nodded.

Mr. Leetsmann stopped and looked baffled. "What?"

"We had a one thirty appointment. You stroll in at one thirty-eight, making me wait, don't even offer us water, let alone allow Jane to introduce us, and then you *continue* to make us wait while you go on about your personal company business. If this is what you call professional, I don't need to do business here."

And we're off!

"Who might you be, sir?" Leetsmann asked.

"I might be the person who might be giving Leetsmann & Stone fifty million dollars of my money to invest. That's who I might be." Go, E. J.!

"There must be some misunderstanding. Jane?"

"No misunderstanding. You would know this if you'd returned my calls to your office. This is Eric Johnson of EJ Sports, and his colleague, Carl Sutker. They are looking to expand their investments and grow their business, and are considering working with us to help them do that."

“‘Considering’ is the key word, Jane,” Eric said, giving Leetsmann a pointed look.

“I know, Eric, I know.”

Leetsmann cleared his throat. “Let’s start over, shall we? I’m Julian Leetsmann of Leetsmann & Stone.”

What a pathetic little fucker Leetsmann was. I looked at him with loathing.

“Pleasure to meet you. What can I do for you today?” Leetsmann continued. “I’m sure we can help your business grow. Jane doesn’t usually bring these kinds of meetings to the office, so you’ll have to forgive my confusion.”

Eric just glared at him. Carl suppressed a laugh.

“Can I get you two water or coffee or something?”

“Thanks, Leetsmann, I’ll take the coffee, with milk and two sugars,” said Eric.

Carl smirked and whispered in my ear, “Eric doesn’t even drink coffee!” He only ordered it to make Leetsmann fetch something.

“Water, please!” said Carl.

“I’ll take water, Mr. Leetsmann, thank you.” To which he gave me a withering look that could have burned holes in me. This was gettin’ good! He intercommed Sheila to bring the beverages in.

Leetsmann sat down and turned to Eric. “Mr. Johnson, what did you have in mind?” I could see he wasn’t going to acknowledge my involvement any longer.

Carl handed out the job requirements that he gave me back at the hotel, and I handed out a schedule and commissions sheet. I said, “Mr. Leetsmann, this is the investment, the schedule, and the commission EJ Sports and I have agreed upon. Because this is a large order that comes with particularly special needs, we decided to have a meeting with you first before we simply started the paperwork and setting up the account and meetings with analysts, and so on.”

"Very smart, Miss Cooper, very smart," he said distractedly. He was greedily combing over the estimate. He paused. "I can see you gave Mr. Johnson quite a discount on his trades."

"Yes. This is his first investment and a sizeable one at that. He also plans on giving us even more capital to invest in the near future, depending on how his initial investments do. I think for where we stand right now" (meaning: *now that the company is on its last fucking leg and the average person would be crazy to invest with us*) "I think this is a great opportunity for everyone involved."

"That's true, Jane," Eric said. I winked at him.

"And of course, Leetsmann & Stone still makes a respectable profit."

"Yes, of course," said Leetsmann and he put down the paper. "So what is here that I don't know about? What are the 'special needs' you mentioned?" His eyes started to narrow. Shrewd fucker.

"Jane, do you want to fill him in?" Eric asked.

"I would love to, Eric." I got up. I was going for the *Dynasty* platinum. I didn't dress like this to sit on my ass. Towering over him, I said, "Mr. Leetsmann, as you've mentioned, we have learned that Ray Bowen has been fired from Leetsmann & Stone."

"That's correct." He looked up at me, confused. Maybe he never watched the show.

"So here's what we want in return for granting you this fifty-million-dollar-plus piece of business. It's very simple." Here I dropped my voice, put a hand on my hip, and got dramatic. "I want this client to be handled by me and me alone. I want my ten percent commission—"

"Wait a minute, for a job like this the relationship managers don't get paid that kind of commission; you were promised that based on smaller investors. And you're still getting salary! You'll be making more than the company off this—"

"—to be paid to me in full thirty days after the signing of the

contract. If it makes you feel better, you can keep my salary. This is not a negotiation; this is your problem. I just brought in a fifty-million-dollar piece of business to this company. Show some respect," I snapped. "Now, more importantly"—I spoke slowly to drive home the point to this numbskull—"I want Ray Bowen hired back with a forty percent salary increase and a titled promotion, *effective immediately*."

"Is that all?"

"That's it. No—and I want you to ensure that if Evelyn Duberone signs on with the firm, Eric is her top priority, that he can meet with her as often as necessary, and that she gives him new research first."

"And what if I don't agree?"

"If you don't agree to all of the terms then you won't get this investor. You might not get him anyway, if he doesn't agree with your analysts or how his account will be set up, but you definitely won't if you don't agree to these terms." I crossed my arms and was tapping on one arm. "Maybe I'll set up shop myself or go to a competitor and just take EJ Sports as my one client. I could make a very nice living from it."

"That's true, you could," agreed Carl. "That's what I'd do," he said, giving Leetsmann a look.

"And do you agree to this?" Leetsmann turned quickly to Eric.

"One hundred percent, Leetsmann. Take it or leave it," responded Eric. Then he pulled an industry magazine from his briefcase and kicked back to start to read. Conversation over.

Leetsmann turned to Carl, who looked at him with an eyebrow raised, bitchy as ever. He then turned to me with his eyes blazing with rage and shaking. His words came out slowly, like he was trying to control himself. "I don't know what you got, girly, that you got these people saving your ass *every* time you are almost out this door, but you must have a golden—"

"Leetsmann!" Carl yelled. I just looked at Carl, stunned. "We

still haven't signed anything. I think you should watch what you say before we sign the dotted line, don't you? Do you need a couple of minutes to decide if you agree to these simple terms?"

Leetsmann just looked at his notepad while gripping the conference table with both hands. He knew we had him by the balls and he was pissed. He reminded me of an angry ape who didn't get his banana exactly when he wanted it. Like a hairy, stupid beast.

"No," Leetsmann answered and looked up. "I don't agree to those terms." He stood up and slammed both of his hands on the table. "Do you really think I made this company what it is today by letting stupid little girls like this one here *dictate* to me what I should and should not do? No. I didn't. And I'm not gonna start now, no way, no how. Thank you for your time, gentlemen, but I think we're finished here." And he got up and walked out of the room.

We all looked at each other back and forth with big question marks on our faces. I really didn't seriously consider this happening. I couldn't comprehend it. We sat in silence for several minutes.

Finally I said, "Shoot. I guess I got too demanding?" They just muttered in agreement. "We kind of ganged up on him. I should have known his big ego wouldn't tolerate that. Shit!"

"I never ever met anyone with the limited business sense or vision that that guy has," Eric said. "These terms really aren't deal breakers for fifty million dollars. Unusual, maybe. But people bend over backwards for this kind of business, believe me. Even if Ray was an awful employee, he could have paid him a six-month salary, kicked him out, and still have our account. We didn't commit him to any duration of employment. He said no because he didn't like feeling forced."

"And he didn't like it coming from me. Maybe I should have sent you in alone. Shit. Shit shit shit! What am I going to do now? What about Ray?"

"I don't know, Jane. We can wait for the dust to settle and then

contact Leetsmann again, maybe with different terms . . .,” Eric said.

“Look, missy,” said Carl, “let’s not sugarcoat. We failed miserably; deal with it. Even that Alexis/Crystal Carrington getup you got going on didn’t do it. Let’s just get out of here. This place is getting on my nerves.” He started packing up his folder and pens.

I couldn’t move. I turned to Eric. “Any ideas? I have no idea what to do. What’s my plan B? Maybe I should have gone with the Crystal rather than the Alexis. What am I going to do about Ray?” I just buried my head in my hands. Everything imploded.

Carl sighed with irritation and tapped his fingers. “Gawd, Jane, enough with the melodrama. Just tell Ms. Thang at reception what you *tried* to do for Ray, and she’ll tell him all about it, I’m sure. She can’t keep her mouth shut, that’s *obvious*. Then when he hears maybe he’ll be okay with you anyway. Neither of you have a job, but you’ll probably make up.”

“Wow, think that’ll work?” I asked hopefully.

“No. I don’t. You fucked up his *career*, Jane. He’s a man, and he’s not some crazy ‘leisure freak’ like you are. He *cares* about his job, like *most people do*. But it’s worth a shot. . . .”

I was crushed. I hated when this bitch queen was right. How did I read Leetsmann so wrong?

“Jane,” said Eric, “for what it’s worth I think playing hardball was the only way to handle it, especially with a creep like Leetsmann. It’s not like you could have had a nice conversation with him and used reason. I’m sorry it didn’t work. He’s an old man and not cut out for this kind of company.”

“Yeah . . . thanks.” I was in a daze. I needed to regroup and come up with a plan B really soon. But not right now.

“Okay, well, let’s pack it up.”

Things are actually worse now rather than better, I thought. *Ray’s screwed, I’m screwed . . . I lost a job and Ray, the best boss ever and a good friend.* I felt like such a failure. I tried not to cry.

We all filed out of the conference room back to reception. Sheila saw my face and shook her head.

"Oh, girl. And you got all decked out for the meetin'."

"We tried to save Ray's job."

"I know you did, girl, I know. At least you tried."

"I said to Leetsman, 'You save Ray and I'll give you this EJ business.'"

"Sounds good to me," she said, patting my hand.

"It didn't work. Leetsmann didn't take the bait." I couldn't hide my disappointment. "Anyway, it's been nice knowing you, Sheila. Good luck here."

"Jane, you give me a hug. You crazy, you know that? But I'm gonna miss you." I went over and she gave me a big hug.

"I'll send you a muffin from time to time. Take it easy."

"'Bye. Oh, and when Ray gets here I'm telling him what you did. He should know that someone tried to help him."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at Carl and he nodded and Eric gave me a pat on the back as we walked out the doors to the elevator bank.

"Jane, you did your best." Eric said. "I know you messed up with Ray, but I have never, ever seen anyone try to right a wrong the way you did today. It was a risk, we knew that. Honestly, I don't think you or Ray should be working for someone like Leetsmann anyway."

"*I know*," drawled Carl, "that old queen has got to be one of the dumbest fucks I have ever come in contact with, I swear."

I started laughing. "Thanks, Carl, I needed that."

An elevator came but then I remembered Evelyn.

"Wait, guys. Don't get on, Eric—we forgot to get Evelyn's contact information from Sheila."

"Oh, yeah, thanks, Jane," he said nervously.

"Don't worry. Anything bad that was going to come out of today already happened. This is all good." I went back through the glass doors while they waited and got the info from Sheila.

As I was heading back toward them, the neighboring elevator opened up and Leetsmann came out and started talking to Eric. "Ah, it seems I was a little hasty before," I heard him begin as I stepped into the vestibule. "I apologize for my abrupt manner. After further consideration, I have decided to accept your business on your terms and am happy and grateful that you are considering Leetsmann & Stone."

We looked at each other in amazement.

"What made you change your mind?" I asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, Cooper," he snapped, "but one of the founding directors, whom I spoke to briefly when I left the conference room, felt we could live with the terms involved. You got yourself a deal, Mr. Johnson. If it's still offered." And he held out his hand to shake Eric's.

"Do we still have a deal, Jane?" Eric asked me. I looked at Eric and smiled gratefully.

Then I turned to Julian Leetsmann and enjoyed my own internal dialogue. I stared at him with a riot of my personal thoughts and feelings running across my mind: *Leetsmann, you gigantic douchebag. You have no idea how lucky you are, not one clue. You act like the biggest tool of all time and what happens? You get to have someone force you into keeping a great employee like Ray, and hand you an amazing client like Eric Johnson . . . must be nice. Your ass and your company are about to be saved and you couldn't be more undeserving. Thankfully, I will be here to remind you on a regular basis that I did this for Ray and not for you, and I do this knowing that you will never learn. But if I know the Universe like I think I do, one day you will get yours, you smelly rabbit. You reek like a donkey dripping in—*

"Uh, Cooper?" Leetsmann asked, looking a little uncomfortable, which was nice.

"We have a deal if you accept the terms," I said with a smile.

Leetsmann immediately turned to Eric. "Mr. Johnson, pleasure

to be working with you.” And he held his hand out again to Eric, who shook it.

“We have a deal!” Eric said, looking pleased.

“Let’s go back to the conference room and fill out the paperwork. I’ll get our standard forms and you can revise them.”

As we headed back down the hall, Eric asked Leetsmann, “Is Evelyn Duberone officially on your team?”

“That was supposed to be confidential information for the time being since nothing is official yet,” he said, eyeing me and shaking his head. “It’s looking like we will—we’ll know by tomorrow for sure. Then we’ll notify the press. Are you interested in her research?”

“She’s a strong incentive for bringing my account here.”

“Okay, well you are her number one priority. We’ll set up a lunch once she’s on board.”

“That sounds good.” Eric turned and gave me a little smile.

While they kept talking in front of us, I whispered to Carl, “Oh, my God, we did it. Holy shit.”

“I can’t believe it, either. I don’t know how you do it—it makes no sense.”

“It doesn’t have to. I’m going to run to the ladies’ room while I have a moment. Be right back.”

I ran in the opposite direction, gave a wave to Piss & Vinegar, and bumped right smack into Ray, who was carrying a box to his office to pack his personal items.

My heart jumped. “Hi.”

“Hi, Jane.” He stopped and we just stared at each other. I tried to think of something to say, but somehow I couldn’t. So I decided just to stare at him. For the first time I saw him as a gorgeous, *gorgeous* man. *Wow. He really is beautiful.* Is this what it feels like to save someone? My stomach had butterflies.

Abruptly he said, “I have to pack my office.” He turned and walked away. I couldn’t speak or move. I just watched his back. Then I ran back to the conference room.

"You guys, I just saw Ray. He's packing his office. I am freaking out!"

"Why are you so nervous? Just relax," Eric said.

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one who's . . ." What?

"Who's what, Jane?" Eric chuckled, looking really amused.

"I don't know, let's just get this over with so we can stop him."

"Look who's little miss bossy now . . .," Carl complained.

"Okay, what is in these contracts that I'm about to sign?" Eric asked me when we sat back down at the table.

"I'll walk you through it." And we went over each section together. Then I wrote out our special terms. Everyone shook hands when we were done. I was still in awe that it actually happened.

Then Leetsmann said, "Interesting, Cooper. You're not as brain-dead as I initially thought. Let's go to Bowen's office and stop him from packing, now, shall we?"

"That's a good idea," Eric said. I walked out quickly but heard Eric tell Leetsmann, "You know, I thought she wasn't too buttoned up either at first—"

"Space case."

"Yeah, but the girl knows what's going on."

We all went to Ray's office. Even Piss & Vinegar because you know she can't miss the action. There he was, in jeans and a T-shirt, packing it all up. Again, my heart started pounding and I couldn't talk or even breathe. Nervous to see Ray Bowen . . . no way. Fucking Rebecka.

I looked up to see Carl just staring at me. I gave him a look like, *What?* and looked down.

"Ray, good news," Leetsmann started.

"What?" Ray said, looking around in complete surprise and confusion at the five of us in his office. He stopped for a moment longer on me. I gave him a hopeful smile but his expression didn't change.

"You've been reinstated here at Leetsmann & Stone, son. Wel-

come back, you're unfired!" And he slammed Ray on the back like they were old friends.

"What are you talking about? I'm not working here, no way. What's going on?"

"Well, it seems the little lady here pulled a fast one on me and saved your behind." To which Ray looked up, shocked.

"Ray, I'll tell you later. Just stop packing, please," I told him, nodding.

"Jane, I don't want to work here anymore." And he continued to throw his personal items into a box.

"Ray, I don't know what's happened here but Jane did secure your job nicely. Maybe you should hear us out," Eric said.

"And you are . . . ?"

"I'm Eric Johnson, a friend of Jane's." He held out his hand to shake Ray's. "My company, EJ Sports, has just signed a deal with Leetsmann & Stone which is only valid if you are rehired. We all flew up here to make this happen for you."

"What?"

"Ray, *I told you* I'd get you some business in South Beach. Don't look so confused," I said. (I know, I'm a brat.) "Sheila told me what happened so I made the deal so that you'd have to be rehired."

"Thanks but no thanks, Jane." He put a little plant in his box.

"At a nice salary increase . . . ," I added in a singsongy voice.

He looked up.

"Plus a fancy title . . . and I might stay after all to help you out. . . ." I regarded him, my head to the side.

"Really? That's surprising. What's the salary increase?"

"Forty percent raise, Bowen, plus the SVP title," Leetsmann told him.

Ray put his box down. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was," said Leetsmann. "Seems that Jane the loose cannon here has some savvy. And I hate to admit it, but what the hell:

she's probably also saved the company. I guess she was an okay hire after all."

Ray just looked at me.

"Okay," Eric said, "it looks like our business here is concluded, and I have to get back to Philly, so I'm going to take my leave. Ray, it was a real pleasure meeting you." Eric shook Ray's hand. "You take care of Jane here, okay?" They both looked over at me.

"I'll walk you out, Eric," I said.

When we got to the elevator, I turned to him and said, "Eric, I can't thank you enough for what you did for all of us, flying here and saving Ray . . . you didn't have to do it, and you've been so wonderful."

"Well, Jane, I've enjoyed it, actually. And I enjoyed hanging out with you and Rebecka in South Beach; it made the trip a memorable one. You two are never boring!"

I smiled. "We did have fun! And we should do it again soon, since Rebecka's staying out there for the time being with Jake."

"That's a definite. Okay, I'll talk to you this week to get everything here started."

"Okay, great—"

"Well, since you didn't ask me, Jane, let me tell you," Carl cut in. "I didn't like any of this one bit. I didn't like South Beach; I thought the whole affair coming here was a fucking nuisance; Leetsmann didn't squeal like a pig like he should have; and I don't remember playing Cupid or any of this stupid drama as being part of the deal when I signed up for this job—"

"I'm going to miss you too, Carl," I said and gave him a hug. It was true. I was going to miss even Carl. Carl gave me a little smile that lasted less than two seconds, but I saw it.

The elevator came. I handed Eric my card. "Here's my business contact info. You both have my personal already. Call me when you get back."

"Oh, we will." Then I heard Eric say as the elevator doors closed, "Look at this. Jane's business card. Heh-heh."

"You should frame it," Carl replied.

When I walked back through the doors, Piss & Vinegar was staring at me with her eyebrow raised, lips pursed, fingers tapping, back to her usual P&V self.

I laughed. "Sheila, all you need to know is that everybody's job is reinstated and Ray is back on board. And there might even be a Christmas party this year, with the big investor we just got."

"Girl, you are like a cockroach, I'm telling you. They can step on you, spray you, set you on fire, but ya just keep comin' back."

"Huh," I said thoughtfully. "Good analogy."

I strolled on over to my desk and sat there in a daze. *What a fucking day . . .* All of a sudden, the nonstop action of the last week hit me. *Why must saving someone's job be an all-consuming, almost impossible task? Why must all of my body's nutrients be depleted in order to right a wrong? Let me take a little nappy-nap.* I started to doze. *Did Ray go through this for me? Hmm . . . I wonder if he's still mad. He didn't seem too excited to see me. Well, I'm going to give him time. Space. Let him vent his anger toward me. . . . Someone is next to me. Someone is standing next to me right fucking now. Damn it!* I opened an eye and looked up.

"Hey," Ray said with his smirk.

"Hey." I sat up and tried to straighten myself out. I looked at him to figure out how mad he was. His face turned beet red.

"Do you want to tell me what happened here today?" he asked in his adorable, fuzzy voice. He started picking some tape off my desk, right next to my hand, avoiding eye contact but leaning in closer to me.

"It's kind of a long story," I said quietly. My heart was pounding out of my chest and my face felt hot. I couldn't really think.

"We might have a lot to talk about," he said quietly.

"Yup. That we do. . . ."

"Do you want to meet up at Samuel's place? You go home and unpack, and I'll go home and change and grab something to eat?"

"Yeah. I should probably shower again. My head hurts from all this hairspray. How about eight o'clock?" I suggested.

"Okay, I'll see you there at eight."

"Okay," I echoed, staring at him. I was fascinated by Ray. Just completely transfixed by him.

"Jane? Are you alright?"

"Oh yeah, you bet. Never better."

Finally I was looking at the man I loved.

Awkard Day *noun* An antiholiday, Awkward Day is a heinous day filled with insecurity, vulnerability, and tension, created to highlight the newness of a romantic relationship and to test the living shit out of it. If you make it through Awkward Day, your relationship has legs. Good news is that it only lasts one day, if that long. Bad news is that it's tedious and you might not have that new boyfriend by the end of it.

I was out of Leetsmann & Stone by three, which was great. It had been a crazy first day back: ups, downs, love, hate, job, no job, job again, just drama drama drama. No need to perpetuate it.

Back in my apartment I just sat on my couch in a daze with the lights off. I didn't embroider, I didn't eat, I didn't play with Snowball. I didn't move for about two hours. All I did was think about Ray.

Ray Bowen. Rebecka was right, of course. I can't live without him, and don't want to for another second. I wish I could have seen it sooner. I thought about him, his personality, and our relationship. It all flashed before my eyes: the roundtable, the blue light lounge, his blushing, his shyness but also his confidence, his laugh, his authoritative vibe, his brains, his I ♥ NY cup, his hang-over before the warning meeting, his eyes, his fuzzy voice, his love of clubs and alcohol, his human decency, him putting himself on the line to save my job and taking care of me . . . I realized that if she was right about me loving him, she was probably right about him loving me then, too.

Ugh. If I permanently screwed this up I'm not going to be able to live with myself. Our friendship is somewhat intact, which is great, but

I need to tell him how I feel tonight and see how he feels because I need a chance at the big love. I don't need some oily tan tennis pro like in Dynasty. I just need my perfect little Ray, the man I love love love.

Suddenly, I got up and got motivated. I hung out with Snowball and did a quick embroidery, just for, like, thirty minutes or so, to let off some steam. I got takeout. Then I took another shower to scrub off the makeup and tone down my appearance. It took about a half keg of shampoo to get my hair to come down with all of the *Dynasty* product that was in it.

I left my hair loose and wavy, and went easy on the makeup to give my face a break. I put on a comfortable outfit that was more warm and inviting. I now wanted “approachable” and “touchable” rather than “scary yet sexy.” I was meeting up with the man I loved soon and telling all!

At eight p.m. I got to the door. Samuel was there with Yuki.

“Hey, guys!” I said.

“Hey, Janie!” Yuki came over and gave me a hug. “How wuz South Beach?”

“Miss Laty Jane is back, safe and sound. Great to see you,” Samuel said and gave me a hug too.

“Nice to be back! How are you guys doing?”

“We’re good, no complaints.”

“Very cool. Um, Samuel, have you seen Ray yet?”

“Mr. Ray is inside. He asked about you too.” He and Yuki looked at each other knowingly.

“Okay, shut up, you two, I know that look! Fine. I love Ray now. Fine, fine. I’m going to tell him right now.”

They started cracking up. Samuel said, “Dat’s da spirit. You go, girl, you get your mon. Let love rule, I always say.” And he squeezed Yuki.

“Thanks, guys.” I jumped inside.

Ray was sitting where Rebecka and I usually sit, talking to the hot bartender. He was wearing a black Guinness T-shirt, Paper

denim jeans, and flip-flops. I could tell he'd made an effort to make his hair look really good; it was extra tousled and he had product in it. And he wore his usual glasses. I'm glad he doesn't wear contacts; I love those glasses.

"Hey," I said when I got to him.

"Hey!" he said, standing up briefly and gesturing to the stool next to him. "Please, have a seat. What'll you have?"

"I'll just have a Corona for now, thank you." I was relieved that he was being friendly. I, unfortunately, felt awkward. I was overwhelmed by this evening's to-do list: apologize, clear the air, declare love . . . it was a bit much.

"Hey," I said just to make small talk, "where are your friends—you know, Sara and that Brad Pitt guy?"

"Brad Pitt guy? Oh, Adam? That's funny. Actually, those two are models so they're in the Bahamas doing a shoot for winter season."

"And people say modeling isn't hard."

"I know, right?" He smiled.

More silence. To make it that much more awkward, I realized that in addition to the to-do list, this was also the first time we'd hung out together alone, just the two of us. We both sucked at smoothing over the awkward moment.

"Is this your friend again, the DJ?" I asked.

"Yup, this is Ven."

"He really is good."

"I know."

"Oh, Eric Johnson, who you met today, is the owner of EJ Sports! They are the kings of DJ wear! We could hook Ven up!"

"No way. That's so cool," Ray said.

Then silence. Awkward, nervous, heinous silence.

Finally Ray said, "Well, Jane, thanks for saving my job."

"Thanks for saving mine."

"With this deal it looks like you won't need the job. It looks like you can have a lot more leisure time."

"Not exactly. Eric wants me as his manager. It's one of the conditions to getting his investment."

"Wow. It's always something."

"It seems I'm meant to work."

"You'll just have to accept it," he said, and we both laughed nervously. Then we were silent again.

"Okay, Ray, I have to come completely clean with you here, right now."

"Okay."

"Maybe we should get shots first. That might help."

"Good idea."

We drank our liquid courage and then I started. "Look. I sincerely appreciate you saving my job for me. I'm not saying that lightly to be nice. I really do. I know that it didn't appear that way at first and I guess I didn't feel that way at first. But going to South Beach woke me up. While I still don't care about my job as much as maybe I should, it's become clear to me that I care very much about you. And I see what you did for me and I'm sorry about how things went down. What I did was wrong and I really hope you'll forgive me."

Ray looked a little uncomfortable. "I appreciate you telling me this. And even though I am nowhere near as mad at you as I was, I still don't like how that went down."

"I know, I know how that—"

Ray just held his hand up. "Let me finish. I want you to understand: I have only a few real friendships and I value them and I expect mutual loyalty and honesty and everyone having each other's back. I felt like you fed me to the wolves without giving it a second thought."

"I believe in the same things. I can't even believe what I did, in retrospect. But in my defense, you saving me, you did that for yourself. You didn't do that for me, because I did not need saving. You know that I do things differently than most people. You know what kind of employee I am, it wasn't a secret. You should have run

that by me first. And I think you know that. You saved my job, and then you expected me to all of a sudden change and be someone that I'm not. . . ."

"Yeah, I know, I realize that. I guess I just didn't want you to go. . . ." Blush blush.

"But again, I really appreciate the fact that you made a sacrifice like that for me. And I did change because of it and learned from it. Which is how this whole *Dynasty* situation went down today."

"'Dynasty' situation?"

I explained how I heard about his being fired, how I met Eric, and '80s television to him.

"So that's why you were wearing that crazy outfit and the makeup!" He laughed.

"Cool, right?"

"Very cool." He touched my hair. "Nice to see your hair back to normal, though."

I hung in there with the conversation because it was now or never. "I had to go to South Beach, Ray. I was fulfilling my destiny."

"What was your destiny?"

"It was a few things. I had a wish list that was registered with the Universe that I've been asking for, and I went to South Beach to receive my wishes."

"And you got them?" He looked amused.

"I did."

"What was the list?"

"One was to have my OCD expressions, my embroideries, discovered and be my ticket into the New York art scene;" (to which Ray looked totally confused) "two was to become best friends with either Pam Anderson, Gwen Stefani, Karen O, Selma Blair, or someone like that;" (his eyes got wide) "three: more leisure, naturally; four: a large lump sum of money, which you know I got from this deal—ooh, which reminds me, I have to give a big chunk of

that to charity; and five was to find true love." I couldn't look at him after saying that, so I stirred my drink.

"So what happened?" he asked.

"Okay. One, my OCD embroideries were discovered by this crazy woman because I put them on handbags that I made for Rebecca and me for our trip. The woman, Svetlana, runs a major gallery and now she wants to exhibit them. So the art scenario is just a matter of time."

"That's so cool!" he said enthusiastically.

"I know, right? Number two, we met Pam Anderson and will be hanging out with her again any time now." And I opened my phone and showed him our picture.

"Holy shit."

"I know, she's awesome. Three, I got more leisure from this EJ Sports deal, which I will outline for you later."

"Of course," he said sarcastically, yet I could tell he was amused.

"Four, I got a lump sum of cash from this EJ Sports deal. I don't know if you've done the math, but it's crazy money."

"I did the math."

"Insane, right? I can't even absorb it. And then five—" I took a deep breath and paused and looked down. Finally I said, "It took me a long time to see this, Ray. I didn't think that I would find true love because of past history and for a lot of different reasons. But, when you were fired, I realized that if I didn't do something about it, I would have to live without you, and that was not an option. That's when I knew. . . . And then when I saw you . . ." I shook my head. "I can't live without you and I don't want to for another second. So that's number five . . . those were my five wishes." I stared into my beverage, not knowing what to do with myself. I couldn't look at him.

"So now you love me?" I looked up. He had a little grin.

"Yeah."

"After all this time?"

"Yeah."

He just looked at me quietly and intently with no readable expression, just concentrating on me. I tried to appear relaxed but I was completely unraveled and didn't know what to expect. I kept pushing my hair behind my ears.

Finally he got up off his stool and stood over me and said in his fuzzy voice in my ear, "I've been in love with you since I walked into the conference room four months, two weeks, and five days ago and saw you for the first time."

"No way." My eyes welled up. I got goosebumps.

"Oh, you knew it. How could you not know—I was so obvious!"

"You know, Rebecka said you might have been but I really didn't see it. I thought it was the Tourette's."

"Jane. I do not have Tourette's syndrome. Will you *please* believe me?" he said, laughing.

"I know, I know . . . I'm kidding, not that that matters. But I was slow to catch on, I get it."

Touching my hair and my cheek, he continued, "I was just so taken with you that I couldn't think straight. I now believe in love at first sight," he said, twirling my hair and looking at me.

"Wow . . . that's beautiful."

"Thanks."

"So what do we do now?"

He had his hands on my face. "Now we do what I've waited a long time to do." So Ray Bowen, the foxiest boy that ever *lived*, gave me the softest, deepest, sweetest, and sexiest kiss that I have ever had in my entire life. He took his time and then he wrapped his arms around me and hugged me hard.

When we stopped Ray asked, with his arms still around me and a big satisfied smile, "So what were the 'more leisure' points you were going to outline for me?"

“Oh, right, thanks for the reminder, just a couple of notes: a) I won’t be in the office that much at all anymore but I do expect to keep my job with the company, b) I will only work on the EJ Sports business, c) —”

“Okay, Jane, whatever you say.” And we spent the rest of the night kissing.

Closure *noun* A point in your life when you can leave the Universe the hell alone and stop asking for stuff.

“Hey, Marisol!”

“Chica! How was South Beach? You look amazing! I heard about your makeover but I didn’t see it!”

“I had a great time but I am glad to be back!”

“How’s Rebecka doing?”

“She’s still in South Beach!”

“No way!”

“Yeah, she met this absolutely gorgeous guy named Jake so they are livin’ it up!”

“Oh, that’s awesome, so nice to hear! Whoever he is I’m sure he’s better than What’s-His-Name. . . .”

“Yeah, really.”

“You know, rumors are going around that that girl Cynthia got caught hookin’ up with What’s-His-Name’s friend Matt.”

“*You’re kidding.*”

“Nope. That’s what I heard and I hear Rebecka’s ex is not too happy with it.”

“That girl just has too much love to give. . . .”

“Mm-hm. Anyway, what can I get for you today, Jane?”

“I’ll take the usual.”

“Be right back.” And off she went. Aaah, the simple pleasures of the café. It was good to be back.

Okay, Universe, I thought, while taking a deep breath and

focusing, *You have proved yet again that you are all-knowing and all-awesome. My gratitude is huge. You have gone above and beyond what I could have imagined for myself. Thank you so much. Thank you for everything I have in my life. Now I won't be asking, I'll just be thanking. Oh, and sorry I didn't pick up on that Ray thing right away. I know, I know, you hooked me up. . . .*

"Is this seat taken?"

"Hey, Ray . . ." I just sat there staring at him, dumbfounded. He's so foxy it's wild. Super-duper foxy. I'm like, I'm like . . .

"What are you doing?" he asked as I shook my head back and forth trying to get oriented. "Do you have Tourette's syndrome? Oh no, I can't be here right now, I gotta go," he said, while looking for the exit.

"Ray!"

"Hi, baby."

"Hi . . ." And he leaned down to kiss me.

"Okay, you two, enough with the p.d.a—it's, like, eleven a.m."

"Marisol, this is Ray."

"Chica, is he joining you here at the café?" she asked, shocked. In all of our time together, Ray's the first man I ever had join me at the café.

"Yes. He is," Ray answered. She walked behind his back and gave me a huge wink and a thumbs-up. Ray just looked at me and kissed me and said, "I love that I can do that now."

"Me too."

"Okay, Jane and her man are a little mushy—what can I get for you, Raymond?"

"A large black coffee."

"Comin' right up."

He turned to me. "Do you want a section of the paper? I brought it since I figured I'd be here for a while and you would be talking to the Universe anyway."

"Raaaay! You know my game already. . . ."

"I do." We kissed again. When he stopped he said, "Look at you, all dressed for work. I'm still amazed that you're not quitting. I'm sure Eric would let you off the hook."

"Hmm. I know, but I'm not quitting now. At least not yet."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. I know, I'm surprised too. But I actually like this job. Now it's kind of fun: my friend Eric is my main investor, I can come and go as I please, I have Leetsmann by the balls, and I have a crush on my boss . . . that to me sounds like a party. Corporate America has become the highly entertaining piece of theater I always knew it could be. And of course . . ." I paused, wondering if I should say it. . . .

"Yes?"

"Well, Rebecka once mentioned the 'possibility' of conference-room sex . . . it would be irresponsible of me not to investigate that."

"I really like her."

"Mm, she does have her moments of brilliance, doesn't she?"

"She does indeed," he said and put his arm around me. "Cool, my star manager is staying."

"For the time being. If it stops being fun, I am out of there."

"I expect nothing more. You are one funny girl, you know that?"

"I know. Speaking of Rebecka, she and I spoke and I told her everything about us."

"And what did she say?"

"She's elated, ecstatic. She loves to be right. So, she wants us to meet her and Jake in South Beach."

He sat back in his chair in awe. "Are we asking for another vacation *already*?"

"Ray, just think about it. When was the last time you had a vacation?"

"Jane."

"You're a senior vice president now! You should have *gobs* of vaca—"

"I think you might be pushing it."

"What are they going to do? *Fire us?*"

"Oh. Good point. Maybe just a long weekend."

"Of course, nothing fancy. Now taste this yummy cheese Danish," I said placing it in front of his lips.

He took a bite. "I could get used to this."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Super special thanks to:

Stephanie Kip Rostan and Emily Haynes for being so brilliant; the fabulous and perfect Donna and Ralf Koslow; Ann Wycherly and Courtney Rethwisch for being the best partners-in-crime in South Beach (“research”!), Danielle O’Connor for all her advice and support, and Eric and Tzipy from Bumble and Bumble for their hair genius.

Thanks!:

Mark, Lauren, Gabriel, Lily, Lucy, Kate and Ginger Koslow, the Keanes, Raj Gupta and everyone at RHG, Chris Halleron, Beth Garcia Neiman, Lysa Hawke and the Opfer family, Jeni Aron, Maria Molina Costello, Sean and Wendy Miller, Joe Dietzmann, Jeff Erb, Michelle Parette, Keith Fernbach, Dorian Spelbrink, Bonnie Sheff, Sasha Conroy and Darren Maynard, Danielle Mascias, Cynthia Santiglia, Joe Belock, Kevin and Greg Whelan, Allison Hernandez and Mike Dunn, Scott McCabe, Dennis Burchell, the Adami family, the Hennessys, Maryellen Doyle, Betty and Richard Abelow, Barbara and Howard Siegerman, Mady and Peter Palese, Maryellen Kein, the Neus family, Helen Raleigh, Allison Greene, Janice Daut, Michelle Lieberman, Wylia Simms, Kutztown University, Sharon Conlon, Dave Lanfair, Michael Pruzan, Denise Harris Schuh, Rebecka Brittain, and Dawn Forney. Your love and support have meant a lot!

