

A close-up photograph of a woman's face and upper body. She is holding several playing cards in her hand, with the top card showing a red patterned back and the word 'A NOVEL' in a red circle. She is wearing a white strapless top, a large white heart-shaped earring, and a bracelet with dice. The background is blurred, suggesting a social setting.

If you can't
meet 'em...
beat 'em!

card sharks

Liz Maverick

card sharks

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Card Sharks

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chapter one

Marianne wasn't like those other girls. She had a job and a guy. She was fine. Absolutely fine. Her problem was one of . . . "va-voom." In short, she couldn't always count on the job to make her want to get up early, nor on the guy to make her want to stay up late. Yet somehow, they were both good enough to make her show up at all.

There were no personal traumas to jolt her out of her current patterns, no wacky grandmothers to set off a chain reaction of events leading to 1) chaos, and then 2) a blissfully happy ending, and no sudden epiphanies to throw her a curveball in life. And hence, no curveball. Everything just progressed in a perfectly straight line, as precise and clear-cut as the thin lines on the yellow legal pad sitting in front of her on the desk.

She wasn't trapped. It wasn't that. And she wasn't failing. It certainly wasn't that. It was more that she'd sort of slipped into the grooves on a track back during freshman year in college and hadn't slipped back off, neither by circumstances beyond her control nor by those completely within her ability to

change. It was as simple as that. And though her ideas, her tastes, and her inclinations had morphed over the years, her career goals had not. Which was how Marianne Hollingsworth found herself in the somewhat unlikely position of tax manager on track for a coveted slot in the partnership ranks of a large accounting and consulting firm.

This matter of fact had two major results. The first was that Marianne sometimes felt a disconnect between the person that she thought she might want to become versus the career goals and lifestyle she was successfully pursuing, and the other was that she had a really killer view from the window of her office.

There'd been one of those periodic mass exoduses among the ranks of weathered tax managers who'd been passed up three years running since their year of eligibility and finally had to accept that they were not destined to receive an invitation to join the partnership team. She'd ended up with one of those coveted window offices. And from what she was seeing as she sat back in her large, typical black leather office chair, it was a beautiful day. Absolutely crystal clear. Sun shining, blue sky, just the quintessential California day.

The cars looked shiny and bright, like pretty little toys on a holiday morning. There was a kind of "up" vibe going on, and as Marianne looked outside she could see that the people of Los Angeles looked happy walking down the streets window-shopping and chatting.

Marianne thought of her family back on the "Right Coast" for a moment. They hated the no-seasons thing and were stuck on the idea that nothing ever changed in California. Every day was like the next. The sun always shone, the people were always tan, and the water was always blue. More and more she was beginning to think they were right.

Nothing ever changed in sunny California. Well, not nothing. But when it did, it was only a matter of a few degrees.

Whipping the pencil back and forth between her fingers so that it made a nice, satisfying *tappity-tap* sound against the pad, Marianne glanced at the clock (9:56 A.M. Four minutes and counting. Four . . .) and wondered for the umpteenth time if she should get back together with her ex-boyfriend, Donny, and if not, if she should stop sleeping with him.

(Three . . . two . . . one.)

The phone double-rang, signaling an outside caller. "Anderson and Young . . . this is Marianne."

"So what are you wearing right now?" Donny asked.

Marianne laughed. "Sensible shoes, a skirt, and a cashmere twinset."

Donny sighed. "Just once couldn't you pretend it was something more like red lace underwear under a trench coat or something? You'd rather be wearing that anyway."

"It's ten o' clock in the morning." He called several times a week at ten o'clock in the morning, which gave him just enough time before lunch to reorganize his schedule on the off chance that he'd score a quickie. She stuck the phone in the crook of her neck and grabbed a blue pencil, ticking off boxes down the column on the tax form as she checked her numbers. "Oh, I'm sorry . . . wait a minute . . . is this a booty call?"

This time he huffed. "You know, Marianne, when you spell it out like that, it just really kills the excitement."

She rolled her eyes. "You're becoming annoying again."

"So are you. I miss you, though. Don't you miss me?"

"Of course I miss you. You're adorable. But also annoying."

He sighed again. "Maybe we should just go to Vegas and get hitched."

"You make it sound like we're living in an episode of *Bonanza*. Talk about unsexy."

"There was no Vegas on *Bonanza*."

"'Hitched'?"

He laughed. "Better luck next time, eh?"

"Indeed. Talk to you later."

"Ciao, bella."

He hung up and Marianne hung up, not thinking one more second about him as her full attention settled back over her work.

Better luck, indeed.

Donny had once even been her "forty guy." If they hit forty, wanted to start a family, and were both single, they'd get married and have kids, that sort of thing. But in this day and age, that seemed kind of pathetic. Women didn't have to have "forty guys" anymore, because no one had to settle when there were all kinds of ways to have a child, if one wanted one, without actually having to put up with an annoying male figure constantly using up toilet paper and insisting on steak instead of fish for dinner. Why settle and have to put up with that crap for the rest of your life? If one was going to bother having a man around the house, one needed to pick one who was a true value-added proposition. The trouble was, Donny simply wasn't a value-added proposition. He'd become a stopgap measure for her, just as she was for him.

Sometimes he'd float back over to boyfriend status and they'd drop the "ex" for a while, but then somehow they'd find themselves apart all over again. He was the sort of guy whom she didn't mind not hearing from for weeks, only to get a phone call suggesting pizza and DVDs, which was code for "I'm still not seeing anyone seriously enough to sleep with them. If you're still not seeing anyone seriously enough to sleep with them, how about coming over and we'll eat something and then have sex."

She pulled forward the enormous tax folder for her one-o'clock appointment and tried to concentrate. Damn sunshiny California summer day!

Her admin knocked on the door to the office and peeked in. “Pinkie’s here.”

“Send her in.”

And so it went. If nothing else, the location of her office in celebrity central meant that the vast majority of her clients were celebrities with exciting lives. She didn’t have enough fingers on her hands to count all of the times the phrase “and there was just so much drama” had been uttered during the retelling of a casual anecdote in between business conversations.

As usual, Marianne did most of the talking while Pinkie paced the office, picking up office tchotchkes and putting them back down, flipping her glossy blond-streaked brunette hair extensions, and readjusting the position and trajectory of her requisite overly large L.A. breasts. Pinkie Watson played Starr, a former stripper turned real estate magnate, on one of the daytime soaps. She was a tabloid regular both in her native U.K. and in stateside grocery stores. Her wild adventures with a variety of men in a multiplicity of places across the globe were becoming the stuff of legends. But when it came to a new tax shelter for her burgeoning wealth, her seemingly idiotic bimbo persona faded a bit to reveal a rather shrewd businesswoman.

“You are not even close to being as stupid as you look,” Marianne wanted to say as a compliment, secretly wondering if pretending you were someone else—especially a lesser someone else—wasn’t totally exhausting. But maybe telling someone their brand image was slipping wasn’t really a compliment. So instead Marianne just amused herself by imagining Pinkie walking in the front door of her Hollywood Hills mansion, looking around to make sure there hadn’t been a breach in security by paparazzi, and then finally relaxing enough to put on a pair of dented spectacles and curl up with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Maybe that was why Pinkie Watson and several other celebrities on Marianne's roster seemed to visit the office to talk about taxes and ask questions about Marianne's comparatively dull personal life more than would seem necessary for an average person. Everyone, it seemed, was living vicariously through someone else, because everyone, it seemed, had stumbled into a kind of life or a type of persona that was easier to stumble into than it was to stumble out of. You might know exactly what you were getting, but it didn't mean you would like it.

"So, frankly, Pinkie, I think that the potential risk of having your left foot cut off by island bandits far outweighs the benefit of an extra one percent in interest over the long term . . . wah-wah-wah . . ." Marianne had given this very same type of advice to various clients what seemed like a million times, and had plenty of brain cells left to cycle on other thoughts in the background, rather like the human equivalent of tax software. A condition that, in fact, did make her feel somewhat like a robot. And the kind of thought that would bubble and churn in the background of her mind as she explained why laundering one's money through the Caymans was not always the best course of action was this: *I live the most boring of lives for the benefit of those with the most exciting ones.*

It was a thought that was less of a complaint and more of a fact, but it had been bothering her more and more. Since the excitement of working with actual, live, honest-to-God famous people had worn off, really, that one thought was what was left in its wake. *While they live their dream, I sit in my office and figure out how to write it off.* Of course, if Marianne had ever been asked about her dream, she would have been caught quite tongue-tied and back around to square one she'd go: There was nothing wrong with her life, and she was accomplishing everything she'd set out to accomplish. Perhaps where she'd gone "wrong" was in calibrating those very first goals. If

you were the sort of person who insisted on seeing things through and achieving your goals, you'd better make sure your goals were the right ones.

"You are so smart, Marianne," Pinkie said, standing. "Go ahead and set that other tax shelter right up. That's just what I need. Screw the Caymans."

Marianne stood up and held out her hand, giving the soap star an opportunity for a very conservative handshake. Pinkie shook and turned to go, and Marianne suddenly couldn't help herself. "Pinkie, before you go, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Marianne."

"What's your typical Friday night look like?"

Pinkie looked a little surprised. With the square white tip of her French-manicured index finger, she scooped a bit of hair out of the muck of her lip gloss. "Well, tonight I've got to go home and change, and then it's dinner with a couple of aging yet still cool rock stars, dancing and drinking with some famous actors who were once considered washed-up but then came back last year and won Academy Awards, and finally some late-night hijinks with professional Italian soccer players who have always been at the top of their game and still show absolutely no signs of weakness."

Marianne smiled. "That sounds great. You have a fun night . . . and a great weekend. And call me if you think of any questions you forgot to ask. Oh, and good luck with that film deal."

"Thanks." Pinkie smiled back and then teetered off to the elevator bank. Marianne closed her office door and sat down behind her desk. She picked up the phone and dialed her best friend, Bijoux Sterling.

Bijoux was a year older than Marianne. She'd been Marianne's big sister at the Chi Omega sorority at UCLA. Apparently she'd chosen Marianne as her little sister based on their

nearly identical height, weight, and shoe size, but the similarities ended there—and Marianne had a lot more to gain from borrowing clothes from Bijoux than Bijoux did from borrowing clothes from her.

With Bijoux's family connections and access to all of the cool Hollywood events, it had actually been a great college experience. She'd had the time of her life. And then they'd graduated and had lost touch for a little while before bumping into each other again at a Beverly Hills farmer's market. Bijoux didn't seem to be buying anything, but she was shopping, all right. Apparently, she'd read something in the *L.A. Times* about how profitable organic produce had become, and was looking for a wealthy farmer-type to date.

The two girls clicked, and since neither one of them had a serious boyfriend taking up all of their free time, they started hanging out again on a regular basis. Fast forward, they were nearing the cusp of thirty-something-dom and they still didn't have serious boyfriends taking up much free time.

"Hello?"

"Bijoux, it's me."

"Hey, Mare."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm lolling. And then I have a thing tonight. Do you remember Peter Graham? The nephew of those neighbors of mine?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"He's that guy who comes to visit his relatives every once in a while. You know, the kind of guy your parents and his parents think you might really hit it off with, and they force you to sit next to each other at a dinner party, like, every five years? The kind of guy you've technically known your whole life but don't really know the specifics of."

"I don't think I ever met him. Why? He's back?"

"He's back. And I'm supposed to take him with me to tonight's benefit. And I'm so not good at keeping lackluster conversation going. It's so stressful. Will you go instead of me?"

"Me at one of those charity events without you? I think not. I'd have no one to talk to."

"You could talk to Peter."

"He's your neighbor's nephew who comes around every five years. Maybe this year he'll be eligible."

"One would think if he were eligible, I'd have noticed it over the course of our respective lifetimes."

"True. But sorry. No can do."

There was a little pause on the other end of the line. "Is Donny coming over?"

"Why would you ask that?" Marianne said, righteously indignant.

"Just asking. Not judging."

"Fair enough. Seriously, though, sorry I can't help you out. Maybe it will exceed your expectations. And besides, you'll still have Friday. The all-important, much-potential Friday." She cleared her throat. "Speaking of which, what are you doing on Friday?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then, "Nothing."

"Nothing, huh," Marianne echoed.

"Nothing. Oh, my God. This really is Wednesday, isn't it? I thought we were still on Tuesday. I guess I lost track. It's almost Friday!"

"So you have something planned then?"

Another pause. "Well, no. Nothing. My parents bought a table for a dinner to raise money in support of that field mouse that was supposed to be endangered, so I could've gone to that if I'd wanted to, but it was canceled when they found out that there was another field mouse that had some similar DNA, so

it's really okay if people go ahead and develop property in the habitat of the first mouse, because if it's accidentally killed during construction and goes extinct, we've already got that other mouse that's close enough. . . . So what are you doing?"

"Nothing," Marianne said.

"Nothing, huh," Bijoux echoed. "Fuck."

"Yeah. Exactly. So you wanna come over and watch TV at my place Friday?"

"Yeah. Do you have a Friday lunch already scheduled? Because I might be able to get passes to SportsClub."

"No way!"

"Way," Bijoux said. "And if that pans out just right, we won't have to date each other on Friday night."

"Oh, excellent. I'll work it out. See you."

"See you."

Click.

Well, okay, then. That was a relief. Friday night all planned out. Sort of. Marianne sighed, sharpened her pencil, and got to work sheltering the earnings from someone else's life.

Several clients and many more cups of coffee later, Marianne closed out her workday, left the office, picked up her car, and hit the freeway system.

Life had become a series of blue-penciled tick marks. A pattern, a routine . . . you got what you saw; you saw what you got. You got into the car after work and started answering the messages left on your cell phone and any messages left in the office since you left work. You got home and made dinner and then turned on the television to "unwind."

Did anyone ever just sit down on the couch in the living room in complete silence and think about what they were doing? Or were the days just going to pass like this?

Apparently, the days were just going to pass like this.

Marianne felt the customary low-level thrill she always got

when exiting the freeway to her neighborhood. How sad was it that her day was so predictable she had to get her jollies by envying the people zipping down the carpool lane and getting off by exiting the off-ramp.

Marianne lived in the Valley—the same Valley with the horrible song and the bad reputation. She'd told Bijoux a million times how much she hated living in the Valley and that she'd moved there by accident without really knowing what she was getting into. As it was, Marianne lived in a nice little old-fashioned complex with a central courtyard that would have been very *Melrose Place* if it had had a pool and hot guys lounging about, and she had nice leafy green trees right outside her window without having to look up in the canyons to see nature.

Park the car. Out of the car. Up the stairs. Into the apartment. Dinnertime.

Marianne dropped her coat and bag on the floor by the door, beelined to the kitchen, turned the stove to 325 degrees, and removed a package of premade chicken enchiladas from Whole Foods, an organic Fuji apple, and a bottled water from the fridge. She stripped off her clothes and hung up the twin-set and the skirt, kicking the shoes to the wall and dumping everything else in the laundry hamper. On with the sweats. Then she went into the bathroom, pausing to stare into the mirror. *Yikes. Let's have a moment of silence in honor of the remains of the day.*

She looked left. She looked right. And she decided she would speak to her hairdresser about highlights of some kind. On her, at least, brunette was a nice way of saying brown. Brown. Mousy freaking brown. She put her hair up into a ponytail, then opened her makeup drawer. The drawer shone with a rainbow of colors. The slight tint in her foundation moisturizer had worn off, and there was a dusting of gray under her eyes

from the shedding mascara, but she didn't bother fixing any of that. Marianne went straight to the colored eye pencils, the eye glitter, the browbone highlighter . . . it was all in the eyes. Peacock greens and blues, purple liner, blue mascara, purple glitter. When she was finished, she had the eyes of a Las Vegas showgirl. Marianne smiled at her reflection, slapped on a little lip balm, and went to pop her dinner in the oven and turn on the TV to unwind.

chapter two

Bijoux was, indeed, lolling. Lolling, lolling, lolling. Lolling about the mansion, to be precise. She liked lolling. She wasn't like Marianne, who always seemed to want to do something and felt almost guilty when she wasn't. Bijoux wanted to do something only if she really wanted to do it. Doing something just for the sake of having something to do made absolutely no sense. Of course, Bijoux went out a lot anyway, because she had a very good reason that absolutely made sense.

She desperately needed to marry rich.

Mustering the energy to put down her *Cosmopolitan* and roll over on the chaise longue to look at the clock, Bijoux decided that she should really start getting ready for the event.

She went to her closet and pushed the button, watching the fuchsias, the oranges, the hot pinks, and the turquoises spin before her eyes. Bijoux picked out a minidress, one of those low-V-neck chiffon "handkerchief hem" styles, and a pair of high-heel platform boots with satin striping. Racy lingerie underneath, of course, on the off chance that this was the day

that an eligible male suddenly materialized. And bedroom-beach hair, carefully crafted via the use of a special pomade that was supposed to make you look as fabulous as possible by making your hair look as dirty as possible. Lots of glitter and blingy stuff. Hair clips, rings, necklaces, too. She had a closet full of bait, and by the time she was through, she'd look like the twinkling feathery lure on the end of a platinum fishhook. If she didn't start with at least two hours to spare, she'd never get it all done in time for the event. *I have to loll about all day. If I didn't I'd never have the energy for all of this.*

The rich-husband thing had become a mission because Bijoux's parents had informed her just five years ago that she would not be inheriting their millions. It wasn't that they didn't love her. It wasn't that they didn't care. She just had the bad luck to be born of accidental multimillionaires with social consciences. In short, her parents were a couple of hippies who'd invented a new use for hemp that had apparently revolutionized some form of overseas industry.

And after living in mansions with maids and chefs and spending lots of money on expensive designer clothing, handbags, and jewelry, they'd decided the entire family should return to their "roots," and when Bijoux turned thirty, they would donate the rest of their money for things like abolishing world hunger and positive social change.

Not that Bijoux disagreed with the basic premises of these things. But she would have strongly preferred if they'd set her up with a trust fund before spending the balance on preventing the extinction of the Romulus monkey of the Verdungali forest, or making sure the tribespeople of Morasai had enough mechanical pencils with which to school their children.

As far as Bijoux was concerned, providing mechanical pencils to tribespeople was a snotty imperialist act just barely disguising the imposition of one's own societal mores on another

group of disinterested peoples. She doubted very much that the tribespeople of Morasai even wanted mechanical pencils; if they wanted pencils at all, they would have already developed an age-old tradition of carving their own pencils from a rare species of teak complete with an ingrained spiritual essence that Faber-Castell couldn't possibly—or at least, hadn't until now—offer up, not even in a bonus package with a free highlighter.

She soon realized that trying to explain this sort of thing was difficult without making oneself sound very bad. It was hard to verbalize that you thought your parents should pass along their wealth to you when they died without coming off like a complete ass.

She was just trying to make do with what she'd become and what she had to work with. And the two ends were having a hell of a time meeting.

Go ahead and set those parameters when the kid is three and send her off to a commune, but don't raise her to be a useless socialite only to pull out the rug and suddenly say that she will not be able to live in the manner to which she's become accustomed. It was too late for Bijoux to build any more character than she already had, and frankly, she was petrified about her future.

It all came around to the fact that Bijoux knew herself, and she knew that in order to survive she was going to have to marry well. It was nothing the women of Jane Austen's time—and really, those before and after—hadn't figured out, and there was no reason to think that a woman like Bijoux Sterling should have to approach life any differently.

So when she was finished preparing her look, she took a long, deep breath and reminded herself what it was all for. And then she proceeded out the door and headed toward Mrs. Keegan's property across the street.

All of the homes in these winding canyons had long, arching driveways, plenty of greenery, and the occasional tastelessly enormous statuary. One practically needed a GPS device to negotiate the route from the street up to the front door. As Bijoux carefully picked her way across the pavement in her outrageously high heels, her arms out wide on either side for balance, the double-wide front doors of the Keegan mansion slowly opened up—they were clearly triggered by remote—and Mrs. Keegan appeared in the doorway, perfectly framed as if she were still a working actress in Hollywood. “Hello, Mrs. Keegan!”

“Good evening, Bijoux, dear!”

The doors continued to open, revealing a less choreographed tableau: a tuxedoed male, bending over as he swiped a green plastic lint remover down the length of his pant legs.

Bijoux continued tottering up the walkway, and he stood up and smiled. Was that her nephew, Peter Graham? Grown-up Peter Graham? He looked like the California beach itself. Ocean-blue eyes, sandy-blond hair. *Hello, sunshine!* Well, perhaps he was actually a bit oversunned, but not in that gross hang-out-by-the-pool-in-a-giant-gold-and-diamond-Rolux-and-a-teeny-tiny-purple-Speedo kind of way. Burnt tan in a more working-journalist way, as if to say, *I stand in the wilds of Africa and take photos of lions as they lunge in my direction and try to eat the leg off my travel assistant.*

In spite of her surprise, she managed to prevent herself from widemouthed gaping, tripping on her heels, or otherwise making a fool of herself. But her brain was practically spinning in a futile attempt to process how it was that he’d escaped her notice so many times. Plastic surgery? Couldn’t be. Bovine growth hormone? Hopefully not. She didn’t know him that well, but she certainly didn’t want his penis falling off.

What was it, then? Perhaps she just hadn't been paying attention. The faint memories she had were of someone much younger who used to come into town during the holidays every so often and encourage the other kids on the block to incite riot at Christmas parties, then step back and document it all with his Polaroid while everyone else got in trouble. Of course, Bijoux never got in trouble; she was watching from the sidelines, too, apparently outside the scope of his lens.

Polaroid boy was now sexy journalist man, and the adult version waved the lint remover in the air and said, "New cat. I wouldn't get too close."

Bijoux stayed on the walk, not wanting cat hair on her outfit, and waited for Peter to come out to her. Mrs. Keegan appeared in the doorway and waved a languid hand in the air. "Peter, you remember Bijoux. Bijoux, my nephew, Peter."

"Hello. Great to see you again," he said. "And thanks for letting me tag along." He raised a small silver voice recorder and then tucked it into the breast pocket of his tuxedo.

"It's great to see you, too," Bijoux said, suddenly shy. Of course, there was no point in being shy; as she'd alluded to Marianne, Peter's mother—Mrs. Keegan's sister—hadn't married rich, which meant that Peter did not, by default, meet the requirement of being currently wealthy or poised for inheritance unless he'd come to town for the explicit purpose of offing his aunt. Not likely, and hence, not eligible.

"Do you mind if I follow?" he asked.

"No problem," Bijoux said, slightly annoyed by the fact that he was taking his own getaway car, even though she'd just decided he wasn't eligible.

She stepped back off the curb and headed to the Mercedes sitting in front of the mansion grounds. The FOR SALE sign stuck

to the rear driver's-side window made her cringe a little, but Peter probably hadn't even noticed.

It wasn't that long of a drive over the hill; just twenty minutes, really. At the front of the Hotel Bel-Air, Bijoux put on the brake, checked her teeth for lipstick in the rearview mirror, then stepped out of the car and handed the keys to the valet. The theme was Casino Royale. The drinks were shaken, not stirred, of course, and served in beautiful crystal wide-brimmed martini glasses, olive optional. The lure was the opportunity to gamble for donated prizes thanks to the usual roster of wealthy L.A. denizens who could afford to fork over a week in their Paris apartments or were willing to spare the genuine Elvis artifacts that had been sitting in the vast basements of their ocean-view mansions. And the cast of characters was about the same as always.

Bijoux waved to a couple of society pals across the room and looked around for the seating cards. That was a missed detail: no numbered seating cards in the lobby. She'd been to so many of these things she could consider hanging out a shingle as an event planner if things really got bad. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

"Do you mind if I peel off for a moment and grab some pictures?" Peter asked from behind her back. "This is kind of a scene."

"No problem. I'll find our table."

He nodded and slipped away.

Peering at the calligraphy on the nearest table, Bijoux jumped in surprise as the hostess came up behind her. The enormously wide brim of her flower-laden hat brushed against the back of Bijoux's neck as she fluttered anxiously around the table.

"Oh, dear God. Oh, sweet Jesus." The hostess clasped her

hands together and shook them, raising her eyes unto what Bijoux guessed might be the heavens. "The count is all off. The seating arrangements are shot to hell. Be a doll, Bijoux, and sit at that table over there. Otherwise it will look so empty." Bijoux sighed and let the hostess steer her with her palm in the small of her back to what she usually referred to as the Table of Zero Possibility. Every charity function had one. And Bijoux sometimes felt as though she'd been sent a lifelong subscription to its membership. The Table of Zero Possibility was usually filled with recent widows, thirteen-year-olds at their first event, or terminally boring married couples. She was actually grateful to have Peter along for the ride this time, because she was tempted just to run into the ladies' room and have a cry.

He slid into the chair next to her, fiddling with the knobby things on his camera. "So how's this function work?" he whispered.

"We eat, we listen to impassioned speeches about the cause and about the hard work of the board, and then we go buy tickets and try to accumulate enough chips to win one of the donated prizes."

"Got it." He looked around and ducked his head back down to her. "Any chance there'll be dancing on tabletops?"

Bijoux smiled. "I wouldn't count on it."

Peter reoriented his chair to face her more squarely. "So what exactly are you up to these days? What do you do?"

"What do I do?" Bijoux still hadn't worked out the right response to that question. Polite society women didn't use the term *mercenary* in mixed company. "I do this," she said brightly. "I . . . support."

She fiddled with the silverware, keenly aware of the slight sheen of sweat that had settled into the cradle above her upper

lip. She'd dressed to impress; she knew she was successfully making a statement, but her short skirt was scrunching up toward her crotch, and her wild platform boots that looked like they had such marvelous arch support had given her twin blisters on both her feet. The chiffon felt soggy against her nervous skin. And one of the cluster of fake eyelashes at the corner of her left eye had sagged and was bothering her contact lens.

But she was blond, buxom, and had dressed for attention—which seemed to be effective, given that she'd just caught the boring married man across the table glancing at her cleavage—and so now that she had everyone's attention, there was no justification for complaining.

"So is this something particularly close to your heart?" Peter asked.

"Sorry, what?"

"I was just asking if this cause was particularly close to your heart."

Bijoux processed the question and realized that she didn't even know what "this" was. *Spotted owl, pampas grass, save the trees, buy an acre of the Amazon, adopt a tiger, feed a child . . . dear God.* She smiled woodenly and answered, "All of them are worthy." *Oh, Lord. I might as well throw in my thoughts on world peace.*

Peter's eyebrow twitched and he just smiled politely. Great. Everything about the way he was looking at her made it obvious he thought she was fake. And that completely pissed Bijoux off.

Of course I'm fake. This is L.A. And after all, you are a journalist. Your daily life hangs on what other people do and say. You literally feed yourself off the ins and outs of other people's situations, comments, and beliefs. You . . . you with your probably borrowed tuxedo and patent

shoes—though admittedly you look pretty hot—you certainly wouldn't be here in your own real life. You clearly don't belong here at . . . at . . . Bijoux looked through the party favor bag for clues and found the “thank you for donating” card. *You clearly don't belong here at the Support Support fund-raiser; apparently a very worthy cause that helps the poor afford proper undergarments to be worn while interviewing for jobs. So there.*

Full of righteous indignation, she turned to the person on her other side, who started a conversation about the size of her bladder. Within two seconds she turned back, feeling somewhat defeated. Peter turned back at the same time, apparently having discovered that Mrs. Peachtree over there on his other side, glamorous as she was in her Chanel, was fond of tossing out the odd racist comment now and then.

He smiled at her, a somewhat wan rendition. Bijoux smiled back but her heart wasn't in it.

Grasping at straws, Bijoux asked a little lamely, “Do you write for a particular paper?”

“Freelance features. Newspapers, magazines . . .”

“Oh. Do you choose your topics, then?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I get a call.”

“Oh. That sounds like a nice job.” Bijoux felt numb. It must have shown.

“Do you go to a lot of these?” he asked.

“Quite a few. Several times a week.”

“Do you . . . work outside the home?”

“After a couple of hundred ‘high teas’ and twice that number of themed luncheons, it begins to feel like work,” she joked.

“Huh.”

This wasn't going well. Normally the men she chatted with at these events understood what it meant to be a lady who lunched. And they certainly understood what it meant to be a

lady who needed to meet a man; otherwise she wouldn't be able to afford lunch. Dating outside of this social sphere required explanations that sounded bizarre to the ear when actually articulated. One really couldn't express that what one did all day was attend social events in hopes of meeting a husband, without sounding ridiculous. Time to change the subject. "So are you planning to write this event up?"

Peter held up his camera and took a shot of well-dressed socialites schmoozing between tables, then stared at what he'd just shot, shrugged, and put his camera away.

"Mmm. Maybe. The whole poker craze is intriguing and it would make a good story, but this isn't quite the angle I was looking for." He craned his neck, looking around over the crowd. "What kind of games have we got at this thing?"

"Society casinos tend to be along the lines of roulette and craps, if that helps," Bijoux said.

"Maybe there's a cigar and poker room."

"Oh, boy."

Peter grinned, looking a little guilty. "It's a guy thing."

"So that's where you've all been," Bijoux teased.

"What you mean?"

"None of my girlfriends can find a decent guy to save our lives. We've been wondering where you've all gone. Apparently, you're all playing poker, and that would confirm what we females have been suspecting. All of the eligible men are too busy bonding out there with each other instead of with us."

"If that's really true," Peter said, "consider this. Poker is a money sport. There could be a lot of rich, eligible men out there wishing some of the girls would come play poker with them." Suddenly, he cocked his head. "Now that's not a bad angle."

Bijoux cocked her head in the same direction. "You know, that's *not* a bad angle."

"Either way, the boys will eventually be back. Poker's just kind of the 'it' thing of the moment. It'll pass."

"It better pass soon or by the time you guys are done playing games, us girls will already have left the state for better odds elsewhere."

"Then maybe you should play, too."

"Maybe I should just move to Las Vegas. Of course, one of my friends . . . did you ever meet Donny Fazzuli? Well, he's got a home poker party thing going on. That would be a shorter drive," she joked.

"Donny Fazzuli. I don't know if I've actually ever met him. I remember the name Donny. He was dating that friend of yours."

"Marianne."

Peter's smile widened. "I remember Marianne. Brunette. Long legs. And if my memory serves right, blue bikini."

Bijoux's jaw dropped. "When did you meet her?"

"I'm not sure I've ever officially met her."

Bijoux sat back in her chair and finally relaxed a little. Maybe he didn't think she was fake. Maybe she felt fake and was just doing a little knee-jerk projecting. "I probably talked about both of them at those little cocktail hours our families used to have. I guess I figured you must have met everyone by now . . . but it's been a really long time."

"I'm sure you did. Of course, there was also that suntanning incident in your backyard."

Bijoux started to laugh. "What suntanning incident? I don't remember a suntanning incident."

"I don't remember which summer it was, but I'm pretty sure it involved me discovering the usefulness of the telephoto lens," he said with a cocky grin. "Don't worry. Neither of you is somewhere on the cover of an *L.A. Girls Gone Crazy* video."

"There's comfort." Bijoux socked him in the arm. "You sleazeball!"

He pretended to defend himself from her attack, shielding himself and laughing. "I was a teenager. I was—"

"Disgusting and wrong."

"I was disgusting and wrong," he agreed gleefully, not looking the least bit sorry. "And unfortunately for me—or perhaps lucky for my reputation—none of you girls turned over. But at that age, the sight of an unclasped bikini top, even if it was just the back, was photo-worthy."

"Men," Bijoux said, exaggerating the syllable.

"You know, I'm thinking of anchoring in L.A. for a while. We really should all get together. Maybe do that poker party."

"Oh! Well . . ." She looked at Peter and thought about him for Marianne. And then she thought about the possibility that he might know some of those rich, eligible men to invite. And besides, he was practically family in that neighborhood-holiday-cocktail-party sort of way. "That sounds great."

"Perfect." He stood up and gave her his arm. "Well, then. Roulette? Craps? What's it going to be?"

Bijoux took his arm and he led her toward the gaming tables. "Which game has the best odds of winning?" she asked. "There's nothing I hate more than running out of cash."

chapter three

9:56 A.M.

“Hey, Marianne. It’s Donny. Wanna fuck?”

Marianne snorted and held the phone down with her chin while she rummaged through her desk for a blue pencil. “Maybe some other time.”

“I thought you liked it when I talked dirty.”

She shook her head. “You’re missing context, tone, and delivery.”

“What’s a fuck buddy if you don’t fuck?”

“A buddy.” Marianne found what she was looking for and stuck the pencil into the electric sharpener.

“How about a back massage? I could give you a back massage.”

“There’s no such thing as a back massage. It’s not-so-clever man code for ‘if I get you to take your shirt off, we’re only approximately three garments away from having sex.’”

There was silence on the other end of the line as apparently Donny had to think about that one. “What idiot gave you the secret decoder?” Then, “Did you meet someone again whom you plan to sleep with, so you can’t sleep with me until

you realize that that relationship is likewise doomed and decide that you might as well be sleeping with me again?"

He meant to be funny but Marianne didn't miss the catch in his voice. "Um, no. How about we meet for lunch?"

"Great! If it's getting stale, I could bring something new to—"

"I literally meant that I'd like to have lunch with you. As friends. There was no sexual innuendo there."

"Friends," he grumbled. "Friends, friends, friends. Friends with benefits, and I'm not getting any benefits . . . but I'll have lunch with you anyway. I have something for you."

"Stop buying me things," Marianne said. "It's too sweet and it makes me sad."

"I like buying you things. It makes me happy."

Marianne studied the perfect point of her pencil and sighed. "Noon, Humboldt Bar and Grill?"

"Great. Later." *Click.*

11:56 A.M.

Donny Fazzuli looked much better than his name implied. Dark hair, dark eyes, olive-tinged skin that tanned to perfection. He wore loose Italian shirts and linen pants or jeans, and with his dark sunglasses on or off, either way there was something so completely male about him that he still had the power to knock Marianne backward on days when she was feeling receptive. He could fix things and plan things and pull things off. He could cook things and clean things and make you feel like the center of the universe.

If he were so inclined.

The biggest problem between Donny and Marianne was that he hadn't been particularly inclined toward much of anything for a while, there, except for watching television and

drinking beer. And Marianne was too much of a doer to be okay with that for long.

They'd met after he'd stumbled out of her neighbor's apartment after waking up drunk on the floor. She'd tried to sneak out of the house to grab the paper before anyone saw her, while wearing a sexy elf costume (long story). Donny saw her. She saw Donny. And though they just couldn't seem to make the resulting relationship stick, they could never find it in them to say good-bye, either.

"Hey, gorgeous," Donny said, pulling out his chair and sitting back like a bronzed sun god, long legs crossed over each other. He adjusted his sunglasses. "I'm glad you got a table outside . . . so, I bought you a present." He passed Marianne the shopping bag. "I was waiting for Valentine's Day, but . . . whatever." He shrugged, the subtext being something along the lines of who the hell knew if they were going to be together on Valentine's Day.

"What is it?"

"Open it and find out."

Marianne reached into the bag, fished around in a bunch of tissue paper, and started to pull the contents out when she caught a glimpse. "Oh!"

His smile widened.

"My coworkers eat lunch here," she hissed. But of course, she was mostly pleased.

"One little French maid's costume couldn't possibly derail you from the career track you're hurtling along."

Marianne stuck her face down in the bag. "It is little, isn't it?" She giggled. "But it looks expensive. You really shouldn't have."

He shrugged. "I figured you probably didn't have anyone buying you bawdy gifts in inappropriate settings at the moment. And besides, I'm an optimist; I think I'm going to get that promotion."

Marianne gave another glance around her to make sure no

one she knew was watching. "You find out today? They'd better give it to you. You totally deserve it."

He took a sip of water, nonchalant as usual about this stuff. In contrast to her totally obsessive vigilance regarding her own career, Marianne found Donny's come-what-may attitude a bit disturbing. Especially because she knew that he was probably the one who had the right attitude. "It'll be fine, either way. But I'll call you tonight and give you the verdict."

"You'd better. And thanks for the present, even though I still don't really know what it's for."

"Consider it a thank-you for all that nagging. I think it might have done me some good."

Marianne snorted. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, now that you have that," Donny said, pointing to the shopping bag, "you can."

7:56 P.M.

"Hey, Marianne. It's Donny."

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Just having dinner. You?"

"Same. Burrito."

"Chicken enchilada," he said, with his mouth presumably full of the very same. "I heard back about the promotion." There was a little pause as Donny swallowed on the other end of the line. "I got it. Can you believe it?"

Marianne shrieked. "Oh, my God! I'm so happy for you. I mean, you're crazy, but obviously . . . yay!"

"I know. I don't believe it either. This town, the more arrogant, the more obnoxious, the more confident, the more they believe. I should've been fired. I didn't even shave for the interview."

"Did you interview with a woman?"

"No."

“Gay man?”

“No.”

“Damn. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, Mare. Hey, the game’s started. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Kay. Congrats again. Bye.”

It clicked on the other end. Marianne hung up. How about that. Good for him. Of course, every time something really great happened to Donny, Marianne couldn’t help feeling a pang. A kind of jealous pang that when they were together—the whole damn time they’d been together—Donny hadn’t had anything great happen to him except her. Was that a horrible thing to think? Was it? She wasn’t the only one. There were lots of successful women who had given up on their men due to the ambition disconnect.

She’d reached the point where she just knew she couldn’t be happy going to work knowing that her guy was sitting at home in a black leather jacket drinking a beer and laughing his ass off at *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Was that so wrong? Yes, yes, there were other things. So many other things. She wasn’t any bargain either. And Donny got fed up with what he called her self-obsession and her constant nagging for him to do something with himself. Fair enough. But Marianne was still a bit bitter, because on the other hand he’d always said how much she inspired him. How she was sort of his muse. But he never got off the couch and proved it—until they’d broken up.

It had something to do with their breaking up that had been a catalyst for his sudden ambition and subsequent climb up the ladder in industry. If she thought about it, Donny’s swagger was perfect for the Hollywood game. But they didn’t know him like she knew him. She knew all his flaws, his insecurities, his habits, and the fact that even on the days when he wore an Armani suit to a meeting, underneath it there was a sometimes goofy guy who liked fast motorcycles, cartoons . . . and tax accountants.

Marianne peered into the bag once more and pulled the costume out. *Damn*. Donny must have spent a fortune. Her eyes narrowed. . . . Unless it was used. She checked for a tag and saw that it was still attached. Strike that. Donny *must* have spent a fortune. She held it up to her body in front of the mirror. Grinning, she started stripping down so she could try it on.

8:56 P.M.

"Hey, Donny. It's Marianne. Whatcha doing?"

"Watching television."

"Wanna hang out?"

"ESPN highlights."

"Oh, shit. Bad timing. Sorry."

"No problem. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay. Bye." *Click*.

Marianne drummed her fingertips against the desk and then picked up the phone again and dialed. "Hey, Donny. It's Marianne. Wanna fuck?"

"See you in fifteen." *Click*.

"He'll be here in ten," Marianne said, flashing a vixenish grin into the mirror.

9:06 P.M.

Marianne opened the door in full French-maid regalia to find Donny standing there with his arms folded against his chest.

He looked her up; he looked her down. "I feel dirty," he said. "I'm looking for someone who has experience straightening things up."

Marianne reached through the door, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him inside. He took charge from there. It was nice to have someone else in charge. Donny was extremely good at it.

And by the time they were finished and lying in a mixed-up sea of pillows, comforter, sheets, and each other on the floor next to the bed where they'd landed at the end, she'd almost convinced herself that this latest sexual episode had been a good idea.

Donny ran his forearm across his sweaty forehead, his other arm tossed around Marianne's shoulders. "It's a shame I'm a self-absorbed bastard with no respect for your needs."

Marianne exhaled slowly to calm her heartbeat. "Yeah. And it's a shame I'm a neurotic bitch with no sense of adventure whatsoever."

"Yeah. We'd be perfect for each other." Donny leaned over, kissed Marianne lightly on the lips, then rolled away and stood up.

"You leaving?" Marianne asked. She climbed back into the bed and pulled up the covers. Normally he stayed over and they cuddled.

"Yeah, gotta run. I've got a poker game with the guys."

Marianne sat straight up in bed. He was denying her post-coital snuggling because of a poker game with "the guys"? How cheap! How demoralizing! How . . . male. Donny grabbed his clothes off the floor and headed for the bathroom. With his hand on the doorknob he suddenly stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Well, we're not committed or anything. . . ."

Marianne blinked at his retreating form. "Nope. We're not committed."

Donny came out of the bathroom, his hair wet and standing on end from the shower. He came up to the bed and pulled the comforter up to Marianne's chin and gave her a big, loud smooch on the mouth. "See you soon, Mare."

"See you soon."

Marianne lay there, listening to the door slam behind him and the distinct percussion of his feet down her apartment stairs. After that, it was completely silent. She'd had a great

time with Donny. They always had a great time in bed. But she suddenly felt icky and distressed. Now that the fun was over and the boy was gone, she just felt wrong.

She got out of bed, straggled into the bathroom, and had a look at herself, makeup ravaged, the remnants of a French maid's costume hanging off her body courtesy of her ex-boyfriend. There was only one thing Marianne could say: "This has got to stop."

She picked up the phone and called Bijoux.

"Donny already leave?"

"Yes. He came . . . we came . . . and then he left to play poker with the boys. Can you believe it? I'm outraged."

"Ooh. No cuddling."

"Apparently he doesn't care."

"You're not supposed to care either."

"Yes, but I'm female."

"I understand."

"I can't be doing this anymore." Marianne's voice cracked. "It's not healthy."

"Have you been crying? Are you okay?" Bijoux asked.

"No and yes. But I feel like I could cry, which can mean only one thing."

"This has got to stop," Bijoux said.

"Right. This has got to stop. If I don't make a clean break with Donny I will never really get off my ass and go find my true soul mate . . . or whatever. So, did you get the SportsClub passes? You know Susan Saunders met her husband at a gym."

"Did she? Fantastic. Because I got 'em. Meet me there at noon tomorrow."

"Will do," Marianne said. "And I'm serious this time. No more Donny."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Sure, Marianne. Whatever you say."

chapter four

It was a typical lunchtime Friday at SportsClub L.A., Marianne thought as she looked around the carefully maintained workout space. Make that typical for the people who actually had legitimate memberships. Then there were the moonlighters, exhibit A being Bijoux and herself hunched over their handlebars at side-by-side bicycle machines in identical Juicy sweat-suits they'd pulled from the depths of Bijoux's closet.

With its marble lobby, plush towels, and vast menu of ultra-high-grade services (meaning you could probably ask them to import a moose complete with personalized pet collar before yoga class and they'd have it flown in from Vermont by the time you were coming down from your hot-stone therapy). SportsClub L.A. was the place for the rich and famous to get their workout on. A membership to one of the guilds might be the first thing the Hollywood hangers-on might buy when they started working, but a membership to SportsClub L.A. was the first thing they bought when they made it big. The high access fees essentially acted as a kind of prescreener for high-income dating, which was why Bijoux suggested they give it a go.

Obviously crashing SportsClub L.A. on day passes was not something Bijoux was in the habit of doing herself, but luckily it was exactly the sort of thing Marianne got her kicks from. So there they were, grinding away on the old bicycles, trying to achieve the classic disinterested L.A. glaze of one who couldn't be bothered. Of course, it was difficult to look disinterested when, in fact, one was keenly interested and having difficulty preventing oneself from blatantly gawking as known person-ages passed to and fro.

Marianne had set her tension to something like a billion, which meant that while doing a loose interpretation of the Tour de France mountain-climb leg, her legs were hardly moving at all. Conversely, Bijoux had gone the opposite route, setting her tension to zero, which had her legs cycling practically out of control. Both methods allowed the girls to keep up pretenses while exerting as little physical activity as possible in lieu of focusing more on the mental activity of scoping out potential dates.

"Don't look right away," Marianne hissed, "but I think that's Jack Nicholson over there doing squats. About two o'clock." Bijoux might be pretty much used to seeing A-list celebrities from her time on the benefit circuit, but Marianne was still a total fangirl.

Bijoux took a casual peek. "That can't be Jack Nicholson. If that's really him . . . well, he's so much . . . so much . . . wider than he used to be." She shrugged and continued scoping the rest of the clientele.

"This place is unbelievable," Marianne said, trying not to look like she was staring at Jack Nicholson's gut. "Where'd you score the passes?"

"I swapped a favor with Mrs. Keegan. I promised—oh, I think that's Brooke Shields in the doorway, there—I promised I'd pet her new Persian for forty-five minutes while she's out of town tomorrow."

“What?”

“You heard correctly.” Bijoux rolled her eyes in a most world-weary way. “I’ve got to pet her cat. She says he’s skittish and needs a comforting human touch to help him acclimate.”

“That’s so L.A. Why doesn’t she just hire someone to do it?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t plan to suggest it. I wouldn’t have anything to swap for the passes, would I? Do you realize a person could bask in a life of luxury in this place without ever having to go outside? I mean, they have it all here. Fine dining, hair-replacement therapy . . . I’m willing to bet we could get BOTOX shots at the smoothie bar—

“Oooh-oooh, five thirty, olive skin,” Marianne hissed.

Bijoux perked up and swiveled around, her body swaying precariously as she began to pedal with even greater vigor. Within a few seconds, however, her shoulders sagged as she came back around and she gave Marianne a look. “Totally gay.”

Marianne reexamined the prospect. “Oh. Oh, yeah. I guess the singlet is kind of a giveaway.”

“Um, *yeah*.”

“Oh! Oh! Nine forty-five!”

Bijoux swiveled . . . and slumped. “Wedding ring . . . cute tracksuit, though.”

“Noon o’clock. Quick!”

Bijoux snapped her head up, squinted, and gave Marianne a horrified look. “TAG Heuer, yes, but gender category uncertain.”

“Just testing you.”

“No more false alarms. My neck is killing me.”

For the next fifteen minutes it was pedal, swivel, slump . . . pedal, swivel, slump . . .

“This is so lame,” Bijoux said after they’d been pedaling for nearly forty-five minutes without a legitimate sighting.

“Okay, seriously. There you go. Four sixteen. Rolex, no wedding ring. Clearly male.”

Bijoux looked. Her eyes widened, telegraphing an unspoken “go” signal to Marianne. Immediately the two girls doubled their efforts on the machine, hair flying, legs pumping, doing the whole making-a-thing-out-of-gulping-a-lot-of-water-for-their-efforts thing. The object of their admiration began to walk down the row of machines between them, and the girls immediately acted as if they’d been working out forever and were just now cooling down.

They’d timed it perfectly. The object was close enough to start a conversation with either one of them. He raised his head and smiled broadly—at a girl riding a bike a few feet down. Her muscles gleamed with perspiration and her skimpy black workout shorts didn’t even begin to contain what there was to be contained.

Marianne looked over at the girl and snorted. “Ass implants. I’m sure of it,” she whispered.

Bijoux exhaled deeply, still trying to catch her breath. “You should have said something. He would have stopped.”

“I thought he was more your type,” Marianne said. “*You* should have said something.”

“That’s what you’re for,” Bijoux wheezed out. “If he’s for me, then you, as wingman, need to start the conversation.”

Marianne just gave her look.

“Oh, God. This is so not going well for me,” Bijoux said. “I’m going to throw up or pass out. Take your pick.” She hunched over the handlebars of the workout bicycle, pedaling sloppily. “I don’t even want to meet someone anymore. I’m all gross. I can’t believe Susan Saunders met her husband this way.”

“Well, stop working out so hard. This isn’t supposed to be about the exercise.”

“I know,” Bijoux muttered. “How can it be about the exercise when we drive over a hill in an SUV and let valets wearing head-to-toe white park us?”

"Let's try one of the classes. It won't be so exhausting. You think?"

"Sure," Bijoux said, eagerly stepping off the machine. She staggered forward as her apparently jellylike knees buckled under her on unfamiliar firm ground. Steadying herself with one hand on the handlebars, she picked up the perfectly snowy white towel and dabbed at her face, working to avoid smearing her full faceload of makeup.

The girls walked over to the schedule of classes and had a look. "Prenatal yoga or candlelight stretching. I think that pretty much decides things for us," Marianne said.

Bijoux nodded, and they headed for the candlelight stretching class.

The wood flooring alone was gorgeous. Honey colored and shiny, it picked up a nice glow from the candles arranged around the room. Low, vaguely Middle Eastern music floated through the air entwined with a mild sandalwood incense. The participants sat perfectly spaced apart on mats, already in lotus position. Marianne and Bijoux adjusted mats in the back of the room and quickly took their spots.

"Now try to imagine the energy flowing through your body . . . feel your arms elongate, let your limbs stretch out nice and limber and strong and long . . . Now imagine the energy flowing and cycling and circling through your body until all that energy is just shooting out your fingertips into the collective spirit of everyone present as we create one massive energy ball. . . ."

"This woman is beginning to frighten me," Marianne muttered under her breath, raising both arms up above her head. They felt extremely short for some reason, and not particularly flexible. The only thing shooting was a shooting pain in her right bicep, which seemed to have taken on a twitch. Next to her, Bijoux's eyes bugged open as she concentrated on manifesting an energy ball from her fingertips.

"Look at these people. They're all perfect," Marianne whispered. "You know what I heard today getting my coffee? This gorgeous girl says to her friend, 'In most cities, people think I'm totally hot; in L.A. I'm, like, totally ugly.'"

A guy on the mat in front of her turned around and sent them a very non-Zen shushing look.

"Yeah, it's crazy," Bijoux whispered back. "The other day I got an e-mail from a benefit-circuit friend of mine. She offered to split a set of BOTOX shots that she was getting on discount from some celebrity plastic surgeon. I didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted." She dropped an arm and pressed her fingers into the theoretically wrinkly spot between her eyes. "Is it that bad?"

"You look fine. Not that you believe me. All I can say is that if you're going to buy botulism for the sole purpose of injecting it into your body, don't get it on discount. For God's sake get the best damn botulism you can get." A girl Marianne recognized as a runner-up from one of the *The Bachelor* seasons turned around and shushed them. Marianne just rolled her eyes. "She's not *that* famous," she said not quite under her breath, and was rewarded in turn by frowns from some of the other participants.

"We are one with the spirit as we geeeeeennnnntttttlllly flow up and around to the other side. Let your negative energy simply leach from your body . . . that's right. . . ."

"Bijoux."

"What?"

"I don't think this fancy stretching is for me. And we can't even talk, much less flirt with anybody."

"Now find a flame and focus on it. Parse the colors of the flame and find your center. . . ."

"What the hell?" Marianne asked.

Bijoux shushed her, her head turning to the right as she focused on a row of candles along the wall. “I’m beginning to feel it. Look into the light, Marianne. Follow the light.”

“Now follow my lead. We’ll remain silent for this sequence as we focus ourselves in the eye of the flame,” the leader said. She was clearly one of those people who’d taken dance lessons at the age of three and had been stretching for the last three decades, for her “lead” consisted of lifting her leg up and around and sticking her foot behind her neck.

Bijoux dutifully tried to arrange her limbs in the appropriate position.

“Don’t do it. You’ll hurt something,” Marianne hissed.

Bijoux shushed her and continued trying to lift her leg up. She lost her balance and keened wildly to the side, rolling into a wooden trencher filled with candles. The Zen-like display wavered, then toppled.

Bijoux squealed; Marianne shrieked, “She’s on fire!” and tackled her friend, smothering her head with an exercise mat, which was probably not flame-retardant but which managed to have the appropriate effect this time. Things suddenly went very quiet.

“Get it off me, Marianne,” came Bijoux’s very indignant voice. “It’s gross and sweaty.”

Marianne peeled the mat off her friend’s face and the two girls examined the singed piece of hair smoldering on the side of Bijoux’s head.

“Maybe you should make that hair-replacement therapy appointment now,” Marianne said, her mouth twitching dangerously as she tried not to laugh.

Bijoux fingered the damage. “It’s just one of my hair extensions. Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready to go.” The two girls stood up, making a flailing

attempt at replacing the fallen candles and the capsized trencher. It didn't work. Sort of bowing and apologizing all at once, they backed out of the room as twelve pairs of eyes stared at them.

"Let's *try* to regain our focus. . . . Imagine a stream . . . and some willows . . . and a pretty fawn. . . ."

Bijoux and Marianne just barely got out the door and into the changing room before bursting into peals of laughter.

"I . . . can't . . . breathe! Too . . . funny."

The changing room attendant took a call on the house line watching them as she spoke. She hung up and started toward them.

"Uh-oh," Marianne said.

"I second that. You want me to drop you at home or do you want to go for a walk?"

"A walk? I thought you said you were exhausted."

"I just had this idea I haven't tried yet. When I go over to pet the cat, I'll borrow the Keegans' dog and walk it around in some really upscale neighborhoods. You know what people are always saying about dog people attracting other dog people. And this way it will be dog people attracting other *wealthy* dog people."

Marianne arched an eyebrow. "Well, you'll have to let me know how that works out for you."

Bijoux looked both ways and then hobbled across the street, which wasn't a very long hobble, and then up the arched driveway, which was.

She rang the doorbell and waited. Rosa answered the door.

"Hola, Rosa. ¿Cómo estas?"

"Bien. Muy bien, Señorita Sterling."

"Um, ¿Señora Keegan está?"

"Noooo. Señora Keegan no está." Rosa waited, a bright

smile on her face that probably hid what she was really thinking; that Bijoux's Spanish was a total embarrassment.

Bijoux peeked behind Rosa into the house. "*El perro está?*"

"*El perro? No. El perro no está. El gato está.*" She thought Bijoux had mixed up the animal word.

"Right. I was getting to the cat part. I just thought . . ." And then it hit her. The cat would work. She'd promised to spend time with the cat anyway. "Right. *El gato.*" Bijoux chewed her lower lip. "Okay. *Estoy toma el gato a mi casa para . . . para . . .* pet it. *Estoy pet el gato.*"

Rosa frowned, put her hands on her hips, and slipped right out of her Spanish. "You're going to take the cat and pet it? Is that really what you meant to say?"

Bijoux nodded. "Señora Keegan asked me to, and I just figured I might as well do it over at my house to, you know, help it acclimate to other areas of the neighborhood better."

Rosa's eyebrow went up, but she swallowed the smile that was forming and stepped away from the door to reveal an enormous gray Persian cat clouded by more cat hair than seemed possible for just one animal to have all on its own. It sat in the middle of a formerly pristine white shag carpet, which had taken on a dingy gray quality in the section where the cat was sitting.

Bijoux bent over and stuck her hand out. "Here, sweetie. Here, precious. Here, gorgeous . . . here—"

"Skippy," Rosa said matter-of-factly.

Bijoux stood upright and looked over her shoulder. "Skippy?"

Rosa shrugged. "Don't ask me. I think Peter may have had something to do with it. It was supposed to be a joke, but it stuck."

"Okay." She turned back to the cat. "Here, Skippy. I'm Bijoux."

The cat stared at Bijoux with clear blue eyes. Eyes that said, *You're an imbecile and we both know it.*

But Bijoux was too quick. In a flash she was stuffing the cat into her tote bag, giving Rosa a more confident *adiós* smile than she actually felt, and then hightailing it back down the driveway.

Though displeased, Skippy took the jostling fairly well.

She'd intended to take the dog, but with his unexpected absence, she'd figured the cat would suffice. What was more, walking a cat would attract more attention than walking a common dog. People would look. More important, men would look.

Unfortunately, it was a hot July, the rope she was using as a leash looked unnervingly like a noose, and people were crossing the street to avoid her. Skippy finally balked, and Bijoux had to pick him up and put him in her purse. He was clearly not happy, Bijoux was not happy, and within fifteen minutes of walking up the canyon road, sirens began to wail from somewhere on a street below.

Bijoux pulled out her cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Mare, it's me."

"You're breathing funny."

"I'm panicked."

"What's wrong?" Marianne asked.

"Is it legal for Animal Control to make a citizen's arrest?"

"I don't know."

"Shit, shit, shit!"

"Calm down and tell me exactly what's happening."

Bijoux looked behind her in the direction of the sirens. "I think I'm being tailed by some sort of law enforcement vehicle."

"Have you done anything wrong?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm sure I look guilty. I'm speed-racing in high heels down a canyon road, talking into my cell phone with a dehydrated Persian cat in my purse."

Silence on the other end of the line.

"Marianne, are you still there?" Bijoux asked.

"Yes, sorry. I was processing. So this is what it's come to. Is there anything I can actually do for you?"

"No, I was just calling to tell you—"

"That this has got to stop," Marianne said, punctuating her statement with a massive sigh.

"Exactly. Hold on." Bijoux glanced behind her again. The van was parked, and some sort of uniformed officer was striding in her direction. Sweat was already running in rivulets down her back, but she picked up the pace, stumbled in her heels, then paused long enough to take them off and carry them in one hand.

Bijoux peeked into the purse, where Skippy stared up at her, looking most displeased. "Almost home, Skippy. Almost there," she said breathlessly as she headed to her house. Peter was just driving up to the curb. She waved him over and then keyed into the Sterling mansion. She put Skippy down in the sink and turned the water on just as a knock came at the door. "I've gotta go, Mare, but let's get together tonight."

"Come over whenever."

"Bye." Bijoux hung up and opened the door. Peter and the officer stood on the doorstep.

"Hi," Bijoux said, attempting to cover her nervousness and hoping to cause a distraction by tossing her hair around a little. "Skippy's having a drink. I was just taking care of their cat, you see. Everything's fine."

"That's what I told him," Peter said, a bemused expression on his face.

The officer turned to him and said, "So that's your cat. And you're okay with . . . this."

"Yeah, everything's fine. She was taking him for an airing. Everything's just as it should be."

Bijoux looked at him gratefully. The officer shrugged and

turned away, shaking his head as he walked back toward his van.

“You okay?” Peter asked.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

“How’s Skippy?”

“Just a little dehydrated, I think. So, Peter . . . is your aunt the litigious sort? Because she should know I’m about as far away from deep pockets as you can get.”

Peter leaned against the door frame, shaking his head. He started to laugh which made Bijoux start to laugh. “Bijoux,” he said, “you’re one of a kind.”

chapter five

Marianne opened the door to find Bijoux holding a bulging plastic grocery sack that was clearly stretched beyond reasonable capacity. Bijoux had changed into a black-and-yellow couture tracksuit, and the whole thing made her look like a disgruntled bee. Her massive amounts of blond hair (the result of a hair extension mishap, or what *Marianne* would term a mishap) were on top of her head. The mess was clamped up and against her head with a barrage of jeweled bobbypins and managed to look terrific.

It might have been a signal of bad things for Bijoux, but Marianne would have been more than happy to look that good without even trying. She herself wore a huge colorful silk kimono that had once been Bijoux's over a pair of faded mismatched sweats.

The two girls looked at each other and just shook their heads in wordless commiseration; then Bijoux stepped over the threshold into Marianne's apartment. "At least we're not boring," she said.

Marianne followed her in. "That's right. Not many people could say they were thrown out of SportsClub L.A."

Bijoux sighed. "Well, I don't think many people would choose to say it."

Marianne just shrugged. "How's the cat? Are they pressing charges?"

"The cat's fine. And Peter's downplaying it to his aunt, which I thought was very nice of him."

Marianne rummaged about in the grocery sack as Bijoux took her jacket off and dumped her things all over the dining room table. "You never told me how that thing went." She rummaged some more. "Wow. You seem to have covered all the bases." She looked up at her friend. "But I'm warning you, there's something up with my cable, and every channel has a weird gray stripe going across."

"I don't care. It's fine," Bijoux said.

"You don't want to go watch at your house? On the wall-size plasma TV? In an enormous mansion where servants will probably ask us if we want champagne with our Twinkies?"

"No, I like it here," Bijoux said blandly, sorting through the stack of magazines on Marianne's coffee table. She settled into her customary spot on the couch, wrapped the decorative cashmere throw around her and got herself all comfortable, then opened up last month's *Cosmopolitan* (actually her own subscription, passed on to Marianne when Bijoux was finished).

Marianne shook her head. "Okay, then. I'll just go make some drinks."

One would think it would make more sense for Marianne to go over to Bijoux's mansion, but Bijoux always wanted to come to Marianne's. She said that if she was going to be tossed out on her ass soon, she needed to start getting used to her new reality. Marianne refrained from pointing out that this kind of reality in this housing market still cost a sizable percentage of one's monthly salary, and without a major source of income, Bijoux would never be able to afford an apartment like hers.

"You don't mind, do you?" Bijoux suddenly called out from the living room as Marianne disappeared into the kitchen and began gathering drink supplies.

"Of course not. I just don't get it."

"You have a nice apartment. It's homey."

Marianne came back around the corner of the kitchen with a small plastic bag of cocktail umbrellas in her hand and leaned against the doorjamb. "Yes, but you have all the luxuries."

"They're already being phased out. Remember that shower with three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spray? Gone. A real bummer. Apparently the water used from one of those showers could hydrate an entire classroom of underprivileged drought-stricken schoolchildren for a week. Besides, I can sit on things here without worrying about how much they'd cost if I broke them."

Marianne looked around. It *was* a nice apartment. She'd done a bang-up job. Wood flooring, warm lighting, and area rugs that felt good between the toes. It was cozy and organized and pleasant with paint job and accessories in nice, calming pastel tones of blues and grays and greens. She called it her "showplace" because it was what her bosses would have expected to see if they ever came over for dinner.

Of course, her bosses never came over for dinner, and Marianne could have afforded a much flashier place. But once she had moved, she couldn't bring herself to move again, though she would probably have been much happier somewhere busier and more energetic, like the Grove or Brentwood. She shrugged and went back into the kitchen and began mixing drinks and arranging tapas, a sigh escaping from her mouth before she even realized it was forming.

How many times had she and Bijoux repeated this scenario? It wasn't that Marianne was unhappy. There wasn't enough going on to be unhappy about. It wasn't like hanging

out with her best friend was some kind of hardship. If they'd just lower their standards, they could easily be hanging out with other people—men people.

Yes, there were tons of perfectly acceptable, average men to date. There were even perfectly acceptable, average men to date who liked smart, successful women and didn't give lectures about women who'd spent their best years concentrating on a career only to wake up at thirty-five and bitch about the men who were left and didn't it serve those selfish bitches right.

A young single woman's search for a mate was not inherently an act of desperation, though in all fairness it was understandable why so many people confused the two.

She had a friend who'd been proposed to during a football game while watching TV with a bunch of friends. The guy had turned to her during halftime and said, "So, do you want to get married?" She'd said, "Uh. Okay." And that, in a nutshell, was Marianne's idea of hell. The whole relationship . . . so uninspired . . . such a lack of sparkle. Everything about it screamed, *You're here, I'm here, we might as well.*

We might as well wasn't at all what Marianne was looking for. She was looking for the guy who would look back at her as if she were the best thing he'd ever seen and would just know that without her, the sparkle in his life would be missing. That was the kind of relationship Marianne wanted. The one with the sparkle. For a moment there she'd thought she'd found it with Donny. Now she wasn't sure she'd ever find it.

The trouble with Los Angeles, first of all, was that it was a handicapped city from the get-go. Everyone was so damn defensive.

Meeting people in this town was built around the concept of

“not.” As in *not* someone who was an actor/writer/musician/model. *Not* someone who was in “industry.” *Not* someone who was into the whole L.A. bullshit. *Not*. It was like a whole extra layer of *not*-ness separating people from each other.

There was a reason people complained it was impossible to meet eligible mates in this town. A million factors conspired. A) Everybody was in their car. B) When not in their car, everybody was taking a phone call. C) Oftentimes, people were both in their cars and making phone calls, which had the effect of killing off some of the overall population from which to choose.

Preconceived notions and stereotypes based on locale to go along with the preconceived notions and stereotypes about women in general. That’s what the women in L.A. today were dealing with. There was something so irritating about men who specified that they were only willing to meet women who were at least five years younger or more. It wasn’t just the fertility issue, because apparently any women who crossed over to the hell known as thirty-four-plus became a disgusting, unattractive, desperate shriveled prune of a shell of a human being.

But also it was because women who didn’t have a man by then obviously had been self-absorbed in their own selfish careers and selves. The way Marianne saw it was, what the hell else were you going to concentrate on if you didn’t have a boyfriend? Yourself and your friends and your family. Women weren’t alone at this age because they’d spent too much time thinking about themselves; they were alone because the men simply weren’t good enough.

She’d just read a newspaper article about how smart women had a much harder chance of finding a mate because A) men preferred stupid women, and B) both ugly and gorgeous women preferred more interesting men. And there just weren’t enough

interesting men who preferred smart women to go around. And of those interesting men who preferred smart women, just like Donny, the vast majority in L.A. were apparently too busy playing poker with their other male friends to be in the right place at the right time to find the women in question.

Marianne walked out of the kitchen and placed the tray of drinks down on the coffee table. She wiped her hands on her sweatshirt. "Do you think I should freeze my eggs?"

Bijoux looked at her over the magazine. "Come again?"

"My eggs. Should I freeze them, just in case? It's the latest thing. So that if I don't meet a guy for a long time, my eggs will still be young even if I'm not."

"That's just . . . wow. That's just . . . *wow*. Well, I think you should do whatever you think will give you the most peace," Bijoux said.

"You don't sound too convinced."

Bijoux studied Marianne's face for a moment. "Well, personally, I don't want kids with freezer burn."

"Oh, for God's sake."

"I'm just saying. The technology's still too new," Bijoux said. "It's early yet. They may come up with some better techniques. Don't be rash."

Marianne sat down on the arm of the couch. "I'm just beginning to think . . . I mean, I keep trying to think how it would work, and it seems like it would . . . but it just doesn't. . . . You know what I mean?"

Bijoux looked up, quirked an eyebrow, said, "Uh-huh," and went back to her magazine.

"I simply can't marry Donny." Marianne threw up her arms in despair. "We'd kill each other. I'm quite sure of it. There's just way too much drama. If we were meant to be together, we'd be together. But we're not together. We're together and then we're not together. We're obviously not meant to be."

Bijoux slowly closed the magazine and folded her hands together on top. "You know what's going to happen after I leave here tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to call up Donny, have sex, be sort of happy you did and sort of sorry it happened, decide for the umpteenth time that you must get on with your life and find somebody new, and then do the whole thing all over again. Nothing will ever change and you'll repeat the same scenario over and over again."

"That's not true. I've sworn off him. I was right next to you at SportsClub, putting myself out there."

Bijoux blinked up at her. Marianne sighed. There was nothing to discuss. That look said, *Same old, same old*, and that was exactly what it was. "I'll get the tapas."

She came back out with the tapas tray and arranged everything on the table, and settled in on the couch next to her friend. Bijoux looked at the little bowls. "I need to learn how to do that. That's really cute. Was it hard?"

Marianne cocked one eyebrow. "I put the little snacks in the bowls. No, it wasn't hard."

"Well, you mean, it's not hard for you."

Marianne just started laughing and opened up the jar of maraschino cherries. "Your turn to pick."

Bijoux thumbed through the *TV Guide*. "It's already started, but *Pretty in Pink*, I guess."

"Again?"

"Would you prefer *Gandhi*? That's on, too."

They looked at each other and in unison intoned, "*Pretty in Pink*."

Marianne flipped to the right channel and said, "Why don't we just rent a DVD one of these days and see something we've never seen?" She leaned over the TV tray and used an umbrella

toothpick to spear a cherry and a canned pineapple slice, then dropped it into Bijoux's drink.

Bijoux gestured to the TV screen with her mai tai. "This was our childhood, Marianne. We were such innocents. Molly Ringwald was our best friend and our world was high school. How could we have known? She always got the boy in the end. Though I still completely disagree with the ending of this movie. I still remember Duckie's face when he let her go."

"Tell me you're not already crying."

"Of course I'm not crying." Bijoux grabbed a cocktail napkin and loudly blew her nose.

The phone rang, and Marianne reached over the arm of the couch and picked it up. "Oh, hi, Mom . . . yeah, I'm fine. Everything's fine . . . what? I'm just hanging out with Bijoux. . . . Yes, I realize it's Friday night. . . . No, we're not going out tonight. . . . No. No. No, we don't have dates. . . . No, Mom, I'm not a lesbian. Would that be better?" Marianne turned away from the phone. "She says that would be better."

Bijoux shrugged.

"What are you up to? Oh. Oh, I see. That sounds great. Well, you go on then. Have a great time. Say hi to Daddy. Okay . . . Okay . . . Okay . . . I love you, too." Marianne hung up the phone. "How sad is it that my parents have a better social life than I do?"

"And they're already married," Bijoux said bitterly. "Pass the bag."

Marianne handed her the grocery bag, and Bijoux began to remove an assortment of items, which she arranged on the table in front of them. "Look what I bought," she said, holding up a transparent, frosting-smeared box. "2-Bite Cupcakes. Aren't they adorable? Just look at that frosting-to-cake ratio."

Marianne opened the top and looked down. "They look good. If we split the box and eat them all tonight, do you think

it would equal a piece of cake for each of us? Or more than a piece of cake?"

"If I'd planned to eat enough to equal a piece of cake, I would have bought cake."

"So what you're telling me is that these are supposed to be diet-serving cupcakes?" Marianne wiggled one of the tiny cupcakes free and held it up to the light for inspection. She stuck the whole thing in her mouth, effectively renaming the morsel to 1-Bite Cupcake. With her mouth completely full she managed to say, "I think I could eat six and just about approximate a piece of cake."

Bijoux looked at her, sighed, and lined six cupcakes up in front of herself.

"So why *do* we need men? We've managed to create these lives where we don't actually need them. We've got sperm banks and Rabbit Pearls and good jobs with lots of money." Marianne looked over at Bijoux, who'd just harrumphed after the word *money*. "Work with me here. What is it that compels us to couple up? I mean, straight or gay is irrelevant. Everybody's coupling up. Why? And what makes it so annoying to be uncoupled in coupled circumstances? And why don't couples like to have uncoupled around? If it were only in our heads, we'd have a lot more dinner invitations. But it's in everybody's heads."

"Noah took two of each animal."

There was a long pause. "That's it?" Marianne asked.

"That's about as much of an explanation as you're ever going to get."

"There are some animals who don't couple up. And there are some animals who don't couple up the way Noah thought they would."

"And we're not either of those kind of animals," Bijoux said with the voice of finality.

"No," Marianne said, taking another 2-Bite in one bite. "We're not."

They turned back to the television, where Molly was sewing a really hideous pink prom dress that the audience was supposed to think was cool and creative but which was actually super disappointing and ugly. Bijoux rummaged through the supplies and pulled out a Twinkies twin-pack. She took one for herself and passed the other one over. "Marianne?"

"Hmm?"

"What are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About our futures."

Marianne hoisted an eyebrow. "I'm doing fine, thank you. And as for you, my suggestion has always been to convince your parents to set up a foundation with you as the head for dispensing your fortune for good works, a task for which you will be admirably compensated."

Bijoux stared down at the remaining Twinkie stub in her hand. "We're not fine." She pushed the stub in her mouth and licked the cream off her fingers, the end result being that the cream filling ended up everywhere. With her mouth still full, she said something along the lines of, "I'm not fine, you're not fine, and if we don't do something about it soon, I fear that it will all creep up on us."

She was so, so serious that Marianne didn't have the heart to tease anymore. "What will, sweetie?"

Bijoux's arms flailed out to indicate the entirety of the Friday-night experience. "This! Terminal *this*-ness. Can you say 'crisis'?"

Marianne just looked at her. "Our problems aren't interesting enough to be a crisis."

Bijoux nodded sagely. "Which means we are facing down a disaster on a scale so massive, so all-encompassing, I fear we may never escape," she said very clearly, very calmly, very seri-

ously. “We are on the verge, my friend, of never-ending blah. And what’s more, we are cresting thirty as we stand on the precipice of this blah-ness.”

“I see.”

“What we’ve got here is an epidemic of catastrophic proportions.” Bijoux was on a roll now. She’d hit some kind of a wall. “Look at this. I mean, just *look* at this!” She swung the remote control toward the television, overexaggerating her movements to indicate just how desperate their situation was. “It’s Friday f-ing night, and the only thing on is Molly Ringwald, Spanish-language programming, and poker. This is my idea of hell.”

Marianne tucked her feet under the one scrap of cashmere blanket that wasn’t swathed around Bijoux. “We could . . . go out or something. No, forget I said that. That’s obviously not working. All of the eligible men in Los Angeles—which isn’t a whole lot to begin with, I might add—all of the eligible men in Los Angeles are staying inside playing poker or watching it on TV!”

“There is one thing we haven’t tried,” Bijoux said. “We haven’t tried meeting the boys at their own game. We haven’t tried going out and playing poker.”

Marianne stared at her friend. “I’m not exactly sure how to process that statement. Is this because you went to that casino benefit?”

“Sort of. Peter and I were talking about it. He says there are tons of rich, eligible men out there playing poker together.”

Marianne narrowed her eyes. “He said that?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“He might have been joking.”

“If that’s the case, it’s probably just as well. I’m not certain we want to be dating gamblers anyway,” Marianne said, popping open a bag of Skittles.

“Some of those guys make millions.”

"The professionals."

Bijoux cocked her head. "Then maybe we should go to Vegas and get ourselves some professionals. The thought has crossed my mind."

"Peter put this into your head?" Marianne asked, grabbing the remote and turning back to *Pretty in Pink*.

Bijoux shrugged, distracted by the show and clearly disinterested in Peter. "You're more his type than me," she said. "Oh, my God. This is where she has to walk into the dance by herself. God, that's just torture."

Marianne's eyes didn't leave the screen, and her hand maintained a rhythm as it steadily transferred Skittles to mouth in a never-ending stream of not really even conscious chewing. "What does he look like?"

"I don't know. He's sort of a male version of you."

"I bore me."

"I don't mean personality-wise."

Marianne's hand stilled midway to her mouth. "I'm not quite certain how to take that."

"What I'm saying is that he might appeal to you aesthetically. But I'm not sure about temperamentally."

"Oh." Marianne's hand still didn't move as she thought that over. And then slowly the Skittles treadmill started up again. "I'm not interested," she said a moment later.

Bijoux rolled her eyes and turned back to the screen. "This is it! Oh, poor Duckie."

"You're hurting my arm," Marianne said. "But you're so right. Poor Duckie. Thank God he gets to dance with that other popular chick at the very end."

She and Bijoux watched the look on Duckie's face as Andie went off with boring old Andrew McCarthy and the theme music kicked in.

Both girls took a deep breath and exhaled. "It never gets old," Marianne said.

"No, it never gets old," Bijoux said, clutching her chest.

Marianne muted the TV as the credits began to roll. "Okay, so Peter's out. But whatever happened with that one guy? What was his name?"

Bijoux looked at Marianne, a crinkle of puzzlement over her nose. "What *was* his name?"

"You know, the one who was about to make a billion dollars. You hung with him for, like, a couple of months and then completely stopped talking about him."

"Yeah. Well . . ." Bijoux sighed. "I broke up with him. I decided that 'about to' wasn't worth waiting around for. I mean, if the guy I'm dating is technically poor at the time the relationship begins, there had better be some mitigating factors to tide me over while waiting for the payoff. But it was becoming totally stale. Finger there. Tongue here. 'Ooh-ooh, baby.' Yeah. Phew. Done. George falls asleep. Bijoux stares up at the ceiling, suddenly realizing she forgot to clean the spilled ground coffee out of the grout like she'd planned. . . ."

"You mean forgot to ask the maid to clean the spilled ground coffee out of the grout."

"Yeah. And besides, I could tolerate less and less of him every time we slept together. The mole on his back I told you about? I got to the point where I just so desperately wanted to pluck the hair out, I was having trouble sleeping at night for thinking about it. I don't know. Maybe we should try harder. Try some of the same things we've already tried, but . . . I don't know . . . put more heart into it."

Marianne grimaced. "I couldn't possibly. It's horrible."

"What about speed-dating?" Bijoux asked. "It's low time commitment."

"Too public. Too obvious. Too desperate."

"Online dating?"

"I'm not trying that again. Nobody can spell." Marianne sniffed with disdain. "I refuse to waste my time going to coffee with men who don't have the energy to punctuate or to capitalize 'I.' If they can't be bothered to form a complete sentence, I can't be bothered to meet them."

"How about going to a matchmaker?"

"A coworker of mine did that. She paid a thousand dollars for the privilege of meeting a cowl-neck-sweater-wearing man named Saul with a comb-over who was very in touch with his feelings. Do I need to add that it didn't take? I don't think I do."

"Maybe the pet thing?" Bijoux asked tentatively. "I don't think we've fully explored that possibility."

"Oh, my God! Are you joking? You said you almost got arrested."

"I was just *worried* about being arrested. But sometimes men find a criminal streak attractive."

"Sometimes they don't," Marianne said dryly.

"Well, it's not like walking a cat is illegal. I didn't expect it to be so hot out, and as we've just established, we'd tried everything else. I like to be able to say I left no stone unturned."

After a pause, Marianne said, "Maybe we *should* go to Vegas and try to meet some professionals. Except we don't even know how to play."

"Why don't we ask Donny?"

"Because Donny is playing poker with the boys!"

"If there are boys there, then let's ask Donny if we can join in. I was already talking to Peter about it. He wants to write a story about poker. And I told him that Donny has a regular game and that maybe we could all have a little poker party."

"I don't see that Donny's going to be excited about opening up his secret men's society to a couple of girl pals. You know

how boys are about that sort of thing. The vibe is never the same with women around. That's what he's always telling me."

"No, you're missing the point. The point *is* that it's a guy thing."

"Well, I'm not going to ask him. I'm not asking Donny to invite me to a poker game so I can get help for his replacement. That's just wrong."

"Fine. I'll ask him. I mean, come on, Marianne. It's just one game. He'll think it sounds fun. Besides, what's the worst thing that can happen? You slay the men and take their money."

Marianne sat bolt upright. "What did you just say?"

"Um . . . he'll think it sounds fun?"

"No, the other thing."

"Slay the men and take their money?"

"Yes." Marianne looked at her with wide eyes. "Now that's a motto I can get behind. You know what I like about you, Bijoux?" she said.

"What?"

"I can eat an entire box of cupcakes and wash it back with a handful of Skittles, and then top it off with Twinkies and mai tais without feeling the least bit self-conscious in front of you."

"I'm so glad," Bijoux said.

"Me too." Marianne looked over at her friend and smiled. "Now pass me that bag of potato chips, will ya?"

chapter six

Donny's place generally looked like it was being bombed on a regular basis. He lived in Brentwood in a minuscule apartment just below Sunset Boulevard. It had white Pergo flooring and slightly curved edges, which gave it a totally eighties feel. He'd taken that theme and run with it, probably because going full-throttle eighties meant that he could decorate with all of the stuff he'd never gotten around to throwing away and calling it retro. Nagel posters tilted slightly off axis hung on the walls. The furniture was all pre-Pottery Barn nineties. It was the sort of place where a suspect from *Miami Vice* might have lived.

He'd obviously cleaned the apartment for the occasion, because the various surfaces were cleared, and towering stacks of papers were piled on the floor up against the walls. From what Marianne had told her, with his new salary Donny would probably be moving to something much nicer, though.

Donny was the kind of guy who could talk his way into just about any kind of job, with or without relevant experience. He just had the gift of networking and a massive sense of self-confidence, two things that never failed to appeal to job inter-

viewers. So now he'd gone and probably landed a huge raise to go with his promotion. Marianne hadn't talked that much about it, but Bijoux knew that Donny's recent success was both a sore spot and a source of pride for her.

Even as Marianne introduced Peter to Donny, Bijoux could see the proprietary nature of her friend's body language. She still loved him. No question.

"Donny, this is Peter Graham," Marianne was saying. "He's an old friend of Bijoux's. Peter, Donny. He's . . . an even older friend."

The two men shook hands and swapped pleasantries, clearly sizing each other up. Bijoux took the opportunity to glance at the other men in the living room as she detoured into the kitchen with the sack of beer they'd brought.

Donny followed behind. "Here, let me take that," he said, lifting the heavy sack out of her arms.

"You're such a gentleman."

"I try." He put it down on the ground in front of the refrigerator and started unloading the bottles. "So you dating this guy?" he asked, gesturing over his shoulder toward where Peter was chatting with Marianne and the other guys around the poker table.

"Oh, he's just a family friend."

"He's not your date?" Donny asked, clearly caught by surprise.

"Nope. Just a friend."

"No money," Donny said with an understanding nod.

Being with Donny was so easy. He understood Bijoux's plight and she didn't feel the urge to cringe when they talked about her impending financial disaster and what she planned to do to solve it.

He suddenly turned and looked behind him. "Is he making a play for Marianne?"

Bijoux looked over her shoulder. "Everyone makes a play for Marianne. You know that. Poor thing is cursed with natural charisma," she said dryly.

They both watched Marianne who'd already drifted across the room, drawing the other men to her like a magnet.

Bijoux chewed on her lower lip and watched. *You're going to have to turn it on, Bijoux. Turn it on. It's why you're here.* She might be the one wearing a bright-turquoise-and-white-polka-dot silk miniskirt and a silver-and-turquoise tank top. She might be the one with piles of blond hair and loud makeup, but when Marianne was in the room, Bijoux always felt like her shadow.

Marianne had two calibrations: "on" and "really on." Bijoux's own calibrations read, "I know you" and "I don't know you—panic!" That was just the way she was. So this whole business about going to play cards with strange men as a construct to meet them and divine their eligibility was really quite preposterous and merely reminded Bijoux just how desperate she really was.

She wasn't stupid. It wasn't as if she had nothing to say. She'd read the latest books, watched bad television, picked up *People* magazine instead of *Forbes* in the dentist's office. She knew how to flirt, how to work a room . . . but it didn't come naturally. She could fake it, no doubt. She could make people think she knew exactly what she was doing, that she had all the confidence in the world, but the reality was that she was going to sit down at that poker table and smile like she meant it and try to meet someone nice (and rich) while feeling just about as uncomfortable in her own skin as a person could feel.

Donny finished unloading the beer and kept the last one for himself, popping the top using just his hand and the counter in that way boys did that always gave Bijoux a bit of a thrill. He continued to watch Marianne through the opening under the

cabinets that went straight through to the living room, the look on his face careening from neutral to negative.

"You okay?" Bijoux asked.

He came to with a start, as if he'd been far, far away, and put his beer down. "I'm brilliant," he said, grabbing both sides of Bijoux's head and planting a loud, obnoxious kiss on the top. "Are you?"

"Yeah." She shrugged. "Same old, same old."

"You'll figure it out," he said. "Now get out there and have some fun."

Bijoux moved into the living room, where everyone was assembling around an ugly black-lacquer table that just screamed, *I am a bachelor*.

Marianne, Peter, and Donny she obviously knew. And of the five remaining men, two were a couple of Donny's old pals she'd met before; two were guys of reasonable (if not inspiring) wealth whom she'd already flirted with before under other social circumstances and had established absolutely zero chemistry with; and the other was . . . well, physically out of the question.

At least there was nothing to be nervous about. Bijoux checked her watch and sighed. It had seemed like a reasonable experiment at the time of conception, she supposed. But now she was stuck playing cards with a bunch of guys who clearly would have no influence on the solution to her financial and romantic predicament.

She took a seat and looked at Marianne across the table. Marianne and Peter sat side by side, and to Bijoux's sudden horror Marianne released a giggle and slapped Peter playfully on the hand.

Bijoux looked over at Donny, who sat at the head of the table, his eyes narrowed and fixated on the very same scene.

"Okay, so everyone has a drink? Oh, no. Wait. We're missing

a beer down there,” he said loudly. He got up, picked up a bottle of beer from the cooler on the floor at his left, and loudly slammed it down on the table between Marianne and Peter.

The beer did its job, and the two of them separated. Donny hoisted his glass. “To . . . us. Drink up!”

Much clinking and toasting ensued.

“Well . . . let’s just deal the cards and begin.” Donny sat down and shuffled a deck of cards with an excess of flourish. He dealt two cards to each player and carefully tapped the remainder of the deck against the table. Bijoux looked at her cards. A ten of spades and a three of diamonds. She wasn’t exactly sure what they were playing or what she was supposed to do next, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to tell her that this was not a good hand.

She looked over her cards at Marianne, who stared back at her with furrowed brow. “So now what?” Marianne asked Donny.

“So now we show our cards. . . . Right, just lay them faceup on the table. . . . Okay, uh-huh, I see. . . .”

Bijoux put her cards faceup along with everybody else. Marianne had only an eight and a three. So depending on what game they were playing, that probably meant that Bijoux was . . . safe. Or whatever.

“What are we playing?” Marianne asked, as if she were reading Bijoux’s mind.

Donny didn’t answer. None of the guys did. He just looked over all of the cards around the table, then leaned back in his chair and unveiled a slow killer smile. “Well, Marianne, that’s you. You’ve got the worst hand. So you’re going to have to take something off.”

Bijoux whipped her head around and looked at Donny, then looked over at Marianne.

There was a palpable silence. Finally Marianne said the only thing she could say: “Um, what?”

“Worst hand strips,” he said, lifting his shoulders in a helpless gesture, then folding his arms over his chest.

Bijoux and Marianne looked at each other once more and then looked around the table at the men. They all wore . . . expectant looks on their faces. Even Peter.

Marianne narrowed her eyes at Donny. “You imbecile,” she muttered.

“What did *I* do? You said you wanted to play poker with the boys.”

She leaned over the table. “This isn’t real poker. We might as well flip a coin!”

“’S okay with me,” Donny said. “It would be faster.”

Bijoux suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She tried to remember exactly what she’d discussed with Donny when she’d called him up and suggested the poker game in the first place.

“Bijoux, we need to use the ladies’ room,” Marianne snapped, standing up.

Bijoux didn’t need any persuading. She got up, and the two of them headed into the bathroom and locked themselves into the cramped space. “Oh, my Lord,” Bijoux said as the locker-room stench hit her olfactories. She reached down and grabbed the matchbox sitting on the sink. She lit a match, let it burn for a second, then blew it out and waved the smoke around in the air.

“Good God, watch your foot,” Marianne said.

Bijoux looked down and recoiled in horror as she tried to shake the item off her spiked heel. “Is that what I think it is? Get it off!”

Marianne used the toe of her own shoe to nudge the jock-strap off Bijoux’s shoe, then grabbed Bijoux’s shoulders. “Focus! We’ve been set up. Do you realize that?”

“I . . . I,” was all Bijoux could say.

"What exactly did Donny say to you when you asked him if we could play?"

"Well, I just said I had this friend who was interested in finding a poker game and that you and I wanted to come play too, just once, and if that was okay with him, we'd really like to. . . . He immediately said it was a great idea and that it would be lots of fun."

"Immediately?" Marianne asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, I thought, 'Well, that was easy.' And I guess it was too easy."

"That scoundrel. He had strip poker on his mind from the very first second, I'll bet. We've . . ." Marianne picked her hand up from where it had been resting on the towel rack and looked at her palm. Her lip curled as she wiped her hand off on the toilet paper roll. "We've totally been had. . . . And how do these men live like this?"

"So what do you want to do?" Bijoux asked.

"What do I want to do? Do you realize that if we stay, as we stand here, we're about ten minutes away from being two socks and some underwear short of appearing stark naked in front of a bunch of wholly undeserving men?"

Bijoux immediately started giggling. She should have known. She'd absolutely walked into Donny's trap. Marianne was right.

"Why are you laughing?" Marianne asked with a frown. "Answer me two things. One, would you date any of them, and two, do you want to get naked in front of all of them right now?"

Bijoux giggled some more, snorting through her nose a bit. "No . . . and . . . no."

"Then stop laughing. This is serious."

Bijoux stopped laughing. "It's serious?"

"We've got to tell them we'll only play real poker and we'll

only play for money. Winner takes the money; losers take something off."

That might sound good to Marianne, but Bijoux was not a naturally skilled game player. "I'll end up naked. I'm not good at games. I mean, I play . . . I just don't tend to win. In this case, that's a problem."

"I'll watch out for you," Marianne said. "We'll kind of tag-team it. I'll play with you in mind. If I see you're heading for trouble, I'll make a play in your favor."

Bijoux nodded. "That might work . . . but you can't guarantee it. And seriously, Mare, I don't want to strip for these boys. I really don't."

"I promise you. I'm good at cards. It's all math, probabilities. That's my thing. If I swear to you that you will not end up naked in front of these boys, will you stay in?"

Bijoux looked at her friend. Marianne was good. And it would be such a sweet victory. "Only if we split the combined profits."

"Deal," Marianne said. She stuck out her hand. Bijoux took it and said, "Let's get in there and rob those horny bastards blind." They shook on it. Marianne pushed open the bathroom door and the girls returned to their seats, innocent smiles all around.

"So where were we?" Marianne asked. "Oh, I lost. I have to take something off." She removed her shoe, dangling it by its silvery strap off her pinkie finger before tossing it over her shoulder. The boys hooted and hollered. Marianne looked over at Bijoux and smiled.

Donny picked up the deck and dealt out two fresh cards to each person. When he stopped, Marianne leaned over and picked up the deck. "Don't put that away. We'll be playing with five cards, stud. With betting. Let's get those wallets out and some money on the table."

The guys looked around at one another. Bijoux studied Peter's face. He didn't know Donny before this. He couldn't have known it would be strip poker. But unfortunately for him, he was male and he'd have to pay. "Best hand takes the money," Bijoux said. "Worst hand takes something off."

An excited murmur made its way around the table. Bijoux looked at Marianne, who bit down on her lower lip to keep from laughing as they examined their hands.

Bijoux stared at her cards. *Let's see, a pair is the lowest. Then two pairs. Three of a kind is better than either of those. . . . What about a full house and four of a kind? And there's a flush and a straight, and I have absolutely no memory of what's better, and there's no way I'm asking these guys. Though it should be based on odds, right? So if Marianne can access the part of her brain that was actually listening during Statistics 101, this will probably be very simple for her. . . .*

She looked up at Marianne, who was frowning at her cards.

"Mare? You going to make a decision anytime soon?" Donny asked.

Marianne looked up at Donny and smiled sweetly. Bijoux watched as his expression changed after that; if the twitch in his right eye was any indication, he'd just correctly read her smile as suspicious behavior.

The boys went around the table and bet, and then it came back around to Marianne. "Fifty-two cards in a deck, four suits," she muttered. "It's a five-card game . . . okay . . . uh-huh, so, 2,598,960 possible hand combinations . . . okay, so, based on probabilities, it's harder to get all cards in the same suit than to get the cards in sequence . . . a flush is better than a straight, and a—"

"Mare?"

"Oh, sorry." She put her cards down on the table, raised the

current bet by an outrageous amount, and then folded her hands together again, once more the picture of innocence.

Bijoux looked up at her, and Marianne gave her an invisible girls-only signal not to bet, which she didn't.

Peter looked at Marianne, then Bijoux, a curious expression on his face. Then he suddenly reached into his pocket and pulled out a notepad and pen. He'd been watching her all evening with a sort of fascination that began to annoy Bijoux. The truth was that although she'd already established that Peter was not quarry, she felt sort of like he was hers. In the same way that, first and foremost, Donny was Marianne's. But Peter didn't seem to understand that. And he just kept leaning and flirting and leaning and flirting and . . . now Marianne had just lost the hand which meant she'd probably decided to start with some kind of bluff to make the boys initially believe she didn't know what she was doing, and now Peter was leaning over to encourage her to take off her underwear and . . . *Oh, for God's sake!*

"Would you like to switch seats?" Bijoux blurted out.

"Oh. No, I'm fine," he said, leaning back in.

Bijoux rolled her eyes as Peter wrote something down in his notebook and then turned his attention back to Marianne, who'd intelligently decided simply to remove her other shoe.

After two solid hours of game play, Marianne's strategies had already started to pay off. Bijoux looked over at Donny, now bare from the waist up. He didn't look like he was enjoying himself that much anymore, perhaps not quite so giddy with possibility the way he was before the men all started losing their clothes.

Peter's intent focus on Marianne the entire time was probably another reason for the scowl. He seemed to be the one guy in the room who was on Marianne's—and, by extension, Bijoux's—side. His attention, his fascination with her abilities and her other assets, say, seemed to spur her on. She was playing to him. She was trying to impress him.

"Your bet, Bij," Donny said kindly, though his voice had taken on a strained quality.

Bijoux looked at her cards for what seemed like the umpteenth time. She looked down at her status. She was still mostly clothed, though a bit disheveled from having to remove her shoes, most of her jewelry, and her bra through her sleeve.

Marianne was true to her word: She'd played well enough to keep herself mostly clothed and Bijoux clothed enough.

Bijoux folded, secure in the knowledge that her hand wasn't good enough to win but not bad enough to lose her underwear over.

The clock struck two o'clock in the morning, and not a sound was made as Marianne laid down her cards and fanned a jack-high straight out on the table.

Bijoux looked up at her friend and grinned. Marianne grinned back and surveyed the other hands that had been more slowly revealed. Marianne looked at the poor unfortunate at the opposite end of the table and gave him a sympathetic smile. "That's you, hot stuff."

Hot Stuff moistened his lips and stood up, completely undressed except for his boxers. He frowned at the rest of the men sitting around the table, all of them stark naked, then looked back at Marianne—still completely clothed. "This is so not my idea of a great night of strip poker." With that he leaned over, pantsed himself, twirled his boxers around his index finger as Bijoux and Marianne hooted and hollered, and then slowly rotated in a full monty.

"Well, that's the game," Donny said, pushing the cards into a pile on the table.

Marianne stood up and walked over to where he was still sitting, his clothes in a pile on the floor by his feet. She picked

up his clothes before he could react and started backing up with them.

“Mare? Maaaare? Give me my clothes.”

“Come and get them!” she said in a singsongy voice, still backing away and waving a sock in the air as bait.

Donny stood up at the table, using a handful of cards to try to cover his privates. “Marianne, I’m serious.”

Marianne wiggled the sock as the others took up some more hooting and hollering. “I think you owe me and Bijoux an apology.”

“I apologize,” he said immediately.

“Mean it.”

“You want me to apologize for luring you and Bijoux over in hopes of getting you naked? And mean it? That’s a tall order. I mean, if you really think about it, it’s your fault as much as mine.”

Marianne narrowed her eyes.

“What? Have I ever lured you over and *not* tried to get you naked? You should have known better,” he said, grinning madly.

Bijoux glanced at Peter, who was leaning against the poker table zipping up his jeans and watching Marianne and Donny with great interest.

Suddenly Donny lost his grip on the cards, and the king of spades slipped from his grasp and fluttered to the floor.

Marianne burst into a fit of giggles. “Your spade is showing. Serves you right.”

Donny started to laugh along with her. “*I apologize*. And I *mean* it. But you have no heart when it comes to me.”

And you never had a diamond when it came to her. If it wasn’t destined to work, it wasn’t going to work, and Bijoux’s job as best friend was to help Marianne make the right choices going forward. Still, Donny and Marianne’s inability to get their

shit together when it came to each other made her a little sad.

“Do I need to *club* you over the head?” Marianne asked.

Donny gave up and dropped the rest of the cards on the ground. Hands out to his sides, palms up, he shrugged. “You win,” he said. And then he came at her.

Marianne mock-screamed and let Donny steeplechase her, completely starkers as he was, up and over the furniture as the others watched and cheered him on.

“What are you afraid of, Marianne?” he shouted. “I think you’ve seen it all before.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that a little mystery is a good thing?” she shrieked back.

Peter looked at Bijoux and raised an amused eyebrow. “Maybe we should leave.”

“That’s what I remember about you,” Bijoux said. “You like to come in, help stir up trouble, and then slip away.”

“I had nothing to do with this one,” Peter said, grinning from ear to ear.

Donny caught Marianne and tumbled with her down on the couch, his clothes flying everywhere.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Bijoux said. She grabbed Marianne’s hand and pulled her laughing friend off the couch. She turned around and looked at the assorted half-naked men. “We’ve got to go. Thanks, guys. We had so much fun, didn’t we, Mare?”

“Lots of fun,” Marianne said, picking up her things and stuffing the wad of cash she’d won into her jacket pocket. She waved as the remaining sheepish-looking fellows called out their good-byes. “Fun all around. Donny, you be sure to call us if you ever want to do this again.”

Donny wrapped a blanket from the couch around his waist and came over. He leaned down and kissed Marianne’s neck. “You got me this time, girl.”

Marianne smiled up at him.

Bijoux rolled her eyes. "Peter, you coming?"

"I'll be right out," Peter said, still getting dressed.

Bijoux dragged Marianne out the front door and down to the car as quickly as she could before Peter came out. "How much money did you make?"

Marianne pulled the wad out of her jacket pocket and sorted through it. "I made about three hundred dollars."

The girls looked at each other and squealed, jumping up and down on the pavement.

"Just think what I could do in a serious game."

"I know!" Bijoux said.

The front door opened up and Peter came down the path to the car. "We should take you to Vegas, Marianne. I think you're a natural. I want to make you a story. I don't know what, though. What do you think about learning how to play online poker?"

"Oh, no," Bijoux said. "Don't you get her mixed up in anything."

Marianne looked flushed and high. She grabbed Peter by the collar and shook him, laughing all the while. "No, no! Get me mixed up in something. Anything!"

Bijoux sighed. "Great."

Peter leaned against the car. "Do you remember when poker first started being really popular? When Moneymaker came out of nowhere and won the World Series of Poker?"

"Yeah."

"He won his ten-thousand-dollar entry fee playing in online poker tournaments. It was forty bucks or something he spent."

Now Bijoux was interested. "That's a very good return." She beeped open the car locks and the girls got in the car, with Peter in the backseat.

Marianne looked over her shoulder. "You can win money online?" she asked.

He nodded. "Not only that, but that forty-dollar investment

online turned into more than a million dollars in the World Series. A *very* good return.” Peter leaned over the seat back. “I’m happy to point you in the right direction.”

“Thanks,” Marianne said. “I may just have to take you up on that.”

“Oh, crap.” In the rearview mirror Bijoux saw Peter frown. “I left my watch inside,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Bijoux watched him run back inside. She looked at Marianne and snorted.

Marianne looked at Bijoux. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You have that look.”

“Oh. It’s not often I’m actually present at the beginning of a new obsession.”

“I’m not obsessed.”

Bijoux gave her a more exaggerated version of “the look.”

“Okay, maybe a little. But seriously, was that not great?”

Bijoux cracked a smile. “I guess it was pretty great.”

“It was better than great. And I think we really learned something tonight. Poker equals boys equals money. It’s everything we’re looking for. In one spot. This night might not have been totally successful, but just one exception does not completely negate a potentially winning formula.”

Bijoux groaned. “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

Marianne leaned the seat back and began to recount her money. “Absolutely.”

chapter seven

The plan was a Friday night tour de force of man-hunting in their own habitat on the home poker party circuit. Once Bijoux had started asking around, it really did seem as though everybody had a weekly game. The problem was that Marianne didn't want to hunt other men around Donny—or around any of Donny's friends, for that matter, so they were stuck trying to find games set up by friends of friends and friends of friends of friends.

Bijoux had apparently culled two parties from her master list for the evening's pursuit. She reread the address off a scrubby piece of paper held about an inch from her face as they stood on the sidewalk in front of another overblown canyon mansion. "This is it," she said. "Let's get this over with. It's just weird to be going around to strange places for the specific purpose of meeting strange men."

"Isn't that sort of what dating is? Not to mention I think this was at least 50 percent your idea and I thought you were excited about it."

Bijoux shrugged and began picking her steps carefully up the stone walkway toward the front door. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Marianne could hear the stress in her friend's voice. It looked like Bijoux's social anxiety was kicking in. She was fine around her usual cast of socialites, not so fine around strangers. If history remained true, she'd spend most of the night in the bathroom, not the ideal spot for meeting men although it had its uses once you'd already met them. "How do we know these people again?" Marianne asked.

Bijoux picked her steps carefully up the stone walkway to the door. "We don't really. I know a guy who knows a guy . . . neither of whom is eligible himself, but the guy's guy knows a guy who said there was a big poker game here called Texas Hold 'Em where they would welcome females."

Marianne stopped in her tracks. "Ew."

"What do you mean, 'ew'?"

"You heard me. Ew. 'Where they would welcome females.' That sounds icky. Like they expect us to show up in cleavage-baring halter tops, stilettos, and short skirts with our thong underwear showing above our waistbands."

"I'm sure it's just a ratio thing. And my thong is *not* showing."

"I wasn't actually talking about you . . . never mind," Marianne said. "And the ratio thing implies that there'll be an equal number of men and women, which is not exactly odds in our favor. Or maybe that they overordered on the females to improve their odds for the male gender, also not in our favor. But, oh, well. It doesn't really matter, as long as they aren't ax murderers."

Bijoux started laughing. "*Texas Chainsaw* Hold 'Em!"

Marianne gave her a look. "Laugh now, my friend. But we don't really know these people. I'm almost tempted to call Donny and tell him where we're going, just in case."

Nobody answered the door. Bijoux stamped her feet impatiently and hugged her arms around her; her skimpy attire was no match for the chill in the air.

"At least it's a wealthy neighborhood. That's a good sign it'll be a high-stakes game with some seriously eligible men."

Marianne rang the doorbell again. "Are you sure this is the right place? I feel like an ass, you know? I just really feel like an ass."

"Mare, you said you'd do this. You said you'd try. You can't start doubting because I'm already doubting. You're supposed to want to do this more than I do. It's as good a way to meet men as any other way. Everyone's so into online dating, but you don't even get to see and hear what you'd really be getting before you've committed your time."

"Sounds like the same damn thing. I've committed my time and I don't know what I'm getting . . . except a thong wedgie."

Rolling her eyes, Bijoux said imperiously, "A thong *is* essentially a wedgie." She stepped forward, pressing her ear against the door this time. "It's not very loud in there. It doesn't sound very festive."

Marianne made a fist and pounded as hard as she could against the door.

The door suddenly opened and Marianne stumbled forward into the arms of a pimply teenager. "Oh, my God," Marianne said.

"Oh, my God," Bijoux blurted out.

"Oh, my God," the kid said.

Marianne recovered her footing and took a step back, effectively removing her cleavage from the kid's face. "This isn't the poker game, is it?"

"Yeah. It's the poker game." He moved the door open, his eyes still fixated. "Letting girls come was a good idea."

Marianne looked past him into the living room which was filled with seven other youngish looking boys sitting quietly

around a coffee table containing a pile of plastic chips and some playing cards. As they robotically stepped over the threshold and entered the house, the boys froze, gaping at the girls in complete and utter shock. And possibly terror. "I don't think these guys are even legal," she hissed. "This is beyond desperation."

"Looking for someone to date is not inherently a desperate act."

"No, I'm saying, it's not even in the realm of discussion. It's, like, not even . . ." Marianne took a deep breath, exhaled, and then smiled at the small host. "Could we just have a . . . moment . . . maybe we could use the restroom or something?"

The kid lifted his hand and managed to point to the hall bathroom with his index finger.

"Great. Just a moment. Excuse us." She grabbed Bijoux by the arm and dragged her into the bathroom, "They're in high school. They're probably *freshmen*!"

"Well, obviously, I didn't *know* that," Bijoux said, taking another look at the piece of paper with the address on it. "I was expecting older guys. Maybe . . . maybe he has a brother and we just picked the wrong week, that's all. The normal game is obviously at somebody else's house this week."

"Then maybe we should go to *that* house! I mean, before, we were just being pathetically cliché by taking this 'meet men' thing to such great lengths. Now, we've added mind-numbingly embarrassing!"

"Stop yelling me! You wanted to meet someone too!"

"You don't tell someone to stop yelling by yelling!"

The girls simultaneously took a big deep breath and let it out. "We are losing our shit, here," Marianne said in a much calmer voice.

"Yeah. I know. You okay?" Bijoux asked.

"I'm okay. You okay?"

"I'm okay."

“Okay. So. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I mean, we could stay and learn and then we’d be more impressive for the second game. You know, we’d be more realistic poker players.”

Marianne leaned against the sink. “You know, when I was about that age, I remember the boys in my peer group making fun of my lack of breasts. I was a slow developer. And I remember crying, and my mother said, ‘One day, they’ll grow up, and you’ll be even more beautiful than you are now, and you won’t want to give them the time of day.’ As usual, my mother was right.”

“So, you’re saying you want to go.”

Cocking her head to one side, Marianne thought about it. “No, no actually I’m saying that karma is a bitch and since we’re here, let’s have them teach us how to play . . . and then we can rob the horny little suckers blind.”

Bijoux’s mouth dropped open. “Mare, that’s *evil*.”

But Marianne’s mind was made up. She flung open the bathroom door, accidentally slamming the knob into the nuts of an overeager eavesdropper. He fell backward to the floor, his mouth open wide in a silent scream as he cupped his groin with both hands.

Marianne and Bijoux looked at each other in horror. “Maybe we should go,” Marianne whispered. “I don’t remember them being so delicate.”

She felt a tap on her shoulder, and a small, earnest boy with Coke-bottle glasses asked, “Would you like something to drink?”

This was not the kind of small boy she wanted to rob. The poor thing probably wasn’t in the position to make fun of anybody’s anything at school, much less some girl’s breast size. This didn’t look like the sort of kid who’d even ever seen a breast. In fact, he didn’t look like the sort of kid who’d ever see an actual breast before the age of seventeen. But if there was such a thing as karma, he’d be the next Bill Gates. A few

decades too late for Bijoux to consider as a marriage prospect, though.

The lad looked so nervous. So unstable. Marianne didn't have the heart to bail out this soon. "A drink would be nice. Do you have the stuff for a mai tai?" Marianne asked.

"Marianne!" Bijoux yelped.

The kid blinked uncertainly.

"Oh. Okay, just a screwdriver. That's fine."

"Um, what's in a screwdriver?" he asked.

Bijoux dropped her head in her hand. "I don't know if this is even legal."

"Orange juice and vodka," Marianne explained, patting him on the head.

After more nervous blinking and some pretty florid blushing, he found his voice (just barely) and said, "Um, there's some orange juice and some water. And some, um, berry juice boxes."

"Just the orange juice, then."

The host kid disappeared into the kitchen and Marianne and Bijoux faced the living room. The injured eavesdropper huddled against the armrest of the couch moaning, but the rest of the boys were setting up the game.

"Here, close that top up a bit more," Bijoux said, rearranging her own breasts to show off less cleavage. "Let's cover things up."

"If we sold skin-care products or Tupperware lunch boxes, we'd be in great shape," Marianne muttered.

The host kid came back and handed both Marianne and Bijoux gigantic glasses of orange juice, which they awkwardly held as they stood in the middle of the living room.

"So, uh . . . do you want to play?"

"You know, maybe we should get go—" Bijoux started to say.

"Will you teach us how?" Marianne interrupted. "We don't really know how to play."

The boys actually looked pleased. And a little relieved to

have a purpose. The host kid cleared his throat. "Well, no-limit Texas Hold 'Em is the best poker game, I guess. You want us to teach you that?"

"Yes," Marianne said. "Please do."

"Okay, hold on a sec." The boys huddled. Then in a flurry of hand gestures they roh-sham-bo'd amongst themselves and the winner of the winnowing process stepped forward. "I guess I'm gonna teach you," he said shyly.

The boys assembled around the table, taking extra care to make sure that Marianne and Bijoux were properly settled in their seats. The roh-sham-boh winner sat at the head of the table between the two girls, and in his best teacher's voice began to explain the game. "The basic rules for no-limit Texas Hold 'Em are as follows. The first thing to know is that there is an automatic ante system called 'the blinds.' This system keeps the action in the game up by forcing two people from the group to ante up even before the cards are dealt. Everyone gets two cards. You evaluate your cards and decide if you want to keep playing. Whoever doesn't fold right away plays in the first betting round . . . any questions so far?"

Bijoux's hand whipped up in the air. "Do you have big brothers who play poker?"

"Yeah," said the host kid. "That's my brother." He pointed to a photo sitting on the living room mantel. His brother was quite the looker.

Bijoux and Marianne looked at each other. "Do you think they would play with us next time they have a game?" Bijoux asked.

The kid looked at his pals, then looked at Bijoux's cleavage. "Yeah, I think they would play with you." He gazed up at her. "But you should really learn how to play first."

Bijoux glanced at the big-brother picture, one more time. "I absolutely agree. Let's continue."

“Okay, well, the dealer deals three community cards faceup in the middle of the table. These are known as ‘the flop.’” He dealt out some sample cards. “If you haven’t folded before, you look at your two cards plus the three community cards and see if you think you can beat the best five cards everyone else could be holding. But you gotta remember that there are going to be two more community cards coming.”

Marianne stared at her two cards, looked at the flop, then reached over and looked at the cards Bijoux would have been holding if they’d actually been playing. “I’m with you. Go on.”

“If you like your stuff, you stay in for the second betting round, and if you don’t like your stuff, you muck your cards.”

“Muck your cards?” Bijoux asked.

“Fold ‘em,” Marianne said authoritatively.

The kid nodded. “And so the best five out of seven total cards wins. And that’s it. It’s really simple.”

Marianne stared at the youngster. It had to be if grade-schoolers or whatever were playing it.

Bijoux scanned her cards and dropped them limply on the table. “Math. Marianne, you are going to be so good at this.”

Marianne smiled back at her. “Keep going.”

“Okay . . . so the dealer deals the fourth community card down on the table. It’s called ‘the turn,’ or ‘Fourth Street.’ You all look at your best cards, and then if you’re still in, you play in the third betting round. Then it’s the same thing with ‘the river,’ the fifth—and final—community card also known as ‘Fifth Street.’ You look at your combined stuff, your best five, and you bet or you muck.” He shrugged. “That’s really it. Do you wanna play some hands?”

At the same time Marianne uttered, “Yes,” and Bijoux uttered, “No.” The girls looked at each other and Bijoux sighed and surrendered. “I’ll do it,” she whispered, “But only because it will give us added poker cred when we finally play with the big boys.”

They played for a while, Marianne getting more and more into the game itself, Bijoux getting more and more restless beside her.

Finally, they took a breather and things seemed to break up a bit. Marianne tossed her cards in the center of the table and let Bijoux pull her to the side. "Bijoux," Marianne said in a voice full of wonder. "This is going to be the most fun I've ever had trying to get a date."

A worried expression came over Bijoux's face. "Well, don't forget to focus on the task at hand. I mean, if you take all the money, I don't think the men will want to go out with us."

The smile on Marianne's face widened.

"Oh, no. Marianne, be good. Keep the focus where it needs to be."

"I thought the whole point was money. You only wanted to play to find a rich guy with money. If we can make the money ourselves, what do we need the guys for?"

"Well, I can think of at least one other good reason to have a guy around."

Bijoux folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot on the ground. "You're forgetting something very important."

"What's that?"

"We're doing this to meet men, not to win money."

"I don't want to lose my money."

"Well, you can hardly believe that I do. You need to think of it as an investment in the future."

"If you win money, you won't have to marry rich."

"Don't look so pleased with yourself," Bijoux said, choking on laughter. "I don't want to think about how much poker I'd have to play—and win—in order to bypass the whole multimillionaire-husband thing. It would not be a pretty sight. You'd probably find me in a polyester leisure suit with a walker in an Indian casino off a desolate highway in Arizona trying to persuade the floor guy to give me a coupon so I could eat lunch."

Marianne let herself fall back against the wall. "That is quite possibly the most depressing thing I've heard out of your mouth in a very long time. I see this is serious. I don't want to be responsible for what you just described. Let's go meet some men." She turned to the gamer boys. "Gentlemen, it's been an honor and a pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time to teach us."

The kids all looked a little crestfallen as the girls stood up and collected their things.

"You're not coming back, are you?" the host kid asked.

Marianne looked at Bijoux, then back at the boys. "Um, no. But thank you so much for everything."

"Can we take your picture?" he asked. The others perked up immediately, hopeful expressions plastered across their faces. Bijoux winced. But fair was fair as far as Marianne was concerned. She still felt a little guilty about her initial impulse to make these guys pay for the sins of boys in her own junior high days. And the change she'd just won off them rattling in her pocket proved they *had* paid, somewhat. They handed Marianne and Bijoux each one end of their gaming club banner, and the guys all filled in between them.

After the photo-op, the host kid pulled a small notepad from his pocket and wrote something down with a pencil. It looked sort of warm and moist from having been stuffed in the bottom of his pocket for so long. Marianne and Bijoux looked at the scrap, and Marianne gingerly took it between her fingers.

"That's my cell phone number. In case you change your mind."

Bijoux's eyebrow arched. Marianne elbowed her to keep her quiet. "Thanks."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay and meet my parents? They'll be home soon."

“Oh, no thanks. But thanks.”

There was an awkward pause as Marianne and Bijoux both started for the door.

“Um, Marianne?”

She looked over her shoulder, desperately trying to keep a straight face.

“You guys are really hot.” The rest of the boys nodded solemnly.

“Thanks.” She stuck her hand out, and he came over and shook it. Bijoux followed suit.

And with that, the girls headed for the car.

“It’s only nine,” Marianne said. “We should have known that a six o’clock poker game was suspicious.”

Bijoux giggled. “They probably have to go to bed early so they’ll be rested for their soccer games.” She got in the car and buckled in. “Hey. You’re not mad at me, are you? If I’d known—”

Marianne was just sitting in the driver’s seat with the keys in her hand.

“No, it’s not that. I was just thinking about those guys. High school’s a horrible, horrible place for guys like that. This was probably the highlight of their year.”

“Probably,” Bijoux said with a sigh.

“It’s just that those boys . . . it’s before they really know how to be . . .”

“Bastards.”

“Yeah. It’s before all the baggage and the game playing and the commitment issues. They think we’re goddesses. And they seem so damn innocent.”

Bijoux laughed. “They’ll get over it. The next thing we know they’ll be passing that picture around school and calling us hookers.”

“Point,” Marianne said, wrinkling her nose. She held up the

scrubby piece of paper, stuck it in her pocket with a shrug, and then keyed the ignition.

"So what's the take?" Bijoux asked.

"Fourteen twenty-five. It's not much, but I didn't want to completely fleece the poor fellows."

Bijoux stared at her. "The total pot was twenty dollars. That *is* fleecing the poor fellows."

Marianne shrugged. "Is not. I can't help it if I'm a natural. I could have easily won that five seventy-five. I exercised restraint. And anyway, here's hoping the next one provides better spoils."

"When it comes to both men *and* money," Bijoux said, leaning her seat back as Marianne hit the accelerator and peeled back down the canyon road.

Bijoux breathed a sigh of relief the moment the door opened on the second party and the girls stepped inside the enormous home. It wasn't necessarily more swanky than the last one, but it had a carefully cultivated sleekness emanating from the white and steel interior design. In short, it breathed money and there were actual full-grown men inside.

There didn't seem to be a designated host and nobody greeted them as they weaved through what was a fairly good sized crowd. It was a beautiful people party and Bijoux tensed a little at the knowledge that she would be judged as harshly—if not more harshly—by others as she would of them. "I need a drink."

Marianne nodded toward a staircase leading downstairs in the direction of blaring hip-hop music and the girls descended down white carpeted steps into a huge underground den.

"Bingo," Marianne muttered.

"You want one?" Bijoux asked.

Marianne was already busy doing the classic L.A. party neck craning thing which involved keeping a minimum of attention on

the not famous person you were talking to while trying to spot a theoretically more interesting famous person to talk to instead.

Bijoux just turned and headed for the martini bar. It was well done, set up with a full array of retro cocktail shakers, napkins, hors d'oeuvres plates, and carefully arranged bowls of cherries, olives, and lemon and lime slices.

She ordered up and allowed herself to relax just a tiny bit, in spite of the anxiety she felt over not knowing a soul at the party save for Marianne. Martinis. Swanky digs. And gorgeous people. A bartender looking very Frank Sinatra in a white tuxedo jacket speared a pair of olives with a Las Vegas–logo cocktail stirrer, accessorized the martini he'd just made and pushed it gently toward her.

Maybe this whole poker construct wasn't such a stupid idea after all.

Her phone rang. "Excuse me. Hello?"

"It's me."

Bijoux swung around. Surrounded by men, Marianne stood at the other end of the room with the phone up to her ear, her hand strategically placed around the mouthpiece area to make it private.

"There's something strange about this party," Marianne said.

Bijoux gulped her martini. "Perhaps it's the fact that we're complete strangers."

"I'm bored. How long were you thinking of staying?"

Bijoux glanced back at the bartender and wondered if he was really just the hired help or if maybe he was a trust-fund-wielding host. "Until the game's over?"

"Where is the game?"

"Where's the poker game?" Bijoux asked the bartender over her shoulder.

"They should be starting soon. He says they'll set up a big table down here . . . oh, here they come."

“Okay,” Marianne said. “I guess I can wait.”

Bijoux hung up and turned back to the bartender. “Are you actually a bartender?” she asked. “Or do you have a trust fund?”

He handed her a cocktail napkin imprinted with a cheerful *Badda-bing!* in red script and said, “I’m really a bartender. No trust fund. And speaking of money, if you’re planning to play poker, just don’t let these guys fleece you.” His glance flicked downward. “Or drool on you.” Bijoux watched the players begin to assemble.

Bijoux laughed. “It doesn’t matter if we lose; we’re chalking this one up to learning. As for the drool, that I’ll watch out for.”

The music stopped abruptly and the poker game was quickly set up in a flurry of activity. Bijoux watched the players begin to assemble.

This group of men looked vaguely “Hollywood industry,” although there was perhaps something a little . . . off about the men here. Maybe it was that they were all wearing the ubiquitous ‘very expensive watch,’ trousers, and hundred dollar designer T-shirts in a variety of colors ranging from gray to darker gray to black.

Bijoux went down the hallway in search of the bathroom, and it wasn’t hard to find, seeing as how it was the size of her apartment. She took her place in front of the mirror alongside five other blondes, and like them, pretended to attend to makeup that needed no attending.

The five girls disappeared back to the party in a flurry of giggling and while it was just Bijoux and should have been completely quiet, the unmistakable sounds of some sort of rigorously come-by ecstasy were emanating from behind the door where the actual toilet was.

Bijoux’s fingers clenched around her mascara wand as the cringeworthy sound effects climaxed in a flourish of “Oh, yes’s” and a loud slam.

It went completely silent, then. Bijoux tried to stuff all her makeup into her bag and escape, but she was too late. "I'll be out in a sec," came a girlish voice. The door opened and a man appeared, disheveled as one might expect. Bijoux smiled without actually looking at him and finished packing up.

The guy washed his hands, slicked his hair, and adjusted his collar. He looked in the eyes of Bijoux's reflection in the mirror and asked, "Are you only girl on girl?"

Bijoux stared at him. "No! What?"

"Does your Web site take PayPal?"

She just wheeled around and burst out of the bathroom, muttering, "Gross, gross, gross," walking straight up to Marianne who was coming her way.

"Bij, are you okay?"

"I don't think so. Do I look like a porn star to you?"

"No, of course not. These girls all have veneers and fake breasts. You're at least 85 percent natural."

Bijoux exhaled a sigh of relief.

"Do you see anyone interesting you want to meet?"

"No! Oh . . . gross. No!"

"What? I could do the wingman thing and get a conversation going . . . do you feel sick? Do you want me to get you something to eat?"

Bijoux gave her a look. "I don't care how much money they have; I'm completely grossed out. I can't even begin to think about touching, drinking, or eating anything, and believe me I'm not just talking about the party."

Marianne looked around in confusion. "It's just an industry party, Bij."

"It's not the kind of industry I'm used to!" She put her hand up to her face and pinched at the spot between her eyes. "You know what? I'm done with this. This is amateur stuff. I'll go with you to Vegas where the big money is, but I'm officially

sticking this home poker party business in the column marked, 'Tried Everything.'

Marianne looked nervously behind her. "I think they're starting."

"Please don't tell me you want to stay."

Marianne started backing away. "Just an hour. I only want to stay an hour."

"Mare! Oh, hell." There was nothing she could do. Bijoux followed her friend to the poker setup where everyone was taking seats. The men seated themselves right up against the felt. The women scooted chairs up just behind them to drape themselves over the players and pretend to be interested.

Suddenly, Marianne elbowed in between a couple of men carrying a chair, sat down at the table and waited for her cards. When things finally got started, the dealer actually skipped her as he dealt. Marianne's mouth dropped open in disbelief and Bijoux began to feel nervous. She walked up behind Marianne and said, "Maybe you should—"

Marianne huffed and flicked a hundred dollar bill forward on to the table. "Excuse me, I'm in."

The dealer froze with the cards in midair, apparently uncertain whether or not to take her seriously.

Marianne's shoulders tensed. "I'm playing. I'm in." She smiled and a murmur of disbelief swept around the table. The dealer dealt her cards.

"You're in," said the man on Marianne's right in a condescending tone. Bijoux fidgeted nervously, knowing full well that if they pushed her friend too far, Marianne wasn't above taking a stand and making a scene. But Marianne just kept smiling, perhaps a little too sweetly.

"Looks like I'm the big blind. You'd better change that hundred dollars into chips because I'm up."

Eyebrows went up all around at her mention of the blind, and Bijoux felt a surge of adrenaline as Marianne showed them all up.

"You know, I really like this game," Marianne said, obviously feeling the same rush. "I like a lot of things about this game."

The guy next to her leaned over and said, "I like a lot of things about this game, too."

"Don't be flirting with me," Marianne said flirtatiously, though Bijoux could see the demonic look in her friend's eyes. "I'm busy trying to win your money, and I don't want to be distracted. Consider yourself warned."

Oh lord. Bijoux smiled pleasantly at the porn star sitting next to her. The woman seemed nice enough and smiled back. Bijoux smiled back at the smiling back. The porn star smiled back. Great. Now what?

She turned to Marianne. "What do you say to a porn star?" she whispered.

They looked at each other for a moment. "I have to admit that's not a question I expected to be fielding tonight," Marianne said.

"I just don't think we have much common ground. I don't want to ask her about her career."

"Ask her what her name is. That's a start."

Bijoux nodded. She turned back to her neighbor, stuck out her hand, and said, "I'm Bijoux. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Fluffy West Third Street. Nice to meet you, too."

With that, Bijoux opened her purse, removed her sunglasses, put them on, and proceeded to doze off, waking only because of the high-pitched squealing from Fluffy.

The players sat slumped in their chairs, ties askew, hair standing on end, empty glasses on the floor, on the table, cards scattered about everywhere. Except for Marianne, who sat stick straight in her chair with a giant pile of money in front of her.

"Marianne," Bijoux said. "That's it. We're going home now."

Marianne stopped counting her money. "Oh. Do we have to?" She looked back at the party. "You're right. This is no way to meet a decent guy. The money's not bad, though."

"Call Peter and take him up on his offer," Bijoux said almost desperately. "He said he'd show you how to play online. Seriously, was there even one guy tonight you were really interested in who fit all the criteria? I thought the point was to meet men, not to play poker."

"It was. But it was clearly a bad idea." Still, she showed no sign of stopping. She anted up and started counting her money.

"Then can we leave?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm making enough to pay for that spa deluxe package at Belle Fleur we've been wanting to try. For both of us."

Bijoux sat straight up and leaned over Marianne's shoulder, staring at the stacks of chips. "How much is there?"

"About seven hundred dollars."

"Oh, quit it."

Marianne looked her straight in the eye. "I'm not joking."

Bijoux just gaped at her friend for a moment, and then the two of them started giggling. "Well, I think you probably took all the boys' money," she whispered. "So we might as well go home."

"I think they have more of it," Marianne whispered back conspiratorially. "Do you want me to get you some?"

"Make no mistake. This was a bad idea. I take full responsibility and you'll have to take me to Vegas to ever do anything close to this again . . ."

Bijoux lost her train of thought as Marianne won the latest hand and scooped a pile of chips toward her from the center of the table as the men around her glowered. "On second thought. No need to rush."

chapter eight

Marianne certainly meant all that stuff about “being in it to meet men, not to play poker,” but she just couldn’t help herself. When she was hooked on something, she didn’t go halfway. She went the whole damn way. Which had her cruising down Ventura to meet Peter at Starbucks on the following Friday night. It did occur to her at some point that Peter might actually consider this meeting a date, and she wasn’t exactly sure what she felt about that.

Swearing under her breath as a car pulled out suddenly in front of her from the curb, Marianne turned down the radio and eased into the strip-mall parking lot.

Well, would it be so bad if he did think this was a date? He was attractive. He seemed interesting. He was single. And they seemed to have chemistry.

No sudden moves, Marianne. Don’t do something you’ll regret. Focus on the cards.

Marianne parked the car and made her way into the coffee shop. Peter was sitting with his laptop in a sea of other people sitting with their laptops, all talking loudly on their cell phones.

The babble mixed in with a backdrop of inane jazz and the delicious smell of freshly roasted coffee.

Starbucks as home office. "Gotta love wireless," she said, sitting down next to him.

Peter scooted his chair over and gave her some space. "I don't know how people functioned without it in the old days. So. It's good to see you again. How're you doing?"

"I'm great. Can I buy you a refill?"

"I've still got plenty."

"I'll be right back." Marianne went up to the counter and ordered her customary nonfat grande cappuccino, watching Peter over her shoulder as she waited for the barista to fix her drink.

So she and Peter were meeting for coffee under the auspices that he was going to show her how to play online tournament poker. Truth be told, the whole thing made Marianne feel a little . . . dirty. A little sleazy. Not the part about meeting Peter; the part about playing poker online.

She returned to the table with her drink and looked at the computer screen over Peter's shoulder. He'd called up an on-line poker site on his computer.

"You know what?" he said. "We should just get you set up. We'll sign you up for a screen name and get you logged in."

Marianne frowned. "I don't know what kind of money I want to commit to this, really."

"It's free." He typed a bunch of stuff into the computer and looked up at her.

"What do you mean, it's free? How can it be free?"

"You can play with pretend money, and then once you're comfortable you can start an account and play for real money. And then if you get really good online, the next step would be to win an early entry to play onsite in Vegas at the World Series of Poker." He cooked his head and studied her face. "I could totally see you there. Now that be a story."

“What?”

“The World Series of Poker. Can’t think of too many sports championships where someone like you could play shoulder-to-shoulder with the pros for millions of dollars, can you?”

Marianne’s competitive instinct kicked in. “No, I can’t . . . millions of dollars?”

“Yep.”

Marianne blinked. “For playing poker?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But that’s ridiculous. And kind of . . . fantastic.”

He shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I really wish I hadn’t gotten involved in this,” Marianne said.

“Why?”

“Because I already like it and I haven’t really even started.”

Peter pushed the laptop over in front of her. “You don’t seem to have an addictive personality,” he said.

“I don’t. But I have an obsessive personality. It’s like when Super Breakout first came out on Atari. I don’t think I left the house for six consecutive weekends. And that was just colored bricks. You know, Bijoux warned me about you.”

Peter looked surprised. “What did she say?”

“Well, not in quite these words she said you were like a crack dealer.”

He choked on his coffee.

“An enabler,” she continued. “An inciter of chaos. A documentarian of drama.”

“You’re making me sound suspicious and evil,” he said with a grin.

“Maybe you are suspicious and evil! You’re . . . you’re . . . the mystery nephew across the street!”

The two of them had a laugh, and then Marianne said, "So what is it exactly that you are hoping I'm going to do?"

He shrugged. "Girls and poker. That's just hot," he said, doing a bad Paris Hilton.

Marianne leaned back in the chair. "Are you going to write a story about me?"

"I'd like to," he said. "We'll have to see what happens, but I'd like to." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms behind his head. "I'll just have to sit back and watch the story unfold."

Marianne leaned over at him this time. "I don't think you're hardwired to sit back and watch the story unfold," she said, studying his face.

A more serious look came over his face. "What did Bijoux tell you about me?"

"What I said before. She basically just said you like to create drama."

Peter shrugged. "Who doesn't? Don't you?"

They just looked at each other and smiled.

The folders were beginning to pile up on Marianne's desk to the point where her secretary's eyebrows waggled nervously every time she entered the office.

Sheila took the skimpy pile from the outbox and left the room, only to come back five minutes later. She held up a sheet of paper. "Can I assume I wasn't supposed to include this along with the cover sheet from the IRS?"

Marianne blanched. It was a sheet she'd been using to study "pot odds" along with the probabilities of being dealt certain hands. "Um, no. I'll take that." When she'd warned Peter that she could be a little obsessive, she wasn't kidding. She'd been honing her craft a little more every day since he'd shown her the ropes. She had enough online poker tournament points to prove it.

Sheila smiled and handed the page back over to her. "Only three more years to partner. Us girls are counting on you. There just aren't that many."

"You won't be here anyways, I expect," Marianne said. "You'll have moved on."

"You'd better believe it," Sheila said. "I'll be long gone. Three years is a lifetime!"

They shared a laugh, because they repeated this same exchange fairly often, and it had become something of a joke between them. Sheila was Marianne's mother's age, and had been her secretary since Marianne had started at the firm. She turned to go and then stopped and turned around, her face suddenly serious. "Marianne, can we speak honestly?"

"Of course. What's the matter?"

Sheila swallowed hard, staring at the table. She seemed to gain strength. "I just wanted you to know . . . that if you have a gambling problem, I can get you some help."

"What?!"

"There's no reason to feel ashamed. It's like snorting cocaine or smoking weed. It's an addiction, and it's not your fault, and you can get better."

Marianne stared at her, unable to quite process what her secretary was saying. "Um, could you not use the phrase 'snorting cocaine or smoking weed' quite so loosely with the head of the partnership walking around the offices today?"

"Sorry."

"What could possibly make you say that?"

Sheila left the room and came back with another file. "These are, um, clippings and things you've accidentally left in your client files and attached to outgoing memos. I didn't want to embarrass you . . . though that's a rather good doodle on that one there." She gave Marianne a kindly look. "Seriously, honey. If you want to talk or perhaps speak to a priest, I'm happy to

help. You have only three years before you'll be a partner. That's three years before you have enough job security to justify getting high and sitting in your office pretending to work while actually doing nothing all day. Think about it, honey." She reached over, patted Marianne on the arm, and walked out.

Marianne stared thoughtfully after her as she walked out of the room. She picked up the phone. "Bijoux, it's me."

"Oh, hi."

"What's after partner?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's after partner? In three years I make partner and then what?"

"And then you can relax into it. Enjoy the beaucoup bucks you're making and treat me to facials, because I'll probably be living in the streets by then."

"But where's the thrill? What happened to the thrill?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "There never was a thrill."

Through the glass walls of her office, Marianne watched people mill about the open floor plan. "No, there never was."

"But you've always been okay with that. You stand to make a lot of money, Marianne. Don't blow it. You took the job for what it was. You're bringing home a fat paycheck as it is; multiply it by a hundred and call me back."

"Wait, don't hang up." Marianne multiplied her paycheck by one hundred. "You're right. I remember now. That's a lot of money. And yet . . ."

"Oh, no. Oh, no. I don't want to hear any ifs, ands, buts, or and-yets. Don't do this to me, Marianne. Don't do this to me. We always said we were in this life together. One of us has got to make it big and pull the other one up. And with my track record, we're both counting on you. Keep your eyes on the prize."

“Right. Eyes on the prize.” Marianne hung up and glanced at the clock. Almost time.

Periodically through the year, just before the major individual, partnership, and corporate tax return due dates, Marianne’s firm held two-day training sessions for the junior staff.

As a junior member of the senior staff, Marianne instructed several of these classes. It wasn’t a big deal. A little PowerPoint, a stack of handouts, some coffee delivered from Starbucks . . . It was the sort of thing where you’d just glance at your desk clock, notice it was time to give your spiel, and would get up, do the training, and get back to whatever you’d been doing at the time.

There was none of that ridiculousness sometimes associated with these types of presentations involving excessive perspiration, toilet paper on the shoe, or face-plants in front of large audiences. None of that.

The only thing Marianne had anxiety about today was the fact that the online poker tournament in which she was playing during her lunch hour was taking longer than expected, and she was going to have to quit the game in order to make the training on time.

“Damn,” she muttered as yet another competitor went all-in and lost, making her one of only six remaining players. She actually had a chance to win this thing. Glancing at the clock, however, she could see it wasn’t going to happen. With a sigh, she went to log out from the tournament and picked up the phone as it rang.

“It’s Ilsa. Where are you? We’re starting. It doesn’t look good to be late.”

“I’ll be right there. Sorry.”

She closed her laptop, unplugged it from the network, walked it down the hall to the training room, and plugged it into a network drop to be projected on the massive screen.

She turned to face the classroom of freshly scrubbed recent college graduates. "Today I'll be going over what is and what isn't deductible on Schedule C. Ah, yes, Ted, I see you looking unto the heavens for a reprieve from this session. But it isn't as obvious as we've been led to believe. Can you deduct a Hollywood producer's wife's manicures and massages? Are an actor's purchases of gum deductible if he considers it part of his image to always be chewing it in interviews?"

The audience laughed, right where they always did. Without even having to look at the screen, Marianne pressed her space bar to wake up her computer and clicked on the training file she kept on her desktop.

"Schedule C is one of the hairiest schedules imaginable when it comes to accidentally red-flagging a creative artist's individual tax return for the IRS. . . ."

She paused. Her audience didn't seem to quite be responding the way she was used to. They were fixated on the screen and seemed to be laughing in spite of the fact that her next funny statement wasn't for at least three more sentences.

Marianne cleared her throat. "Schedule C . . ."

The trainees were snickering. Hands covering mouths. Bodies slumping down in chairs. She looked to the back of the room where the other trainers were sitting. They were gesticulating wildly to the screen behind her.

Marianne exhaled. "Right, okay." She turned around to find that her poker tournament was still going on behind her.

"Huh. I wonder where that came from. Someone must have hacked into the network," Marianne said with totally overdramatized indignation. *Shit, shit, shit.*

A new kid in the front row leaned forward, squinted, and said, "Are you MachineGunMarianne?"

Marianne ignored the question and tried to make the poker tournament go away, but the pop-up windows with their exciting

casino promotions, designed with grotesque moneybag graphics, just kept on coming.

So much for no excessive perspiration, but at least there wasn't a face-plant.

Marianne picked up her laptop, muttered something about computer viruses, and left the room, practically running back to the office with the machine under one arm. She'd barely had a chance to stick it back in its docking station when Ilsa magically appeared as she often did, to hover and cluck and swear and ring her hands.

Marianne sat down heavily in her chair. "Were you there?"

"In the back corner."

"Did it look that bad?"

"It was beyond bizarre."

"Bizarre isn't bad."

"At this company, there's nothing worse than bizarre. Bad can be made good. Bizarre is just . . . bizarre."

"Right. Shit. I swear, it was only on my lunch hour."

Ilsa glared at her. "That was really stupid, Marianne. We know each other well enough that I can say these things."

Ilsa didn't mince words, and Marianne appreciated that fact. She was Marianne's mentor. She'd actually hired Marianne and had helped her up the ladder ever since. She was the one who explained to Marianne that it was still a man's world and that if she wanted to succeed, she'd have to play a man's game.

So Marianne had taken both her advice and the card for a stylist who specialized in creating an image for career-oriented women who need a game plan for that man's playing field they'd be on.

The stylist had shown Marianne how to wear her hair and her makeup, and explained what clothes she should be wearing to work.

Ilsa was a bit stern. She was a rather conservative woman of Swedish stock, who, in Marianne's weaker moments, managed to scare her to death with dire warnings of all hell breaking loose at the slightest negative rumor, or doomsday predictions about who wouldn't make partner.

The thing was, she was right. She was entirely right. And while most of the women around Marianne faltered for one reason or another, being too this or too that, Marianne went straight as an arrow right up the ladder. The men liked that she was a strong team player but didn't seem to worry that she would steal their starting positions. Until the weak and undeserving among them lost their positions, as they would have anyway, and Marianne stepped up to the plate.

Marianne had never had trouble playing alongside the boys. She'd never had trouble beating them. (She just hadn't quite nailed the art of living with them.)

In any case, it was universal knowledge that Marianne was good enough and smart enough at what she did to deserve what she got, so everybody in the tax manager stratum got on quite well. And she was happy enough and well liked, and really, there just wasn't anything to complain about.

And after a few years at the firm, the pink lipstick and neutral eyeshadow and the gray skirts and pastel cashmere twin-sets really didn't seem like costumes anymore.

Ilsa leaned over Marianne and read off some of the user names of the poker players still online. "HitMeGood66, Jenny-LuvsCards, CardsNotJobs . . . Jesus H., Marianne. If you don't stop this, you're going down." She looked down at the screen, shook her head in disgust, then looked more closely, gasped, and looked up again. "PokerPussy?"

"It's a cat thing . . . I'm sure," Marianne said weakly.

"It's gambling, Marianne. Do you understand how this looks? Very, very bizarre."

“I—”

“Three years to partner. You’re three years away from having a shot at partner. Three years to the payoff of all of your hard work.” She gestured disdainfully at Marianne’s laptop. “Is this who you really are? No.” She waved her hand up and down, taking in Marianne’s entire person. “*This* is who you are.” She pointed an accusing index finger back at the monitor. “You are not PokerPussy!”

What Marianne wanted to say was, *You’re right. I’m not PokerPussy. PokerPussy is a seventy-eight-year-old cat-fanatic librarian in Tucson, Arizona, specializing in Omaha High-Low. I’m MachineGunMarianne. I know this because sometimes we chat on the side while we play.*

What Marianne actually said was, “You’re right.”

“All right then.” Ilsa sighed heavily. “I’ll go out there and stand by the water cooler and try to do some sort of damage control. You pull yourself together.”

Ilsa left the room, and Marianne sat there quietly for a moment. Then she peeked around her monitor and looked through the glass to make sure no one was coming to give their condolences or whatever and tapped on the space bar to reactivate the screen.

Her eyes widened. Even as her online account sat inactive save for automatically entering money to cover the big and small blinds her competitors had played badly and gambled themselves out of the game while actually paying attention. She’d placed third in the money!

It was possible to make money without even participating. And when she was participating, it was clearly possible to win. Marianne stared down at the account on her poker game. She should have felt more remorse, perhaps shame . . . something negative. She felt elated and even a little . . . naughty. Marianne missed feeling naughty.

A little *bing* chimed as a new message arrived in the in-box of her poker account:

Congratulations, MachineGunMarianne! You are one of the top five chip leaders at the close of the bonus qualifier. You have won an entry into the World Series of Poker! Please contact the competition administrator to receive your tournament entry receipt. And . . . see you in fabulous Las Vegas!

Marianne stared at the screen in near disbelief until her widemouthed gape relaxed into a self-satisfied smile. She picked up the phone and dialed.

“Peter, it’s Marianne. I think I’ve got a story for you.”

chapter nine

Squashed three abreast with her friends in the coach section of a no-frills airline, Bijoux sat with her fingers gripped tightly around the armrests, her gaze fixed firmly (and slightly insanely, should anyone look at her) in front of her.

On one side, Marianne struggled to focus on her inspirational reading material, Chris Moneymaker's memoirs of coming from a forty-dollar online tournament entry to win \$2 million in the 2003 World Series of Poker.

On her other side, Peter outlined story ideas on his laptop, blissfully unaware of the torment around him, thanks to his headphones. Bijoux squirmed in her seat, and Marianne looked up. Poor Bij. "There's a place for frills," her friend conceded. "I'll give you that. There's a definitely a time and a place for frills."

Bijoux tried to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. She squirmed some more. "This would be that time and that place. I'd like to take this moment to thank you for showering this morning."

"My pleasure. And likewise."

Bijoux grunted.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing shortly . . . wah-wah-wah, wah-wah . . . wah."

It seemed as though the entire cabin heaved a sigh of relief as they descended. Probably the only thing worse than being on a no-frills plane going to Vegas was being on a no-frills plane returning from Vegas. At least on the way there everyone had a sense of possibility and hope and smelled relatively clean. Even so, it was all barbecue-stained T-shirts and baseball caps.

The plane lurched to a standstill at the gate, and, like sprinters waiting for the starter gun, the passengers poised, half-out of their seats . . . and when the seat belt light went out, the hand-carry stampede went into effect.

Bijoux unclipped her seat belt and leaped up, ready to claim nausea or leprosy if it would get her off the plane faster.

"Let's just wait," Marianne hissed, cowering against Bijoux as a beer gut in the aisle swayed dangerously in her direction.

Peter slipped off his headphones and tucked them in his laptop bag. The doors opened and the plane began to empty out. Stepping out into the aisle was like trying to merge gracefully onto an L.A. freeway—it couldn't be done without guts, timing, and really good acceleration. Bijoux and Peter looked at her expectantly; Marianne chose to conserve her energy, and when everyone except the disabled and the child-laden had stampeded off the plane, she finally made her move.

Both Bijoux and Marianne struggled to pull their overstuffed carry-ons from out of the overhead compartment. "Here, allow me," Peter said. Bijoux sent Marianne an approving glance behind his back and they ambled off the aircraft, weaving their way through the Las Vegas airport out to the curb.

The taxi line was moving at a brisk pace. Everything moved at a brisk pace in this town. Everyone wanted to get into the

mix, and the World Series of Poker was part of the draw. Marianne handled the logistics with the driver as Bijoux struggled with her luggage once more, the wheels on her largest designer piece hardly capable of balancing the load stuffed into it. Once more it was Peter to the rescue. They filled the cab and headed out, with only one near accident as the cabbie braked suddenly to accommodate the undulating stiletto-handicapped crossing of a woman whose person appeared to be entirely composed of silicone and BOTOX.

A twenty-minute drive and they were checking into the hotel.

Weaving through the crowd, Marianne smiled back at her, looking as if she could practically smell the excitement of the poker tournament in the air. Bijoux could smell it, all right; it smelled like cigarettes, money that had been wadded in someone's sweaty pocket for a week, and spilled, stale liquor. But Marianne was clearly compartmentalizing all of that.

Peter, on the other hand, simply surveyed the scene with a neutral expression of curious observation. A recorder up to his mouth, he was already documenting details.

Apparently sensing Bijoux's distress, Marianne put her arm around her and turned inward a bit to protect her as she used her forearm to clear a path before them.

"I feel like Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*."

"I will always love you, Bijoux."

"Um . . . let's just get to the room, shall we?"

Marianne laughed and beelined to the check-in counter, already swarming with people. As Peter was ushered in a separate direction he raised his cell phone, signalling they'd talk later, and twenty minutes later Bijoux and Marianne finally managed to check in, take a breath and really look around. Once they were out of the forest, they could actually see the trees.

The elevator bank was on the other side of the lobby, which meant they'd need to make another pass across the casino floor. It was a sea of green felt, marquee lights rimming what seemed like every possible edge in the place. Flashing neon, with slot machines ringing and literally programmed to shout encouragement at the players perched on stools in their pastel sweat suits and gaudy jewelry. The blackjack tables were crowded with an equal mix of cocky fraternity boys and jaded old-timers.

"There have to be at least a thousand people here—Hey!" Marianne swiveled around. "Did you just spank me?"

Bijoux raised an eyebrow. "It wasn't me."

Marianne ran her palm down the back of her skirt. "Someone just spanked me."

"Spanked you? Are you sure it was a spank and not a grab or a pat?"

"I'm sure it was a spank. Not to mention if it was a grab or a pat, that wouldn't be better."

Bijoux crowded in behind Marianne as the people continued to shuffle, stream, and push around them. "Let's move to the side."

They shuffled down a row of slot machines to get out of the way of the foot traffic, stumbling over a cane left sprawled on the ground by a slot machine junkie. Marianne stared at the lady's blue cloud of hair and her glassy-eyed fixation on the symbols whirling before her eyes. Turning back to Bijoux, she said, "It's visuals like that that make gambling unfun."

Bijoux glanced over and nodded. "Let's not have that be you in fifty years, 'kay?"

"Deal . . . Okay, so let's see." Away from the vortex, they had a better picture of the situation. Marianne surveyed the scene . . . and then she saw it: a huge space of the casino floor being converted to what was essentially tournament central.

Her stomach leaped, and in a hushed whisper she said, "Over there."

"There" was a huge floor-to-ceiling whiteboard completely filled from one to almost seven thousand with the names of the competition participants. Marianne and Bijoux gaped at the enormity of the event as they approached the area.

"Is it alphabetical?" Bijoux asked.

"I'm not sure. I think they just add names as they come."

Bijoux squealed. "Then you should be on there already from winning your entry from that online satellite. You start from the front, and I'll start from the back."

Five minutes later, plus a crick in her neck, Marianne found her name. "Here, Bij! Number seven sixty-three. Hollingsworth, Marianne." They stared at the name in silence for a moment, then turned to each other and started jumping up and down and squealing and laughing.

Marianne had been fairly mellow about the whole thing up to this point. But suddenly she just went nuts. "This is crazy. I don't believe it! Can you believe it? Hilarious. Just . . . hilarious!" Pointing to the board, then clutching her chest . . . pointing to the board, then clutching her chest . . . Suddenly she reeled around and grabbed Bijoux by the shoulders. She tried to speak but nothing came out. She just shook her, a slightly crazed look in her eyes that said, *I want to win this thing.*

"I know," Bijoux said, giving Marianne a nice pat on the arm, and then working a little harder to dislodge her friend's fingers from her collar. "You're going to be great."

Marianne gulped in a huge breath. "My God. I've got to prepare myself. I've got to find my center, my Zen, my inner champion, my whatever. I've got to get to the room and rest."

Bijoux frowned. "Don't you want to go out and have some dinner?"

"No," Marianne said. "I'll get room service. I'm officially in fighting mode."

"Does that mean you don't want to go out to a nightclub and flirt with boys?"

Marianne looked at her like she was insane. "This isn't about boys anymore."

"It's not? You're not going to look around at all?"

"Bijoux, this has *nothing* to do with boys anymore."

"It doesn't?"

"No! This is about . . . me! I've got to conserve my energy. There will be ample time to play around, but I don't want to get bounced on the first day. I'll need all my wits about me."

"I guess I just didn't realize you were taking this quite so seriously. I mean, it's Vegas." Bijoux chewed on her lower lip and glanced around at the activity. "I thought we'd take advantage of that and have some fun." Bijoux shrugged and nodded to the desk clerk to have a porter bring their luggage to the room.

She knew what Marianne was thinking. She was thinking that they would still be there when the tournament was over. That the boys would always be there and, like poker, it was just a question of timing and luck. All well and good for Marianne. *She* seemed to have plenty of time and luck.

After the door to the hotel room opened, the first thing Bijoux always did was run into the bathroom and look at the toiletries. The only thing better than free toiletries were really tony free toiletries, and it was always fun to see what the hotel had to offer.

A high-pitched giggling and the sound of springs expanding and contracting signaled the other hotel tradition. Bijoux raced out of the bathroom and leaped up on the bed next to Marianne, who was jumping up and down, laughing hysterically.

Bijoux always let Marianne pick which bed she wanted and which drawers suited her best. She took what was left and

quickly unpacked her things, hanging up the clothes and arranging her vast collection of makeup and toiletries over the expanse of the bathroom counter.

The unspoken rule was that Bijoux owned the lion's share of the closet and the bathroom. In exchange, Marianne got to choose her side of the room, her drawers, and the average room temperature. They'd successfully traveled together many times under this arrangement.

Marianne flopped down on the bed and, still giggling, picked up the phone to order room service. As she launched into strained negotiations with the room service people about the meaning of "on the side," Bijoux just tossed the gift she'd brought for her friend onto the bed, meaningfully arched her eyebrow, and went in for a quick shower.

The powerful hotel spigot sluiced away the travel ick. Bijoux took a deep, calming breath of hot steam and told herself not to be irritated with Marianne. Bijoux had been hoping for more of a romp through Vegas, not an episode of the Marianne Show, as she sometimes called it when she thought the two of them were going off to do something together when really it was more about Marianne obsessing about something specific to her.

She should have known, though. Marianne had a competitive streak a mile wide. And she also had Donny to fall back on. So it would be Marianne focusing on her game this weekend and Bijoux romping about by herself trying to get the Fates to coordinate things so she could meet somebody perfect. If the Fates worked quickly enough, she'd find someone to romp about Vegas with her while Marianne did her thing.

Turning off the spigot and pulling the shower cap from her head, Bijoux made quick work of toweling off, pausing to wait a moment as Marianne settled things with the porter and the door slammed shut.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, Marianne had unwrapped the gift and had already buried her nose deep into it: *Caro's Book of Tells*. "This is fantastic," Marianne said. "Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome," Bijoux said. "I wasn't sure if it was a joke gift or a serious gift, but since you're serious, it's a serious gift."

"It's perfect."

"Nah."

Marianne looked up at Bijoux and made a face. "What am I thinking? Can you tell what I'm thinking?"

Bijoux stared at Marianne for a few seconds. "I have no idea."

"Okay, how about this?" She stared at Marianne, then shifted her gaze quickly from left to right. "Well? What do you think that means?"

"Um . . ." Bijoux slowly shook her head. "I really couldn't say. Though they say that people who don't hold your gaze are lying."

"Perfect! This book is awesome." Marianne stuck a cocktail straw in her mouth and scrunched up her features. "How about now? I'm thinking something. . . . Can you read my tell?"

With a sigh, Bijoux studied Marianne's face once more.

"I really think that out of context—"

"Just pretend we're there at the tables. I'm a player, you're a player . . . what am I thinking?"

"Am I a man player? Are you a man player?"

"Yeah, sure. Whatever."

"If I'm a man and you're a man, I'm thinking you're thinking that the cocktail waitress has big tits, which I would know because if I'm a man, that's what I'd be thinking."

Marianne "arghed" and went back to the book. Her finger slid down the page as she read. "Oh, shit. I *so* do that." She tapped the page. "Oh, my God. And I *so* do *that*."

"You're obsessing," Bijoux said mildly, actually pleased that she liked the book so much.

Marianne pulled a deck of cards from her suitcase and splayed them out on the bed. Then she suddenly leaped up and went to the full-length closet door mirror and made a face. This procedure repeated itself over and over as Bijoux readied herself for the evening.

Marianne would read a passage about a particular "tell" or another, stare at her face in the mirror from a couple of different angles, deal the cards out in a specific situation, and repeat the whole process.

"Um, you know . . . I meant to ask . . . do you mind if I don't watch the whole day tomorrow? I mean, I really have faith in you, which means that you're going to be sitting in that chair playing for hours."

"Of course not. Go do your thing, too."

"Cool. I was thinking of maybe getting some sun tomorrow. Just sort of relaxing. I need to get my mind off my money and my money off my mind," Bijoux said as she whipped her bathing suit out of the drawer. "I'm going to get some sun and relax."

"There's a pool at this hotel?"

"No, I'm going to Caesar's. I'm going to wallow in the delicious excess of the Roman Empire at the Garden of the Gods Pool Oasis."

chapter ten

“What, are you insane? You can’t wear that.” Bijoux blocked the door, her mouth gaping wide-open.

Marianne looked down at her outfit. She’d worn it to work a million times and had received lots of compliments. True, she was wearing a cardigan. But it was a cardigan with cool beading, a tight fit, and creamy butter-yellow cashmere. “What?”

Bijoux cocked one hip and glared at her. “You’re the businesswoman. You’re supposed to understand image. Or have they pummeled every ounce of creativity and marketing smarts right out of you? Do you want to blend into the crowd? Do you want to be just another amateur?”

“Um . . . no?” Marianne turned and frowned at her reflection, a little taken aback by the uncharacteristic vehemence of Bijoux’s feelings. Maybe they *had* pummeled every ounce of creativity and marketing smarts right out of her. She did look a bit . . . timid. “Being underestimated is a kind of strategy, too, though.”

“No. You’ll already be underestimated based on the fact that you’re female. Don’t add a bunch of sappy clothes into the

mix. You'll wash right out. You won't feel powerful and confident. You'll sink yourself. You need to make a statement. A statement that reflects confidence, not . . . conventionality."

"You've always liked this outfit!" Marianne said as Bijoux took the sides of the cardigan and yanked it backward off Marianne's shoulders. She pointed to the closet. "You know what to do. Go!"

Marianne glared at her friend and opened the closet door. Her glare-worthy feelings vanished as she stared into the candy store of Bijoux's wardrobe. Bijoux's clothes were the best. Marianne's fingers twitched as she reached out and ran her palm across the wild fabrics.

Bijoux crowded up behind her and began to art-direct Marianne's new look. "Take that skirt . . . that sweat—no, the jacket. Take the jacket and wear . . . that . . . underneath. And those shoes. Done. Put the outfit on and we can discuss."

Marianne changed clothes, not missing how Bijoux immediately tried on the offending cardigan. With her tan and her platinum hair, it looked great, and somehow not so prissy. But the cardigan went in the discard pile anyway, as Bijoux changed into her bathing suit, pulling on a pair of flowing white silk pants over the bikini bottoms. The gold lamé bikini top was covered only by a skimpy turquoise mesh top.

Looking at her watch, Marianne swallowed nervously. "Can we discuss now? I've got to get down there."

The two girls faced each other. Bijoux had added a gold wristlet and a pair of sunglasses. She raised the sunglasses off her face and examined Marianne's outfit.

"You look . . . way better than I look in that stuff," she said, not even concealing her surprise. "You always do. It's uncanny. That's exactly what you should be wearing. You'll feel powerful and confident. Clothes matter, Marianne. They really do. I may not know a lot, but this I know."

Marianne looked down at the layers of clothing, from the tips of her black high-heeled boots to the flippy black miniskirt to the irreverent tight glitter-decal T-shirt to the brightly colored deconstructionist puffed-sleeve jacket. She looked . . . badass but feminine. She leaped at Bijoux to give her friend a hug. "You know plenty. This is perfect." She took a deep breath. "Are we out of here?"

"We're out of here," Bijoux said.

Okay. Day one of five. Out of a field of over 6,000, I, Marianne Hollingsworth, am randomly listed as number 763 on the board. Number of waters already consumed: two. Number of bathroom breaks likely to be required: seven. Number of hands blatantly groping me in a crowd since I came down this morning: four; plus one brushing of the buttocks with questionable intent and purpose.

This is it, Marianne. This is the big time.

The floor of the casino was packed with poker tables and jammed with spectators probably waiting for a glimpse of the heroes and heroines of the poker world. Moving through the tables was like trying to get to a middle seat in a crowded movie theater.

It looked like the population of a small suburban California town had emptied into the arena. Shorts, sunglasses, baseball caps, for the most part. And it didn't seem glamorous in the least. At least not yet, with all of the riffraff and dead money like herself clogging up the works. Well, the wheat and the chaff would be going their separate ways soon enough. And if Marianne had anything to say about it, she was going to hang with the wheat this week.

As contenders began to fill up the tables, the more famous players began to stand out from the crowd, distributed about room.

Cameras dotted the playing floor and a bleacher area for

spectators. It looked like some people had coaches. Some people had pals. Some people had loved ones. And just about everyone was taking this seriously. Nobody wanted to go out, much less on the first day. But it happened to even the best. For a ten-thousand-dollar entry fee, you just didn't want to have to admit you went out on the first day.

Peter had finagled a press pass somehow. He was talking to one of the cameramen and taking notes again.

Bijoux clutched at Marianne's arm. "This place is packed. Absolutely packed."

"Ow! Oh, my God. Doyle Brunson just knocked me in the head with his elbow."

"Who?"

"Doyle Brunson. *Super System* Doyle Brunson. One of the granddaddies of poker. He knocked me in the head with his elbow."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it."

"No, I mean, it's a good thing. A good sign."

Bijoux knocked Marianne upside the head.

"Ow! What the hell?"

"I thought it might help," she said. "Is that a good sign too?"

"No!"

Bijoux grabbed Marianne by the shoulders and with utter seriousness shook her a bit. "Don't fall into the mystique of all of this. You're here to win. Remember? You're here to win. We've both got a job to do while we're down here. Let's keep the focus and do what we came to do."

"I know, I know. Sheesh." Marianne rubbed her temple. "I don't think brain damage is going to help my game any. And let's not even begin to discuss the potential impact of shaken-gambler syndrome."

"Sorry. I'm suddenly nervous."

"What are *you* nervous for?"

"Well, look at all these people."

"So what? They don't know anything you don't know."

"How do you know what they know?"

"I just know. Where are you going to sit?"

Bijoux chewed on her lower lip and surveyed the bleacher section. "I guess I'll wait and see what table you end up at and then I'll find a seat. . . . I wish I could take pictures."

"Me too. But I don't think it's allowed. Doesn't this all sort of remind you of standardized testing?"

The tables were strewn with water bottles and snacks. Jittery participants waited with unlit cigarettes and cocktail straws flopping from their mouths. Most wore incredibly bored, jaded expressions on their faces clearly meant to give the impression that they'd done all of this a million times before. Marianne figured that at least half of them were just like her; fresh and new, without big expectations, and really mostly just thrilled even to be here.

Of course, anyone could win this thing. And "anyone" had. Since Chris MoneyMaker in 2003, more and more amateurs were entering the game and getting lucky. And that was part of the mystique, that anyone could win. It was the only professional sport in the world where amateurs could regularly sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the best players in the game and make a case for membership in the championship ranks. The World Series of Poker actually had the largest purse of any professional championship, and for as little as her forty-dollar online tournament fee, Marianne had won the opportunity to gun for millions of dollars that would go to somebody in the course of less than a week.

If there really were two different camps, the experienced killer-champion type and the fresh and new low-expectation type, she figured she might as well ally herself with those who'd come here to win. But doing so suddenly made the en-

tire championship incredibly important to her. She clutched at Bijoux's arm. "I'm nervous."

Her friend wheeled around, her eyes like saucers. "What are you talking about? You don't get nervous."

"Well, I'm nervous now."

"Don't panic. Whatever you do, don't panic," Bijoux said, clearly panicking on Marianne's behalf. "Remember what you told me. You said that the first strategy is to sit back and let all the idiots lose their chips in the first moments. Don't let anybody rile you up or tinker with your strategy. Just play your own game and let the idiots shake out. Remember that? You don't even have to play that many hands to make it through. So just sit back and let the idiots shake out."

"Huh. Now that you mention it, that mantra actually sounds like something that could be useful in many facets of our lives."

"Good, then. Just keep repeating your mantra. Let me hear you say it."

"Let the idiots shake out." Marianne said robotically.

"Perfect. You're ready. And for God's sake, whatever you do, don't be one of the idiots. At least make it to day two."

Marianne stared at her. "Are you doubting? Are you doubting that I'll make it to day two? I thought we agreed there was no way I'd lose on day one. Are we suddenly doubting? Should we be nervous?"

"Okay, deep breath. Deep, cleansing breath. And let's hear the mantra."

"Let the idiots shake out."

"Great." Bijoux took Marianne by the shoulders and turned her around to face the tournament tables. "Now go find your seat."

Marianne steeled herself, stiffening her posture. "I'm going to find my seat."

Bijoux gave her a little push and she was off. She suddenly

turned around. Her friend was still standing there, and gave a little wave. "Have a great day, Bij. Good luck to you, too!"

Bijoux smiled and blended into the crowd.

Marianne checked in with one of the tournament staff and received what seemed to be a randomly assigned seat number, but on her way over she was stopped by a guy wearing a headset, an ESPN baseball cap, and a clipboard full of dog-eared pages.

"Yes?"

Gripping her arm with one hand, he hadn't even turned and spoken to her yet, engaged as he was in a fierce whispered conversation with a tournament seating official and another ESPN baseball-cap guy.

Suddenly she was magically (and not quite so randomly) reassigned to a table in the center of the room located directly behind the table where TJ Cloutier already sat waiting patiently as a couple of techs set up camera lighting.

She searched out Bijoux, who'd found Peter in the crowd and was following him to the seats behind the roped spectator area. Bijoux looked up, and Marianne pointed to the rigged lighting and mouthed, *ESPN!*

Donny would totally freak if he could see her now. The table being set up in front of her was the ESPN "featured table." She'd be in the background of any of Cloutier's shots; ESPN obviously had liked her look. Marianne silently thanked Bijoux, who had put together the outfit this morning and insisted on extra makeup.

Marianne moved her chair just slightly to the left to give the camera a better view over Cloutier's shoulder. Her heart started pounding as she watched the camera assistants scurry to and fro. She'd never felt more ready for a close-up in her life.

Her hand automatically went up to fluff her hair before she remembered that real women probably didn't fluff their hair for ESPN. Not that she was a religious viewer of the channel, but

Marianne couldn't remember ever seeing Venus or Annika fluff their hair for ESPN.

Marianne looked over her shoulder into the stands. Bijoux stood up and flapped her arms madly just in case she hadn't been spotted. It was absolute bedlam back there.

Spectators sat in chairs or hung over the cords and railings separating them from the playing field. Globe lights hung from the rafters, along with security monitors and cameras. Closer inspection revealed that aside from the inherent excitement and glitz of the normal playing areas of the casino, the tournament itself had all the atmosphere of a low budget Hollywood film set. Cameramen and tournament officials scampered along the worn scarlet carpeting, dodging wastebaskets already overflowing with coffee cups, bottles, cans, and napkins and paper plates.

It was almost impossible to believe that this was a sport with prize money of over \$8 million.

Marianne settled into her chair, slinging her purse over the back of it and trying to relax. A couple of players who knew each other from a prior tournament were reliving old times behind the back of a rumpled fellow wearing square prescription glasses and a green tracksuit who was delicately arranging his apparently lucky orange, fingernail-gored Johnny Chang-style, in the mouth of a shredded Styrofoam cup. The orange looked as though it had been lucky for some time now, and was beginning to develop a slight green fuzz along the rind.

Looking around the table at her fellow competitors, she found much of the same, but with different accessories. Some people had MP3 players. Some wore sunglasses. Some fiddled with religious icons. There were stuffed animals, lucky charms, and grotesquely large medallion jewelry meant to intimidate.

The room was filling to capacity with all of them. Men in

floods, bad hairpieces, leather jackets. Men wearing T-shirts with poker puns splashed across them, suspenders, or ridiculous hats. There were men of all shapes and sizes, all ages, all persuasions.

There were hardly any women. And there was nobody at all who looked like Marianne, done up specially for Vegas in some of Bijoux's borrowed clothes. Conscious that she was attracting attention and not at all unhappy about it, Marianne set about looking busy and relaxed, which involved sliding her water bottle to and fro to find just the right out-of-the-way spot for it. All she'd really brought was the water, some moisturizing lip gloss, and her card cap, the small token she planned to use to designate her facedown cards still in play.

A camera set up behind one end of the featured table suddenly swiveled in her direction. Marianne looked straight into the lens and flashed a brilliant smile. It swiveled away and she looked up at her friends. Bijoux raised a defiant fist into the air and nodded in a go-get-'em-girl way. Peter didn't make eye contact; he was too busy scribbling wildly in his notebook.

And then, a hush fell over the crowd. There was a flurry of activity during which any players still standing suddenly scrambled for their seats and the camera folk adjusted their headsets . . . and that was it.

The game was on.

The announcer reached for the microphone, and quite dramatically called out, "Dealers! Shuffle up and deal!" The Championship Event of the World Series of Poker began.

Tonya Harding's doppelgänger dealt the first round of cards, her face completely blank, her eyes nearly hidden by the green sweep of her plastic visor, and her roots unapologetic and quite visible against her dyed-blond hair.

Marianne reached out to collect her two cards and noticed with disgust that her fingers were trembling from the adrena-

line. She looked around the table at the nine men assembled there and began to use the old trick of imagining her fellow players naked, former champions and potential champions alike. Of course, poker being a sedentary sort of game, the image developing in her head of man-breasts and beer guts immediately started throwing her off her game, and she had to stop.

Looking around to see how everyone else was doing it, Marianne mimicked a player across the table, scraping her face-down cards along the felt until the very last moment, when she bent her head down toward the table and curled up only the corners of the cards to see rank and suit.

First hand, first day, her first World Series of Poker . . . a five and ten, off-suit. Aha! A little visit to what was known as “the five and dime.” Also known to Marianne as crap.

She didn’t have any money committed as the small or the big blind. Obvious: fold and let the idiots shake out. Marianne mucked her cards and crossed her arms—no chips committed, no harm done.

And with that, her game was on. Marianne released a deep breath. This wasn’t so hard. She watched the other players intently, noting how too many of them paid up to see the flop. No way they all had playworthy hands.

The hand played out, revealing the truth of her suspicions. And just like that, Marianne’s nerves vanished. She really didn’t have to be in the group of players slinking out of the casino on day one. “It was a privilege just to play,” wasn’t going to cut it.

Every competitive cell in her body was primed as the winner raked in his chips and the dealer dealt the next round.

The guy on her left bounced his knee, sitting forward as if he couldn’t wait to play some cards. Marianne guessed he wouldn’t be patient enough and would be out before the day was up.

The guy three seats to her right was apparently someone

important. She stole glances at him, not wanting to make a spectacle of staring at him. The overly caffeinated guy on her left whispered into her ear, "Last year's champion. They call him Texas Trouble."

Last year's champion? Cripes. She looked over at the former champion once again and a cocky little smirk greeted her. She might have imagined it, but she could have sworn he was giving her a dismissive look. Possibly the you're-a-female dismissive look.

Watching her competition closely for any giveaways, Marianne stayed under the radar, tossing in her next few hands, just watching and biding her time. As the hands played out without her participation, she noticed a shift in the vibe of the table. The men were forgetting she was even there. The men were disregarding her potential, even as the chip stacks in front of everyone went from even to lopsided with her stack remaining at its original level.

The gears of the tournament had begun to turn within minutes of the start. The rich were already becoming richer, the poor were already betting themselves right out of the game, and Marianne was exactly the same, watching, learning, studying . . . and waiting.

At last the big blind came around the table. Marianne paid up and ended up scoring a pocket pair for the first time all morning. Too bad it was a middle pair. Sevens. Across the table, a college-age kid wearing his baseball cap on backwards raised the pot, and when the betting came around to Marianne, she called; her sevens were a bit of a borderline hand, but worth seeing a flop for under the circumstances.

The flop came with a jumble of suits. Ace . . . five . . . seven! The third seven gave Marianne the set she had been fantasizing about, and it was all she could do not to reveal her excitement. And besides, there were still more than a few ways she could

lose. A couple of different straights could be built around the community cards, and if anyone had a pair of pocket aces, their set would clearly annihilate hers.

The thing to do was play it slow, for now, and hopefully trap him on Fourth Street. The kid bet, and Marianne just called even though the potential of those sevens made her almost giddy enough to raise.

She checked, hoping he would bet and raise her. But he didn't; the kid checked behind her and Marianne knew he must be holding weak cards. If she didn't get too greedy, she could still take some extra chips from him on the river.

A ten on the river, a modest bet from Marianne, and a kid falling prey to decent pot odds. Nice.

Her heart pounding, Marianne flipped her cards over as the kid did the same, and smiled when they revealed she was the winner. Scooping a pile of chips toward her from the center of the table felt amazing. Winning a pot at tournament was like mainlining adrenaline, and she had to suppress the urge to jump up from her chair, shriek like a banshee, call in the cameras for a booty-dance close-up, and order up an umbrella cocktail. Instead she said, "Oh, my!" Then she giggled and began arranging her chips, quickly fading herself back into the background as the idiots around her continued to shake themselves out.

The possibility of surviving day one became very real in Marianne's mind. Her focus tightened. Her world became the table. Four hours into the tournament, two players from their table had played themselves out, and Marianne's slowly but consistently rising stack was beginning to attract attention.

In fact, it was beginning to attract a certain amount of ire from Texas Trouble, who seemed unclear on the concept of women playing poker. Her success seemed personally offensive to him. Every time she won a pot, he'd snort loudly and mutter something about "lady luck."

And as time wore on and Marianne's eyes began to blur a bit, and her back began to ache and the probabilities she was tracking in her head began to swim with misplaced decimal points, the vibe of the game changed.

Her early euphoria flagged as she realized that successfully navigating the tournament wasn't going to be as easy as it first looked.

The very real possibility of being drummed out of the tournament settled over the playing floor and a kind of collective tension began to spread throughout the room.

As far as Marianne could tell, those players who weren't trying to win the poker championship were apparently making a play for the championship of being annoying.

Habits that were annoying in strangers for short periods of time (i.e., waiting for your "just a regular venti coffee, room for milk" behind all those fucking caramel-drizzled extra-shot coconut-mocha frappuccinos with "just an extra crumble of graham cracker on top if you don't mind" that took ten minutes apiece to make, sitting in the movie theater just as the lights dim and the U.N. representatives from the Amazon run in and sit down in front of you, etc.) took on new and excruciating levels of insidiousness, threatening to distract the weak and unprepared from their game.

Those in the know used headphones, tuning out the small talk and focusing on their personal game. But Marianne and anyone who'd never played a floor tournament before had to contend with the humming and intentional distraction in the form of loaded questions, leading questions, stupid questions, and the even more stupid rhetorical questions. There were noises that didn't sound accidental and smells that didn't smell coincidental.

There were a host of methodologies employed for the apparent purpose of getting an opponent to reveal something about

his hand or strategy or even just to get you so pissed off that it rendered you unable to play with your customary logic due to being so overwhelmingly consumed by thoughts of revenge.

Marianne was beginning to find herself falling into the trap of the latter.

For the last hour, last year's champion had decided that he would offend Marianne out of the game. Apparently gross misogyny was a key component of his poker playing strategy which involved insulting Marianne to the point of becoming so flustered that she'd just turn and "run like a girl" or so consumed with vengeance that she'd make a fatal error in the course of trying to drum him out of the game.

Seeing as how he was the short stack, not she, Marianne felt confident in her ability to both extract vengeance and survive to play another day. It was just going to take a little patience.

The small blind this time, Marianne pushed the required chips into the center of the table and waited for her cards. She'd scored a pair of pocket queens, not a slam dunk, for sure, but an excellent hand to trap with from the small blind, especially since she already had an investment on the table.

Unfortunately for herself and the green-tracksuit guy who'd already been committed by default due to the big blind, Texas Trouble went all-in.

Marianne inwardly sighed. He could have anything. He was short-stacked as it was, so he might not have waited for one of the top hands, fearing he'd bleed out with the blinds. But he could have scored something big, a king/king, ace/ace, or 'Big Slick,' ace/king. The amount of chips he had going all-in would have taken a sizable chunk out of her stash, and she just wasn't sure she wanted to risk it right now, with this particular player who seemed so intent on screwing her out of the game.

Next to her, she could sense the green-tracksuit guy going through the same thought processes.

"Tell you what," Texas Trouble said. "Give me this one and I'll show you mine if you show me yours. Give you a little insight into the mind of a champion."

Marianne glanced over at Green Tracksuit, who wiped his sweaty forehead with his sleeve. She wasn't planning to go for it, so she might as well get insight, though she'd be revealing she threw away a pretty powerful hand. But if it did turn out to be a stupid reveal, she figured she could just chalk it up to the stupid-female stereotype that she planned to blow out of the water later down the road.

She nodded, Green Tracksuit nodded, and the two of them went out, revealing her queens and Green Tracksuit's suited nine and five. Texas Trouble shrugged, a sly little grin plastering his face, and revealed a pair of jacks.

That could have been the end of it. Marianne was hating the guy, really hating him, but he'd beaten her fair and square, with a nice psychological fake-out tossed in there to boot. But he made the mistake of pointing at her instead of the queens he was referencing and drawled, "Nice pair of tits!"

Someone had the courtesy to actually gasp in horror, and then the table fell silent and all eyes shifted to Marianne. She moistened her lips and smiled, pointing at Green Tracksuit's cards. "Speaking of which," she said, "we have a Dolly Parton on the table, working nine to five. Did you know that the first cloned mammal was a sheep named 'Dolly' in honor of Dolly Parton, because it was cloned from a mammary cell?"

Nobody said a word. And then from the bowels of the table over there, out of Texas Trouble's sinus came a disdainful short.

Something in Marianne snapped. Perhaps it was the mounting tension in the room, the exhaustion from focusing on the cards for so many consecutive hours. Maybe it was the fact that she desperately had to pee or the reality that the empty spots

around the table used to belong to people who'd lost the right to play the game.

Whatever it was, Marianne just looked over at Texas Trouble. She called his snort, raising it with a slightly daffy, oh-so-calculated girlish giggle, and kept the following thought to herself:

I am so going to eviscerate you.

chapter eleven

A few hours into the tournament, Bijoux left an enthralled Peter and slipped out of the mob, beelined for the casino lobby, and asked the doorman to hail her a cab. One pulled up immediately and emptied itself of the tournament curious, no doubt.

Ditching the tournament after Marianne dumped a pair of queens and shot what Bijoux recognized as a death stare on that Texas champion guy's face was no problem at all. Marianne was fixated on the tournament, *Peter* was fixated on the tournament, and Bijoux had, of course, prepared for the possibility of becoming terminally bored watching poker by wearing her bathing suit under her clothes.

In the backseat of the cab, she threw her shoes into the tote bag she'd lugged down with her and swapped them for more pool-appropriate designer sandals. By the time she'd touched up her makeup, she'd arrived at Caesar's casino and looked the part.

She paid the taxi, stepped into Caesar's sumptuous lobby, and began bribing the appropriate nubile young man for a pass to VIP poolside treatment.

She meant to be a good supporter. She'd stuck in there at the tournament for hours, straining to catch a glimpse of Marianne the entire time.

But the video screens mounted on the ceiling were too small and didn't have a special one just to feature Marianne, which Bijoux couldn't understand at all, given that she was the cutest player out there and undoubtedly one of the most interesting to watch.

The nubile young Roman escorted Bijoux to the pool area. Bijoux pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and slipped it into the hand that he raised to his lips.

She strutted out to the pool, choosing a lounge chair and accepting a snowy-white towel from a toga-clad cart jockey.

Well, who could blame her for being anxious? Marianne might be putting her time to good use making money, but Bijoux wasn't accomplishing a thing. The men squashing into her from all sides at the tournament clearly weren't of interest, and obviously she couldn't make money gambling if she were sitting on her ass all day watching Marianne do it.

Bijoux settled and looked around. This was more like it. This had potential.

Bijoux had picked the pools at Caesar's over the other casino pools for a reason. Mandalay Bay had a wave pool, sure. But what the hell did Bijoux want with a wave pool? Wave pools attracted kids, and the last thing she wanted was to put herself in a situation with a bunch of married folk and their sticky progeny.

At Caesar's, with the white, white of the Roman columns and the blue, blue of the water in the pool, she could actually start to imagine herself in a place of peacefulness.

A waitress approached in full sassy toga-themed getup and handed her a menu.

"First, a cocktail. Let's see . . . is this a new menu? I think

it's changed since the last time I was here. Well . . . I'll have an Aphrodite's Kiss, please. And just a snack . . . just a snack . . . yes, I'll have a side of the fried cheese balls."

"The Kiss and David's Balls. I'll have that out to you shortly."

She reached back and managed to raise her lounge chair up a bit, then began to work her low-digit sunblock into her skin. She frowned as she reached her feet; tiny little chips appeared along the very tips of her toenails. A polish change was in her future. She could go up to the spa and maybe get a massage and some Jacuzzi time first.

The waitress returned very quickly with the refreshments and prepared an attractive little presentation on the table next to Bijoux's chair.

Bijoux ate her snacks and sipped her cocktail as she surveyed the scene over the top of her sunglasses. There were several very nice-looking men out. Perhaps some of them had all of the qualities Bijoux was looking for.

One of them sat up to apply more sunscreen and made eye contact. Bijoux smiled and licked cheese-ball grease off her fingers. He smiled back and then proceeded to rub suntan lotion into his male companion's back in a way that implied he wouldn't be coming over to share snack balls.

Bijoux sighed and pushed her plate aside. She stretched out on the lounge chair, arranged her bikini top to maximize the presentation of her assets, closed her eyes, and waited for someone of wealthy persuasion to come over and try to pick up on her.

She could sense the moment someone was hovering and slowly opened her eyes.

The cocktail waitress bent down. "I'm sorry, but this card didn't go through."

Bijoux's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

The waitress looked sympathetic, but didn't offer a comp. "Do you want me to charge it to the room?"

"Um . . . um . . ." She looked around for a white knight and, giving that up, tried to conjure up how the numbering system might work for the rooms at Caesar's. "No, I'd rather go to the ATM. I hate debt."

"There's one just around the corner on the casino floor." She looked at Bijoux's skimpy getup. "I'm really sorry. . . . Are you sure I shouldn't just charge it?"

Bijoux wasn't above guessing a room number, but a sick feeling in her stomach wouldn't have allowed her to rest easy at the pool any longer even if she had. The hotel room hadn't been charged yet. Had she been shopping for something else lately? Well, of course. She was always shopping. Good God, had her parents really been serious about implementing a limit and phasing her out? Was this cold-turkey? What day was it? How old was she? She wasn't thirty yet.

Bijoux slowly removed her ATM card from her purse, her mouth parched and her skin breaking out into a cold sweat. She held the card out in front of her, cradling in her palm that ugly little orange-and-brown rectangle that didn't match any of her wallets. And then she stood up and began the walk to the ATM.

Her breathing became shallow, her thoughts racing. "Please work. Please work."

The ATM sat there against a wall, oddly plain in a place filled with machinery emblazoned with lights and colors. Bijoux approached quickly once she saw it, shooting little glances to each side to make sure no one was watching. It was rare that she had to resort to this, and each time, she thought with a sigh, it was a little like learning to ride a bicycle all over again.

Bijoux looked at her ATM card and then almost defiantly slipped it into the machine. It requested her password and she typed it in. The account revealed a zero balance, which was

strange. She must be looking in the wrong account. There must be another account. She pushed a few buttons but couldn't seem to navigate to any other accounts. So she took the card out, put it back in, and typed in a different password. The card was rejected.

Unwilling to accept that there wasn't somehow more money somewhere on the card, she tried a series of different but plausible passwords for the same card. Her mother's maiden name, the name of the first guy she'd ever slept with, her magic number, her secret number, her magic, secret number . . . and then the card just didn't come back out.

Bijoux frowned and pushed the clear button. Nothing happened. The machine was completely silent.

Her pulse picked up again. She looked around, thankful there was no one in line behind her, and gave the machine a little kick. Just a little one. Nothing violent or too noticeable. Sort of like a nudge. A suggestion.

The card wouldn't come out.

Bijoux began to sweat profusely at this point as she pressed every single button on the kiosk. The screen started glitching and blinking, but no card.

"Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God." If this was someone's idea of a joke, it sure as hell wasn't a funny one.

Her towel slipped to the floor, and Bijoux stood there in the lobby of the casino in just her bikini and sunglasses, her fingers fixed around either side of the machine, just shaking the thing as if the world would end.

This is what it's going to be like to have no money. When you push the button, nothing comes back. No more good life. No more easy life. Everything was going to be hard. From here on out, things were going to be just too damn hard. "I need some money. Please," she begged, bending over the ATM.

"Tilt."

Bijoux stood straight up and turned around. Behind her stood a portly woman with brunette beehive hairdo about the same height again as the rest of her body, calmly sweeping the floor all the way up to where Bijoux was standing.

“What did you say?” Bijoux asked.

“Tilt. The machine. I don’t think it’s coming back, hon,” she said cheerfully in a voice that under more pleasant circumstances might have registered to her ear as a comforting Southern drawl.

Bijoux took her by the shoulders. “I don’t think I can live like this.”

The cleaning lady picked up Bijoux’s towel and handed it back to her with a commiserating look. “When the money done all run out, the money done all run out. This isn’t the real Roman Empire, honey. All this fancy stuff isn’t real. It’s just Caesar’s, Las Vegas. When you walk outside that door, you’re just outside. That’s all there is. Better get used to it.” She picked up her broom and swept away in the opposite direction.

Bijoux leaned against the ATM and started to sniffle. A tear wound its way down her cheek; she picked up a discarded ATM receipt and pressed it against her skin in an effort to stanch the makeup rivulet eeking its way down her face.

Down the hall at the entrance leading out to the pool area, the cocktail waitress peeked in from the outside, chewed nervously on her lower lip when she saw Bijoux standing there, and then disappeared again.

Bijoux swore under her breath, looked around her, and finally went back out to her lounge chair by the pool, completely deflated. Ignoring the stares of the rich and beautiful basking on lounge chairs as she passed, she pulled her cell phone from her tote bag and dialed Marianne. No answer. She was probably still playing poker, which was a good thing, of course. . . . *But dammit! I really need you, Mare. Where are you?*

She hung up and chewed on her fraying nail, hunched over and hiding her face from the passersby. Then she dialed Peter.

He answered quickly. "S up? I don't really think we're supposed to be using the phone in here," he whispered.

"Peter, thank God." Bijoux's heart was beating fast enough to qualify her for a completely different species.

"What's wrong?"

"Look, I need a rescue," Bijoux blurted out, absolutely mortified. "I'm at Caesar's and I . . ."

She could hear the sound of him jostling the phone and apparently moving through the crowd. *Bless him.*

"What happened?"

"I . . . I can't pay my bill," she said, but it came out only in a whisper.

"What's that?"

"I can't pay my bill," she repeated.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. He obviously didn't understand. "Please come," she said. "I'm at the pool."

"I'm getting a cab. I'll be right there."

Bijoux hung up. She leaned back in the beautiful lounge chair by the side of a pristine blue pool and looked up at the Roman columns decorating the scene.

"I can't pay my bill," she whispered again.

Feeling nothing at all like a Roman goddess, Bijoux put her sunglasses on and let the tears stream down her face.

She stared up at the tops of the columns and thought about how much she'd always liked Las Vegas. Each casino with its own personality. You walked into Paris and you were in a completely different world. You walked into Hard Rock, completely different world. There were so many casinos, so many different worlds. And then just like the lady had said, you walked outside and you were just outside.

“Bij?”

Bijoux took her sunglasses off and Peter frowned. She must look worse than she'd thought.

He sat down on the end of her lounge chair. “How can I help?”

“Can you pay my bill?” she said, too embarrassed to make eye contact. “It's not a big one.”

“Sure.”

“And then can you pretend this never happened?” She looked at him then.

He pursed his lips and slowly nodded. She still didn't think he understood. But he held out his hand and she put her hand in his and he gave it a comforting squeeze.

“This is so embarrassing,” Bijoux said, wiping under her eyes with the fingertips of her free hand. “But you see my situation.”

He nodded sympathetically, and Bijoux felt the need to explain. “I'm sure Marianne's told you. About my situation, I mean. I'm going to lose all my money, so I've got to find a replacement source. What you see is what you get; I'm a common golddigger.”

Peter leaned over the lounge chair and slipped her a private smile. “You may be a golddigger, Bij, but there's nothing common about you.”

Oh, my God. He does understand me. Something inside of her snapped. And she looked into those blue eyes and felt herself fall a little. “That's the nicest thing anybody's said to me in a long time,” she said in a whisper.

Peter used his grip on her hand to help her up out of the lounge chair. “If we leave now, I bet I can slip back into the tournament, and Marianne will never notice I skipped out on her.”

“I'll head back down to meet you guys after I change. Marianne already knows I wasn't going to watch all day,” Bijoux said. And while Peter went off to pay the bill, she collected her

things and thought about cute, nice boys and wondered why the ones she fancied never had any money.

Bijoux would have recognized Donny from a mile away based on just body language alone. He was leaning on the door to her hotel room in a kind of sulky way, like he'd been waiting for a while. He perked right up when he saw her, and smiled. With his hair too long in front, tousled and sloppy, uneven bits falling in his eyes, the whole package was just gorgeous and bad, and she was reminded why Marianne had a such a hard time letting him go.

"Hey, Bij!" He wrapped her in an enormous hug and squeezed her tight.

"Will you look what the cat flew in," she teased. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? I just saw my girlfriend on ESPN. Fifteen seconds of full frontal airtime is nothing to scoff at."

Bijoux narrowed her eyes. "You just said 'your girlfriend.'"

"My who? What?"

"You called Marianne your girlfriend."

"No, I didn't . . . did I?"

"Are you here to make trouble?"

"Is there trouble to be made?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"Donny, I'm serious. This is not the time to get Marianne all riled up."

He cocked his head. "I know that guy's here with you. Is there something going on you wanna tell me about?"

"No! There's nothing going on. We're all just friends. And that's exactly what I'm worried about. Don't go escalating things where there's nothing to be escalated. He's just here to work on a story. Marianne's a great story. You know that."

Donny held out his arms, palms up, the picture of innocence. "Look, I'm just here to support."

She gave him a dubious look.

"Come on," he drawled. "You had to know I would come. Poker. The World Series of Poker, to be precise. And Marianne playing in it, fer chrissakes. I mean just the thought of that all mixed up together makes me hot."

"Well, "I shouldn't be the least bit surprised to see you. And really, I couldn't be happier you're here. I've had the most rotten day."

"What happened?"

Bijoux waved the question off. She didn't want to go into it.

"Hmm. Well, how about you and I go out right after the tournament and have some fun?" Donny asked. "Maybe I can make your potential suitors jealous. You know how well we men respond to that."

"I don't much feel like golddigging tonight," Bijoux said, the Caesar's disaster still too much on her mind to relax.

"Okay, then let's just go and watch the end of the tournament. I want to see Marianne in action."

"Sound great."

"Give me your room key."

"Oh! Fabulous." She handed him her room key, her makeup, and some gum. He took it all in his hands, looking a little lost at the volume of it all, and then stuck it in various pockets. It was always nice to have a guy around who could substitute for a purse. "I'll just drop this back in the room."

"Okay," he said, picking up his suitcase.

"Okay," Bijoux said, opening the door and then letting it slam back in Donny's face as he stepped forward.

"Oh, my God! Are you okay? Donny, I'm so sorry!" She pulled him inside the suite and fussed and clucked and tried to get a look at his nose as he clutched it and moaned in pain.

He broke loose and disappeared into the bathroom, from where he began swearing profusely while Bijoux used all of her human body strength to drag the suitcase from the hall into the suite.

Donny came out of the bathroom and flopped down on Marianne's bed. "Jesus."

"Everything still functional?" Bijoux asked.

"To the best of my knowledge. After all, it's only my nose. It could have been worse."

"Sorry, though . . . Wait a minute."

"What?" he said, his eyes narrowed.

"You stepped forward. Did you think you were staying with us?"

Donny gingerly poked his index finger along the bridge of his nose. "What did you think I wanted the room key for? Obviously!"

"Obviously," Bijoux said dryly.

He got off the bed and moved to the full-length mirror, preening and reviewing his injured member from all possible angles.

"So which one of us were you planning to sleep with?" Bijoux asked, tapping her foot on the ground.

Donny gave up on the nose and flashed her his hundred-watt smile. "Every guy's dream question."

His fingers rubbed the bottom of his chin as he looked between the two beds.

It made Bijoux just want to roll her eyes. She knew what he must be thinking. If he insisted on bunking with Marianne, he looked too needy, the worst thing a guy could possibly do. And if he bunked with her, he stood no chance of getting anything. Worst-case scenario, if he got his own room, he couldn't be sure that Marianne was staying in hers.

He finally stuck his bags on Bijoux's bed. "Just try not to knee me in the nuts while I'm sleeping. That's all I ask."

"Are you joking?"

He unzipped his suitcase and began removing clothes. "I need a favor, Bij. Just help me out."

Bijoux chewed on her lower lip. She would have let him stay either way, but . . . "I kind of need a favor, too. Can I borrow some money?"

Donny stopped unpacking, midshirt, and stared at her. "You've run out of money?"

She waved it off as inconsequential. "My cards aren't working. It's a pain in the ass. I'll pay you back when we get home . . . You know I'm good for it." *Aren't I?*

"Of course you are. No problem. It's just not a set of words I think of as ever coming from your mouth. 'Can I borrow some money.'" He pulled his wallet out of his pocket and tossed it to the comforter in front of her. "Take whatever you need."

Bijoux sighed and opened the wallet. She took out a hundred dollars in twenties, closed the wallet, then thought better and took another hundred, leaving a five and a couple of grimy ones. "This is either going to be incredibly ugly, or the best damn Vegas weekend of my life."

"I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy," Donny said, flashing a grin as he opened the drawers—it happened to be Marianne's side of the bureau—and began jamming his clothes in. "You gonna change or what?"

"Just give me a second." Bijoux pulled a fresh outfit from her closet and headed into the bathroom. "You're not really here to watch Marianne in the tournament, are you?" she asked, closing the bathroom door behind her.

"I am so here for Marianne," he shouted.

Bijoux snorted.

“Oh, and if I’m going to be staying with you girls, there’s one more thing!”

“What?”

“Can we stay away from that let’s-put-makeup-on-Donny-for-fun business?”

“I’ll try,” Bijoux said with a laugh. “But anything can happen.”

chapter twelve

Marianne was staring at the chips still stacked in front of her on the table, calculating how much she had. Someone came on the loudspeaker. She wasn't listening. She was a machine. She was feeling the adrenaline of . . . not losing pounding through her body. It was a good thing she didn't have an addictive personality, because right about now she'd have been hooked on the drug.

Yes, you must die.

I'm a badass female and you must die. If I cannot pull a Tarantino and slice the stiletto heel of my boot through your gut, I will simply have to beat you at cards.

She might not have looked it, with her hair tucked behind her ears, part askew, and her jacket discarded on the back of her chair, but Marianne was in the zone. She'd settled into the game, the toes of her boots pressing into the floor as she leaned forward, mesmerized as the dealer dealt the cards around the table once again.

A king of spades and a jack of hearts. Not a terrible hand, but not automatically playable. She looked around and noted

she was in a middle position, two off the button. At the very least it didn't warrant a raise before the flop. She flicked her eyes over and took stock of Texas Trouble's chip count. He was a reckless player. He cared too much about things like women sitting at his poker table. He needed to go down.

She picked her matching bet out of her chip stack and carefully placed it in the center of the table, keeping her facial expression entirely immobile. Texas Trouble snorted and called without hesitation.

Marianne looked at the chips, not at the man. If he were so confident, he should have raised. It wasn't about the snorting and the wagging eyebrows and the rolling eyes. It was about how much money you committed to the pot and how good of a bluff you could pull off when you didn't commit that much. She'd been watching him closely since the very first insult, and he wasn't a good bluffer. He was just blustery across the board.

Amazingly, only four people folded, and the remaining five of them waited for the dealer to burn a card and show them the flop.

It came in 8/7/ace, all spades. That put her one card away from the nut flush. To be unbeatable, she'd need one more spade for herself plus no pairs to show on the board. Anyone holding an eight, a seven, or an ace was ahead of her game, but she was on the draw with reasonable odds.

She glanced up at the clock. They were down to twenty minutes. This would be one of the last hands. If she could get Texas Trouble to go all in. . . .

And though Marianne had warned herself time and time again about not playing hotheaded and letting her irritation with her competitors affect her game play, her desire for revenge sort of took over.

She shifted her weight in her chair. Texas Trouble was

apparently watching her closely. "You don't have it," he said. He frowned and shook his head.

Marianne shrugged.

"You don't have a thing," he repeated, obviously trying to draw a clue from her by forcing her to answer.

She just tapped her fingers against the felt as if she couldn't have been less concerned.

"All-in," he finally blurted. Besides herself, two other players called. The dealer burned and turned: ace of hearts. Then burned and turned for the final community card: Yes! A spade! Marianne had her nut flush. This was going to be an excellent moment.

Texas Trouble was not taking his defeat well. He flipped his cards over to reveal a six and a nine that hadn't panned out into the straight he'd been chasing. "You want to come to the prom with me and get a suite?" he drawled, referencing the fact that his cards combined to a 69.

Marianne had to work hard not to recoil in total disgust. She flipped over her jack and king, off-suit. "Jack/king, off," she shot back at him, slurring her words so that it came out like the poker slang was meant to: jacking off.

A low "ooooh" came from the other men at the table.

The third player flipped over his cards. Queen/three, otherwise known as queen/trey or a queen with a tray. He'd been chasing a flush with the queen of spades paired with a limp diamond three. "These should have been your cards," he said to Texas Trouble. "A gay waiter."

Texas Trouble started to stand out of his chair. "You trying to start something?"

"Not that there's anything wrong with that," the guy said, holding up his hands and laughing.

The fourth guy flipped over his cards. "Jack/ace. You're all a bunch of jackasses," he muttered and stuck his face down in his drink.

Marianne looked up and smiled at Texas Trouble. "I guess I do have it," she said.

While Texas Trouble was busy taking the news of his unceremonious rousting from the tournament rather badly, Marianne exhaled slowly, raked in her chips, and looked up at the clock.

The blinds had passed her by, now, and they weren't necessarily going to come around in the time left, so there was no issue of sunk costs. Thinking of the online game that had landed her at the World Series and how her conservative (or, really, in all fairness, non-existent) play had worked to her advantage, she decided to take the conservative approach and only play the truly choice hands for a while.

No choice hands came her way, so she concentrated on watching the pros. So engrossed in listening to a couple of professionals discuss the play, it took someone shaking her shoulders to realize she was being addressed.

"Marianne."

"Uh."

"Marianne!"

Marianne looked up. Everyone at the tables was standing up now.

"Marianne!"

"Oh, my God. I'm still here." Marianne took it all in and turned to find Bijoux standing up in the spectator section, waving her hands frantically.

"Can I come out there?" Bijoux shouted. Marianne shrugged. Bijoux shrugged and came out to her.

"You did it!"

Marianne's cracked, parched lips didn't want to answer properly. "I think I'm delirious." She staggered forward, zombie-like. "I don't think the human organism is designed for this. It's not natural. This is much, much more taxing than it looks."

"I should say so. You look like you've been hit by a bus."

"What happened?"

"What happened? What happened? You made the cut! You survived the first day. TJ Cloutier and the Magician might have gone down, but you're still standing."

"I made the cut?"

"You made the cut."

"I made the cut?"

"Yeah."

Marianne's jaw dropped open. Then she started laughing. She jumped into Bijoux's arms, squealing. "I made the cut! Whooooo-hoooo!"

A flash blinded her. It was Peter taking a picture. He took a few more pictures of the scene and then came up to them. "Congratulations!" He stuck his voice recorder in her face and asked, mock-tabloid style, "So how do you feel?"

Her answer was a scream at the top of her lungs as she spotted Donny coming toward her through the crowd. "Donny! Oh, my God! I can't believe you came! What about your job?"

"Vacation time." He grabbed her, lifting her up and turning her in a circle. Marianne's heart nearly leaped out of her chest, as it always did in these pure moments with him. The ones when they weren't fighting, weren't analyzing, and had basically forgotten everything else except that they were happy to see each other.

Donny put her down and Peter stuck out his hand. The two men greeted each other in a reasonable semblance of meaning it.

"Hey," Donny said. "How ya doing?"

"Hey," Peter said. "Great. How you doing?"

"Great." Donny took the opportunity to snake his arm around Marianne's shoulders in a claim-staking sort of way, pulling her in close.

Marianne and Bijoux looked at each other. "Uh, so let's eat," Bijoux said. "I bet you're starving."

"Totally. I need some serious protein. I need a steak. A large steak. Fighting food. I don't care what those pansies back in L.A. think."

"Why don't we try the hotel restaurant? It's supposed to be great, and it's easy."

"I just want room service," Marianne said. Bijoux's face fell. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to go out. I'm just really tired."

"How about you and I go?" Peter said. Bijoux's face lit right back up. She looked at Marianne and Donny. "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

In unison they answered, "We're sure."

Marianne was relieved to see them go. Donny was easy. She could just be her lazy ass self around him and he'd understand. She looked over at him as they walked to the elevator banks. "You should go with them if you want to. This is Vegas, after all. You're not supposed to stay in your hotel room in Vegas."

"Eh. I can do Vegas any time. Chilling out sounds good to me. We'll go out tomorrow for a little celebration after you make it through Day 2."

"That's not exactly a given."

"Think positive. The longer you stay in the game, the more bragging rights I have."

Marianne laughed as the elevator doors opened and they headed for the room. She keyed them in and dumped her stuff on the bed. "Would you order room service while I grab a quick shower?"

"Will do."

Marianne stripped off and just left Bijoux's clothes lying on the floor as she rinsed off. Donny didn't even have to ask exactly what to order. She sighed and raised her face to the spray. Why couldn't they make this last when they were actually trying as boyfriend/girlfriend? Why did semantics make

such a difference in practice? Maybe they were so used to failing, it was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

She turned off the water and toweled off, removing all her makeup. With her towel wrapped around her, she came out of the bathroom and pulled her pajamas from the drawer, then walked back into the bathroom to change.

"I've seen you naked before," Donny yelled.

"It's the principle of the thing," she yelled back.

"Well, it's stupid!"

Marianne laughed softly. She came out of the bedroom and flopped backwards on the bed.

Staring up at the ceiling, she said, "I guess I'll just share a bed with Bijoux."

"Don't be daft."

"What?"

"That's really not necessary. You're in competition. Your sleep is important."

"And you think I'll sleep better with you in my bed?"

He grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Marianne rolled her eyes. "So you're going to sleep with Bijoux?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" he said casually.

"No, I just . . . Yes. That's ridiculous. I mean, come on."

He blinked innocently at her. "Bit of a dilemma, eh?"

"Why don't you go share Peter's room?"

Donny's face darkened. "I don't even know the guy. He's Bijoux's friend. Why doesn't Bijoux go sleep with him?"

"Because Bijoux's supposed to be rooming with me."

He threw up his arms. "Well, I guess I'll just sleep in the bed that's not taken at any given moment. Course, if you want to crawl in with me, I won't say no."

Marianne huffed. "I don't know how you get away with everything you get away with."

“Personal charm,” he said, getting up to answer the door. The room service guy wheeled in a cart and began offloading plates onto the desk.

Marianne made herself comfortable on top of the bed and grabbed the remote, turning the TV on to ESPN; Donny handed one of the plates over and arranged the silverware and drinks on the bedside table, then settled in cross-legged next to her.

Announcer: “It’s been a bloodbath for former champions on day one; four have been knocked out, but we still have some big names as we move into day two of competition. Phil Ivey, Annie Duke, Phil Hellmuth . . . the young guns are still in the game. Join us for the big action tomorrow and watch the temperature rise.”

“Machine Gun Marianne,” Donny said with a grin. “That’s my girl.”

Marianne grinned back and stuck a huge forkful of steak and potatoes in her mouth.

Bijoux and Peter found a spot at the bar more easily than she’d expected. Perhaps everyone else had gone upstairs to pass out, or was seeking refuge from the tournament at other casino bars. It was fine with her. If they weren’t going to make a night of it, then they might as well go some place where they could actually hear each other talk.

The honeyed glow of the lights against the wood of the bar made for a surprisingly intimate setting. Not that this was a date or anything.

After ordering a couple of drinks and settling in, Peter asked, “So what’s up with him?”

“Donny?” Bijoux just shrugged. She didn’t much feel like talking about Marianne and Donny.

“He’s the ex?” Peter asked. An obvious statement, of course, and one obviously designed to elicit information that wasn’t forthcoming.

"In his defense, he's not really just an ex. He's one of our oldest friends."

"But he *is* Marianne's ex."

"Yes, he is. But try to think of him as an . . . an . . . an overly concerned brotherlike figure."

"Right." He chuckled, but as Bijoux watched his face she thought she detected a faint whiff of jealousy. Bijoux did her best to hide her disappointment that he cared so very much about what Donny was or wasn't to Marianne.

"You like her."

"What is this, high school?"

Bijoux shrugged. "Just a simple observation." Maybe she was just projecting.

"Of course I like her. She's talented, she's hot, she's smart, she's . . ."

Maybe she wasn't just projecting.

Peter stopped flattering Marianne and focused in on Bijoux to the point that it made her nervous.

"Let's talk about you," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it's interesting. What's your story, Bijoux?"

"You know what I'm up to. I'm a gold digger," she said glumly. "But I'm starting to reconsider my position." She looked around at the people posing and posturing in the bar alongside her, surprised to find Peter staring intently at her when she glanced back. "What?"

"You're pretty honest."

She shrugged. "I don't know."

The server came with the drinks. Bijoux sat back and let Peter open a tab. "You know, Marianne and I are very different," Bijoux blurted out. "Marianne's a doer, you see. And there's much more to her than meets the eye."

Peter cocked his head.

"People always think I'm the wacky sidekick, but that's not how it is."

Peter stared at her as if he were seeing her for the first time. "No, it's not, is it?"

"It's always Marianne at the center, true. But I don't mind. I don't. She just has more natural charisma than I do. But the people at the center have got to have someone around them for it to really be the center." Bijoux considered the bar mix, but decided to pass to avoid pretzel breath. "I guess she's the center of the universe *and* the wacky sidekick. I wonder where that leaves me?"

Peter laughed. "You've got a good heart, Bijoux."

"Don't tell anyone. I've got reputation as a mercenary to protect."

"I don't really think it's money you're looking for."

Being with Peter was making her nervous. She felt so self-conscious, so fluttery. Breaking eye contact, she begged a cigarette off the guy sitting next to her at the bar just to give herself something to do.

"Bijoux."

She froze in midair, the cigarette still unlit in her mouth, the match flame flickering. Peter leaned over and blew out the flame. They just looked at each other for a moment. Bijoux could count on one hand the number of really deep moments she'd had in her life with men, and so this one didn't escape her notice at all.

He reached out slowly, took the cigarette out of her mouth, and crushed it in the ashtray. "You don't want that," he said quietly. Their eyes froze, and to Bijoux's horror she felt a bolt of whatever Marianne must have felt when she looked in Peter's eyes. Thank God he was just an underpaid journalist with no prospects of ever becoming extremely wealthy, because there was no way Bijoux was ever going head-to-head with Marianne for a man. "What do you want, Peter?"

He looked a little surprised but didn't shoot back a pat

answer or get around the question with some witty phrase meant to conceal or disguise.

“And don’t give me the man answer.”

He laughed. “What’s the man answer?”

“The kind of answer that doesn’t involve any analysis. Give me the answer you’d give me if you’d thought about the question for quite a while.”

He took a long sip and then set the drink down on the drink protector, taking the time to realign the condensation ring. “I can tell you what I don’t want. I don’t ever want to feel stagnant.”

Bijoux smiled at the *don’t* of it.

“It’s one of the reasons I like the idea of being a journalist. Never the same story. Always someone new to meet, somewhere new to go, something new to experience. I want to feel as though there’s always the possibility of something completely different around the corner.” He smiled. “There’s your non-man answer.”

“Thanks,” she said quietly. *You picked the right girl. Marianne’s the spontaneous one. The one up for adventure. The one who will always seem fresh and exciting and new.* “Why do I get the feeling that there’s going to be an incendiary *L.A. Times* article about girls gone wild playing poker in Vegas, accompanied by crazy pictures of Marianne and I.”

“I’ll let you see the pictures first,” he said with a wink.

Bijoux stared at him for a moment in disbelief and then burst out laughing. “You shit disturber!” she yelled out, and began pummeling him in the arm.

Suddenly nervous, she stopped pummeling him. He caught her by the arm and she was sure, absolutely sure he was going to try to kiss her, which she wasn’t sure how she would handle, but maybe he wasn’t about to kiss her and it was all in her imagination and . . . and—he didn’t.

Might as well eat the bar mix, then. Pretzel breath obviously wasn’t going to be an issue tonight.

chapter thirteen

Taking her seat and arranging her things yet again, Marianne noticed that she'd gotten stuck immediately to the left of the button and would be the opening small blind for the day.

She looked up at the leader board, noting that her chip count still didn't compare to the amounts accumulated by the top players. In spite of her couple of big wins the prior day, she was going to have to play hard and smart to catch up.

She wasn't so low that she'd need to start stressing immediately and get involved in a bunch of major confrontations unless she really, really wanted to. But she also needed to be careful that she didn't play too conservatively and lose by virtue of a slow chip bleed to extinction. The chip leaders at the table would try to push her around, and the trick was to avoid their maneuvers. Because all they were thinking was that eight million dollars got closer every day.

Find the zone, Marianne. Find the zone.

The first hand of the day came around, and a kind of electricity sizzled in the air. *Everyone* was trying to find the zone. Everyone was digging in to make it to the next day.

Marianne looked at her cards. Pocket rockets—ace/ace. A good omen. Conservative play was one thing, but this wasn't the moment to hold back. When the betting came around she raised three times the big blind, hoping to get as many chips as possible into the pot or take the whole thing before the flop. At the other end of the table, one of the old pros stared at her for a few moments—during which Marianne kept her expression carefully blank—and then went all-in.

Marianne froze. She'd committed a ton of money to the pot. To match his all-in would deplete her stash even further. He had to have something good, not just something good enough to make this risky a play. She called and everyone else mucked their cards. Yes! Perfect.

The two of them flipped their cards over.

It was Marianne's two aces versus a pair of kings. If the flop pulled a king, she was in deep trouble.

The dealer burned and turned. Nine of clubs, two of diamonds . . . king of hearts. Marianne sat stone-still as the dealer flipped the turn card. Ace. *Holy crap*. Marianne's opponent stood up, shifting his weight from leg to leg.

One card away . . . the dealer flipped the river card. A queen.

Her opponent cussed loud enough for the entire room to hear and smashed his fist down on the table. He brought his hands up to his head, elbows akimbo, and just kept on swearing a blue streak.

Marianne held out her hand for a condolence shake, but he didn't even see it. He left the tournament red-faced and screaming, most likely forcing the ESPN folks to find their bleeper button.

She released a slow breath and raked in the chips. Just like that, she was one of the bullies now. She had her mojo back, and she wasn't going to let it get away from her this time.

Day two was going very, very well already. Marianne had

logged the number of hostile stares encountered on the way to the bathroom at five, the number of men staring at her cleavage at any given time during game play also at five, and the number of times her opponents made it obvious that they assumed she was a total moron at fifteen.

They couldn't have been more wrong and Marianne suddenly felt more relaxed than ever. Today was going to be a good day. A very good day. And tonight, Bijoux would get that night out she'd been waiting for.

There was no such thing as a "regular" nightclub in Las Vegas. The prototype simply didn't exist. Marianne, Peter, Donny and Bijoux sat at a table at what was, at the current hour, merely a restaurant, but which would segue into a nightclub that would, in turn, morph into some sort of performance.

The houselights went out, and the place flickered with strobe lasers as individual ceiling tiles slid away and a team of dancers was lowered into the club on harnesses.

The electronic ocean sounds gave way to a thumping dance track as the harnesses lowered all the way to the ground and dancers stepped away from the rigging and took up residence along the midlevel catwalks above the two bars and on risers above the dance floor.

The hostess leaned over and said something into Peter's ear.

"What did she say?" Marianne asked.

"It's three hundred dollars to keep the table, including a bottle of liquor and mixers all around," he shouted back over the growing din.

"Should we do it?" Marianne asked, clapping her hands and looking at the others.

"Absolutely," Donny said. He took out his wallet. "It's cheap if we all split it."

Bijoux bit her lower lip and shrugged. "I left my credit

cards upstairs. How about we forget the table and just dance?”

Peter grabbed her around the waist and dipped her in a most masterful manner. “Then tonight,” he said with exaggerated drama, “tonight, we dance!”

Donny’s eyebrow flew up. He turned to Marianne and held out his palm. She put hers in his and he yanked on her arm, twirling her in until he had her in a somewhat tangled embrace. “Let’s do it.” They hit the dance floor, already crowded with brides-to-be, their posses, and the single men who hoped to reap the benefits.

The *whump-whumping* of the music seemed to psych Marianne right up. If she was tired from playing poker all day, she certainly wasn’t showing it.

Within a few moments Donny had managed to generate a circle with himself as the hub and a circle of bridesmaids around him. He gestured for the rest of them to join the circle.

“Can I get a robot?” he shouted, preening for the crowd. Everyone went wild as he proceeded to answer his own question. He pointed to Peter, getting into the Chuck Berry chicken position and grooving to the music. “I said, can I get a robot?” he challenged.

Bijoux looked at Marianne in horror, who was bobbing up and down and clapping next to her in the circle. “Oh, my God. It’s a dance-off.”

“A testosterone-a-thon!” Marianne shouted back happily.

“I’m opposed to public humiliation!”

“You have to loosen up! Besides, you’re not the one about to be humili—” She broke off in midsentence, squealing as Peter Chuck Berry-chickened into the center of the circle, saw Donny’s robot, and raised him an old-school Running Man. Bijoux and Marianne jumped up and down, hooting and hollering and clapping and laughing. . . .

"This is all your fault, you know," Bijoux said. "They're battling for supremacy in the great war for your love."

"Are you drunk?"

"Getting there."

"This isn't about me."

"It's always about you," Bijoux said with a smile, bumping her hip against Marianne's.

"Yeah, yeah, let's see some of that!" Donny called out to the girls. The circle broke as everyone started hip-checking one another.

Both Donny and Peter came toward them, Peter cock-blocking Donny at the last minute to grab Marianne's hand and pull her into tango position. The two of them tangoed off across the dance floor.

Donny looked a little stunned for a second, then recovered and took Bijoux into his arms as a techno remix of Sinatra's "My Way" kicked in. "What's up with that, Bij?"

"With what?"

"I thought he was with you?"

"He's not with anybody."

Donny's eyebrow arched.

"Don't be jealous. You do it to each other."

"I'm not jealous. *You* don't be jealous."

She watched Peter and Marianne whooping it up on the other side of the dance floor. Marianne really did seem to have all the luck. Not that Bijoux begrudged her. A poker player needed luck.

Perhaps it was more that Marianne had fewer requirements than she did. Not that her standards were lower or anything. Just that without the constraints of things like becoming insanely wealthy, Marianne had more options.

Of course, the fact of the matter was that even without a monetary requirement factored in, there just weren't a lot of extraordinary relationships to be found.

There were plenty of perfectly nice guys out there. There were plenty of ordinary lives out there to be lived, the kind that people all over the country were living. There were plenty of completely acceptable futures to sign up for. That was why Bijoux and Marianne weren't desperate—because they could have picked any number of completely respectable, eminently acceptable guys and settled down by now.

Of course, give it five years and Bijoux might be feeling a little bit more desperate. She looked at Peter, thinking she should really go out tonight and see who was out there. Well, maybe he could be her wingman. Guys liked women who already had guys. The pigs. Adorable pigs, but pigs nonetheless.

"I think I'm going to go hit the craps table, actually."

"Alone?"

Bijoux shrugged. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, but before you go . . . I think I'm going to have to see a . . . Roger Rabbit!"

Bijoux burst out into laughter as Donny performed for her. Over his shoulder she could see Marianne craning her neck to watch him, too.

The dance beat *whump-whumped* some more and the waitress came by and stuck a drink in her hand that Peter had ordered for her, and she drank and danced like a trashy vixen while watching Donny cheer up Bijoux on the dance floor.

He was doing a good job, plying her with liquor and doing a little dirty-dancing of his own, but with his own personal style, which involved a lot of posturing and goofing off. And as Marianne watched, Donny managed to put a smile back on Bijoux's face.

Marianne took a swig of vodka and let it burn her almost as much as the streak of jealousy going through her body. Peter put his arms around her waist, grinding her from behind and nuzzling

her neck. She couldn't begrudge Bijoux a thing. Not a thing. But for Marianne, seeing her ex-boyfriend from the outside—what he'd look like if he were with another woman that he really cared about, what he'd look like with her very best friend, for God's sake—well, it just made a girl have to reassess her priorities.

Marianne downed the rest of her vodka and turned around in the circle of Peter's arms to reassess her priorities by way of grinding her body into his, face-to-face. Part of her focused on the fact that she was actually really enjoying the high of all of this. The tournament, the drinks, a sexy new guy looking at her like Peter was looking at her right now. You had to move on sometime. Bijoux was right. She couldn't do whatever it was she'd been doing with Donny forever.

"How's your story coming?" she asked.

"Not bad at all."

"Are you going to watch the tournament tomorrow or wander around a little?"

"I plan to watch some. Take some pictures. Get some interviews, if I can. I still need to interview you officially when you've got the time and energy."

"So ask me some questions."

"Now?"

"Sure. Ask me anything," she said.

"What thrills you the most?"

She chuckled. "At the poker table, I assume?"

He bent his head in acquiescence. "I know Bijoux's a craps fan, but I've heard that true poker players tend not to mix other games in much."

"I like to play all sorts of games."

"Roulette? Craps?"

Marianne cocked her head. "Oh, yeah. I like to put my money on the come as much as the next girl."

They both burst out laughing.

Marianne nodded and looked around for Donny and Bijoux. She'd last seen Donny in some kind of nightclub-dancer sandwich, but she couldn't find him on the dance floor anymore. She didn't want to think about what he might be up to. "Hey, Marianne." Peter leaned forward, putting his mouth so close to hers she thought he might kiss her right here on the dance floor. Instead he just said, "If you play your cards right, I could be your very own seven-card stud."

"You are so flirting with me!"

"Is that a problem?"

Marianne looked at him coyly. "Not yet." She dropped her forehead down on his chest and let it rest there, suddenly aware of just how exhausted she was and completely sure that she didn't have the energy to flirt back anymore tonight. "Wow. I'm so tired. . . .

Peter picked her head back up as if he'd read her mind. "Let's get you upstairs. You've got an important game tomorrow."

Peter reached the elevator banks first and tapped the up arrow. It arrived almost immediately and the two of them stepped into the car completely alone. They stared silently at the massive columns of numbers representing the route up to their suites. Peter looked up at the security camera. Marianne followed his gaze. They looked at each other and laughed.

Peter reached out and slammed his palm into the stop button, then took Marianne in his arms. He dipped her low, his arm supporting her back, and then leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers.

It was all meant to be a bit of a joke; that was how it started out—overly dramatic and just one of those things people did in casino elevators in Vegas.

But somehow a bit of chemistry kicked in, at least on Marianne's side, and she didn't struggle for her release. The fake kiss turned into a real kiss, soft and serious at first, and then

more intense as she responded and he responded to her response and . . .

For a first kiss, it was a great kiss.

Peter righted her on her feet again and let go, stepping back.

"Sorry," he said, a grin plastered on his face, utterly charming and handsomely rumped in the best possible way. "I'm a guy," he said by way of explanation.

"Is that a camera in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" Marianne joked, for some reason not at all flustered and not entirely sure what she thought about the whole thing.

He pulled his camera out of his pocket and snapped a close-up of Marianne's face, then reached over and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "You know what? You know who you are, Marianne. And I really, really like that." Then he turned away, hit the go button, and the elevator started up again.

What? Marianne leaned back against the cool elevator wall, then looked back up at the security camera and winked. She folded her arms across her chest and studied Peter's face. "You kiss a good kiss, my dear fellow, but I don't know if you know what you're talking about."

He slapped his chest as if mortally wounded. "You think this is just gamesmanship?"

She rolled her eyes, but they shared a look, and she wasn't so sure he was gaming her. The way Peter kissed, you could almost start to believe things, romantic-sounding things, when they came out of his mouth. But he'd hit a sore spot. What exactly did he think he'd figured out about her? Marianne really hated it when people claimed to have some sort of insight that she didn't even have herself.

I only think I know who I am . . . and how can you know what I know? That was the thing about relationships. It was all about waiting for the truth to come out. It was all "And then after I got to know her . . . and, like, two weeks later she sud-

denly started . . .” The fact of the matter was that there was really no such thing as “suddenly,” “after,” or “later.”

Everything that was going to be wrong, everything that would be picked apart and overanalyzed by the women and shrugged off into a box labeled “just don’t bother calling again” by the men had been there from the very beginning. If you paid enough attention, you’d begin to realize that there were no surprises.

At this point in life, reasonable adults would be idiots to assume that what they thought they saw in one another at the get-go was actually what they were going to get in the long run. The best strategy was probably to run away as fast as possible from anything that looked really good in the first moments. Of course, using that strategy she should be running away from Peter and not kissing him in elevators for the benefit of bored casino security people. The door opened, and Marianne flounced out with a sassy glance over her shoulder and her hair falling in her eyes. “You can take me for an elevator ride anytime, sunshine.”

He answered with a jaunty salute, and the elevator doors closed on him, framing those golden looks just perfectly until the last moment.

But when she knew he couldn’t see her face anymore, Marianne let the smile fade away. Slipping the key card in the door, she was reminded just how exhausting the day had been, and all she wanted to do was get into bed and sleep.

The bottom line, she figured, was that it was all about how much one chose to reveal, and how carefully the other person watched. Peter was a journalist. He was trained to analyze detail. Did he see the real Marianne, or did he just see what he hoped was true?

She opened the door and nearly fell over. Donny was lying on the bed, completely alone, watching television.

“Hi.” He immediately raised the remote and turned off the show.

"Hi . . . I wasn't sure you'd actually be coming back tonight."

"I could say the same about you."

They stared at each other, clearly surprised, and then Donny chuckled softly, shaking his head.

Marianne smiled to herself as she closed the door behind her and kicked off her shoes.

Donny got up and walked over to the minibar, took out a bottled water, which he uncapped and handed to her, and then plumped up a second pillow next to the one he'd been leaning against and flopped back down. Marianne lay down next to him and took a swig of water.

Picking a small stack of chips off the nightstand, he started goofing around with them. "You know any chip tricks?"

Marianne shook her head.

He stuck a poker chip on his hand between his index finger and thumb and proceeded to flip it from knuckle to knuckle until it landed at his pinkie finger. "All the pros do it," he said with a wink. "Here." He took Marianne's free hand and stuck a chip on it.

Marianne tried and the chip immediately fell to the comforter.

Donny showed her again. "The knuckle roll. Boyd, Esfandari, all the guys do it."

Marianne tried again and the chip plopped right down on the comforter. She just laughed. "Show me something else."

Donny dramatically pushed up his sleeves. "Maybe we'll start with just a simple flip." He fiddled around with the chips some more, doing a couple more tricks. "Here, give me your hand."

Marianne stuck her hand out again and tried the trick, failing miserably once more. Donny put a chip back in her palm, but it slipped out. He just held her hand, then, and Marianne took another swig of water, then stuck the bottle on the nightstand and leaned her head on Donny's shoulder.

chapter fourteen

Bijoux pushed through to the exit and stepped out into the hotel lobby. She went straight to the casino floor and walked up to the changing booth, swapping the money Donny had lent her for chips.

A handful of chips and she was good to go. Bijoux headed to the craps tables and looked around at her options. The tables were crowded and noisy, a blur of excitement and waving limbs and fistfuls of money and clanking of chips, but the elevator banks were silent; the tournament crowds had dispersed, and everyone who was going somewhere was already there.

She wanted a table that was hot, one that had strangers high-fiving each other and cheering boisterously. There was nothing worse than being at a lackluster craps table with the other tables gloating and cheering around you. Granted, the purpose this week wasn't really to win money, though Bijoux would be delighted with the by-product. The purpose was to *meet* money. Of course, while the success of the player wasn't as important as the player himself, it was much better to date a good gambler than a bad one.

Bijoux walked the entire circumference of the craps scene. Her outfit showcased her well, and she noticed the looks of admiration. A little surprised by how unenthusiastic she was feeling about her goal, Bijoux decided to settle in a bit and just play and see where things went from there. She found an open spot at a fairly energetic table and lined up two rollers down from where the dice were.

She tentatively put her money on the pass line, but after making a point apiece, the two men crapped out. The dealer collected the dice with his stick, and as he snaked them toward her, the entire table started hooting and hollering.

"Lady roller! Now we're talking! Let's see some action . . . lady luck, give us something we can work with!"

Bijoux smiled nervously and took the dice. Her heart beat furiously, and the surge in adrenaline made them practically lurch right out of her hand. She tossed them down the felt, rolling a five and a two.

"Seven, seven . . . that's a seven! A win for the pass line!"

The stickman pushed the dice back toward her, and the table cheered and clapped even louder than before. Bijoux picked up the dice and threw them once more, making a point for the table. The cheers grew louder, the compliments bolder, and Bijoux felt something inside of her relax.

With an enormous smile on her face, Bijoux began flirting with a tuxedo-clad, silver-haired businessman like there was no tomorrow.

She smiled across the table at some of her other admirers even as she encouraged yet another suitor on her opposite side. He was telling her a joke about the time he shot an armadillo in Texas after mistaking it for something else. The story was apparently wildly funny, and Bijoux dutifully laughed as she placed another bet and the dice came around.

"Give us something good, sweetheart!"

Armadillo Tuxedo bellowed as cheers went up around the table. Bijoux threw the dice and put another point on the board. A six.

She doubled up behind the bet on the pass line and asked for a bet on the eight, to boot. Chips and hands went flying as everyone placed their bets and the stick swooped in to deliver Bijoux's dice right back to her.

"Come on, baby. You look good in that dress, but you'll look even better if you throw another six," her silver-haired admirer whispered in her ear.

She flashed him a smile that took a bit of effort to pull off, then glanced around the table at the men who were watching her. They were really watching her. She shook the dice, and calmly uttered, "Six," landing another six like a batter guaranteeing a home run by pointing to heaven. The table went wild as her consecutive sixes paid off, and once more the chips and money scattered across the felt.

Bijoux was rolling red-hot. She rolled for fifteen minutes, building points and paying them off. The table was packed, every slot filled, the felt covered in chips.

A college-age guy with spiked hair he'd obviously spent a couple hours on came around from the opposite side of the table. He put his hands on her shoulders, and gave her a joke shoulder rub as if she were a boxer about to go back into the ring.

God, it felt good to be the center of attention.

She could feel the hot flush in her cheeks. She was delivering what they all wanted: cold, hard cash. And everybody loved her for it.

She left the table only after sevensing out when the vast quantities of champagne forced her to take a break. She headed to the restroom, making a conscious effort not to weave her way across the noisy casino floor.

Bijoux finished her business, then reapplied her lipstick

and attended to the makeup smudges accumulated over the course of the evening. On her way back she was nearly run over by a group coming out of the VIP rooms.

The men wore tuxedos; the women had on full evening wear, colorful dresses made out of silk and chiffon and ruffles like all the characters on *Dynasty* and *Dallas* once wore. And they dripped with diamonds. One of the women stumbled and planted her high heel squarely on the toe of Bijoux's shoe, knocking her against the wall as they laughed and pushed themselves through the crowd like they owned the casino itself. One woman's diamond pendant swayed through the air, and Bijoux stared at the gemstone as if it were some sort of hypnosis device, self-consciously sweeping her hand up to her own neck and brushing against nothing but bare skin as the woman passed.

Eyes sparking with threatening tears, she leaned against the wall and lifted her foot out of her shoe to have a look. Bijoux Sterling, born a VIP, was losing her grip on the acronym as well as on the wall.

She lost her balance and nearly fell on the walkway, into the path of what appeared to be a set of linebackers for some Midwestern football team, only to be snatched away from certain death by Peter Graham.

Bijoux let him help her up, searching her addled brain for some explanation for his presence down here in the casino with her when he was supposed to be rolling about on a bed in some vaguely European romance-hero manner (as compared to Donny's supposed impassioned-caveman approach).

Marianne was probably playing hard to get; hell, Marianne *was* hard to get. And good for her for it. Bijoux had to respect that her friend would rather get a good night's sleep to be fresh for the poker game the next morning than thrash about with

Peter, but she couldn't really claim that she would have made the same choice.

"You have a knack for finding trouble," Peter said, not unkindly.

"I wasn't in need of a rescue," she said, knowing it was really a lie. "I'm heading back to the tables."

"You're not ready to go back upstairs?" he asked, looking as though he thought she should be going upstairs.

"No. I'm rolling hot! Come with me."

He laughed. "Sure."

Bijoux took his arm, commandeering him toward the tables. With Peter holding her steady, she felt the most intense sense of relief rush through her. Of course, she told herself that she would have been relieved to see anyone. That she would have felt more comfortable if Marianne had come down and gambled with her. But once Marianne started wrapping boys around her little finger, Bijoux probably would have changed her mind about that. But it had been strange to be down in the action, drunk off her gourd, with no one to take care of her. There was always someone taking care of her. There was always someone to call and make things right. Marianne and Donny were at the top of the list, but now Peter was on the list, too.

Bijoux fixated on Peter's big, strong hands as he guided her in a mostly straight line back to the table, and she felt herself melt a little bit in the kindness of his care.

Oh, dear.

She was always developing crushes on the wrong people. It came with the territory. When the characteristics of a desirable mate limited your candidate list to a fraction of a percent at any given time, in any given place, having crushes on inappropriate people happened fairly often. You simply had to accept it for what it was and then move on to the next potential millionaire.

Bijoux knew what she needed to do. She simply made a mental note to refer to him as “Marianne’s Peter” so that she never forgot what was what and who was whose.

Back at the table, Bijoux took over her original spot where the dealers had been watching out for her chips, leaving Peter to find an empty slot on the other side.

Someone at the table had purchased more champagne by way of thanks for her successful rolling and it was clear that the entire table was pleased to have her back just in time to start rolling again.

Bijoux downed half a glass of champagne in the time it took for the player next to her to crap out. And then she put down her bet, reached for the dice, and started rolling again, glancing up at Peter now and then to see if he was still watching.

Oh, hell . . . I want that boy. “Marianne’s Peter,” she murmured to herself, flushed from the champagne, the roar of the crowd around her. She didn’t even look at the table this time, just stared right at Peter and swung her arm out and started rolling straight through for about fifteen minutes.

She finally crapped out with a seven slammed into the opposite end of the table. But she didn’t care. She was too tired and drunk to stand much longer and she was sure she’d made enough to pay Peter back for Caesar’s and Donny back for the loan. Judging by the massive quantity of chips in the little trough in front of her, she’d probably done a fair bit better than that, even.

In fact, nobody who’d been around for the original run seemed to care that Bijoux was clearly done for the evening. As she had her chips colored up, the men around the table started tossing more chips over to her as thanks.

Peter’s face went blurry. She put her hand to her head, laughing and laughing as they added hundreds of dollars to her winnings.

When Peter came back into focus, he just looked worried.

He came around the table as Bijoux stuffed chips into her purse, spilling them onto the floor in an orgy of money and male attention.

He helped her pick up her stray chips, said something to the onlookers, and helped her toward the elevator banks. "You've been like that all evening?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Bijoux said, drawing the sound out in a drunken slur. "You should've come down earlier."

"Apparently."

"I've never felt so decadent," she said, surprised at the slight slur in her speech. "A bit drunk."

"Yeah. I'll get you back to your room. Don't worry."

The elevator door closed behind them, leaving them alone. Peter looked up at the security camera, then looked away, his brow furrowing in a funny way.

Bijoux turned and grabbed him by the collar. He looked . . . like a guy who wasn't going to take advantage of the situation. How tiresome. He seemed to interpret her come-on as if she'd reached out to steady herself from falling.

When the elevator doors opened on their floor, he helped her down the hall to her room.

At the door she fumbled with her card key, dropped it, and then let Peter do it for her.

"You going to be okay now?" Peter asked, one hand still attentively at her elbow.

Bijoux nodded. *Kiss me, you idiot. Just kiss me.*

He gave her shoulder a brotherly squeeze.

"Marianne's Peter," Bijoux said sadly.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Take care of this," he said, handing over her purse. "When you wake up tomorrow and count this, you're going to wonder who the hell you robbed."

She looked in the purse and just saw a mess of chips, then pulled some out and pressed them into his hand. "For Caesar's. Thanks."

"My pleasure," he said, handing half of them back to her.

After a strange little pause, he kissed her hand in a teasing, gallant manner and backed away from the door.

And just like that, he was gone.

The room was just barely lit up by the lights coming from the Las Vegas Strip below. The drapes were still open; it was gorgeous.

In the dim light she saw Donny holding Marianne in his arms, the two of them asleep on top of the covers, both fully clothed.

Bijoux stared at the tableau for a moment, then shuffled to her bed and sat down, just barely managing to remove her high heels before being swamped by overwhelming exhaustion. Clutching her bulging purse and practically swimming in spilled poker chips, Bijoux finally let her guard down and relaxed.

chapter fifteen

“Bij, wake up!”
“Ungg?”

“Wake up! What did you do? Are you okay? Should we expect the police?”

Bijoux turned over and blinked sleepily; then suddenly her eyes flew open. “Oh, my God.” She sat straight up. “Oh, my God!” She looked around at the piles and piles of poker chips in the bed with her. She had the disk-shaped imprints of poker chips pressed into various parts of her body.

Marianne reached out and peeled a thousand-dollar chip off Bijoux’s cheek, then handed it back to her.

Bijoux’s eyes widened. She looked up at Marianne, grinned and then fell backward on the bed. “I remember drinking champagne and throwing lots of good numbers. And I remember . . .”

“Please tell me you’re not hungover,” Marianne said. “I need your help.”

“I don’t get hungover. You know that. It’s a bad policy, and I don’t believe in it.” She turned over and splayed facedown on the bed.

Marianne put on her new sunglasses and poked Bijoux's leg. "How bad are these?"

Bijoux instantly sat up, then recoiled as she took in the full effect of Marianne's shades. "What in God's name is on your face?"

"An admittedly unattractive, pair of squarish wraparound sunglasses I picked up at the gift shop."

Bijoux inched to the edge of the bed, stuck one foot on the carpet, tested her ability to hold her own weight, and stood up. "Sunglasses. For sun. Right. We haven't left the hotel since we arrived."

"These aren't for sun. They're to prevent my competitors from reading my tells."

Bijoux started stripping off her stale clothes. "Well, they certainly aren't going to want to even look at you in those things, so I guess that could work. But I think those are glasses for half-blind elderly people. They're so dark, you won't even be able to read your cards. I read in the in-flight magazine that Annie Duke doesn't wear sunglasses. She says that part of the game is exposing yourself, and that besides, you risk misreading the cards through your sunglasses."

"Hmm. Well, what about the outfit? Is it enough exposure? Too much? Maybe I'm showing too much cleavage. But I'm trying to use my feminine wiles to my advantage."

Bijoux glanced over and shrugged. "You look great. I would even go so far as to suggest that you turn it up a notch. Borrow something else of mine if you want. Though I should point out that Annie Duke probably never used her breasts to get an advantage either."

"I hate to break it to you, Bij, but I'm no Annie Duke. And if I have to use all of my weapons against the condescending brotherhood of patronizing, 'tit'-happy, poker-playing men I'll likely be playing with today, then that's what I'm going to do."

"You look like Paris Hilton," Bijoux said, heading for the shower.

"Oh. I didn't realize it was that bad."

"No! I mean you look good for what you're going for. Now could you remove those atrocities from your face? They make me nauseous."

Marianne ignored the request. Instead she tugged her skirt down a bit and stepped into the doorway of the bathroom. "Does my—"

"Your butt doesn't look big at all in that skirt," Bijoux said with a smile, then closed the bathroom door in Marianne's face.

The sound of the water turning on drowned out Marianne's next question, and then suddenly Bijoux yelled, "Can we get back to the sunglasses? You really don't want to show up on ESPN wearing horse blinders. Let's go shopping at the Bellagio and get some decent ones that you can feel good about wearing on national television. How much time do you have?"

"I'm not on until the afternoon."

"What?"

"The afternoon! Later!"

"Okay. I'll go shopping with you! I'll be out in ten!"

"Okay!"

Bijoux was as good as her word, and was made up and just about ready to go in another ten.

Marianne looked around for the card key. "So Peter kissed me last night," she said.

Behind her Bijoux stumbled trying to put on her shoe and landed on her ass on the floor. "What?"

Marianne looked over her shoulder. "Peter kissed me." She looked suspiciously at her friend, who was suddenly spending quite a bit of time bent over that shoe, giving it more effort than it really should have required, given that there were no complicated laces involved. "Are you that shocked because I'm

supposed to be focusing on the game at this point, or because it happened at all?"

Bijoux stammered a bit as she said, "I didn't really get that you were that interested in him. Like, already kissing interested."

Marianne shrugged. "Why not? I like him. He seems like a contender." She looked at Bijoux in horror. "Oh, no. Did you like him? Because if *you* like him—"

"Absolutely not. Don't be ridiculous. He kissed *you*, and I'm absolutely *not* interested. Ready to go? I'm ready."

"Yep." Marianne grabbed her purse, and the girls headed out of the casino for the first time in days, both of them stumbling back, their hands flying up to shade their eyes, blinded by the sunlight.

"Holy crap," Marianne said. "You weren't kidding."

Bijoux steered them both to the side while their eyes adjusted to the light. "I think the Bellagio is that way," she said, pointing down the strip, which was still looking very white-light bright.

It felt good to be outside, and Marianne enjoyed the walk. Unfortunately the shops were about as crowded as the casino had been. They had to push their way through the throngs of gawking madras-plaid tourists and sugar daddies with their mail-order supermodels just to get in the door of the designer sunglasses shop.

Marianne beelined for the Chanel. The clerk raised an eyebrow but unlocked the case and pulled out the tray while Bijoux pulled a mirror over. Marianne picked up the first pair. She adjusted them on her nose and turned in profile to see if the insectlike appearance was as bad as it seemed to be.

"So if he hadn't kissed me, would you have been interested?"

Bijoux froze with a pair of white Marc Jacobses in her hand. "What?"

"You said, 'He kissed you, and I'm absolutely not interested.' And I'm asking whether, if he hadn't kissed me, you'd've absolutely been interested."

"Of course not. Don't be silly. Those are dreadful. You're like an enormous fruit fly. Try these."

"Okaaay. Because all you have to do is say the word and I'll back off."

Bijoux stared at her in silence for a moment.

"I would!"

But Bijoux just shrugged. "Well, it's not necessary. Off with the Jacobs. Try these." She handed over a pair of orange Versaces. "Oh, God, no. Horrible. You look like some kind of alien J-Lo."

Marianne stopped in her tracks and turned to Bijoux. "You really don't want him. Right? I mean, he's not rich. He does not match your purported criteria in any way. Am I correct?"

Bijoux stumbled a bit on her answer. "Well, no, he doesn't meet my purported criteria, but—"

"Good, that's settled then," she said, handing back the Versaces and putting on some deep purple Guccis.

Bijoux stared down for a moment at the orange bling-laden sunglasses in her hand. "So, uh, how was it?"

"It actually rated pretty high. It had a lot going for it. Well, it started out as just a kind of a joke thing, so there was humor—"

"A joke? A kissing joke?"

"Well, right. So there was this sort of spirit of fun, you know, with a bit of swashbuckling behavior and a dash of . . . oh, I don't know . . . drama and occasion."

"Jesus," Bijoux muttered.

"And he was . . . I don't know . . . nuanced about it. Very different from Donny. Equally good, but very different."

Bijoux rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. I'm Donny. 'Hey, Marianne . . . wanna fuck?' And now I'm Peter. 'Hey, Marianne . . .

let me make luuuuuvvvvv to you, my fragrant little flower.' Is that the difference we're talking about?"

"Don't be mean to Donny," Marianne said, cracking up.

"I'm not being mean. Would you please take those off? Try these." Marianne swapped her the purple Guccis for a pair of green Diors. Bijoux put the rejects in the reject pile and said, "You know I love Donny. But he's so 'Me man. Grunt. You woman. Grunt.'"

"He is not like that. Well, not exactly. I mean, his caveman tendencies are not without technique. Besides, sometimes you just want a guy who's gonna—"

"Throw you down on the bed and ravage you," Bijoux said calmly.

"Yeah."

"But not every day."

"Maybe not."

Bijoux shook her head, frowning at the green Christian Diors. "They engulf the top part of your head like some kind of flesh-eating plant. Not good. Maybe we should just go to Coach. They have a store here."

"What's wrong with the Sunglasses Shack? I could get some really fabulous crazy ones on the cheap."

Her friend looked at her with a pained expression. "Do you want to be on national television wearing cheap sunglasses?"

Marianne thought about that one for a moment. "I'm not entirely sure I care. I just want to win."

"This was so not originally about winning." Bijoux huffed. "It was supposed to be about you and me and men."

"Peter's a man."

Bijoux nodded. "True. But you don't have to go for the first one who shows interest, Marianne."

Marianne wheeled around. "Ouch."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that you should have your pick. You're a . . . you know . . . you're a catch."

"You sound like my grandmother. If there were really so many good fish in the sea, we'd be out there enjoying both fish and sea from an expensive yacht with our wonderful husbands in the Caribbean."

"Maybe we just haven't met them yet."

"My point exactly. All in good time. Which is why I'm here to win. If you can't meet 'em . . . beat 'em," Marianne said with a grin as she turned to the door. "And if we can't find a decent pair at Coach, I'm going to the Sunglasses Shack."

"We'll find a decent pair at Coach. I promise," Bijoux said grumpily. They thanked the saleswoman and headed back out to the other shops. "Well, poor you. A choice between the best of both worlds. Should you go with Colin Farrell? Or Cinderella's prince? What a burden."

"There's no choice to be made here, unless it's go for Peter or don't go for Peter. Donny and I aren't a thing. And he knows that when I find someone new—long-term new—all this messing about we do on and off is done with. And it's the same if it happens for him first."

Bijoux chewed on her lower lip. "Those things are more easily said than done. It's easy to say you don't care until the evidence is in front of you and you're reeling with jealousy."

"He has no right to be jealous. If he really wanted me, he would have made some sort of effort by now."

"You don't think he's made an effort? I kind of think he has . . . in his Donny sort of way."

"'Wanna fuck' is not an effort. It's a sporting event. A fine sporting event, mind you. A Wimbledon or a Super Bowl—"

Bijoux held up her palm. "Thank you. I get it."

Marianne followed Bijoux into Coach and tried to focus her

brain on shopping. Talking about Donny was making her feel weird. “Why do I feel guilty? I shouldn’t feel guilty. I haven’t done anything wrong. Donny and I have an understanding. Don’t you think?”

“You haven’t lied to him, so I don’t see the problem.”

“Good, good. Why is this so weird for me? I feel weird about Donny.”

Bijoux picked up a purse and looked inside. “For fuck’s sake. You guys need to clean-break it, clean-slate it, whatever. Or else get married and get it over with. Peter’s the best-looking, smartest, most qualified male individual prospective to come into your life for a long, long time. Do not let Donny guilt mess this up. Do not let on to Peter that it’s even an issue. Do not talk about Donny. Do not talk about how you’re *over* Donny. The minute these men sense weakness, their little feelers go up.”

“Their little feelers. Heh.”

“Stop laughing. This is serious. You know what I’m saying. The red flag goes up the minute you sense the specter of a fucked-up relationship not yet far enough in the past. Ex baggage is just a deal breaker. He’ll pull back. He’ll preemptively dump you—”

“He can’t dump me. We’re not really dating.”

They wandered over to the glass case with the sunglasses and Bijoux flagged down an assistant.

“Well, you are about to.” Bijoux stood behind Marianne and looked over her shoulder into the mirror. “All jokes aside. I beg of you, just keep Donny out of the conversation.” Bijoux took Marianne by the shoulders. “Look at me. Look right at me. You need to cut this thing with Donny off for good. Because just about every element, every angle makes you crazy. The guilt. I’m always hearing about the guilt. And you know you’re not

going to get back together with him. He knows he's not getting back together with you. Yet you never make a clean break and there's always this . . . stuff . . . there between you, and you go through this cycle all over again with every guy you realize you might like. What about Donny? What about poor Donny? Cut bait, Marianne, 'cause you've both been fishing off that particular pier for a long time now, and if one of you was going to bite, you would've bitten by now."

"But—"

"No but. No but." She pointed to a pair of pink sunglasses and the sales assistant handed them over. "There is no more 'poor Donny,' do you understand that? Because you're going to cut the guy loose, swear off him for at least six months to a year, and maybe even focus on this amazing guy who has just come into your life."

"You're right. You're so right. Okay. Donny's a big boy. He's an adult. He makes his own decisions and he can take care of himself. You're absolutely right. Thank you, Bijoux, for doing exactly what a best friend is supposed to do."

Marianne tried on the sunglasses and studied her reflection.

Beside her, Bijoux threw up her arms in mock despair. "How do you do it? I mean, you weren't even trying to get Peter. You were actually playing poker. God bless you, I don't know what you did to deserve it, but where's *my* amazing guy?"

"Don't worry. First of all, we don't know that Peter is so amazing. They always seem amazing at first, but within two weeks you know as well as I that all the annoying habits show up and the desire to impress disappears. And second of all, your amazing guy is just around the corner. He may literally be just around the corner."

"Hold still." Bijoux studied Marianne's look. "Those are so much better."

Marianne took the sunglasses off and nodded to the saleswoman, who took them over to the register. "Were you listening to me, Bij? I mean, he could very well be literally around the corner at the craps table. But you've got to remember that the difference between my existing possibly amazing guy and your amazing guy-in-waiting is at least a million dollars or so. So it's not surprising that it's going to take you just a little longer to find him."

Bijoux collapsed into a chair by the register, head bowed, as Marianne signed her credit card receipt.

"No, don't give up! This is Vegas. There are tons of fish here. You just have to keep looking."

"I'm going to be poor. I can feel it."

"You're not going to be poor."

"Are you into him?"

"Who? Peter?"

"Yes."

Marianne shrugged. "He seems great."

Bijoux cocked her head impatiently. "I didn't ask if he was convenient; I asked if you were into him."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm into him."

"Okay."

"Why?"

"No, I was just wondering. You know, wondering if I should prepare myself for the obsessive analysis that we're about to get into now that you've found a new guy. The endless comparisons to Donny, the endless questioning about whether it's 'right' or not."

"Well, not at the moment," Marianne said, checking her watch. "Honestly, Bij, you're obsessing over my obsessing over Peter more than I'm actually obsessing over him. Come on; I've only got a couple of hours left before I'm on, and I want to upgrade my makeup."

They headed back to the hotel where Marianne beelined to the TV and turned on ESPN.

“... another player tearing up the series is one Marianne Hollingsworth.”

The girls shrieked and then quickly shushed each other as the recap package continued to roll, showing Marianne in action at the tables the prior day.

“Hollingsworth is a tax accountant from Los Angeles. . . .”

“Wait for it,” Bijoux said, staring at the screen.

“... but she doesn’t look like anyone *I’ve* ever discussed finances with, heh-heh.”

Marianne rolled her eyes.

“That’s right, she arrived in Vegas as ‘dead money,’ but she’s still here, and with a comfortable spot in the middle of the chip count, Miss Marianne is looking very much *alive*. And that’s our final player recap as play is about to start. This is Ted Wick on the morning of day two here at the Rio as competition heats up. . . .”

“Wait for it,” Bijoux said.

“... and the players try hard not to *cool down*, heh-heh. And now back to the studio.”

Marianne put the TV on mute and grimaced. “‘Miss Marianne’?”

“How much do you want to bet they pull you aside for one of those personal-interest interviews?”

“‘Miss Marianne’?”

“You’d better get down there.”

“Phil Hellmuth waits for, like, an hour after the day has already started before he comes down. It’s some sort of intimidation strategy.”

“Phil Hellmuth is a two-time winner of the World Series. Phil Hellmuth can afford to do whatever the hell he wants. You, my friend, cannot.” She put her hands on Marianne’s

shoulders and turned her back to the door. "You should have your butt in your chair at the starting bell. Go down and start getting acclimated."

Marianne shrugged and grabbed her purse.

Bijoux stuck her hands on her hips. "Are you going diva on me? Pride comes before a fall, missy."

Marianne opened the door and looked back at Bijoux over her shoulder. "If ESPN does interview me, I'm going to tell them I don't accept that nickname."

"The point of nicknames is that you don't get to choose them. Now get out of here."

Marianne looked dreamily off into the distance. "Machine Gun Marianne. That's so much better. I need something with a little . . . fear in it. Oh, well. At least I got airtime. Oh, crap. I almost forgot; toss me my sunglasses, will you?"

Bijoux walked the Coach pair over to her pal and checked her watch. "I'll be down in about half an hour. So don't even think about losing." She gave Marianne a hug. "Good luck. Oh! Do you have your card cap?"

Marianne's eyes went wide. "Oh, shit. Where did I put it?" She started lifting up magazines, poker books, hotel menus. "Okay, don't let me panic. This is a bad time to panic. Where is it?"

Bijoux tried to hand her a quarter. "Just use this. If I find it, I'll bring it down."

"No! Donny gave that to me and it's lucky. It was a stretched penny from New Orleans."

"Listen to yourself. It's just a stretched penny from New Orleans—and Donny gave it to you."

Marianne looked up. "I want it back, Bij. Help me."

Bijoux frowned and shook her head. "I seriously don't get it. But whatever. Let's calm down and be systematic about the search." She started stacking things in neat piles while Marianne got down on her hands and knees and looked under the bed.

“Oh. Here it is. It must have just slipped off the bedside table.” She got to her feet and stood up to face Bijoux, feeling sheepish.

Bijoux stood there, her arms folded across her chest, tapping her pump toe against the carpeting.

Marianne stared down at the silly stretched penny. Donny.

She tossed the penny in the air, caught it neatly in her hand and tucked it into the tiny pocket on the outside of her purse.

Bijoux gave her a hug. “I’ll be right down. Don’t lose. Good luck.”

chapter sixteen

Things were getting really frenetic around the table. In particular, two of the men were arguing about seating. ESPN had done a good job picking a featured table. It was packed with a cast of characters that would certainly give a good story.

Marianne looked over at the spectator section. Bijoux was squinting, apparently trying to figure out who else was at Marianne's table. She pointed at something in her tournament guide, and Peter looked down where her finger was trailing across the page. He looked over at the table and then wrote something down in his notebook. Donny looked straight over at Marianne and winked.

Marianne settled her water bottle down on the table, then decided she didn't like where it was placed and fidgeted with where to put it for the next few moments. As she waited for the attendant to come around with their plastic bags of chips from the previous day, she tapped her index finger on Donny's stretched penny. She had to confess she liked the idea of him watching her play.

Marianne pulled her new sunglasses from her purse and

slipped them on. In the glare of the camera lights, it was actually helpful to wear them, though as Bijoux had warned, if there hadn't been so much light she wondered how she'd even see her cards.

She'd had enough sleep, but almost wished she hadn't expended so much energy on shopping in the earlier part of the day. Everyone was looking a little ragged, and it was only going to get worse.

The ESPN officials ran around organizing things, pointing camera lenses, lighting the area, taking down names, and getting waivers signed.

"You're an asshole, Noonan," the guy on her left suddenly blurted out, leaning over Marianne to direct his comment to the man directly on her right side.

Okaaay.

The guy on her right leaned over her. "You're a bigger asshole, Pierce."

Marianne leaned back as far as her chair would allow as the two men held a standoff, eyes narrowed, fists curled.

She cleared her throat. They both swiveled their heads and looked at her. Marianne smiled in hopes of de-escalating the situation with her innate charm. They smiled, looked at each other and glared, then sat back in their own seats.

Marianne looked across the table, where another trio of competitors were studiously avoiding eye contact with either of the men.

"Whatever," she muttered below her breath, opening her bag of chips. "Focus."

"Don't even think about looking at my cards!" Pierce yelled out with the classic undertones of the deranged, apparently not realizing that with the seating arranged as it was, Noonan's being able to see anything to Marianne's right was patently impossible.

Suddenly the man on her right swooped in and practically tongued her ear in an effort to hiss, "You watch that son of a bitch on your left. He'll try to sneak a peek at your cards. You just remember, pull the cards straight into the keyhole camera and peek—only enough so's you can make sure you're really seeing what you think you're seeing—and then put that cap right down on your cards. You lean into me if you have to, sweetheart."

"That's very kind of you," Marianne said, leaning distinctly away from the staleness of him and then recoiling back from the staleness of his adversary. She sighed. This was going to be a very long session. "Let the idiots shake out," she muttered. All the same, she knew it was time to up the risk factor. As the players all emptied their bags and arranged their stacks she was actually a little alarmed to see the amount of chips the others had amassed. "Don't get nervous. Just play your game." She circled her shoulders a couple of times and stretched out her neck. God, she was tired. Everyone looked like hell.

Noonan put his hand on Marianne's back. Her eyes popped wide-open, and she tried to form the correct words to scream under the circumstances. "If that son of a bitch tries to cheat, you call him out," he said. "You just call him right out and I'll support you."

"Thanks. That's . . . really . . . kind of you. So do you guys know each other, then?"

"Yes."

No additional information was forthcoming, and the unpleasant sensation of his creepy hand on her back was just a bit more than she was prepared to tolerate. Marianne smiled, scooted her chair back, and stood up, running through a series of runner's stretches, putting her shoe on the chair, stretching her back by bending over. Suddenly she noticed the ESPN assistant pointing in her direction as he spoke to a cameraman who appeared to be filming her.

Marianne played to the camera, and then suddenly the announcer appeared and asked everyone to settle in, and day three was on. It started out slowly. Two players had squeaked into day three from the prior day pretty low in the chip count. The first went out almost immediately after going all-in on a decent enough pair of tens. Nobody dominated for the first few hours, with good-size wins being evenly distributed among the chip leaders at the table.

Halfway through the day, with her lower back on fire, Marianne took a moment to stretch again and review the chip situation. She was pretty much smack in the middle of things, winning just enough hands at just the right time to stay above the danger line. But if she didn't start ramping things up a bit, she was in jeopardy of draining the life out of her game. In other words, it was time to start playing a little riskier than she had been.

In the next few hours she put the balls to the wall, changing things up and risking bigger amounts of money, limping in, then raising big after the flop, sometimes making faces opposite from what she was feeling in order to draw an easy bluff . . . and sometimes not. As some of the other men at the table gambled on all-in play and lost, she began to sense a change in the air. She began to sense . . . respect. Or if not respect, maybe a little concern that she wasn't going down so easily. And there was certainly nothing wrong with currying either one of those sentiments.

The concentration, the constant sitting, the ache in her back, the hot lights—it was all making her really tired. Marianne knew the day couldn't go on and on. The end would come at some point, and she needed to hold on, as high up on the ladder as she possibly could.

For what seemed like the umpteenth time, the dealer dealt out two cards apiece to the table survivors. Marianne looked at her cards—an off-suit ace and seven—and decided to limp in

from the button, then raise big if she liked what she saw on the flop. Unfortunately, a quiet elderly man named Tran who'd only stepped up for one really big hand so far took this as an opportunity to go for glory raising Marianne's bet. Willing to gamble on the possibility of flopping an ace, Marianne called. After all, Tran had bluffed several hands back, flipping his cards over at the end of the hand to prove he'd snowed his opponent well. So it was possible he didn't really have anything.

But when the flop came it turned over a king, a five, and a two. Marianne cringed inwardly. No immediate help at all, though it had remote straight potential and she'd committed a lot of her chips already. If she let this hand go down, she'd be horribly crippled for the rest of the play. If she pursued it with what she was holding . . . well, she might have to try the biggest bluff she'd ever done. She didn't want to chase a straight under the circumstances, but if that ace popped up . . .

She looked up at her opponent, mentally cycling through the stuff she'd read about tells, and unfortunately not seeing any of it reflected on his face. He smiled politely. She smiled back.

What did he have? *Okay, let's see.* Worst-case scenario, he had a pair of kings, pair of aces, or ace/king. If he'd had a superstrong pair, he would have raised higher. Maybe. Probably. And with one ace in her hand, the probability of his having one, much less two, was significantly decreased. So what to interpret? *Sigh.*

"Your hand is not so good," Tran said sympathetically.

Marianne's eyes narrowed in spite of herself. He was doing the chatty thing—the chatty thing she'd heard the commentators talk about on television, where your opponents struck up idle chitchat in hopes that you'd accidentally spill a piece of information they could use against you.

Not so fast, buddy. Of course, the fact that she'd shot him a

death glare at all was something of a tell. *Control yourself. You're good at that. Control yourself.*

Luckily, with Tran the big blind and Marianne acting behind him, he was first to bet. And he hadn't made his decision yet, either.

"Your hand is not so good," Marianne echoed sweetly.

A couple of the other guys at the table chuckled.

Tran bet. Marianne called. The dealer flipped the turn and things didn't really improve. A four.

Chasing a straight, indeed. *Should I get out? If he bets, I'm out.* But Tran checked.

Marianne studied his face. He stuck out his tongue good-naturedly and Marianne laughed. Well, if he wasn't sure he really wanted this pot, she'd take it.

Marianne bet. And Tran called. *Huh.*

"Miss Marianne's maybe not so sweet as she looks," Pierce said to Tran, who merely raised an eyebrow.

The dealer flipped over the river card. Oh, god. A ten. So not helpful, and she'd already committed so much. She should get out. No, wait! Marianne looked at the chips on the table and tried to calculate pot odds. Oh, hell. If Tran didn't bail out, this would require the bluff of the century. And she was going to deliver it.

Tran bet. Marianne raised.

Tran's eyebrow arched, giving away his surprise. She could practically see the wheels turning in his head as he calculated the pot odds. And then suddenly, almost as if it were an impulse, he mucked his cards and swore.

Several men at the table released a breath at the same time.

Marianne considered turning over her cards to show them her bluff. Instead she just said, "It's not 'Miss Marianne.'" Raking the chips toward her current stacks, she looked up and smiled. "It's Machine Gun Marianne."

Things seemed to only get better as the remaining hours dwindled. She was just playing really hot. Very few of her hands were completely horrible. Many of them were playable. And some of them were downright terrific. Luck, it seemed, was simply on her side today.

Her average take wasn't, perhaps, as lucrative as one might have expected, but she was raking in chips at a consistent pace. They said that with the top pairs one could generally expect to win small pots and lose big ones; she preferred to be on the winning side, regardless of the size of the pot.

The next hand the dealer laid out, Marianne couldn't believe her streak of good luck. A king and an ace, suited. *Sweet!* Marianne decided to play it strong this time, hoping to knock out some of her competitors before the flop. On her turn she bet and forced out a couple of players who had checked. The blinds called, but Noonan played back at her with a hefty re-raise. Marianne called. The blinds folded, leaving her heads-up with Noonan.

Sure enough, Noonan bet; but Marianne decided to keep the faith, and raised. She couldn't just call because that would make her look weak. A raise would give Noonan the chance to fold if he didn't like his hand. It would probably also stop his betting on the turn, which would mean she'd get a free card. And, of course, an ace or a king might hit on the turn or the river. In which case she'd have him by the . . . well, by the nuts.

The flop came with a lackluster array of rags of three different suits. If she was operating against a low pair somewhere on the table, things were about to get very sticky. Sure enough, a raise came in before it ever got to her, and Marianne decided to keep the faith, reraising with hopes of a second ace or king hitting on the turn or river down the line.

Noonan stayed in, prompting some more warnings from Pierce about concealing her cards properly, and the dealer

burned one and flipped over the next community card. Marianne got the ace she was looking for and had to work hard not to reveal any signs of elation. Her Coach sunglasses were doing their job, and she was doing hers. All she had to do was hang on.

Pierce mumbled something again, and Noonan slapped his in-play hole cards down on the table, stuck his card cap on top of them and glared at Pierce. "You coaching her?"

"What?" Marianne yelled out in outrage. "How dare you?"

Pierce stood up, knocking his chair back, his fists curling as he threw some jabs into the air. "You talking to me, Noonan?"

ESPN was all over it as a couple of tournament employees moved in to settle things down. Marianne requested a seat change but apparently there was no such thing. They told her to calm down, that nobody was accusing her of anything, and that these guys were legendary for their extreme dislike of each other.

Everyone sat back down. Marianne glowered at Noonan and bet an outrageous amount of money, immediately cursing herself for falling into the trap of playing hotheaded. Anything could happen on the river.

Noonan had apparently decided that Marianne had officially sided with Pierce, which wasn't entirely untrue. This day could not be over soon enough. She looked over her shoulder into the stands. Donny was leaning forward, his fists clenched. Peter was writing furiously in his notebook, and Bijoux was just staring at Marianne, her mouth gaping wide open.

Meanwhile, Noonan was reviewing his massacred chip stack. He raised his hands as if to go all-in, and then stopped at the last moment.

And Marianne knew that luck had to be on her side. Just had to be. Unless she was going to lose on the river. Noonan was saving chips in case he lost which meant he wasn't feeling confident. Because if he went all-in, he would put himself out

of the tournament, whereas if he saved some chips back, he still had a chance for a comeback. A chip and a chair. That's what they said. It was all you needed to come back another day.

And sure enough, Noonan checked. They looked at each other. Marianne could hear the drone of the announcer in the background as they flipped their cards.

Noonan was left fuming as Marianne pulled in the lion's share of the stack he'd been accumulating over the last few days.

He reached over Marianne and stuck his index finger into Pierce's chest. "You're a bastard."

"You're a bigger bastard," Pierce said.

Noonan smashed his fist down on the table and stood up again. Marianne sighed, jaded now, and very much engrossed in forming stacks out of the pile of chips she'd won off Noonan.

Noonan apparently needed to vent. "I've been listening to your crap the entire time, and I've had enough, you miserable son of a bitch. We both know you're good with a sucker punch, but can you keep up in a fair fight? Huh? Can you keep up?" He was literally out of his seat, jumping on the balls of his feet, left foot to right, shadowboxing.

Marianne looked around at the others at the table, hoping to see them laughing. A few crooked smiles, a bit of uncertain tittering, but this was clearly getting out of hand.

Marianne kept scootching back in her chair. Unfortunately the camera equipment behind her prevented escape. The two men were right over her head, grappling now. She scrunched down, but Noonan, leaning in from the left, and Pierce, leaning in from the right, were making it impossible for her to dodge the scene.

There were shouts all around. Some of the other players and the tournament directors were trying to pull them apart.

Marianne stood up and knocked her chair over, still crouching down as the blows rained above her head.

Finally the two men were separated, raging and yelling at each other to take the fight outside. Marianne went to make her escape, but forgot her purse on the floor beneath her feet. She bent down to pick it up, and when she came back up Noonan flailed out with an arm that got away from his handlers and hit her smack in the head, knocking her sunglasses clear off her face.

Splayed face-down on the ground beside the table, Marianne almost wished she'd been rendered unconscious. It was not to be. She could hear Donny swearing at the top of his lungs in the background and Peter requesting ice. "Um, Bijoux?"

Bijoux knelt down and put her hand on Marianne's back. "Yes?"

"Is my underwear showing?"

There was a pause. "Yes, but you're wearing the cute black ones with the pink bow and lace."

Marianne felt her skirt flap back down to cover her ass. "Um, Bijoux? Is ESPN still filming?"

There was another pause. "Yes."

"So my underwear—make that my underwear-clad butt—is being broadcast internationally."

"Well . . . yes. If poker is an international sport, I'd have to say that, yes, your underwear-clad ass is being broadcast, er, far and wide. But I'm sure the folks in Dubai don't think any less of you."

Marianne looked over her shoulder at the gathering crowd. "I see. Could you help me up now?"

Suddenly Donny's face appeared. "I think you should lie still for a moment and make sure you're really okay. Because if you're not okay, I'm going to go kick somebody's ass."

Working hard to keep the edge of hysteria in her voice to a minimum, Marianne said, "Actually, I'm really embarrassed, and I think I'd like to get back to the room as soon as possible."

Above her, Bijoux gave Donny a look and said, "It's a girl thing."

He sighed. "Okay." With one on either side of her, Marianne's friends lifted her up, dusted her off, and helped her away from the table. Bijoux recovered the sunglasses and cleaned up Marianne's smeared lipstick with a tissue and Peter reappeared to thrust a plastic cup of ice at the sore spot on her head. As they weaved through the tables toward the exit, the lookers-on began to clap.

"Oh, my God. The group clap. I've done the gambling equivalent of dropping my lunch tray in the high school cafeteria."

"Nah, it's not that bad," Donny said. "This is more like twisting an ankle after yellow-carding someone in soccer and being clapped off the field."

Marianne turned to Bijoux. "Is ESPN still filming?"

"Um . . . don't worry about it, Mare. You look fine."

They led her into the elevator and the door closed. She leaned her aching, frozen head against Peter's shoulder and then felt her head being moved to somebody else's shoulder.

Suddenly she bolted upright once more. "Oh, crap! I'm still in, right? The day closed out, and I'm still in, right? I'm not disqualified for fighting or anything? I mean, I was just standing there. I was participating. Not intentionally, anyway . . ."

"You didn't just finish, Marianne. You finished in the money. You're guaranteed money now," Bijoux said.

Marianne gaped. "Are you serious? More than the ten-K entry fee?"

"Would I lie to you about money? I just don't remember exactly how much," Bijoux said. "But since you won your entry online, it should be a decent chunk of change."

"Oh, my God! That's incredible! I'm really good! I'm really, really good! I'm really, really . . . tired." Suddenly Marianne just started to crash.

“Ssssh.” Donny smoothed Marianne’s hair away with a gentle hand. “Everything’s fine. It’s been a really long day and you just need to rest. Because you’re going back out there tomorrow. I guarantee it.”

The elevator doors opened. Marianne let them shuffle, drag, and carry her to the room. She barely felt Bijoux and Peter taking off her shoes before she crashed. “Day four, here I come,” she said as a kind of rallying cry.

And then she slumped weakly back onto the bed and fell asleep.

chapter seventeen

By the morning of day four, the euphoria Marianne had experienced on the first day of the tournament had pretty much worn off, and if anyone had asked and she'd answered truthfully, she would have described her current playing experience as closer to finals week at college than anything else. Granted, this was more fun than that, but it sure as hell wasn't easy, and as a first-timer, she was getting to the point where she just wanted it to end. To give 100 percent required an extraordinary effort as far as energy and focus were concerned.

Energy could probably be mustered, but focus wasn't coming easy this morning as Marianne nestled against the warmth of Donny's body. Lying here with him felt positively divine, and she didn't feel like getting up, much less playing twelve hours of poker.

Donny shifted, pulling Marianne in closer. She smiled to herself in spite of the ache on the side of her head where she'd been punched.

This waking up in his arms was beginning to become a habit again. A good habit, because it just didn't get any better than

this. Of course, she remembered thinking that before. Lots of times before. Before things just didn't get any worse. The two of them were merely on an upswing. But why couldn't they ever just stay up here? Why couldn't they at least try?

Don't do it, Marianne. You don't start The Conversation with a boy during finals. It's a bad idea.

But maybe if they tried this time, really tried, they could make things work.

Don't do it, Marianne. It never ends how you want it to. This is not the day, or for that matter, the week.

Donny moaned softly in her ear, his hand moving up to Marianne's breast. "Oh, Mare," he murmured.

Marianne instantly overheated. It was so tempting. But lying on her side, she could see Bijoux buried under the covers. Bijoux was a light sleeper. The poor thing would wake up and then have to fake being asleep and lie there through the whole thing and that just wasn't fair. Besides, a covert romp wasn't really what Marianne had on her mind. "Donny."

"Mmm?"

"Donny, stop."

"Is that a real stop or a take me now stop?"

"Real stop."

He stopped, then sighed. "I thought it might help your game," he whispered.

"Can we talk seriously for a moment?"

He stilled, as if every fiber of his being dreaded whatever sentence would follow. "Uhhhh. That never goes well."

Marianne rolled her eyes. "Well, let's not fall into the same old trap, then."

He didn't say anything.

"Don't you think this is nice?" Fuck. She sounded like one of those needy girls. Maybe she was one of those needy girls. Maybe Donny brought it out in her, and maybe that's why she

always went away. Because she didn't like to have to beg for something that should be natural.

She turned over and glanced up at his face. His eyes were wide-open and staring. He blinked, so apparently he wasn't catatonic, merely paralyzed with fear over the commitment-oriented conversation he knew they were about to have.

"Yes, I think this is nice," he said mechanically. "That's why we do it this way."

"Wouldn't it be nicer if we could do it this way all the time and we could stop having conversations that forced me to point out that it was nice?"

Donny sat up, irritation written all over his face. "Don't go there, Marianne. We've tried."

"Not really. We've never really committed to it. We've always sort of expected that it would cycle to an end. What if we assumed that it wasn't going to end? Just for once?"

He got out of bed and went over to the drawer, and started pulling out workout clothes.

"Donny—"

"Stop it," he hissed, glancing over at Bijoux to make sure she didn't wake up. "This works. Okay? You force something, it's not going to work." He disappeared into the bathroom, probably wishing Bijoux were awake so he could slam the door.

Donny sounded like one of those commitment-phobic men. Because he was. And that's why he always went away.

Her heart was pounding a mile a minute which seemed strange because they'd been here so many times before. She could probably have lifted an entire scene from the past and used the same words. "This doesn't work for me," she said, doing just that as he came out of the bathroom and starting putting on his tennis shoes. In the back of her mind, she told herself not to cry, told herself to stop escalating an argument,

told herself not to get worked up before the tournament. “I deserve better than this,” she said.

“Fine, then let’s just stop doing this,” he said cruelly.

“I love you.”

His fingers froze. “I love you, too. That goes without saying.”

“I don’t think it should ever go without saying.”

He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth set in a grim line. “What do you want from me? I’m doing the best that I can, and I don’t need this bullshit. I didn’t want to have this conversation, we both know how it always ends, so why are you going there?”

Marianne’s mind churned with all of the possible answers she could give him, all of the options she had to escalate or deescalate the situation. She finally made up her mind just as he unlocked the chain on the door. “Have your stuff out of this room by the time I get back this afternoon,” she said, rolling over and pulling the covers back up.

After a moment of silence, the door opened . . . and closed. He probably thought that this was just another go-round on the endless cycle of their relationship. But it wasn’t. Because someone had to break the cycle. He was never going to make her a priority. He was never going to treat her like he really believed she was the One.

Marianne dropped her face into her hands and swallowed hard to keep the tears back. *Marianne, you idiot. You don’t break up with boys during finals. Everybody knows that.*

She looked over at the lump representing Bijoux under the comforter. “You don’t have to pretend you’re still asleep. He’s gone and we’re done.”

Bijoux sat up and stared blankly in front of her for a minute before slowly looking over at Marianne.

Marianne shrugged. “Let’s pretend it never happened,” she

said. "Let's pretend everything's fine. Because I can't afford to think about it right now. I don't want to cry. If I cry, if I acknowledge the conversation, my concentration is shot."

"Okay." That was all Bijoux said. Just, "Okay," and then just sat there, slumping over on the bed, her eye mask twisted around on her head.

Do not think about Donny. Focus on the tournament. It's the only thing you can control right now. Marianne slowly reached across the bedside table and grabbed Bijoux's compact to examine the bruise on her face. She pressed a finger gingerly into the delicate flesh. "Ow."

"Stop poking at it," Bijoux said.

"I look horrible. I mean, granted, I could have looked a lot worse, but, damn, I look horrible." Marianne stood up and began rummaging through the drawers for something to wear. "Day four is a big one. I make it through this, and not only will I have made it to the final day of the tournament, but making it to the final table could very well be within my reach."

She chose her nicest blue-and-chartreuse satin-ribbon detailed underwear, seeing as that warning moms used to give about wearing nice, clean underwear in case of getting hit by a bus seemed to be true in her case. She'd been hit by the poker bus, anyway. Marianne leaned over the bureau and examined her bruise in the mirror. "Do you think they'll give me a new nickname? That would be cool."

"What, like 'Bull's-eye'?" Bijoux asked.

Marianne frowned. "Oh. No, I was actually hoping for something more like the Punisher. A kind of ironic yet unexpected moniker that would let people know not to be fooled by my femininity."

"You were the one who almost got killed. You were the one who got knocked unconscious. If anyone should be called the Punisher, it would have to be the guy who threw the punch."

Bijoux got out of bed and walked up behind Marianne, reaching around for her cosmetics case resting on the bureau. She pulled out some concealer.

Marianne stepped out of her reach. "Are you sure I should cover it up? I mean, it looks pretty cool. A poker injury and all. I might get some sympathy play. The others might underestimate my abilities thinking I'm brain-damaged or something."

Bijoux looked at her as if she were insane, then proceeded to stay the course, carefully dabbing concealer over the bruise. "They'll still be able to tell you got socked. I'll leave a bit of purple near the eye, but this ruddy bit will look terrible on television without cover-up."

"There is a plus side to all of this, though," Marianne said, staring into the mirror. "I'll always be the cute girl who got punched out on day three. They'll probably include it on the DVD set. Donny will totally laugh . . ." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

Bijoux put the concealer cap back on. "Are you sure you can play?"

Marianne blinked rapidly to staunch the flow, then mustered up the ebullient tones of enthusiasm if not the real emotion behind it. "You'd better believe I can play. Poker is not a glamour sport. It's deeply psychological and apparently more physical than I'd even anticipated. I'm in the trenches now." She crouched in fighting stance, pantomiming spearing nameless opponents with a bayonet. "And when you're in the trenches, you don't just give up. You get in there. . . ." Suddenly she just stood up and went over to the bed, sitting down on it with her arms crossed over her stomach. "I don't really feel like playing today."

Bijoux went and sat down on her bed, her arms crossed over her stomach. "Me neither," she mumbled.

Marianne looked at her in surprise. "What?"

Bijoux just shrugged, a sulky look on her face.

Uh-oh. “I’d better get dressed,” Marianne said, leaping back up and heading for the closet. She ransacked it for just the right outfit, and, of course, couldn’t find anything she wanted to wear from her side. She glanced over at Bijoux’s side, then forced herself to focus back on her side. She pulled out one of the many outfits she’d hadn’t already worn from her own stash and laid it out on the bed. “How about this?”

Bijoux surveyed Marianne’s pick and then looked at her with utter disdain. “A three-quarter-length skirt? Jesus. Didn’t you wear that to lunch with one of the partners back at the office? Wear something more noticeable.”

Marianne frowned. “I’ve worn everything I’ve brought that you presanctioned as noticeable and most of what you brought.”

“Wear something else I brought,” Bijoux said, slumping backwards down on the bed.

Marianne studied her friend for a moment. A good person—a nonselfish person—would pursue this obvious display of upsettedness. She glanced at the alarm clock and went to the closet instead, pulling out a few of Bijoux’s things. She held the pieces up to her figure and turned around. “How about this? I love this. It’s deliciously loud.”

Bijoux managed to roll her head to the side. “That will look fantastic on you.” After a pause, she added, “So you think it might be too loud? Do you think it’s too loud on me?”

Marianne shrugged into the top. “You’ve always worn loud clothes. Ever since I’ve known you.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Marianne’s head popped out of the top as she pulled it down. Glancing into the mirror, she felt slightly better. The top really did look fantastic on her.

“I said, that’s not what I asked.”

“Um, well, I suppose the question is . . . does it suit you? Do you feel comfortable in it?”

“Not especially,” Bijoux said. “Sometimes I think I look like a fucking clown.”

She said it with such rancor that Marianne stopped fussing with her clothes and turned around to look at Bijoux’s face which wore an expression that looked as bitter as she sounded.

Marianne swallowed hard. She could feel the negative charge in the air. Bijoux didn’t often make big scenes. Bijoux didn’t create drama on a regular basis. And when Bijoux cracked, it was big. And Marianne didn’t have time for a big, multi-scene Bijoux drama. That was simply going to have to be compartmentalized along with any thoughts of Donny.

“I have to wear all that stuff,” Bijoux said.

“Why?” Marianne asked nervously.

“Because people barely notice me as it is. If I don’t wear it, they won’t notice me at all,” Bijoux said. “I’ll just be a shadow. You could wear a goddamn potato sack and have a million Peters trailing after you.”

Marianne’s hands stilled on the tiny buckle of her shoe. “Are you asking me to back off Peter? Is that what this is about? Because—”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Bijoux wailed, pressing her palms over her eyes. “A bad friend would say that. I’m just saying . . . I’m just saying . . .”

A knock at the door interrupted whatever she was going to say; both girls looked at the door and then back at each other. “Are you sure that’s not what you’re saying?” Marianne asked.

“I’m sure,” Bijoux said. “This isn’t about Peter. This is about me.” She wrenched herself off the bed and went to answer the door, abnormally unconcerned about the fact that her hair was an embattled mass of tangles and she wearing a fairly revealing negligee.

Peter stood there on the other side. "Hi," Bijoux said robotically. "Marianne's almost ready."

Marianne grabbed her bag and looked over at Peter as he tried to keep his gaze steady above neck level. "I'm ready," she said.

"Great." He turned to Bijoux. "You seem to need a little more time. Do you want me to wait for you?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and I think it's going to be at least an hour and a half." She moved out of the way so Marianne could walk past her.

Marianne stopped on the threshold and glanced at her watch. Over her shoulder, she asked, "Bijoux, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Bijoux said brusquely. "I'll see you down there."

Peter closed the door. "What's wrong with her?"

"I guess we all just woke up on the wrong side of the bed," Marianne said, working hard on that compartmentalizing thing. "Definitely the wrong side of the bed."

chapter eighteen

Marianne descended to the tournament floor, popping her sunglasses on to conceal the bruise enough to suggest that she wasn't trying to play it up, but making it visible enough so as not to kill the cool factor that came from being the recipient of unwarranted poker violence.

"What's the matter?" Peter asked. "You seem stressed-out."

"Bijoux started getting weird, and I bailed on her because I was afraid she would throw off my vibe. Now I just feel like a total bitch and my vibe is thrown off anyway."

"Hey, relax," he said, massaging her shoulders.

"I just didn't have time to discuss it. And now it's . . ."

"I'll go check on her," he offered.

"That would probably just embarrass her. But thanks."

"I can always just call her. Well, good luck." He held up crossed fingers and slipped into the spectator section.

Marianne managed a tentative smile, but as she made her way to the check-in desk, she felt just . . . off. *Don't make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don't let this set the tone.*

There were substantially fewer people milling around, and

exponentially fewer people than that even still listed on the white board. She started at the end, shocked to arrive at her own so quickly. *Number 439, Hollingsworth, Marianne.*

Marianne picked up her seat assignment and headed to her table, a little disoriented when she realized that there weren't nearly as many tables as there had been, and with a lot more room between them to walk around in.

A shrimpy guy wearing a headset, a clipped on walkie-talkie, a cell phone, and an ESPN-logo clipboard, upon which was attached a sheaf of papers so large that it barely held to the backing, intercepted her there. "You're sitting at this one?" he asked her cleavage.

"Yeah." The ESPN guy turned and whistled hard, waving his hand in the air to alert the lighting and camera assistants.

"Great." He rustled up some of the papers, his finger running over a diagram. Then he looked up at Marianne, revealing the huge sleepless bags under his eyes, and said, "You might want to check your teeth before you start."

"This is the featured table?"

"It is now."

Marianne wasn't nervous about playing cards on television. She was nervous about playing *bad* cards on television in front of millions of people. She was also nervous about making female poker players look bad, and to top that off, she was nervous that being nervous would make her game that much worse.

Oh, God, now she was trying to put on one of those jaded player faces, the ones she'd made fun of when she'd first arrived. She sat down and smiled at the other two players who'd already arrived, neither of whom she recognized in any way.

At which point Richard Sparks sat down across from her, and Johnny Chang took a spot on the far left at the narrow part of the table.

The tournament started quickly enough. Everyone was

used to the procedures by now, and there was substantially less chaos.

Judging by the roots du jour, today's starting dealer was a natural brunette who preferred being a redhead. She dealt the cards and everyone tried to settle in.

Marianne felt rusty. Too rusty. She looked at her cards. She'd pulled an ace and an eight, also called the Dead Man's Hand. She hoped that it referred to her opponents rather than to her, and mucked the cards as the betting came around.

Two of her tablemates took up the cause, however, and while they took their chances and rode their bets from the flop to the final card, Marianne had a look around at who she'd be playing with over the course of the day.

Nine players at her table, including one other woman—the only other woman Marianne had played against in the whole tournament. She relaxed, feeling a kind of kinship, a bonding vibe as the woman looked at her cards, then put them down, her long, thin, fluorescent-pink nails with little painted flowers tapping, scraping, prodding, and otherwise molesting the table felt.

Pink Fingernails looked up her, and Marianne smiled. Not a whit of expression registered on the blank canvas of the woman's face as she began scraping schmutz out of her right thumbnail.

Marianne swallowed and quickly looked away. She'd been given the cut direct. So much for the sisterhood. She glanced back at the woman as the winner of the hand raked in his chips and the dealer set up for the next hand. The woman looked back, and Marianne sensed an almost imperceptible narrowing of the eyes. As if by littering fingernail scrapings on the table the woman felt she had marked her territory.

And what Marianne interpreted from that narrowing of that woman's eyes was that there was only one camera lens, and

there was room for televising only one hot female per table. And this table, apparently, was hers.

Marianne gulped. *Dear God*. This could very well be war! It just seemed so . . . so . . . so against code. There were so many unpleasant men to demoralize; why take down a sister?

"You're the big blind," the beefy guy next to her said.

"What? Oh! Sorry." The entire table watched—along with the ESPN camera—as Marianne hurriedly counted out chips and pushed the big blind into the center of the table. *How embarrassing*.

The cards came. Marianne peeked. A ten and a two, a Doyle Brunson. She looked over her cards at the fingernail lady, who sat with her hands folded on the table, staring right back at her. If Doyle Brunson had received these cards, he would have played them. Of course, Marianne wasn't Doyle Brunson, and the fact that she was getting so flustered that she was actually considering playing such a crappy hand made her even more flustered. She quickly mucked her hand and watched the left corner of the fingernail lady's mouth quirk up as she stayed in the round with Richard Sparks and the ESPN cameras swiveled around to catch the action in close-up.

This isn't about airtime. This is about staying power.

Past the flop and into the turn, Marianne realized what she'd just done. She'd mucked her cards before the flop when she was the big blind. Meaning she'd paid for the bet up front and then didn't bother to see the flop she'd essentially paid for. Rookie mistake. Worse than rookie mistake. A hot red flush crawled up her face as she muttered, "Oh, my God."

Beefy Guy gave her a sympathetic look; they'd all seen it. They'd probably all cringed in one collective motion when she'd done it. But she was too busy being cowed by the specter of Evil Fingernails to notice.

That first ill-fated hand was a harbinger of hands to come.

Marianne played badly, losing most of her confidence and lots of her chips. She thought of her friends watching her. She thought of Texas Trouble watching from a really gross bar somewhere. She thought of everything except the hands in front of her and the game she was supposed to be playing.

By the time the tournament was called for the day, it was evening. Marianne had no idea how many hours she'd been sitting there, but it was definitely in the double digits. She looked at her dwindling chip stack and slumped back in her chair. What a horrible day. An "off day," as Beefy Guy had called it, didn't even do it justice. She should be thrilled just to still be in the game, thrilled to be coming back for day five, but there was no thrill at all.

The only thing worse than losing was playing badly enough to lose and having it all televised on ESPN; Marianne had earned her "Dead Money" moniker all right: lots of cash, little chance.

Tears pricked at her eyes. Marianne swallowed them back. Maybe it wasn't that bad. Rather, maybe it didn't *look* that bad.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw that none of her friends were there watching, and then remembered exactly how she'd left things with Donny. Except that he wasn't supposed to realize that they'd broken up for good and Marianne needed him, now, more than ever.

She sat there at the table, very still as she looked at the meager chip stack in front of her. She didn't want to get up and admit that the day was over and that this was all she had to show for it.

Instead she just signed her chips back in with the official, collected her things, and stood up. Her head ached. She put her hand to her forehead, swaying a little.

Suddenly Peter was at her side, slightly out of breath. "Sorry, I had to take a phone call. . . . Aw, come on, Marianne;

it's not that bad. You're still in the tournament. Making it to the final day is huge."

"You don't understand. I was horrible. I was horrible and it's almost all over."

"Well . . . that's . . . true."

Men. They never knew what to say. "When it's over I have to go back," Marianne tried to explain.

"But you have to go back to work anyway. So, yeah."

Marianne reeled around and grabbed with both hands, clutching his collar. "Don't you get it? I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back!"

Peter took her by the elbow and steered her to the side, where, ostensibly, she could rant with a little more privacy.

She started to cry. Turning red from embarrassment, Marianne put her head down and mumbled, "I'm going to go upstairs."

He put his fingers under her chin and lifted her head up. "Marianne, why don't you let me take you out on the town tonight? We'll get all dressed up and make a big night of it. You've been living and breathing this tournament so much that it's beginning to seem like . . . everything."

He was right. It did seem like everything. Marianne looked up at Peter gratefully and nodded. "I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

Bijoux was in the room when Marianne got back up there. "Where's Donny?" Marianne asked petulantly. "Seriously, where is he?"

"You told him to be gone by the time you were done today. Remember?"

Marianne stared at Bijoux, hearing the words but not really comprehending that Donny would actually leave. Rather, *of course* he would leave, given their argument . . . but he

wouldn't actually *leave* leave . . . would he? "He's never around when I need him!"

"He was around when *I* needed him. He went to the business center. He's going to call me about his plans tonight. I have no idea if he's catching a plane, or what."

Suddenly, Marianne had just had it. She'd had it with the games. She'd had it with making herself crazy. She remembered how serious she'd felt about ending things with Donny just this morning and how she was already making it just another cycle. Not this time. She was supposed to be the one to break the cycle. The details of their morning conversation came flooding back into her mind and she refused to let herself care whether he got on a plane or not. "I'm busy tonight. Peter's taking me out."

Bijoux looked up in surprise. "I figured you'd want to make an early night of it. Tomorrow's going to be a big one."

Marianne shrugged it off and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She stared in the mirror feeling total panic welling up inside her. *I don't want to go back to my old life. I don't want to go back to being that person in that job in that life. And I won't keep running in circles with Donny.*

Bijoux leaned against the bathroom doorjamb. "What's wrong, Marianne? We should be thrilled you've gotten all the way to the last day. Do you realize what an accomplishment this is? We should be jumping up and down and squealing like we did when we first got here. This was supposed to be fun."

The phone rang in the other room. Marianne glanced at her watch. "I need to get ready to go out. If it's Donny, tell him I'm not here."

Bijoux glared at her in the mirror and disappeared. From the other room Marianne heard her on the phone: "Hey, Donny, what's up? Uh-uh. She's . . ."

Marianne mouthed the word *out* at the mirror.

"Out," Bijoux said.

Marianne nodded her head and turned the shower on to drown out the rest of the phone call. When she finished and turned off the water, Bijoux was still on the phone.

"Did they say when they'd be back?" she was saying. "When they find inner peace? I see. Yes, that *could* take a while. Shit. So, they didn't leave any extra credit cards or . . . well, any stacks of money or anything? I see. Okay. Well, thanks, then. Good-bye."

Marianne came out of the bathroom just as Bijoux hung up. She hesitated, then asked, "You low on cash, Bij?"

Bijoux shrugged casually. "Oh, there's just some confusion with my credit cards." She punctuated her statement with a nervous laugh.

Marianne studied her friend's face. "If you want to borrow—"

"Oh, God no. It's not a big deal." She forced a smile. "I have all that cash from craps."

"Okay. Well . . . you just let me know." Bijoux shrugged and started flipping through a magazine on her bed.

Marianne dropped her towel on the ground and put on a fabulous pink bra and panty set that Donny had bought her after one of the times when they'd gotten back together. The weirdness between her and Bijoux from the morning hadn't gone away and could not be ignored. She put on the going-out clothes Bijoux had picked out and arranged on the bed for her while she'd showered. Then, wearing one shoe, Marianne limped over to where her friend was pretending to read, sat down, and waited.

Bijoux sat there, chewing her nails, and finally blurted out, "I'm scared. My credit cards are maxed out and the ATM ate my card. I borrowed money from Donny and paid him back

after gambling like a lunatic at craps and getting very lucky.” She swallowed hard, her voice cracking as she blurted out the rest in one breath: “I don’t know how I’m going to live without my money, and I don’t know why I can’t find someone to love me, much less someone who can afford me.”

Marianne put her arm around Bijoux’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “First of all, you will find that guy someday. I promise. And second of all, I want you to know that if I had that kind of money, I’d give it to you. And in the meantime, what’s mine is yours. You know that.”

Bijoux looked at her and smiled for real. “I know. And I adore you for it. But you don’t even have close to what I need, so there’s no point in bankrupting you for pocket change.”

The girls shared a laugh.

“And as for the guy . . .” Bijoux started.

“Do you mind my going out with Peter?” Marianne asked suddenly. “Sometimes I think you do. You say you don’t . . .”

“Stop right there. I see right through you,” Bijoux said gently. “Don’t use me as an excuse not to go out with Peter. If Donny stays, I’ll hang out with him tonight so he’s not alone. You need to move on already.”

Bijoux put her hands on Marianne’s shoulders, flipped her around to face the mirror, and pointed at the lipstick sitting on the bureau. “Apply and resume course. You have a date. Go forth and date. Do not fall back into the Donny quagmire.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t found someone wildly in love with you yet. Your massive vocabulary makes even me a little hot.”

The two of them started laughing and Marianne knew they were going to be okay.

“Apply . . . and resume.”

Picking up the lipstick, Marianne bent toward the mirror and just stopped, looking into her best friend’s eyes in the mirror’s

reflection. "I don't want to go back to all of that, Bij. I can't take it anymore."

Bijoux teared up unexpectedly, but blinked it back in time. "Then just decide. Go forward. Just say, 'This is it.'"

"This is it," Marianne whispered.

Bijoux nodded and cleared her throat. "If we don't stop talking about this, we're going to both mess up our makeup. Here, finish up with the lips, and I'll show you how to do that cool thing with the false eyelashes."

chapter nineteen

Peter was true to his word, from the red rose at the start of the night to the bottle of champagne at the end. Even the way he looked at her as she came back towards him from the ladies room was having the excellent effect of distracting Marianne from the earlier stresses of competition.

His gaze swept from the tips of her strappy sandals to her silk Pucci-inspired ruffle-bottom miniskirt, up past the slice of skin peeking out at the abdomen and over the tight-fitting combination lingerie/tank layers where he lingered over her cleavage before they locked eyes.

He left a hot, delicious flush on her skin. The kind of sensation guaranteed to make a girl forget about a crappy day at the poker tables.

"You look fantastic," he said as she sat down again.

Marianne smiled. "I borrowed it all from Bijoux."

"It looks great on you."

"You've seen me dressed up before."

"Not for me."

She cocked her head and studied his face. Peter looked

very upscale-L.A.-goes-to-Vegas in a nice suit saved from being too formal by a *Swingers*-esque shirt with a funky collar. With his blond hair and blue eyes, he was almost too pretty, more Bijoux's type than hers, really, but still good enough for any girl to gamble on.

Bijoux was so right. *Don't mess this up.*

It had been quite a while since Marianne had enjoyed a full-scale night out like this. Cocktails to start, a little wine with the tasting menu and a bottle of champagne with dessert. She may have been exhausted from the competition, but her sense of fun wasn't stunted in the least. And Peter was certainly a worthy companion.

"I love this," she said, looking around the restaurant. "I love being out of the office. I love being in the tournament. I love wearing Bijoux's fabulous clothes and being on ESPN and not having to wake up at seven in the morning every single weekday. I love knowing that there are people who do this professionally. They don't have schedules. They don't have to play when they don't want to. They travel around to different places. And oh, my God . . . can you imagine having a job where the primary verb used to describe what you do is 'play'?"

"Funny."

"What?"

"I've been thinking lately that my lifestyle's been just a little too unstable. Traveling around to different places so much can make it difficult to have a relationship," he said.

Marianne met his eyes. "Let's get out of here."

"We just ordered more champagne."

"We'll take the bottle. Let's go breathe fresh air."

The champagne arrived, Peter asked for the check, and Marianne stuck the champagne bottle behind her back and marched toward the exit with it after they'd paid. "Come on. Let's make a break for it."

She hit the down button on the elevator and looked mock surreptitiously over her shoulder, the champagne bulging noticeably out of her clothing.

"You act like you're doing something naughty," he said.

"I am. I'm staying up late on a school night."

Peter's brow furrowed. "Are you sure this is a good idea? You've got to play tomorrow."

Marianne frowned. *What's with the mother act?* "Stop being such a goody-goody. You're supposed to encourage my outrageous behavior. I've been obsessing, and I need some distance. This will be good for me."

Peter shrugged and held the elevator door open for her. In the elevator Marianne took a swig of champagne, then passed it to Peter, who did the same. She had it back under her jacket by the time the elevator hit the ground, and they left the casino for the Strip outside.

The fresh air felt nice and cool against Marianne's skin. The farther she walked from the casino, the freer and happier she felt. There were people everywhere, dressed for the evening, ready for fun. The upbeat vibe of a city just beginning to get started was contagious.

"Where do you want to go?" Peter asked.

"Wherever our feet take us."

He held out his arm, she tucked hers in his, and they marched off down the Strip with the bottle of champagne swinging from Marianne's grip. Every casino was lit up to the maximum possible extent. "Take my picture!" Marianne yelled, running away from Peter to pose in front of the Eiffel Tower.

Peter pulled his camera out and snapped a shot as Marianne modeled with her arms outstretched, the bottle spilling forth bubbly.

"Stand up on the riser," he said, snapping more shots.

More champagne for both of them, and then it was, "Let's go to the Aladdin!"

More camera angles, shots, Marianne posing on various structures, running from place to place, nearly out of breath, her neck aching from staring up at the glitter and hum infusing the night sky.

Peter started shouting posing instructions, playing photographer to Marianne's model as they ran up and down the Strip, weaving through mobs of tourists, dodging the flyers thrust at them from strip-club purveyors, leaping by the opening doors of limousines and taxicabs lining both sides of the street, and stopping in front of the most outrageous monuments the casinos had to offer. Bally's, Paris, Aladdin, the MGM, turning up again on the other side of the street to New York-New York, Monte Carlo . . .

. . . and a dead stop at the Bellagio.

Marianne ran to the ledge overlooking the water at the Bellagio casino and clasped her hands. The Bellagio fountains had just started, kicking up majestic waterfalls in a choreographed display as the most romantic-sounding tenor kicked in from hidden speakers.

The champagne was kicking in, too, in the most marvelous way. Marianne felt delightfully muddled. She climbed up on the ledge and raised her arms out at her sides. "I don't feel like Marianne tonight! I'm someone else!"

"Marianne, get down," Peter said from behind. She looked over her shoulder. His face was a mix of concern and admiration.

"No," she said, turning around and picking up one foot. "Take my picture."

He hesitated.

She reached down and removed her shoes, swinging the stilettos dangerously around in one hand as she picked her foot up again and balanced, her ankle shaking as she swayed on the ledge. "Take my picture. I dare you."

Peter raised his camera and took the shot. Marianne posed again, nearly losing her balance. "Take my picture."

He took another picture. "Take another one." He did. And suddenly he just started snapping away as Marianne twirled and posed and mugged on the ledge.

"That's great, Marianne. Keep going. You're fantastic," he called out.

She turned too suddenly then, and staggered back, then forward; Peter ran up and caught her by the waist, pulling her off the ledge and against his body.

Still giddy from the most recent glass of champagne, Marianne let her brain switch to autopilot. She wrapped her arms around Peter and allowed herself to indulge. He pressed her against the concrete and kissed her madly as a light mist from the fountains dampened the back of her neck. Champagne lust on a Vegas night. Didn't get any better than this. She pulled him even closer to her, sneaking her hands under his clothes and igniting her own desires with the heat coming off his skin.

He must have been feeling something similarly intense, because he tore his mouth away from hers and said with a minimum of slurring, "Marry me."

"It's *Marianne*, silly."

Peter laughed and ran his finger over her lips. "Marry me, Marianne. Let's just do it. Let's be wild and crazy and just do it!"

"If you ask me again, I'll know you're serious and I'll take you up on it. Don't ask me if you don't want me to call your bluff." Marianne pushed away and leaned against the stone railing, taunting him with her smile. The opera music swelled and then faded away, and the water slipped into the lake almost as suddenly as it had started.

In the shocking new silence, Peter raised his camera for a close-up. "Marry me, Marianne. Give me the big ending to the story."

I don't want to go back. Old job, old boyfriend, old life. I can change things in an instant. I don't have to go back. Go forward. Marianne stared into the camera lens, her body still buzzing with want. "Yes, let's," she said. "Let's be wild and crazy and do things we don't do. Let's be a pair of someone elses tonight."

He took the picture and then lowered the camera. "Let's," he said rather urgently, then wheeled around and stepped out into the street, full-on New York-style, arm out, whistled loud and clear, and hailed a cab like there was no doubt the very next one was theirs. And it was.

It pulled up and Peter leaned down to the open window. "We're getting married. Take us where you take people in this town to get married." He opened the car door and ushered Marianne inside.

The cabdriver seemed a little blasé for Marianne's taste, threatening to quash the swashbuckle of the moment by saying, "There's not just one place. There's lots of places."

Peter crushed a twenty-dollar bill into the cabbie's hand. "Take us to the best one. And take the long way."

The cabdriver took the twenty, smoothing it out in an infuriatingly nonchalant way. "The Strip is the long way."

Peter hopped in, and the cab took off with a lurch. Marianne squealed with laughter as Peter reached out and slammed the door shut and they merged into traffic.

The lights of the Las Vegas Strip blurred into rainbows of color through the windows as Peter pressed Marianne down into the backseat and covered his mouth with hers.

Hands everywhere they should and shouldn't be, Peter with no shirt on pouring champagne from above into the lipstick-smeared mouth of a laughing Marianne. Champagne-wet skin, hot mouths . . . the damn ride ended much, much too soon.

They tumbled out of the cab, Marianne and Peter tossing

money over the front seat and falling on the sidewalk in hysterical laughter.

Peter stood up first, his shirt and jacket crumpled in one hand. He tried to grab the empty champagne bottle but missed. It rolled over the curb and shattered on the street.

"We'll get some more," he promised, helping her up with a little too much gusto. Nearly toppling over to the other side, Marianne finally found her balance.

The wedding chapel stood before them, an enormous architectural confection of white paint and plastic floral decorations in pink, green, blue, and yellow. Just like the cakes from those crappy street-corner bakeries that smelled like chemicals, looked so pretty, and tasted so fake.

Arm in arm they mounted the steps to the wedding chapel, pushed through the heavy glass doors, and headed up to the reception desk.

"Ooh, look!" Marianne pointed to the Polaroid pictures of the day's earlier wedded couples tacked to a bulletin board. "They have costumes. We have to get dressed up."

"I am dressed up."

"No, I want to wear something special. I want a costume."

"I don't wear costumes," Peter said.

Marianne blinked, finding herself becoming irrationally upset.

"But you'll look great in a costume," he said.

Peter leaned over the desk, his elbow missing the edge and just barely avoiding smacking his face hard on the counter. "My fiancée . . ."

Marianne giggled. Peter grinned, and Marianne had never been more sure in her life that spontaneity, adventure, and a total lack of planning were the way to go.

He began again. "My fiancée would like whatever package you've got that has costumes in it."

"All of them come with the costume option." The clerk pulled a chapel brochure from the clear acrylic holder on the desk and pointed to the choices A, B, and C. "We have Aloha Hawaii Elvis, Classic Elvis, and Pink Cadillac Deluxe Elvis. It's not in the brochure yet, but we've just added a less expensive option, the Lisa Marie."

"Aloha Hawaii, please. And I want a large, frothy pink dress."

"That won't match," Peter said.

Marianne frowned. "I don't care. I want to get married in paradise wearing a large, frothy pink dress. If you have issues with that perhaps we should step through that side door for a moment and discuss it." She pointed to a door. It said, RESTROOM—UNISEX. She blinked and moved her finger to the right. "I mean, that side door." She pointed to a door that said, MARRIAGE COUNSELING—\$15 w/ PREPURCHASED ELVIS PACKAGE.

Peter shrugged and plunked down a credit card. "Indulge the lady with the Aloha, if you would, please."

The woman beamed. "Oh, honey, that's not bad at all. She'll look lovely."

The credit-card receipt printed out. She stuck it on the counter and followed it up with two plastic glasses, which she filled from an open bottle on her desk.

Marianne and Peter took the glasses, clinked them, producing more of a dull *plunk* sound than a *clink*, and downed the champagne.

"Will you be needing a ring?" the receptionist asked.

Peter looked at Marianne in alarm. The receptionist placed a shrink-wrapped band of red on the counter.

Marianne peered at the specimen. "Is that plastic?" Peter picked it up and stared at it, and the two of them started laughing.

“Okay, you . . . that way. And you . . . that way. You’ll exit out the door from inside the dressing room when your name is called.”

Marianne headed for the women’s dressing room, misjudging the distance between her palm and the door and barreling through to the other side.

Inside, it was packed. There were at least three other brides and their attendants in various states of undress, and several racks of wedding dresses and other costumes that seemed to relate to the various package themes.

“I’m beginning to get sober,” Marianne muttered to herself. In the back of her mind there were doubts. In the back of her mind where the alcohol had already leached away, she wasn’t quite having as much fun anymore. Bijoux should have been here, at her wedding. But that wasn’t the point of a spontaneous elopement.

Stop it, Marianne. She was ruining it. Ruining it. Be that girl who knows how to think and act outside of the box. There are plenty of opportunities to sit in the box the rest of your life.

“Leona Mae!” squawked the loudspeaker. An adorable red-head surrounded by five apparent bridesmaids squealed in delight and disappeared with her posse through the door.

Marianne walked up to the dress rack next to a large girl trying to squeeze her body into a white tube dress. The girl’s friend was trying to help her with one hand while holding a bottle of Jack Daniel’s in the other.

“Do you want me to hold that for you?” Marianne asked.

“Thanks,” said the friend. She handed the bottle to Marianne, who immediately took a large swig. And then a second large swig. The friend got the rest of the girl’s massive torso into the top of the tube dress, then reached back for her Jack

Daniel's. Marianne somehow decided she didn't want to let go. "I'll hold it for you," she insisted.

The friend gave up on the bottle. "I'll go get the flowers," she said to the large girl, and disappeared out to the lobby after flashing a look of disgust in Marianne's direction.

Sloshing the whiskey in one hand, Marianne quickly palmed through the dress rack until she saw it. And suddenly all of those cares mounting in the back of her mind vanished. "This is it." She put the whiskey down and took the dress off the rack.

Quickly stripping, she stepped into the dress and pulled it up. It was almost too long. Well, really it *was* too long, but it allowed Marianne to keep her own shoes on. The bodice fit perfectly, which was all that mattered.

"My dress is very large and pink," Marianne said with great satisfaction.

"Oh, that's so pretty on you!" said the sausage queen. "I'm just going kind of traditional white. I wish I had your guts."

Marianne beamed. "That's the nicest thing you could have said. Do you need help with your hair?"

The girl nodded. "I want this to stay. I don't want to keep having to fiddle with it."

Marianne looked down at the hairpiece that seemed to have twice as much veil as the girl's dress had fabric. She picked it up and settled it in place. "Here?"

"Perfect."

She secured it with bobby pins, then spun the girl around.

"Crystal!" the loudspeaker squawked.

"That's me!" The girl put her hands on Marianne's shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "I've never been so happy in my life."

I've never been so . . . drunk.

Marianne fluffed the dress around her and squeezed through the throng of women to the mirror to reapply her lip gloss.

"Here," said one of the girls, jamming a tiara onto Marianne's head. If Marianne had been feeling any pain, she would have felt it then, but as it was she just looked at the sparkling crown with delight and stuck it to her hair with some abandoned bobby pins lying on the ground.

"Marianne!" the loudspeaker squawked. Marianne jumped in surprise. "That's me."

One of the girls turned from the mirror. "Good luck." She took Marianne against her enormous bosom and gave her a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thanks so much!" Marianne opened the door labeled ALOHA HAWAII and was greeted by a recorded trumpet flourish that had a skip in it.

She'd stepped out into her wedding, rather like Alice had stepped into Wonderland.

Peter stood there, swaying at the end of the wedding aisle in a highly detailed tropical Hawaiian set. There were silk flowers and vines everywhere. The landing where Peter was standing bridged a giant sandbox. She heard the sound of birds chirping and waves lapping the shore, smelled suntan lotion and plumeria. And, of course, there was an Elvis, in full regalia.

He waved, indicating that she should begin her walk. She took a step forward and a kicky Elvis beach song started up.

The ceremony itself was a blur. Marianne and Peter laughed and laughed as Elvis said those words—those words that were so often repeated to the point of cliché. She felt as if she were in a play, acting a part, desperate not to look over her shoulder and realize there was no audience.

Somewhere in the middle of the overwrought hilarity, Peter elbowed her, and Elvis said, "Do you?" and Marianne said, "I do."

Elvis instructed Marianne and Peter to kiss. They kissed and then forgot it was a wedding and just switched back to

make-out mode until Elvis cleared his throat and announced that it was time for his serenade.

Marianne leaned against Peter as their Elvis impersonator headed into "Love Me Tender." Peter took Marianne into his arms. They lurched about in the aisle.

"This is so funny. I've been wanting to settle down," Peter said, his voice slurring.

"This *is* funny," Marianne agreed. "'Cause I've been wanting to run off and do something crazy for a very long time."

Peter pulled away, his flushed drunken face and knitted eyebrows showing just how hard he was thinking. "Funny," was all he said.

"Funny," Marianne agreed. She closed her eyes and focused on what it felt like to be in Peter's arms as he rocked her in time with the music. *Oh, how surprised Donny will be. Oh, how Donny will laugh! And how sorry he'll be he let me go.*

Elvis cleared his throat again and announced that time was up and that she could return the dress to the rack after a final complimentary glass of champagne. Marianne didn't want to take the dress off, or the tiara for that matter, because if she took the dress and the tiara off then reality would set in, and she somehow really, really did not want that to happen. With Peter's hand in hers, and her fluffy pink skirt billowing up around her ankles, she waved off the desk clerk holding up the deposit slips, cried out, "Charge it!" and ran.

Laughing hysterically, Peter and Marianne dashed outside to the taxi stand and dived into the first cab that opened its doors. She tripped on the center floor divider and twisted, falling lengthwise onto the backseat. Peter dived in on top of her, and the cabbie closed the door behind them.

chapter twenty

Marianne woke up like she'd just slept in on SAT day, sitting bolt upright in bed, her pulse racing, a kind of terror engulfing her brain as she clarified who she was, where she was, and what the hell she was doing there.

Her head pounding, her mouth dry and her brain dizzy, she looked at the hotel alarm clock; dear God, she was supposed to play in a matter of hours.

She might well have gone for the cheaper Classic Elvis package, because everything about this was classic: waking up in a hotel room in Vegas married to a guy she really didn't even know. There was a reason Marianne had been taking the road more taken. It was because wild and adventurous were often just synonyms for *stupid*. Those other words just had better PR.

The mystery element—the who, what, and where of it all—unraveled pretty quickly as she looked down at the man lying in bed next to her. So this was what it was like. It happened in movies and books all the time, but it wasn't quite the same as having it happen to you. “Happen to you.” The phrasing in and

of itself was telling. It wasn't "we did this crazy thing"; it was "this thing happened to me," like an illness or an accident.

Of course, it was an accident. The whole thing was a train wreck. Donny was going to have a field day with this before laughing in her face. The thought of Donny made her stomach drop. Marianne put her hand to her heart, her head spinning.

There was still, of course, the big question to attend to. Just how married was she? Marianne pulled up the covers and peeked under the sheets. Underwear, check. Bra, check. Stockings, heels . . . and that painful sensation in her scalp was a tiara. Nope. No way. She definitely hadn't slept with him.

Marianne put the covers down, took a deep breath, and looked over at Peter, who was lying on top of the covers. He still wore the tuxedo shirt, shoes, and technically his pants and underwear. It was the technicality of the pants and underwear that gave Marianne pause, for the whole mass of it had been shoved down to his thighs, leaving his ass completely exposed to the elements.

Marianne stared at his nicely rounded buttocks with a sinking feeling. Then she oh-so-carefully rolled out of bed and tiptoed away, nearly undone by a wave of nausea. She hobbled into the bathroom and just made it before she threw up in the toilet.

She cleaned herself up, wishing not for the first time that she were one of those superorganized people who went about their lives with a full complement of toothbrushes, Thomas guides, and Swiss army knives. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror made things even worse.

Her tiara was sticking off her head at a forty-degree angle; her hair was like a matted, twisted cloud billowing out from around her head. Her makeup was smeared this way and that, with dark circles from the eyeliner and mascara forming hideous half-moons under her eyes. She had a translucent red

stain circling her mouth, the way it looked when you'd kissed a guy for a prolonged period of time.

What was I thinking? Oh, right. I wasn't thinking. Marianne put her hands on the edge of the sink and leaned her head down, praying for the spinning to stop. Her mouth was gummy and unpleasant, her head ached, and her stomach was out of control. If she didn't eat a greasy breakfast soon, she wasn't going to be well enough to play later with all her wits about her.

Thank god she hadn't slept with him. They'd gotten randy in the backseat of the cab on the way back from the chapel, but there was no way she'd slept with him; she'd have been able to tell. She looked over at Peter. And given how much they'd had to drink, there was no way he'd have been able to get it up, anyway.

The bottom line was that she needed to get out of here and back to her room without waking Peter up. She wasn't sure what his reaction was going to be, but if hers was any indication, it wasn't exactly going to be a full-blown celebration.

She needed to get to her room. So she tiptoed back into the bedroom and found only a mangled pile of pink tulle. Looking around produced nothing else she recognized as her own, so she put the dress back on and reached for her purse, which was stuck under Peter's thigh.

She pulled at the strap and Peter stirred, turning over to lie flat on his back, that dangerous middle section completely exposed. Marianne winced and eased her purse slowly away. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she did not want to be in the room when Peter and his exposed winkle woke up.

Backing slowly away toward the door, she slipped out and stepped into the hall. From there she moved quickly to the elevator, passing several members of the hotel staff (they looked at her as if they saw this kind of thing every day) and

several vacationers (they looked at her as if she were the spawn of Satan).

The important thing was to focus on recovery. And when she slipped back into her own room, it was all she could do not to sigh with relief to find it empty.

Her situation was going to be ridiculous enough in anecdote without actually having her friends see her as she was, looking like cold leftovers.

The TV had been left on. It droned on for a while as background noise while Marianne jumped in the shower and fixed herself up.

As she made her way gingerly around the room, assembling the things she'd need for the day, she focused in a little more.

"... and the last member of our Dead Money Roundup. There are two women left in the tournament. One is poker champion Annie Duke; the other is novice tournament darling Marianne Hollingsworth. Miss Marianne, as we like to call her..."

Marianne rolled her eyes and sat down heavily on the end of her untouched bed. "Tournament darling," she muttered sarcastically. Then, "Jesus, I'm already jaded."

The TV ran a replay of the big hand from earlier in the week where she took down Johnny Chan by bluffing out on a weak pair of fours into a flop of ten/ten/two, and miraculously nailing a full house on the turn. "A bigger full house than Chan's. Johnny had been slow-playing two/two, and, trying to trap her; but when a third ten came on the turn they both got all their chips into the middle, and Chan was out of the tournament." Marianne watched herself play to the crowd hanging over the rails and cheering as if she were some kind of a rock star.

Sure, she was some kind of a rock star... if that rock star was Courtney Love. Pale-faced and dark-circled, the real Marianne looked around the room and swallowed hard against a bout of nausea.

“As we get ready for day five of the tournament—”

Marianne turned off the television and stared squinty-eyed at the blurry alarm clock. She had a couple of hours before her call time. “Coffee,” she bleated out. “Coffee and grease.”

She picked up her cell phone, noticing with some chagrin that nobody had called, and then put it in her pocket and headed down to the casino hotel coffee shop.

She’d only just ordered when a half-consumed plate of ham and eggs plunked down across the table from her and Donny sat down.

He didn’t say anything, just pulled the little bowl filled with individually packaged strawberry jams and butter spreads toward him and unwrapped a jam.

Marianne looked up. He obviously thought it was business as usual. Make up. Break up. Not this time.

He paused in the middle of spreading the jam on the last half piece of toast on his plate and said, “Hey.” Then he finished spreading, folded the toast into a double-size quarter toast and stuck the whole thing in his mouth.

“Donny, I married him.”

A horrible choking sound erupted from Donny’s mouth. He gestured for her water, and she slid it over to him.

Oh, my God. He’s not going to laugh. Marianne looked down at her napkin, suddenly terrified.

Donny made a few more choking sounds; then he took some more water and sputtered a bit. “You slept with him?”

Marianne tried to look him in the eyes, but it was too upsetting, so she looked just past his right ear. “I said I married him.”

“You slept with him,” he said in a horrified whisper, clearly unable to process straight.

Marianne forced herself to look at him. He seemed stung. Devastated, even. “I married him,” she said through gritted teeth.

"You slept with him . . . and you married him." He pushed the ham and eggs away, which was unfortunately closer to Marianne, who was just now realizing that a greasy breakfast would not solve any of her problems today.

She winced and looked up at Donny's face and then winced again at the struck expression frozen there. "I didn't sleep with him. I swear it. I just . . . married him."

He suddenly brightened up again. "You're joking. Let's see the ring."

Marianne dragged her purse off the chair next to her and pulled out the ring and some documents she didn't really remember from the prior night. She put everything on the table between them.

Donny looked at the plastic hologram thing and laughed. "This is just pathetic. If I were planning to pretend I got hitched, I would at least fake it with something decent."

Marianne couldn't speak. She just pushed the documents closer to him across the table. Donny opened the brochure. "'Dear Las Vegas Elvis Chapel. It is with deepest sincerity and gratitude that we write to thank your entire staff for making our fiftieth-anniversary vow renewal the greatest experience of our life. We want Elvis to know that my sister, Betty Ann (who was in *Love Me Tender* with the real Elvis), told us that your Elvis was really special and had the very same sweetness that the real Elvis had. We would recommend your chapel to anyone getting married. Thank you, Lewis and Tallulah from Wisconsin.'"

Donny looked up from the brochure, the pained expression still stamped on his face.

"Oh, come on, Donny. Don't be like that. You're supposed to laugh in my face."

"Which package did you get?" he asked, stone-faced.

"What?"

"Which package did you get? I want to know. Was it the Aloha Hawaii? The Classic Elvis? Or did you splurge and get the Pink Cadillac Deluxe?"

"Stop it."

He stared at her.

"It was an accident," she bleated.

Donny stood up so fast he upended his chair. "For God's sake, Marianne. If you're going to have that kind of accident, couldn't you have accidentally married me?"

She stared back at him, dumbfounded. "You don't want to marry me. You've never wanted to marry me."

"I thought we would eventually come around. You told me I needed to get my act together and I've been getting my act together. And now you just go and do this! I thought we'd have this sort of Tracy-Hepburn, Bruce Willis-Holly Gennaro thing where eventually we'd come around. I thought you did too. I mean, I honestly thought that eventually we'd get over ourselves and get married."

That was so typical. Only after you broke up with a guy did he start waxing on about how he was just "this close" to asking you to marry him. If he wanted to marry you, he should have said so before it all came down to a really unromantic de facto ultimatum. How ridiculous that by the time you convinced yourself that he was so flawed you couldn't possibly want him, that was when he'd finally give you an indication that he wanted to be with you for the rest of your life.

"Holly Gennaro wasn't even in *Die Hard II*. It didn't come around," Marianne said, starting to cry. It wasn't fair. She loved Donny. She'd always love Donny. Unfortunately they didn't . . . jell. They just didn't jell.

Donny rifled through the rest of the papers while Marianne just watched helplessly. It should have been funny. It should have been something to laugh about. But when he opened the

cardboard pamphlet clearly designed and sold by the same people who did prom-night photos, Marianne didn't feel like laughing. He looked at each one of the six Polaroids in turn, with Marianne in her enormous pink dress, enormous hair, and overdone fifties makeup in the arms of, being dipped by, clowning around with, kissing . . . Peter Graham. She felt like crying.

Donny threw the photos down on the table and picked up the fallen chair.

"Where are you going?" Marianne blurted.

Donny wheeled around and looked at her with more contempt than she could ever remember seeing in his face. "To find Bijoux. I swear, Marianne. You think *I'm* dense." Without another word, he walked away.

Marianne leaned into the vinyl chair cushion and watched him weave his way through the throngs, his hands in his jeans pockets, shoulders hunched, head low.

That was what was wrong with them. They had never been able to be real. Sure, she could tell him anything; she could say anything . . . even the most awkward thing, she could say it to Donny and he could say it back. But once you go along after so many years and establish just how deep you're going to go, once you establish whether or not you're going to share that stuff that's buried in the way, way back of your head and your heart, you're screwed if it's not deep enough. She and Donny had learned to be honest with each other; they'd just never learned to be real.

Because once you got used to the standards of a relationship, it took something monumental to shake it up. But the problem was that it was usually too monumental not to kill the relationship in the aftermath. Things like, "I cheated on you because you . . ."; "I can't stay married to you because you . . ."; "I've never said anything before now, because you . . ." It was the *because* that was responsible for killing the relationship.

Marianne put her face in her hands. His look. That wound completely exposed in his expression—that was the first time she'd ever seen the real. *Oh, shit. It's really too late.*

And it shouldn't have been a surprise. Being real simply came too late for most people. You usually couldn't save what had come before, what had been the catalyst for the lesson. You could only make sure that you didn't let this same mistake happen in the next relationship. Oh, there would be mistakes. Other mistakes, new mistakes. But not this mistake. And this was the mistake that would sever the relationship between Marianne and Donny for good.

They would never be the same. And now all that was left was for her to realize that she had had a good thing she didn't even know she had. And she was one Elvis wedding chapel too late. It wasn't just Marianne. They'd both done it. Done it to each other and to themselves. And he was one proposal too late. And what she was realizing sitting here, ready to throw up at the table, was that Donny had just realized it, too. That look. That look on his face. He knew what she knew. And they both knew it was over.

chapter twenty-one

Bijoux could not stop crying. Good old Donny held her while she wailed and snotted and cried all over his cute Vegas shirt. He looked like he wanted to cry, too.

"Bij, I'm a guy. You're going to have to explain it to me. I don't understand why you're so upset. Is it because Marianne's married and you aren't?"

"No. Everything she wants falls into her lap without her even trying. She doesn't even know how lucky she is. I'm really, really, really, really upset. I'm just really upset. You know? I'm really . . ." She looked around the room, her fists clenched, trying to put into words what she was feeling. "Really . . . upset. I can't even explain how horrifyingly just completely, totally, awesomely upset I am. I'm just so—"

"Upset."

"Yes!" She scrunched up her face, not wanting to admit it. Not wanting to admit it, but this was Donny, and he was the person after Marianne whom she could say anything to, and in this case, he was the only one she could say anything to. But

she couldn't quite say this one thing. "I hope I don't have that horrible feeling you sometimes get after you've revealed something very personal to somebody else and instead of feeling relieved, you feel like you've just exposed the fact that you're kind of a loser, and what was said is just forever 'out there,' and what's between you is never the same again."

Donny unfurled a length of toilet paper from the roll he'd set on the nightstand and pressed the wad gently against Bijoux's face to soak up the tears.

Bijoux sniffed and looked up at him. "I wish I loved you, Donny. Wouldn't that be perfect? You're such a pain in the ass, but every once in a while, you just show you know women."

"If I knew women, Marianne would still be with me."

Bijoux looked away, but Donny brought her back to face him with his hand on her chin. "Don't be mad at her," he said. "You guys have been friends forever. Get through whatever the hell this is."

"*You're* mad at her."

He thought about that. "Okay, go ahead and be mad at her." He frowned. "Funny. It's not like she really did anything."

"I'm going to be honest with you. It's like here we are, side by side. She's a fucking tax accountant; I'm an heiress. Granted, an heiress who's not going to be inheriting anything, but still, it's a nice, juicy occupation. And if you take a guy and have him come up to us as we're standing there side by side, who do you think they're really going to be talking to? Who are they going to be looking at? She's got this unbelievable charisma; she's got it all. You know what, Donny?"

"What?"

"I'm hideously, horribly, grossly, unbelievably, totally jealous of my very best friend." Bijoux rested her chin in her palm. "She's so lucky."

He held her by the shoulder, at arm's length, and locked eyes. "You think she's lucky?"

"Yes!" Bijoux said in that voice that meant, *obviously*.

"She just married a guy she doesn't even know. She's on the verge of derailing her life from everything she's worked on for the last decade."

Bijoux thought about that. "Including you."

"Including me. Granted, I completely fucked up my end of the bargain. I mean, we clearly would have gone on like we were forever . . . except for the part where I assumed we'd stop acting like idiots and admit we couldn't live without each other." He shrugged. "That's just not the way it went."

"I just wish . . ."

"What?" Donny asked.

"Don't laugh."

"Do I look like I find any of this even remotely funny?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I wish I'd been the one who accidentally married Peter Graham."

Donny looked terminally confused.

"What a great mistake it would have been for me."

"I don't understand you at all, Bij. He's not what you've been looking for. Not at all. He's kind of . . . kind of . . . not rich."

"That's why it would have been a great mistake. Do you know what he said to me? He said, 'I don't really think it's money you're looking for.' What do you think about that? Everybody knows it's money I'm looking for. Everybody knows."

Donny sat back, slumping back against the pillow, and slowly nodded as he crossed his arms over his chest. "You know

what I think? I think that different people are charismatic to different people. Have you ever been sitting on a bus or in a coffee shop or whatever and just been drawn to someone? Not necessarily because they've got a rockin' bod or big tits or whatever. Maybe it's not even someone of the opposite gender. But there was just something about them, an energy that made you curious about them or wish the world were the kind of place where strangers really walked up to one another. You ever just see a person and say to yourself, 'They've got that . . . thing.' That thing. It's a kind of chemistry, but you haven't even talked to them. So it's not really a chemistry; it's just a thing."

"Yeah?" Bijoux said dubiously.

"You've got it."

"I don't understand."

"You've got it, too. That thing. For different people. Maybe for people who can't quite bring themselves to walk up to you."

"I don't know."

"You shine, kid. Sometimes it just might not feel like it because you're always standing in somebody else's shadow." He stood up, rubbing his eyes. "Now. I'm going to run down to the business center and check my e-mail. I'll be right back. You clean yourself up and we'll go down there and represent. Everything is going to be fine. Okay?"

Bijoux jumped up and gave Donny a monster hug. "Okay."

The moment she was alone in the room, Bijoux got out her purse and upended the whole thing, then took everything out of her wallet and stared at her credit cards. *Well, who am I really, then?* She looked in the mirror and suddenly had a violent urge to rip her extensions out of her head.

She went to the closet, slammed the door open, and stared at the two sets of clothing. And instead of choosing from her own loud side, she rifled through Marianne's things

and picked out a charcoal-gray pencil skirt and the yellow cashmere sweater. She added a sexy white-and-gray lacy camisole and some low Sabrina heels, which were like walking in tennis shoes compared to the stilettos she was used to. Then she went into the bathroom and wiped some of her makeup off. When she was finished, there was a super-stylish, sort of kittenish, fresh Bijoux staring back at her in the mirror.

The image was like a relief; for the first time in a long time Bijoux felt comfortable with what she saw.

She sat down to wait for Donny, but someone knocked on the door. She opened the door and found Peter on the other side and she felt like she'd just been slapped. "Marianne's probably looking for you," she blurted.

"Can I come in?"

She stepped away from the door and Peter came in and sat down on the end of the bed. With furrowed brow he stroked at the stubble on his chin, the picture of rumpled woefulness.

Bijoux could have played nice. She could have comforted him. She could have done a lot of things, but she just folded her arms across her chest and waited. It would have been different if she actually thought it was love at first sight between him and Marianne, but she knew better than that.

As if he could read her mind, Peter finally just sighed deeply, looked up at her and said, "I have no idea why I took it so far. I'm an idiot."

The old Bijoux would have just told him that everything would be okay. But Bijoux was tired of saying things she didn't mean and pretending at things she didn't feel. So, she leaned over, grabbed a pillow, and slammed it into the side of Peter's body. "You *are* an idiot! You may be super-good-looking, but

you're just as messed up as the rest of us. What the hell were you thinking?"

Peter defended himself from the blows and grabbed on to the free side of the pillow. "Bij . . ." he said in a calming sort of tone. The kind that just made Bijoux more hysterical. If he so much as told her 'to relax' she was going to lose it.

"You need to relax."

"Oooh!" She wrenched the pillow away and slammed him in the side again. "That's it! Out! I'm not this desperate!" Her index finger pointing straight up in the air, she marched to the door and opened it. "Out, I say! It's not like you're anybody's white knight!"

"Did you think I was?" he asked, obviously surprised.

She bent her elbow to get more leverage so she could heave the pillow at his face, then suddenly lowered her arm. "Kind of," she admitted. "I'm not exactly sure why."

"Close the door. Please. Just close the door and let's talk."

Bijoux thought about it and decided that at least some sort of explanation would be nice. She let the door fall closed and came back and sat down next to him.

He laughed softly and said, "So now you know."

"Know what?"

"Well, you've always had your suspicions. I'm a shit disturber. Like you said. I can't help it. If I didn't stir up trouble in other people I'd bore myself to death."

She glared at him. "You don't get away with that, you know. At some point, you're going to have to realize that you're just as fake as I ever was."

"I don't know why I took it so far. I mean, I like Marianne, but she and I don't make any sense, not the way you and I make sense. I guess that it was opportunity. Everything seemed larger than life for a moment. I got caught up in the

excitement.” He shrugged. “Sometimes you just want to feel like you’re living a bigger life than you really are. Obviously, I can’t become something I’m not just by doing one spontaneous thing in a night. The funny thing is that Marianne really is that kind of girl. She just did the spontaneous thing with the wrong guy.”

Bijoux still didn’t find it funny and she knew Donny didn’t either. And probably what they both wanted to know was how far it went. “Well, let’s have it. Did you . . .”

“No!”

“Oh!” She wasn’t sure why she was surprised, but she was. It sort of went with the territory. Well, if they were going to have an attack of honesty, here, she might as well take advantage of it. “Did you want to?”

He looked up at the ceiling with a frown. “I’m not quite sure how to answer that. Admittedly, I woke up with my pants around my knees, but I don’t know that it had much to do with anything other than an inability to remove my clothes for more comfortable sleeping while drunk off my ass with my shoes still on.” He looked her square in the eye. “I’m glad I didn’t.”

Bijoux studied her fingernails. It was all very interesting, of course, but it was that one bit stuck in the middle that had her attention. “How do you and I make sense?”

Peter started, as if he realized what he’d said. “I’m just saying that we have a lot in common. And we understand each other.”

With a disdainful sniff, she said, “I’m not so sure I understand you.”

“I think in the big picture, you do,” he said. “Here’s the thing. I’m saying I made a mistake. I’m saying that I’m sorry about it, especially if it’s made things between three longtime friends pretty rocky. And I’m saying that if I could start this

whole thing over again, there wouldn't be any me and Marianne, and there certainly wouldn't be any me marrying any Marianne . . . screw it, here's what I'm asking . . ."

Bijoux suppressed a smile; it was nice to see a boy struggling over her.

"... I'm asking, can we at least be friends? We can see where it goes from there, but can we at least be friends?"

She couldn't help herself; she smiled for real. She thought about Peter coming around for her at Caesar's and at the craps tables and how he'd just sort of accepted what she was about. He did understand her. And you couldn't put a price on having someone in your corner who really accepted you for who you were.

"Bijoux? Do I have any sort of chance here?"

"Well, I really couldn't say," she teased. "These things take time."

"Okay, okay. I'll take that answer. I can appreciate that. And in the interest of full disclosure, there's something else I need you to know. So that everything's out in the—"

The unlatched door swung open and Donny walked in. "Hey, you leave her alone," he yelled as he reached down and pulled Bijoux off the bed.

Peter jumped up and the two men faced each other.

Donny's eyes narrowed. "Um, Bij. Are you going to be okay if I talk to Petey here for a second?"

She nodded and stepped away, a small thrill in the pit of her stomach as the two men squared off.

"It's Pete. Or Peter."

"Okay, Petey."

They stared at each other in silence. Finally, Peter said, "Why don't you tell me what's bothering you."

Donny looked even more pissed, if that were possible. "There's nothing more annoying than fake maturity."

Peter looked him up and down. "Yeah, there is. Real immaturity."

Donny got in Peter's face. "You make Marianne cry, and I will kill you."

Peter stepped in even closer. "I've *never* made Marianne cry. I don't think you can say the same."

"You son of a bitch!"

"Get out of my face or I'll make you very sorry," Peter growled.

"I'd like to see it. You wanna take it outside?"

"Sure. How about after the tournament and before the annulment?"

"The annulment?" Donny asked.

"Obviously."

"Annulment," Donny repeated. "Right. Obviously." His body visibly relaxed. "Well, if we don't get to it before the annulment, we'll do it another time."

Bijoux cleared her throat. "We're really late for the tournament. It's already started." Stating the obvious, of course. "Will you guys go down with me?"

They stood there, still close enough to plant one on each other if they were so inclined. Donny broke the silence first this time. "I'd still like to beat your face in," he said pleasantly.

"And I'd still like to beat in yours."

Bijoux rolled her eyes.

Donny nodded at Peter, an appraising look in his eyes. "All right then . . . So you wanna check out a strip club before we leave?"

Peter cocked his head, giving Donny an appraising look in return. "Sure. Yeah." He took a step back and straightened his jacket. Then he held out his hand and Donny took it. The two

men shook hands in a cursory manner, and the testosterone levels in the room returned to normal, just like that.

As they headed down to the tournament spectator area, Bijoux just shook her head and looked up at the ceiling in wonder. *Men.* Marianne had better be doing her part at the table to put them in their place.

chapter Twenty-two

The featured table wasn't any big news for Marianne anymore. The cameras followed her around like flies. She sat down in her assigned spot, uncapped her bottled water and set it to one side. She pulled her sunglasses from her jacket pocket and put them on the table, then tucked her jacket around her chair, tying the arms around as she'd seen Johnny Chan do. Then she dumped her card cap on the table and signed in her plastic bag of chips. Thank god it was all beginning to feel old hat, by now, because her focus was wrecked.

Find your killer instinct, Marianne.

After all, there was nothing she could do at the moment about the big mess waiting for her after the game. All she could do was play her best and not create a big mess *during* the game.

"Way to hang in there," her seatmate said.

"I was cutting it pretty close," Marianne said, gesturing to the fairly meager stack of chips in front of her.

"A chip and a chair. That's all you need. Good luck."

Marianne nodded and they shook hands. "Good luck to you too," she said.

Out of habit, she turned around and craned her neck over the crowd to see if she could find her friends behind the rail. To her surprise, Donny, Bijoux, and Peter were all there. She quickly turned back around and stared down at her hands as the ESPN crew finished checking the rigging above. A makeup guy suddenly attacked her, fussing over the size of the bags under her eyes and the slight pallor of her skin. "You must be so tired," he said, pressing his hand to his chest in dramatic fashion.

He had no idea. This wasn't quite so much fun anymore. This moment should have been more fun. She'd made it to the final day. She'd be made up and be on TV at the break, interviewing about her game and how she'd gotten into poker. They'd film her trying to do chip tricks, laughing as she, the novice coming from nowhere, adorably messed up.

Marianne would go back to the room, and she and Bijoux and Donny would cram onto one bed, Donny lying between Marianne's legs with his head on her stomach. They'd point and laugh and scream at the ESPN rerun package. They'd have the time of their lives. Everything would be . . .

"Marianne, could you lift your chin a little?" A light meter was thrust into her face and they took a reading.

She looked around at her competitors. The playing field had condensed to the point where she was actually playing at a table with Howard Lederer, Barry Greenstein, Phil Hellmuth, and Richard Sparks.

Another lucky Dead Money player at her side pointed to the felt in front of her and asked, "Did you mean to have two card caps? Is that even allowed?"

"Oh. Oops. No." She stared down at the stretched penny alongside the plastic wedding ring that had tumbled out with the rest of her stuff. She stuck the ring back in her pocket and focused.

For the final time, the announcer called out, “Dealers: shuffle up and deal!”

The gears of the tournament began to turn and Marianne headed down the home stretch. *Win this thing.* Marianne settled in, pushing her blind into the center of the table. Her head might be pounding and her stomach might be protesting, but she was going to give this last run everything she had.

The dealer laid the cards down, waiting as everyone pulled the corners up for the keyhole camera. Jack/ten, suited. She was already in for the big blind, so all that was left was to wait and see what kind of a raise might come out of the table.

There wasn’t a raise. The small blind paid to see the flop, but surprisingly, no one else wanted action. The flop came as a queen, nine, and three, setting Marianne up for a straight. She bet, the small blind called, and they watched a king come down on fourth street. Marianne raised big and scared her opponent out. Oh, well. A small win was better than nothing.

Another round. Marianne looked at her suited jack and nine this time. She paid to see the flop, then instantly regretted it as a pair of kings came on the board. She mucked her cards and took a hit that was about the same size as her prior win.

As the lights shone down on the table and time passed, jackets were removed and eyes were rubbed. Marianne was feeling incredibly weary—weary with her cards, and with her chips going up and down in small increments. She had the strange sensation of wanting to just chuck it all and end this thing. It didn’t seem like she could win. And it did seem like this game could last forever. *No, no suck it up! Focus!*

Marianne signaled for another water, blinked to clear her blurry vision and looked at her newest hand. Ace/three, unsuited. As the small blind this time, she paid only a little to see the flop. It came down as ace/five/jack. With the ace showing up, she had to work hard not to show sudden signs of alertness.

There were too many people in this hand. Too many people had paid up to see the flop. If anyone else had an ace, chances were that they'd have a better kicker than she did with her paltry three. And if someone was slow-playing a king/ace combo, the story ended there. A raise came around the table. Marianne figured that with the chips she'd already put in and the chips she had left, she didn't have many more hands to get lucky with. She might not get another chance with an ace pair. She played the hand out to the end, only to find she'd been beaten with an ace/four.

The crowd behind her groaned in unison as the announcer repeated the cards. Lederer pulled the chips in and Marianne knew that she was only one or two hands away from her last stand. She'd fight to the very end, though, because if she could wait even one more opponent out, the prize money would be that much higher. But also for the principle of the thing. She was not going to mentally quit now. She'd had a lapse earlier in the day and she was paying for it, but she was not going to quit now.

She and Greenstein eyed each other, both the smallest-stacked of the table. There were only five players left—four players away from glory. Marianne looked away from Greenstein and steeled herself as the cards came around. *A pair of tits. How appropriate.*

Marianne played the queens aggressively, raising big and acting like she had a pair of pocket aces instead. Greenstein went all-in. Marianne went all-in. And Hellmuth called.

The flop came with a third sister to bring Marianne's pair the good news. Three queens. It didn't take long for Greenstein and Hellmuth to realize their fates. Within minutes Greenstein was standing up from his chair, shaking hands with Marianne and the others, and making his exit in a hail of applause and cheers.

Marianne pulled in her winnings, her heart pounding like a heart attack. She'd driven one of poker's biggest out of the tournament, and she'd won big, but compared to the other men it wasn't big enough. On her next good hand she was going to try to double up.

The dealer spread the cards. Marianne took one look and folded, since she wasn't on the hook for either blind. A new hand came around. Again Marianne folded. This went on for a while, as she just couldn't seem to catch the right cards on the deal. But even as she stayed on the sidelines, the more aggressive players continued to knock each other off.

A sudden flurry of activity distracted her, and in a burst of applause, the remaining players at the table got up and started stretching out, ordering up bottled water, or wandering up to the spectator section. Marianne looked up at the ESPN assistant. "We've lost enough players to combine to the final table," he said. "Congratulations."

Marianne's jaw dropped. She looked behind her at her friends in the stands, squared her shoulders and forced herself to go do what she had to do before the tournament officials called her back over. She marched up to the stands, where Peter, Donny, and Bijoux sat in a row, and went first to Peter. "Peter, it was great getting to know you. You're a fun guy . . ."

He stepped down and gave her a hug. "It's all going to be fine," he whispered into her ear before returning to his seat.

"Donny, I don't even know where to begin."

"How about going back to the table and trying to win?" he said, holding up crossed fingers. "At least give me bragging rights to take back with me."

Marianne looked at him helplessly, then turned to Bijoux. "Bij, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I—"

Bijoux stood up. "Marianne Hollingsworth!" she shrieked.

Everyone went silent.

"Now you listen to me," she said. "You are in the middle of something very important. Don't you get distracted now. Not at this late date."

"But, I—"

"Don't interrupt me."

Marianne gulped and shut her mouth.

Bijoux leaned down over the rail. "Don't mess up your chance to win over something stupid that we'll get over and laugh about later. Turn around and focus on finishing in style."

Marianne stared up at Bijoux. "It's not stupid."

Bijoux's eyebrow arched.

"I said, 'it's not stupid.'"

"Okay, it's not stupid. But I guarantee you that we are all going to laugh very hard about it all later."

Marianne glanced over at Donny and couldn't tell if he agreed with that or not. She looked back up at her best friend. "For a golddigger, you're just about the most generous person I've ever met."

Bijoux went and teared up, which made Marianne tear up. "Don't make me cry on ESPN. I doubt Annie Duke has ever cried on ESPN."

"I bet not. But sometimes the tennis players do. And the Olympians always do," Bijoux said.

Marianne swallowed her tears. Showing one's car-accident underwear was one thing, but crying internationally was something else. "You are the very best friend I could ask for."

"I know," Bijoux said. "But so are you."

"You gotta get back out there, Mare," Donny said, peeling Bijoux and Marianne away from each other. "Go."

Marianne went back to the table and settled in once more. She was short-stacked to say the least. It only took a few hours of play to bounce out five more players, putting Marianne in the final four. The dealer dealt the cards. Marianne took one

look and folded. A new hand came around. Again, Marianne folded. Yet another hand. This time, Marianne was the big blind. She took one look at her cards and knew this was her moment. The men across from her didn't make a sound as she pushed her chips into the center of the table and uttered the timeless phrase: "All-in."

All or nothing. *Please don't let me end up with nothing.*

chapter twenty-three

“I can’t breathe,” Bijoux said. “Did she just go all-in?”

Peter took her hand, an act that Bijoux registered on several different levels. But her primary focus was on Marianne, who was just sitting there rather limply in her chair, stock-still. She didn’t move. Her hair was in her face, and Bijoux couldn’t see her expression.

Bijoux strained to get the best view, looking up at the television monitors, then craning her neck to see over the people in front of her.

“She’s gone all-in, folks. This could be the end of the line for our favorite new sweetheart of poker. . . .”

Bijoux cringed.

“What do you think, Bob?”

“Well, Stan, I think it was the right move. She’s short-stacked against three of the world’s best players. This is no place for conservative play. And frankly, she’s probably thinking that whatever she’s going in with is probably as good as she’s likely to draw before her chips drain out on the blinds. Okay, wait a minute. . . . Right, so Phil Hellmuth has asked for a

count on her chips. He's thinking about it . . . and yes . . . yes, both Hellmuth and Sparks have called. Lederer has folded, steering clear of what might be the final bloodbath."

"Anything can happen, Stan. All our Miss Marianne needs now is a little luck."

The color commentator laughed. "Funny how it all comes down to that. Let's see what we're looking at."

Having gone all in, it was time to show the stuff. As Marianne moved to flip over her cards, Bijoux sucked in a breath so loud it drew notice from the other spectators. A pair of threes. *Oh, God.* A pair of threes against Sparks's damn suited ace/king and Hellmuth's pocket tens.

Bijoux watched Marianne plaster a frozen grin on her face as Hellmuth tried to shake her confidence with a running commentary.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," she hissed.

Peter gave her hand a squeeze. She looked at him and smiled, then clutched at her heart. "I'm not cut out for this kind of stress. I don't know how Marianne can sit there in front of all these people and not completely panic."

"I think everyone's a little tense," he said, pointing to the floor.

Richard Sparks leaned back in his chair, taking a long, noisy slurp through the tiny cocktail straw in his drink. But his knee bounced under the table, suggesting that maybe he wasn't feeling as cavalier on the inside as he was trying to portray on the outside.

"Here it comes," Donny said. He leaned forward in his seat as the dealer burned a card and flipped the first three community cards.

A king. Sparks's odds soared, and he wasn't shy about his excitement. Marianne's odds tanked; she just sat very still.

The dealer burned one card and dealt the fourth card. Bijoux sucked in another breath as the crowd reacted and she got a look. A six. Didn't help anyone. It would come down to the final card.

Bijoux shook her fists in front of her. "Come on, come on. Let's see a three!"

The dealer flipped the fifth and final card. It seemed to take an eternity for her hand to move away and reveal the card. Bijoux gripped Peter's and Donny's wrists on either side and shrieked in dismay.

A ten. It was all Hellmuth with a set of tens. Sparks nearly fell out of his chair with his hands up to his head and a look of total pain on his face. Hellmouth was celebrating big time, and Marianne was just . . . sitting there. That was it. That was the end. Bijoux stared, gaping out over the rail at her friend still just sitting there watching Phil Hellmuth rake in the pot with a cocky grin on his face. The crowd started to applaud as they realized Marianne was out. Marianne didn't get up.

"Oh, God. Don't cry, Marianne. Whatever you do, don't cry in front of all these people. You'll never forgive yourself for being all blotchy and gross on television." Bijoux swallowed as her friend finally stood up, still staring down at the table as the commentators took a moment to salute her play and close out the discussion of the hand.

Suddenly Marianne pumped her fist in the air. She brushed her hair back, and Bijoux could see the look of sheer delight on her friend's face.

"Yes! I rock!" Playing for the cameras now, Marianne thrust her arms up in the air, *Rocky*-style and jumped up and down. "This was so great! This was so great!" As she mugged and played to the cameras and the audience, the remaining three guys at the table stood up to shake her hand, paying her the

respect her play throughout the tournament had deserved. And as she turned back to face them all, the crowd around them rose in a standing ovation.

Bijoux started laughing even as she couldn't help crying a little.

Marianne *Rocky*'ed all the way from the table, shrieking with glee, "I'm fourth! I'm fourth!" as a harried cameraman followed her every move.

"We'd like to pull you for a final interview," one of the assistants ran up and said.

"Okay. I just need a minute. . . ." She looked at Bijoux.

"Well, we're going to break in, like, ten seconds. Can you come with us?"

Marianne looked back at her friends.

"Go on," Bijoux said.

Marianne headed to the interview area. Lights. Camera. Microphone thrust in face.

"You seemed to take your loss pretty well," the host said by way of a question. "Usually the guys going out this close to the prize look pretty trashed."

"It just suddenly hit me—what I'd done. I'm so excited."

"Yours is another one of those fairytale stories—an amateur winning a buy-in from an online tournament, and then breaking out of the Dead-Money Roundup to make her mark. A hell of a story. What does the future look like for you now, Miss Marianne?"

Bijoux leaned over the rail. "It's actually Machine Gun Marianne. That's what they call her in L.A."

Marianne smiled gratefully, and Bijoux just knew that everything was going to be fine. *Never let a man come between you and your best friend. Good advice, good policy.*

"Machine Gun Marianne," the announcer repeated, turning

to the camera and building his closing metaphor, making his voice even deeper and more dramatic, as if he were selling an audience on an upcoming action flick. “A fitting nickname on this bloodbath of a week for many of poker’s greatest. She took them down one after the next, shooting aces and kings all week until her bullets just barely ran short today. With a fourth-place finish, this newcomer has proven she can play with the big guns. Back to the table action as we take the top three to the end of what has been a very long road.”

They cut the transmission. “Thanks. And congratulations on making it so far.” Marianne shook hands with the announcer and turned back to face Peter, Marianne, and Donny in a line—at what was essentially the end of the line.

She exhaled loudly. “Wow.” She looked at Peter and just shook her head, obviously finding it difficult to articulate her feelings. “Wow. So, Peter—”

“It’s okay. We both know—”

“No, I’ve got to explain this. I mean, you see me like this and maybe you think, ‘Where did Marianne go?’ But I’m not really who you think I am. You don’t really know me. This is me,” Marianne said. She indicated her jeans and loud, fun blouse. Splashy jewelry. Outrageous makeup. Bijoux thought her friend looked terrific—a much less slutty, much more comfortable version of her own former exterior.

Marianne exhaled, an impatient sound. “Peter, what I’m saying is that we’ve got to go get an annulment. Now. The careful, tasteful suit . . . the plain shoes . . . the subdued makeup . . . the tax accountant job and the stuff I do to convince them I’m a safe choice for partner . . . all that’s just a costume. For me. Look at Bijoux.”

Everybody looked at Bijoux, who blanched at the unexpected attention.

"That stuff works on her," Marianne said, gesturing to her clothes on Bijoux's frame. "That's her. I mean, not the plain part . . . Oh, crap, Bij. I don't mean it like that. You know what I mean." She looked wildly between the three of them. "You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Bijoux said softly. "We've just been wearing the wrong clothes."

Marianne looked back at her, such a grateful look. "Yeah." She looked at Peter. "And you've been kissing the wrong girl."

Peter held out his palm. Marianne stared at it for a moment, her brow furrowed; then her expression cleared. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the plastic ring, which she placed in Peter's palm. He winked at her, then turned to Donny. With an exaggerated flourish of his arm, he presented Marianne and Donny to each other.

Marianne stood there, blinking up at poor old Donny like an idiot.

Donny cocked his head. "Congratulations . . . on the tournament."

Her face fell a bit. "Thanks," she said nervously.

Bijoux felt a growing horror. Donny wasn't going to make the first move. He had way too much pride. "Do something, Marianne," she hissed at her friend.

Marianne took a tentative step toward Donny, one eyebrow raised in a question mark.

Donny broke, his expression melting into a huge grin. He tried to play it cool, dropping his arms from his chest and turning his palms out to indicate that he was receptive to a hug.

Marianne didn't waste the gesture. She leaped into Donny's arms and kissed him with everything she had, and Donny answered back.

Bijoux wrapped her arms around her chest and gave herself a delighted squeeze. "Oh, my God. It's the ending *Pretty in*

Pink should have had. She goes with Duckie. Except Donny's so much better-looking."

She turned to Peter.

He looked down at her, then looked back up at Donny and Marianne kissing. "Bij, you remember how there was one thing I needed to tell you?"

"Yeah." Bijoux asked.

"You know how you said that I was as fake as you?"

"Yeah." Bijoux crossed her arms over her chest. "And I meant it."

"Well, you're right."

He put his arm around her shoulder and cradled her in close. Leaning down, he said, "The truth is that I have been faking things as much as you have. The truth is that I'm going to be filthy, stinking rich."

Bijoux blinked rapidly, attempting to process the validity of his statement. Suddenly, it dawned on her. "Mrs. Keegan's fortune?"

Peter gave her a wink. "Yeah. Why do you think I'm putting up with that damn cat?"

"Huh. Remember back up at the room, you asked if you had a chance with me, and I said it would take a little time? Maybe these things don't take as much time as I thought," Bijoux said. She flashed him a wicked grin and the two of them just started to laugh.

Donny broke away from the kiss first. Marianne looked up at him nervously. He'd been the one all along. She'd just refused to see it because he didn't fit the parameters of what she thought she wanted.

She pulled at her blouse, trying to explain. "What I've been doing—before this, I mean—that's just not me. You know it. You know what I'm really all about. I'm not the girl who—"

He put his finger on her lips to shut her up. "You don't have to hide it, Mare," he said. "Wear it on the outside, girl. Wear it on the outside."

Marianne looked up at him, at this guy who'd been in her life for what seemed like forever, this guy she could never let go of, even when it seemed like an impossible fit. The truth was, Donny had straightened himself out. She thought he had some growing up to do. But it wasn't just him. It was both of them. And now that Marianne had straightened herself out, too, the fit didn't seem so impossible anymore.

"Donny, you know how I nagged you all those years about being responsible and doing something with your life and developing a long-term plan?"

"Uh-huh."

"Will you hate it if I quit my job and become a professional poker player? Will you hate it if I stop being so responsible all the time?"

"I've never hated anything about you, Marianne. You make me crazy. You make me mad. But you're my girl. You've always been my girl. And what the hell's better than a girl who plays poker?"

"A girl who plays poker and loves to watch football?"

He shrugged dismissively. "That's what boys are for."

"Okay," Marianne said. "This is one of those times where you just gotta put it on the line. If it's bad, then it's bad and I lose my pride. I lose my guy. . . ."

The corner of Donny's mouth quirked up in a hint of a smile.

Marianne took a deep breath. "You know that dorky expression, 'you're my everything'?"

He laughed—a little uncertainly, though. "Yeah."

"I want everything."

Donny went very still. “Don’t tease me, Mare. I don’t think I can stand any more of this. Don’t get back together with me unless you mean it.”

“Of course I mean it. You act like I’m the only one who ever said we should be apart.”

“You were the only one who ever really believed it. I know I never said . . . what I should have said. That’s my fault. But . . .” He clutched his chest, grabbing onto his leather jacket with dramatic flair, the same old Donny, all grown-up. “I love you, Marianne. You’re one crazy girl. But you’ve always been the one for me. I swear I’d ask you to marry me if you weren’t already married,” he said as he stuck his arm around her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. “You gotta do something about that. I don’t sleep with other men’s wives.”

She laughed and punched him in the shoulder. “I’ll get on that.”

He looked at her, revealing a tenderness in his eyes Marianne couldn’t remember seeing—or noticing—before; then he brushed her hair away from her shoulder. Leaning down to her ear, he whispered sweetly, “Hey, Marianne, it’s Donny. Wanna—”

“Yeah.”

chapter twenty-four

The sky hung like a pitch-black canvas, streaked and dotted with Strip neon as if it were one of those velvet Elvis paintings you could pick up in Tijuana. The sidewalk outside had picked up steam again at this late hour, now that dinner was over and the flip side of twenty-four/seven was about to begin. Marianne might have been drunk the last time she'd made it out of the casino, but she remembered what this looked like.

"Where are we going?" Bijoux cried out as Marianne practically dragged her behind her.

"Come on!"

"Marianne, seriously. You're supposed to be the responsible one. We're going to miss our flight."

"You have to see it. It's magic. I swear, I think it's really magic."

"I didn't bring a sweater," Bijoux said plaintively from behind her.

"Here." Marianne pulled her friend up to the stone wall overlooking the lake where the Bellagio fountains waited.

"I'm serious. We have to go. The guys already called a cab."

"Give it five minutes. We'll be out of here in five minutes."

Marianne glanced at her watch and then leaned on the wall, staring over the side into the lights of Las Vegas reflecting off the water.

Bijoux had quieted now, huddling close to Marianne for warmth, and likewise transfixed by the reflection. “Almost,” Marianne whispered.

And then, like a blast from a cannon, the fountains shot up out of the water, the display lights switched on, and the music kicked in.

*Con te partirò.
Paesi che non ho mai
veduto e vissuto con te,
adesso sì li vivrò . . .*

Bijoux was transfixed. “Oh, Marianne! It’s fabulous.” One hand grabbed onto Marianne’s arm; the other went to her heart. “It *is* magic.”

The strains of Italian opera soared higher as Bijoux suddenly opened her purse and rummaged around. She pulled out a small cosmetics bag, found her pot of eye glitter, and unscrewed the lid.

“What are you doing?” Marianne asked.

“Hold out your hand.”

She did, and Bijoux dumped half the pot in her palm and the other half in her own, and Marianne saw what she was about.

The fountains danced to the music in a pool of light. Bijoux and Marianne looked at each other, then turned to the spectacle and blew as hard as they could, as if making a wish.

Silver glitter twinkled in the air, catching the light from all sides as the sparkles rained down over the railing into the water. Bijoux slung her arm around Marianne’s neck and, laughing together, they turned away and headed for home.