



Chasing Harry Winston

By Lauren Weisberger

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Meet Emmy, Leigh, and Adriana. Best friends since college, each has seen her share of career foils and romantic foibles over the past decade. Now, as they approach thirty, they're looking toward their future...and they're not quite sure they like what they see.

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Chasing Harry Winston By Lauren Weisberger Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #934866 in Books
- Published on: 2010-01-26
- Released on: 2010-01-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x 1.20" w x 4.19" l, .42 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Lily Rabe throws herself enthusiastically into her narration; she sounds like she's having a ball, and listeners will, too. Rabe especially has fun with over-the-top Brazilian sexpot Adriana, making melodramatic pronouncements and calling everyone querida in a sexy, throaty exotic accent. She's also great as Emmy, the marriage-and-family-obsessed member of the trio: Rabe's sobbing, outraged delivery of Emmy's rant about her boyfriend dumping her for his personal trainer is simultaneously touching and hilarious. Leigh is the straight man of the group, but Rabe's performance conveys her doubts about her engagement realistically and sympathetically. This fun audio brings out the best in the novel. *A Simon & Schuster hardcover (Reviews, Apr. 7). (June)*

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About the Author

Lauren Weisberger is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Devil Wears Prada*, which was published in forty languages and made into a major motion picture starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway. It was announced in 2017 that musician Elton John and Paul Rudnick will adapt *The Devil Wears Prada* for the stage. Weisberger's four other novels, *Everyone Worth Knowing*, *Chasing Harry Winston*, *Last Night at Chateau Marmont*, and *Revenge Wears Prada*, were all top-ten *New York Times* bestsellers. Her books have sold more than thirteen million copies worldwide. A graduate of Cornell University, she lives in Connecticut with her husband and two children. Visit LaurenWeisberger.com to learn more.

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Chasing Harry Winston

panties is a vile word

When Leigh's doorbell rang unexpectedly at nine on a Monday night, she did not think, Gee, I wonder who that could be. She thought, Shit. Go away. Were there people who actually welcomed unannounced visitors when they just stopped by to "say hello" or "check in"? Recluses, probably. Or those friendly Midwestern folks she'd seen depicted in *Big Love* but had never actually met—yes, they probably didn't mind. But this! This was an affront. Monday nights were sacred and completely off-limits to the rest of the world, a time of *No Human Contact* when Leigh could veg out in sweats and watch episode after beautiful TiVo'd episode of *Project Runway*. It was her only time alone all week, and after some intensive training on her part, her friends, her family, and her boyfriend, Russell, finally abided by it.

The girls had stopped asking for Monday-night plans at the end of the nineties; Russell, who in the beginning of their relationship had openly balked, now quietly contained his resentment (and in football season relished having his own Monday nights free); her mother struggled through one night a week without picking up the phone to call, finally accepting after all these years that she wouldn't hear from Leigh until Tuesday morning no matter how many times she hit Redial. Even Leigh's publisher knew better than to assign her Monday-night reading...or, god forbid, knew not to log an interrupting phone call. Which is precisely why it was so incredible that her doorbell had just rung—*incredible and panic-inducing*.

Figuring it was her super, there to change the air-conditioning filter; or one of the delivery guys from Hot Enchiladas, leaving a menu; or, most likely of all, someone just confusing her door with one of her neighbors', she hit Mute on the TV remote and did not move a muscle. She cocked her head to the side like a Labrador, straining for any confirmation that the intruder had left, but the only thing she heard was the dull, constant thudding from above. Suffering from what her old shrink called "noise sensitivity" and everyone else described as "fucking neurotic," Leigh had, of course, thoroughly scoped out her upstairs neighbor before signing over her life savings: The apartment might have been the most perfect she'd seen in a year and a half of looking, but she hadn't wanted to take any chances.

Leigh had asked Adriana for the scoop on the woman above her, in apartment 17D, but her friend had just pursed her pouty lips and shrugged. No matter that Adriana had lived in the building's full-floor penthouse apartment from the day her parents had moved from São Paulo to New York nearly two decades before; she had completely embraced the New Yorker's I-Promise-Not-to-Acknowledge-You-If-You-Extend-Me-the-Same-Courtesy attitude toward her neighbors and could offer Leigh no info on her neighbor. And so, on a blustery December Saturday right before Christmas, Leigh had slipped the building's doorman twenty bucks, Bond-style, and waited in the lobby, pretending to read a manuscript. After Leigh spent three hours scanning the same anecdote, the doorman coughed loudly and looked at her over the top of his glasses with meaning. Glancing up, Leigh felt an immediate wave of relief. Before her, removing a QVC catalog from an unlocked mailbox, stood an overweight woman in a polka-dot housedress. Not a day younger than eighty, thought Leigh, and she breathed a sigh of relief; there would be no stilettos clacking against the hardwood floors, no late-night parties, no parade of visitors stomping around.

The very next day Leigh wrote a check for the down payment, and two months later she excitedly moved into her mint-condition one-bedroom dream apartment. It had a renovated kitchen, an oversized bathtub, and a more than decent northern view of the Empire State Building. It might have been one of the smallest units in the building—okay, the smallest—but it was still a dream, a beautiful, lucky dream in a building Leigh never thought she could afford, each and every obscenely priced square foot paid for with her own hard work and savings.

How could she possibly have predicted that the seemingly innocuous upstairs neighbor was a dedicated wearer of massive wooden orthopedic clogs? Still, Leigh berated herself regularly for thinking high heels were the only potential noise risk: it had been an amateur's mistake. Before she'd spotted her neighbor wearing the offending shoes, Leigh had created an elaborate explanation for the relentless upstairs racket. She decided that the woman had to be Dutch (since everyone knew Dutch people wore clogs), and the matriarch of a huge, proudly Dutch family who received constant visits from countless children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, siblings, cousins, and general advice-seekers...all, most likely, Dutch clog-wearers. After spotting her neighbor wearing an air cast and feigning interest in the woman's disgusting-sounding foot ailments including (but not limited to) plantar fasciitis, ingrown toenails, neuromas, and bunions, Leigh had clucked as sympathetically as she could manage and then raced upstairs to check her copy of the co-op rules. Sure enough, they dictated that owners were required to cover eighty percent of their hardwood floors with carpet—which she realized was an entirely moot point when the very next page revealed that her upstairs neighbor was president of the board.

Leigh had already endured nearly four months of round-the-clock clogging, something that might have been funny if it was happening to someone else. Her nerves were directly tied to the volume and frequency of the steady thump-thump-thump that segued into a thumpety-thump-thumpety-thump-thump pattern when Leigh's heart began to pound right along with it. She tried to breathe slowly, but her exhales were short and raspy, punctuated by little guppy gasps. As she examined her pale complexion (which on good days she thought of as "ethereal" and all other times accepted as "sickly") in the mirrored hallway closet door, a thin

sheen of perspiration dampened her forehead.

It seemed to be happening more frequently, this sweating/breathing issue—and not just when she heard the wood-on-wood banging. Sometimes Leigh would awaken from a sleep so deep it almost hurt, only to find her heart racing and her sheets drenched. Last week in the middle of an otherwise completely relaxing shavasna—albeit one where the instructor felt compelled to play an a capella version of “Amazing Grace” over the speakers—a sharp pain shot through Leigh’s chest on each measured inhale. And just this morning as she watched the human tidal wave of commuters cram onto the N train—she forced herself to take the subway, but hated every second of it—Leigh’s throat constricted and her pulse inexplicably quickened. There seemed to be only two plausible explanations, and although she could be a bit of a hypochondriac, even Leigh didn’t think she was a likely candidate for a coronary: It was a panic attack, plain and simple.

In an ineffective attempt to dispel the panic, Leigh pressed her fingertips into her temples and stretched her neck from side to side, neither of which did a damn thing. It felt like her lungs could reach only ten percent capacity, and just as she considered who would find her body—and when—she heard a choked sobbing and yet another ring of her doorbell.

She tiptoed over to the door and looked through the peephole but saw only empty hallway. This was exactly how people ended up robbed and raped in New York City—getting duped by some criminal mastermind into opening their doors. I’m not falling for this, she thought as she stealthily dialed her doorman. Never mind that her building’s security rivaled the UN’s, or that in eight years of city living she didn’t personally know anyone who’d been so much as pickpocketed, or that the chances of a psychopathic murderer choosing her apartment from more than two hundred other units in her building was unlikely.... This was how it all started.

The doorman answered after four eternally long rings.

“Gerard, it’s Leigh Eisner in 16D. There’s someone outside my door. I think they’re trying to break in. Can you come up here right away? Should I call 911?” The words came out in a frantic jumble as Leigh paced the small foyer and popped Nicorette squares into her mouth directly from the foil wrapper.

“Miss Eisner, of course I’ll send someone up immediately, but perhaps you’re mistaking Miss Solomon for someone else? She arrived a few minutes ago and proceeded directly to your apartment...which is permissible for someone on your permanent clearance list.”

“Emmy’s here?” Leigh asked. She forgot all about her imminent death by disease or homicide and pulled open her door to find Emmy rocking back and forth on the hallway floor, knees pulled tight against her chest, cheeks slick with tears.

“Miss, may I be of further assistance? Shall I still—”

“Thanks for your help, Gerard. We’re fine now,” Leigh said, snapping shut her cell phone and shoving it into the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt. She dropped to her knees without thinking and wrapped her arms around Emmy.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” she crooned, gathering Emmy’s tear-dampened hair from her face into a ponytail. “What happened?”

The show of concern brought with it a fresh stream of tears; Emmy was sobbing so hard her tiny body

trembled. Leigh ran through the possibilities of what could cause such pain, and came up with only three: a death in the family, a pending death in the family, or a man.

“Sweetie, is it your parents? Did something happen to them? To Izzie?”

Emmy shook her head.

“Talk to me, Emmy. Is everything okay with Duncan?”

This elicited a wail so plaintive it hurt Leigh to hear it. Bingo.

“Over,” Emmy cried, her voice catching in her throat. “It’s over for good.”

Emmy had made this pronouncement no fewer than eight times in the five years she and Duncan had been dating, but something about tonight seemed different.

“Honey, I’m sure it’s all just—”

“He met someone.”

“He what?” Leigh dropped her arms and sat back on her ankles.

“I’m sorry, let me rephrase: I bought him someone.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Remember when I got him a membership at Clay for his thirty-first birthday because he was desperate to get back in shape? And then he never went—not one fucking time in two whole years—because, according to him, it wasn’t ‘an efficient use of his time’ to just go and stand on the treadmill? So rather than just cancel the whole damn thing and forget about it, I, genius extraordinaire, decide to buy him a series of sessions with a personal trainer so he wouldn’t have to waste one precious second exercising like everyone else.”

“I think I can see where this is going.”

“What? You think he fucked her?” Emmy laughed mirthlessly. It sometimes surprised people to hear Emmy trash-talk with such ferocity—she was, after all, only five-one and looked no older than a teenager—but Leigh barely even noticed anymore. “I thought so, too. It’s so much worse than that.”

“That sounds bad enough, sweetheart.” All-out loving sympathy and support were the best she could offer, but Emmy didn’t appear comforted.

“You probably wonder how it could get worse, right? Well, let me tell you how. He didn’t just fuck her—I could maybe deal with that. Noooo, not my Duncan. He ‘fell in love’ with her.” Emmy jabbed out air quotes with the forefingers and middle fingers of both hands and rolled her bloodshot eyes. “He’s ‘waiting for her,’ quote-unquote, until she’s ‘ready.’ She’s a VIRGIN, for chrissake! I’ve put up with five years of his cheating and lies and kinky, weird sex so he can FALL IN LOVE WITH A VIRGIN TRAINER I HIRED IN THE GYM I PAID FOR? In love! Leigh, what am I going to do?”

Leigh, relieved that she could finally do something tangible, took Emmy’s arm and helped her to her feet.

“Come in, honey. Let’s go inside. I’ll make us some tea and you can tell me what happened.”

Emmy sniffed. “Oh, god, I forgot...it’s Monday. I don’t want to interrupt. I’ll be fine....”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I wasn’t even doing anything,” Leigh lied. “Come in this minute.”

Leigh led her to the couch and, after patting the overstuffed arm to indicate where Emmy should rest her head, ducked behind the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. With its speckled granite countertops and new stainless steel appliances, the kitchen was Leigh’s favorite room in the whole apartment. All of her pots and pans hung from under-cabinet hooks in order of size, and all of her utensils and spices were obsessively organized in matching glass and stainless containers. Crumbs, spills, wrappers, dirty dishes—all nonexistent. The refrigerator looked like someone had Hoovered it clean, and the countertops were entirely smudge-free. If it was possible for a room to personify its owner’s neurotic personality, the kitchen and Leigh could be identical twins.

She filled the kettle (purchased just last week during a Bloomingdale’s Home Sale, because who said you were entitled to new things only when you registered?), piled a tray high with cheese and Wheat Thins, and peeked through the window into the living room to make sure Emmy was resting comfortably. Seeing that she was lying flat on her back with an arm flung over her eyes, Leigh slipped out her cell phone and selected Adriana’s name from her phone book. She typed: SOS. E & D finished. Get down here ASAP.

“Do you have Advil?” Emmy called from the couch. And then, more quietly: “Duncan always carried Advil.”

Leigh opened her mouth to add that Duncan had always carried a lot of things—a business card for his favorite escort service, a wallet-sized picture of himself as a child, and, occasionally, a genital wart or two that he swore were just “skin tags”—but she controlled herself. In addition to being unnecessary since Emmy was suffering enough, it would be hypocritical: Contrary to everyone’s belief, Leigh wasn’t exactly in the world’s most perfect relationship, either. But she pushed the thought of Russell from her mind.

“Sure, I’ll get you some in a minute,” she said, turning off the whistling kettle. “Tea’s ready.”

The girls had just taken their first sips when the doorbell rang. Emmy looked at Leigh, who just said, “Adriana.”

“It’s open!” Leigh called toward the front door, but Adriana had already figured that out. She stormed into the living room and stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the scene.

“What is going on here?” she demanded. Adriana’s slight Brazilian accent, little more than a soft, sexy lilting when she was calm, made her almost unintelligible when she felt, in her own words, “passionate” about someone or something. Which was pretty much always. “Where are the drinks?”

Leigh motioned to the kitchen. “Water’s still hot. Check the cupboard above the microwave. I have a whole bunch of different flavors in—”

“No tea!” Adriana screeched and pointed to Emmy. “Can’t you see she’s miserable? We need real drinks. I’ll make caipirinhas.”

“I don’t have any mint. Or limes. Actually, I’m not even sure I have the right booze,” Leigh said.

“I brought everything.” Adriana lifted a large paper bag over her head and grinned.

Leigh often found Adriana’s abruptness irritating, sometimes a little overwhelming, but tonight she was grateful to her for taking control of the situation. It had been nearly twelve years since Leigh first saw Adriana’s smile, and still it left her feeling awestruck and a little anxious. How could someone possibly be that beautiful? she wondered for the hundred thousandth time. What higher power orchestrated such a perfect union of genes? Who decided that one single solitary soul deserved skin like that? It was so fundamentally unfair.

It was another few minutes before the drinks were mixed and distributed and everyone had settled down; Emmy and Adriana sprawled on the couch; Leigh sat cross-legged on the floor.

“So, tell us what happened,” Leigh said, placing a hand on Emmy’s ankle. “Just take your time and tell us all about it.”

Emmy sighed and, for the first time since she arrived, appeared cried out. “There’s not that much to tell. She’s absolutely adorable—like, nauseatingly cute. And young. Really, really young.”

“What’s really, really young?” Leigh asked.

“Twenty-three.”

“That’s not so young.”

“She has a MySpace profile,” Emmy said.

Leigh grimaced.

“And she’s on Facebook.”

“Good lord,” Adriana muttered.

“Yeah, I know. Her favorite color is lavender and her favorite book is The South Beach Diet and she just adores cookie dough, campfires, and watching Saturday-morning cartoons. Oh, and she simply must get nine hours of sleep or else she’s really, really cranky.”

“What else?” Leigh asked, although she could predict the answer.

“What else do you want to know?”

Adriana started the quiz show-like round.

“Name?”

“Brianna Sheldon.”

“College?”

“SMU, Comm major, Kappa Kappa Gamma.” Emmy enunciated these last three words with a perfect Valley

Girl inflection.

“Hometown?”

“Born in Richmond, raised in a suburb of Charleston.”

“Music?”

“Like you even have to ask. Kenny Chesney.”

“High school sport?”

“Let’s just all say it in unison....” Emmy said.

“Cheerleading,” Adriana and Leigh simultaneously.

“Given.” Emmy sighed, but then she smiled for a second. “I found some pictures of her from her sister’s wedding photographer’s Web site—she even manages to look good in teal taffeta. The whole thing is positively nauseating.”

The girls all laughed, each accustomed to this oldest of female-bonding traditions. When your life was in the gutter because your ex-boyfriend suddenly surfaced on weddingchannel.com, nothing offered comfort like trashing the new girlfriend. It was actually how they had become friends in the first place. Leigh and Emmy met each other first in Astronomy 101, a class both were taking to fulfill the dreaded science requirement. Neither realized until it was too late that Astro was actually an aggressive mixture of chemistry, calculus, and physics—not the chance to learn all the constellations and look at the pretty stars, like they had hoped. They were the two least-competent and lowest-scoring members of their lab group, and their TA had strung together enough English words to let them know that they’d better start improving or they would fail the class, which prompted Leigh and Emmy to meet three times a week in the study lounge at Emmy’s dorm, a glass-enclosed, fluorescent-lit pod wedged between the kitchen and the coed bathroom. The girls were just beginning to tackle the review notes for the upcoming midterm when they heard banging followed by distinctly female shrieks. Emmy and Leigh looked at each other and smiled as they listened to the angry words being exchanged down the hall, sure it was yet another argument between a scorned sorority girl and the drunken guy who hadn’t called the next day. The yelling shifted, however, and within seconds Emmy and Leigh watched as a gorgeous honey blonde with a sexy accent took a verbal barrage from a hysterical, red-faced, significantly less pretty blonde directly outside the study lounge.

“I can’t believe I voted for you!” the red-faced girl screamed. “I actually stood up in front of the whole chapter to speak on your behalf, and this is how you show your appreciation? By sleeping with my boyfriend?”

The stunner with the accent sighed. When she spoke, it was with quiet resignation. “Annie, I’ve said I’m sorry. I never would have done that had I known he was your boyfriend.”

This was not calming to the screamer. “How could you not have known? We’ve been together for, like, months!”

“I didn’t know, because he accosted me last night, flirted with me, bought me drinks, and asked me to his fraternity formal. I’m sorry if it didn’t occur to me that he had a girlfriend. If it had, I assure you, I wouldn’t

have been interested.” The girl held out her hand in a gesture of reconciliation and apology. “Please. Men aren’t that important. Let’s forget about it, okay?”

“Forget about it?” the girl hissed, almost snarled, through closed teeth. “You’re nothing more than a little freshman whore, sleeping with the seniors because you think they actually like you. Stay away from me and stay away from him, and keep your stupid freshman trampiness out of my life. Understood?” The girl’s voice had gotten louder; by the time she’d asked if Adriana understood, she was shouting again.

Emmy and Leigh watched as Adriana took a long look at the girl, appeared to weigh a response in her mind, and then, deciding against it, simply said, “Understood perfectly.” Immediately the angry blonde swiveled on one Puma and flounced away. Adriana finally allowed herself to smile before noticing Emmy and Leigh watching from the lounge.

“Did you just see that?” Adriana asked, moving into the doorway.

Emmy coughed and Leigh blushed and nodded. “She was really pissed,” Leigh said.

Adriana laughed. “As she so kindly pointed out, I’m just some stupid freshman. How am I supposed to know who’s dating who around here? Especially when the guy in question spent half the night telling me how great it is to be single again after being tied down for the last four months. Was I supposed to hook him up to a polygraph?”

Leigh leaned back in her chair and took a swig from her Diet Coke. “Maybe you should start carrying a list of every single older girl on campus and their phone numbers. That way, every time you meet a guy, you can call every one of them to make sure he’s available.”

Adriana’s face broke into a huge smile, and Leigh was charmed: She saw immediately why the boy from the previous night had lost all memory of his girlfriend in Adriana’s presence. “I’m Adriana,” she said, giving first Leigh and then Emmy a little wave. “Apparently also known as Class of 2000 Queen Slut.”

Leigh introduced herself. “Hey. I’m Leigh. I was thinking of rushing next semester, until I just met your ‘sister.’ So thanks for that informative lesson.”

Emmy dog-eared her textbook page and smiled up at Adriana. “My name is Emmy. I also go by The Last Remaining Virgin in the Class of 2000, in case you haven’t heard. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The girls had talked that night for three hours, and when they were finished, they had established a game plan for the next few weeks: Adriana would drop out of the sorority she had joined under duress (pressure from her mother), Leigh would withdraw her application to rush in the spring, and Emmy would lose her virginity the moment she met an appropriate candidate.

In the twelve years since that night, the girls had barely come up for air.

“And I also happened to read on her Friendster page—using Duncan’s password, of course—that she dreams of having two boys and a girl and wants to be a young mom. Isn’t that just precious? It doesn’t seem that part bothered Duncan.”

Leigh and Adriana exchanged glances then looked at Emmy, who was completely absorbed in removing a cuticle in an apparent effort not to cry.

So there it was. The new girl's age, her cheerleading, even her oh-so-adorable name might have been infuriating, but they weren't intolerable; the fact that she, too, yearned to be a mom as soon as humanly possible was the real clincher. For as long as anyone could remember, Emmy had been very vocal about her desire to have children. Obsessed. She told anyone who would listen that she wanted a huge family, and she wanted it as soon as possible. Four, five, six kids—boys, girls, a bunch of each; it didn't matter to Emmy, as long as it happened...soon. And while Duncan certainly knew better than anyone how badly Emmy wanted to be a mom, he had managed to wriggle free of any major discussions about the topic. The first two years of their relationship, Emmy had kept this particular desire to herself. After all, they were only twenty-five, and even she knew there was plenty of time. But as their years together started to cycle past at what felt like warp speed and Emmy grew more insistent, Duncan only got cagier. He would say things like "Statistically speaking, chances are I'll have kids one day," and Emmy would ignore the lack of enthusiasm and his telling pronoun choice, focusing instead on the fact that Duncan had uttered those three magical words: I'll have kids. It was because of those magical words that Emmy conceded Duncan his overnight "work" absences and once—god knows why now—an inexplicable brush with chlamydia. After all, he had agreed to be the father of her future children.

Adriana broke the silence by doing what she always did when she got uncomfortable: changing the subject entirely.

"Leigh, querida, it's seventy-five degrees outside. Why are you dressed for the middle of winter?"

Leigh looked at her thick fleece pants and matching sweatshirt and shrugged.

"Do you not feel well? Are you cold?"

"I don't know; it was just what was laying around. What does it matter?"

"It's not that it matters, it's just strange that someone so, how should I say it, temperature aware isn't positively melting right now."

Leigh wasn't about to admit that she was actually warm—too warm—but that there were extenuating circumstances. Adriana might have asked, but she definitely didn't want to hear that Leigh swathed herself in clothing because she hated when the backs of her arms or thighs stuck to the leather couch. That of course she'd prefer to sit around in a pair of boxers and a tank top, but the skin-on-leather stickiness—not to mention the annoying ripping noises every time she shifted position—made this impossible. Leigh knew they would think her crazy if she explained that she'd actually already worn all of her lightweight, full-length pajama pants (and even all of her yoga pants) and that because she preferred to wear them without underwear, they were really only single-use pants and ended up in the wash pretty quickly. So she was really wearing the fleece sweat suit only because it was the single clean option in her closet that was capable of protecting her from the dreaded leather couch, which both her mother and Emmy had insisted would be the right choice even though Leigh had really wanted the modern fabric one that wouldn't have felt like sitting in a vat of rubber cement all the time. Not to even mention the fact that in a few short months (six) it would be winter, and she'd still have to dress like an Eskimo because regardless of how toasty warm she kept the apartment, the couch would feel like ice against her bare skin instead of snuggly and soft like the MicroSuede one everyone else had vetoed. No, it would be better to just leave well enough alone.

"Hmm," Leigh murmured, hoping to end the conversation by saying nothing. "I think we're ready for another round."

The second drink went down easier than the first, so easily in fact that even the increased upstairs thumping no longer made Leigh feel quite so...unhinged. It was time to rally for her friend.

“So, give us the top three things the cheerleader will be less than thrilled to discover about Duncan,” Leigh said, placing her soles together and pushing her knees to the floor, feeling the stretch in her inner thighs.

“Yes, yes, a good idea.” Adriana nodded.

A chunk of Emmy’s naturally brunette hair—she was the only one among the three of them, and possibly the only woman in all of Manhattan, who had never dyed, permed, highlighted, straightened, or even so much as spritzed lemon juice on her shoulder-length mane—fell out of her ponytail, covering half of her bangs and her entire left eye. Leigh yearned to reach up and tuck it behind Emmy’s ear, but she resisted. Instead she popped another piece of Nicorette in her mouth.

Emmy looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what are his flaws? Disgusting habits? Deal-breakers?” Leigh asked.

Adriana threw up her hands in exasperation. “Come on, Emmy. Anything! Quirks, hang-ups, obsessions, addictions, secrets...It’ll make you feel better. Tell us what was wrong with him.”

Emmy sniffed. “There was noth—”

“Don’t you dare say there was nothing wrong with him,” Leigh interrupted. “Now, granted, Duncan was very”—Leigh paused here, wanting to say “manipulative” or “devious” or “deceitful,” but she stopped herself just in time—“charming, but he had to have something you never told us about. Some sort of classified information that will have perky little Brianna hanging up her pom-poms.”

“Narcissistic personality disorder?” Adriana prompted.

Leigh immediately jumped in for a back-and-forth rally. “Erectile dysfunction?”

“Gambling addiction?”

“Cried more than you did?”

“Violent drunk?”

“Mommy issues?”

“Dig deep, Emmy,” Leigh urged.

“Well, there was something I always thought was a little strange...” Emmy said.

The girls looked at her eagerly.

“Not that it was really a big deal. He didn’t do it during sex or anything,” she said quickly.

“This just got a hell of a lot more interesting,” Adriana said.

“Spill it, Emmy,” Leigh said.

“He, uh...” She coughed and cleared her throat. “We didn’t really talk about it, but he, uh, sometimes wore my panties to work.”

This disclosure was enough to silence the two people who considered themselves professional talkers. They talked their way through shrink appointments, out of traffic tickets, and into fully reserved restaurants, but for many seconds—possibly an entire minute—neither could produce a remotely logical or rational response to this new information.

Adriana recovered first. “Panties is a vile word,” she said. She frowned and emptied the caipirinha pitcher into her glass.

Leigh stared at her. “I cannot believe you’re being pedantic right now. One of your best friends just told you that her boyfriend of nearly five years liked wearing her panties, and your biggest issue is with the word?”

“I’m just pointing out its relative grossness. All women hate the word. Panties. Just say it—panties. It makes my skin crawl.”

“Adriana! He wore her underwear.”

“I know, trust me, I heard her. I was commenting—as a side note, mind you—that in the future, I don’t think we should use that word. Panties. Ugh. Do you not find it repulsive?”

Leigh paused for a moment. “Yeah, I guess I do. But that’s not really the take-away here.”

Adriana sipped and looked pointedly at Leigh. “Well, then, what is?”

“The fact that her boyfriend”—Leigh pointed at Emmy, who was watching the exchange with wide eyes and a blank expression—“put on a suit every day and went to the office. That under said suit he was wearing a pair of cute little lace bikinis. Doesn’t that freak you out slightly more than the word panties?”

It wasn’t until Emmy gasped audibly that Leigh realized she had gone too far.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry, sweetie. I didn’t mean for that to sound as awful as—”

Emmy held up a hand, palm out, fingers spread. “Stop, please.”

“That was so insensitive of me. I swear I wasn’t even—”

“It’s just that you have it all wrong. Duncan never really showed any interest in my lace bikinis. Or my hipsters or boy shorts, for that matter.” Emmy smiled wickedly. “But he sure did seem to love my thongs....”

“Hey, whore, I’m ready for you.” Gilles swatted Adriana on the upper arm as he walked past, nearly dislodging the cell phone she had balanced between her chin and her left shoulder. “And move it along. I have better things to do than listen to you have phone sex all day.”

A few of the older ladies looked up from their Vogues and Town & Countrys, eyes wide with disapproval at this breach in propriety, this complete ignorance of basic common courtesy. Looked up, actually, just in time

to see Adriana place her china cup on its saucer and, now having one free hand, raise her right arm over her head and extend her middle finger. She did this without glancing up, still entirely immersed in her conversation.

“Yes, querido, yes, yes, yes. It will be perfect. Perfect! See you then.” Her voice lowered, but just a notch. “I can’t wait. Sounds delicious. Mmm. Kiss, kiss.” She tapped a red lacquered nail on the iPhone’s touch screen and dropped it into her wide-mouthed Bottega Veneta satchel.

“Who’s this week’s lucky prey?” Gilles asked as Adriana approached. He turned his swivel chair toward Adriana, who, aware that she had the entire salon’s attention, bent forward the tiniest bit, allowing her silk blouse to fall a few inches from her chest and her bum—not particularly small, but rounded and tight the way men loved—before placing it, just so, on the leather.

“Oh, please, do you honestly care? He’s boring to sleep with, much less talk about.”

“Someone’s in a good mood today.” He stood behind her, working through her wavy hair with a wide-toothed comb and talking to her through the mirror. “The usual, I assume?”

“Maybe a little lighter around the face?” She finished the last of her coffee and then threw her head back into his chest. She sighed. “I’m in a rut, Gilles. I’m tired of all the men, of all the different names and faces I have to keep straight. Not to mention the products! My bathroom looks like a Rite Aid. There are so many different cans of shaving cream and bars of soap that I could go into business.”

“Adi, dear”—he knew she hated that nickname, so he used it with relish every chance he got—“you sound ungrateful. Do you realize how many girls would change places with you in a heartbeat? To spend just a single night in that body of yours? Hell, just this morning I had two socialites-in-training jabbering away about how utterly fab your life is.”

“Really?” She pouted at herself in the mirror but he could detect a hint of pleasure.

It was true that her name did regularly appear in all the gossip columns that mattered—could she help it if the society photographers flocked to her?—and of course she was on the list for just about every party, product launch, store opening, and benefit that mattered. And yes, if she was being entirely truthful, she would have to admit that she had dated some impressively wealthy, gorgeous, famous men in her time, but it drove her crazy that everyone assumed the trappings of fabulousness were enough to make her happy. Not that they weren’t great—or that she’d be willing to give up a single second of it—but with her advanced age (closing in on thirty), Adriana had begun to suspect there might be something more.

“Really. So buck up, girl. You may flit around the Make-A-Wish benefit like an angel, but at core you’re a dirty slut, and I love you for that. Besides, we did you the whole session last time. It’s my turn now.” Hip jutted to the side, he impatiently held his hand out while his assistant, a lanky brunette with Bambi eyes and a fearful expression, rushed to place a foil in his open palm.

Adriana sighed and motioned to the assistant for another cappuccino. “All right. How are you doing?”

“How lovely of you to inquire!” Gilles bent down and kissed her cheek. “Let’s see. I’ve decided to focus my husband search on men who are already in committed relationships. Granted, it’s still early, but I’m getting some positive results.”

Adriana sighed. “Aren’t there enough single men out there to keep you busy? Do you really need to play home-wrecker?”

“You know what they say, darling—if you can’t have a happy home, wreck one.”

“Who’s ‘they’?” she asked.

“Why, me, of course. You haven’t seen a man enjoy a blowjob until you’ve watched a guy who hasn’t gotten one in ten years.”

Adriana laughed and immediately looked at her lap. Although she always feigned nonchalance and pretended to be casually cool with Gilles’s comprehensive and explicit descriptions of gay sex, it actually made her a little uncomfortable, an admission that annoyed her. She blamed this bit of old-fashionedness on her parents, who, while generous with their money and exuberant in the many ways they spent it, were not what anyone would call social pioneers. Not that she was exactly conservative when it came to her own love life, granted—she had lost her virginity at thirteen and been to bed with dozens of men since then.

“I think I’m onto something, seriously,” Gilles said as he artfully placed the foils in a face-framing halo, head cocked just so, forehead crinkled in concentration.

Adriana was accustomed to his ever-changing “lifestyle choices” and loved to retell them to the girls. Previous appointments had brought gems such as “When in doubt, wax it,” “Real men use decorators,” and “No weights, no dates,” all rules to which he adhered with surprising dedication. He’d struggled with only one promise, made on his fortieth birthday, when he swore off prostitutes and escorts forever (“Tricks are for kids. From here on in, civilians only”), but a follow-up pledge to swear off Vegas had hoisted him back on the wagon.

Adriana’s phone rang. Peering over her shoulder, Gilles saw first that it was Leigh.

“Tell her if she can’t convince that Adonis boyfriend of hers to put a ring on her finger soon, I’m going to kidnap him and introduce him to the wonders of the homo lifestyle.”

“Mmm, I’m sure she’s terrified.” To the phone: “Did you hear that, Leigh? You have to marry Russell immediately or Gilles is going to seduce him.”

Gilles brushed the solution onto a lock of hair using a smooth upstroke followed by a slight wrist flick. He then swirled the ends into the roots and crisply folded the foil over the whole goopy mess with a precise tap of the comb. “What did she say?”

“That he’s all yours.” Gilles opened his mouth, but Adriana shook her head and held up one hand in a “stop” motion. “Splendid! Count me in. Of course I have plans tonight, but I’ve been desperate for a reason to cancel. Besides, if Emmy wants to go out, who are we to stand in her way? What time? Perfect, querida, we’ll meet in the lobby at nine. Kiss!”

“What’s wrong with Emmy?” Gilles asked.

“Duncan met a twenty-three-year-old who’s dying to have his babies.”

“Ah, but of course. How’s she doing?”

“I actually don’t think she’s devastated,” Adriana said, licking a puff of foamed milk off her lip. “She just thinks she should be. There’s a lot of the ‘I’ll never meet anyone else’ stuff, but not much that really has to do with missing Duncan. She should be fine.”

Gilles sighed. “I dream of getting my hands on that hair. Do you even realize how rare virgin hair is these days? It’s like the Holy Grail of coloring.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that along. Want to come tonight? We’re going for dinner and drinks. Nothing major, just the girls.”

“You know how much I love a girls’ night, but I’ve got a date with the maître d’ from last weekend. Hopefully he’ll be leading the way directly to a quiet table in the back of his bedroom.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.” Adriana clearly focused on the tall, broad-shouldered man in a checked blue dress shirt and perfectly pressed slacks who had approached the reception desk.

Gilles followed her gaze to the door as he secured the last lock of hair into a foil and waved his hands in a “voilà!” motion. “I’m finished, love.” The Bambi-eyed assistant grasped Adriana’s arm and led her to a dryer seat. Gilles called out from his station loud enough for everyone—and certainly the newcomer—to hear, “Just sit there and concentrate on keeping your legs closed, darling. I know it isn’t easy, but fifteen minutes is all I ask.”

Adriana rolled her eyes dramatically and gave him another finger, this time holding it high enough for the entire salon to see. She relished the shocked looks from the society ladies, all of whom looked like her mother. She saw out of the corner of her eye that the man who had watched her and Gilles wore a small smile of amusement. I’m too old for this, she thought as she sneaked another look at the handsome stranger. The man walked past her and turned his smile toward her. With equal parts calculation and natural instinct, Adriana gazed up at him through wide eyes, eyes that said “Who, me?” and placed the tiniest tip of her tongue in the middle of her upper lip. She simply had to stop acting like this, there was really no question; but in the meantime, it was just too much fun.

Moving quietly around her apartment so as not to wake Otis, Emmy realized there wasn’t all that much to straighten. It was a small apartment, even for a studio in Manhattan, and the bathroom was a bit grimy and the light—especially on Saturday afternoons, when you were accustomed to staying at your boyfriend’s place—was virtually nonexistent, but how else could she hope to live on the best tree-lined block of the West Village for under \$2,500 a month? She had decorated it as carefully as her graduate school budget would allow, which wasn’t much, but at least she had managed to paint the walls a pale yellow, install a space-saving Murphy bed in the far wall, and place some comfy floor cushions around an extra-fluffy shag carpet she’d found on clearance in a remnant store. It wasn’t big, but it was cozy, and so long as Emmy didn’t think about the kitchens in Izzie’s Miami apartment or Leigh’s new one-bedroom or Adriana’s palatial penthouse pad—especially Adriana’s—she might have even liked it. It just seemed so fundamentally cruel that someone who loved food as much as she did, who would happily spend every free minute at either the farmers’ market or the stove, should not have a kitchen. Where else on earth did \$30,000 a year in rent not entitle one to an oven? Here she was forced to make do with a sink, a microwave, and a dorm-sized refrigerator, and the landlord—only after a ridiculous amount of begging and pleading—had bought Emmy a brand-new hotplate. For the first few years she’d fought valiantly to create dishes using her limited facilities, but the struggle to do anything more than reheat had worn her down. Now, like most New Yorkers, the ex-culinary student only ordered in or dined out.

She gave up on the idea of cleaning, flopped onto her unmade bed, and began to flip through the pages of the hardcover photo book she'd designed at kodakgallery.com to commemorate the first three years of her relationship with Duncan. She'd spent hours selecting the best pictures and cropping them to varying sizes and removing the red eyes. Click, click, click—she clicked the mouse until her fingers tingled and her hand ached, determined to make it perfect. Some of the pages were collage-style and others had only a single dramatic candid. The one she'd chosen for the cutout window on the cover had been her absolute favorite: a black-and-white photo someone had snapped at Duncan's grandfather's eighty-fifth birthday dinner at Le Cirque; Emmy remembered the transcendent sesame-crusted cod more than anything else from that night. She hadn't even noticed until now, years later, how her arms wrapped protectively around Duncan's shoulders, or the way she looked at him, grinning, while he smiled in that controlled way of his and gazed in another direction. The body language experts at *US Weekly* would have a field day with this one! Not to mention the fact that the book, presented at a dinner celebrating their third anniversary, had elicited the kind of excitement one usually expects only from the receipt of a scarf or a pair of gloves (which, incidentally, was precisely what he had given her, a matching set, prepackaged and professionally wrapped). Duncan tore the paper and ribbons painstakingly selected for their masculinity and tossed them aside without bothering to unstuck—never mind read—the card taped to the back. He thanked her and kissed her on the cheek and flipped through it while smiling that tight smile and then excused himself to answer a call from his boss. He asked her to take the photo book home with her that night so he wouldn't have to carry it back to the office, and it had remained in her living room for the next two years, opened only by the occasional visitor who inevitably commented on what a good-looking couple Duncan and Emmy made.

Otis cawed from his cage in the corner of her L-shaped studio. He hooked his beak around one of the metal bars, gave it a determined shake, and squawked, "Otis wants out. Otis wants out."

Eleven years and counting, and Otis was still going strong. She'd read somewhere that African Greys can live to be sixty, but prayed daily that it had been a misprint. She hadn't particularly liked Otis when he was squarely under the ownership of Mark, the first of Emmy's three boyfriends, but she liked him even less now that he shared her 350-square-foot apartment and had learned (with zero coaching and even less encouragement) an uncomfortably large vocabulary that focused almost exclusively on demands, criticisms, and discussions of himself in the third person. At first she had refused to watch him for the three weeks when, the July after graduation, Mark went to hone his Spanish in Guatemala. But he had pleaded and she conceded: the story of her life. Mark's two weeks became a month, and a month became three, and three became a Fulbright to study the aftereffects of civil war on a generation of Guatemalan children. Mark had long since married a Nicaraguan-born, American-educated Peace Corps volunteer and moved to Buenos Aires, but Otis remained.

Emmy unhooked the cage and waited for Otis to shove the swinging door open. He hopped ungracefully onto her proffered arm and stared her straight in the eye. "Grape!" he shrieked. She sighed and plucked one from the bowl that nestled in the puff of her down comforter. Generally Emmy preferred fruit that she could cut or peel, but Otis was fixated on grapes. The bird snatched it from her fingers, swallowed it whole, and immediately demanded another.

She was such a cliché! Dumped by her cad boyfriend, replaced by a younger woman, prepared to shred the pictorial symbol for their sham of a relationship, and kept company only by an ungrateful pet. It would be funny if it weren't her own pathetic life. Hell, it was funny when it was Renée Zellweger playing a sweet, chubby girl in the throes of an alcohol-fueled pity party, but it somehow wasn't so hysterical when you were that sweet, chubby girl—okay, skinny, but not attractively so—and your life had just morphed into a chick flick.

Five years down the drain. Ages twenty-four to twenty-nine had been all Duncan, all the time, and what did she have to show for it now? Not the position Chef Massey had begun offering a year ago that would give her the opportunity to travel around the world scouting new restaurant locations and overseeing openings—Duncan had begged her to keep her general manager position in New York so they could see each other more regularly. Certainly not an engagement ring. No, that would be reserved for the barely legal virgin cheerleader who would never, ever have to endure vivid nightmares involving her own shriveled ovaries. Emmy would just have to make do with the sterling silver Tiffany heart pendant Duncan had given her on her birthday, identical to the ones—she later discovered—he'd also bought for his sister and grandmother on their birthdays. Of course, were Emmy being really masochistic here, she might note that it was actually Duncan's mother who had selected and purchased all three in order to save her busy son the time and effort such gift-giving required.

When had she gotten so bitter? How had everything played out like this? It was no one's fault but her own; of that she was absolutely certain. Sure, Duncan had been different when they first started dating—boyish, charming, and if not exactly attentive, then at least a bit more present—but then again, so had Emmy. She had just left a waitressing job in Los Angeles to go back to culinary school, her dream since girlhood. For the first time since college she was reunited with Leigh and Adriana, and exhilarated by Manhattan, and proud of herself for taking such decisive action. Granted, culinary school wasn't exactly as she had envisioned it: The classes were often rigorous and tedious, and her classmates were shockingly competitive for externships and other restaurant opportunities. Since so many were temporary New Yorkers and knew no one but other students, the social life quickly became incestuous. Oh, and there was that small incident with the visiting Michelin-starred chef that had circulated in less time than it took to make a croque-monsieur. Emmy was still in love with cooking but disillusioned with culinary school when she scored an externship at Chef Massey's New York restaurant, Willow. She'd met Duncan during that externship, a crazy, sleep-deprived time in her life when she was beginning to realize that she enjoyed the front of the house more than the kitchen and was working around the clock to figure out where, if anywhere, she belonged in the food-service industry. She hated the egos of the chefs and the lack of creativity it took to merely re-create carefully dictated recipes. She hated not being able to interact with the actual people who ate the food she was helping to prepare. She hated being stuck for eight, ten hours at a time in steaming-hot, windowless kitchens with only the shouts of expediters and the clanging of pots to remind her she wasn't in hell. None of this had featured in her romantic notion of what her life would be like as a world-famous cook. What had surprised her even more was how much she loved waiting tables and tending bar, getting to chat with customers and other servers, and, later on, as assistant general manager, making sure everything was running smoothly. It was a time of turmoil for Emmy, of redefining what she really wanted from her career and her life, and she realized now that she had been ripe for picking by someone like Duncan. It was almost—almost—understandable why she'd fallen so immediately for Duncan that night at the after-party for the Young Friends of Something or Other benefit, one of the dozens that year Adriana dragged her to.

Emmy had noticed him hours before he approached her, although she still couldn't say why. It could have been his rumpled suit and loosened tie, both tastefully conservative and expertly matched, so different from the baggy polyester chef uniforms to which she'd grown so accustomed. Or maybe it was the way he seemed to know everyone and offered backslaps and cheek kisses and the occasional gallant bow to friends and friends-to-be. Who on earth was this confident? Who could move with such ease among that many people without appearing the least bit insecure? Emmy's eyes tracked him around the room, subtly at first and then with an intensity she herself didn't understand. It wasn't until most of the young professional crowd had moved on to late dinners or early bedtimes and Adriana had flitted off with her man du jour that Duncan appeared next to her.

"Hi, I'm Duncan." He slid himself sideways between her stool and the empty one next to it, leaning on his

right arm against the bar.

“Oh, sorry. Here, I was just leaving.” Emmy scooted backward off the stool, placing it between them.

He grinned. “I don’t want your seat.”

“Oh, uh, sorry.”

“I want to buy you a drink.”

“Thanks, but I was just, uh—”

“Leaving. Yeah, you said that. But I’m hoping I can convince you to stay just a little longer.”

The bartender materialized with two martini glasses, petite compared to the fishbowl-sized ones most places served. Clear liquid in one, cloudy in the other, and both with a spear of mammoth green olives.

Duncan slid the one in his left hand toward her by the very bottom of its stem, his fingers pressing into the flattened glass base. “They’re both vodka. This one’s regular and this one”—as he pushed his right hand she noticed how clean and white his nails were, how soft and groomed his cuticles looked—“is extra dirty. Which do you prefer?”

Good lord! You’d think that would have been enough to activate anyone’s skeeve sensor, but noooo, not Emmy. She had found him positively captivating and, when invited moments later, had happily accompanied him home. Of course, Emmy didn’t sleep with Duncan that night, or the next weekend, or the one after that. She had, after all, been with only two men before him (the French chef didn’t count; she had planned to have sex with him until she’d tugged down his extra-tight white briefs and discovered what, exactly, Adriana meant when she insisted Emmy would “just know” when faced with an uncircumcised situation), and both were long-term boyfriends. She was nervous. Her prudishness—something Duncan had yet to encounter from a girl—increased his determination, and Emmy stumbled, quite unwittingly, onto the concept of hard to get. The longer she held out, the more he pursued her, and in this way their interactions came to resemble a relationship. There were romantic dinners out and candlelit dinners in and big, festive Sunday brunches at trendy downtown bistros. He called just to say hi, sent her Gummi Bears and peanut butter cups at school, asked her out days in advance to ensure she wouldn’t make other plans. Who could have possibly predicted that all that happiness would screech to a standstill five years later, that she would have gained such a cynical edge and Duncan would have lost half his hair and that they, the longest-lasting couple among all their friends, would collapse like a sand castle at the first sign of a tropical breeze?

Emmy posed this question to her sister the moment she picked up the phone. Izzie had been calling twice her normal amount in the week since Duncan had dumped Emmy; this was already the fourth time in twenty-four hours.

“Did you really just liken your relationship to a sand castle and the cheerleader to a tropical breeze?” Izzie asked.

“Come on, Izzie, be serious for a second. Would you ever have foreseen this happening?”

There was a pause while Izzie considered her words. “Well, I’m not sure that it’s exactly like that.”

“Like what?”

“We’re talking in circles, Em.”

“Then be straight with me.”

“I’m just saying that this isn’t completely and totally out of left field,” Izzie said softly.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“It’s just when you say that everything collapses at the first sign of, uh, another girl, I’m not exactly sure that would be completely accurate. Not that accurate matters, of course. He’s an idiot and a fool regardless, and so not even remotely in your league.”

“Okay, fine, so it wasn’t exactly the first sign. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

“That’s true. But a sixth or a seventh?”

“Wow. Don’t hold back now, Izzie. Seriously, tell me what you really think.”

“I know it sounds harsh, Em, but it’s true.”

Together with Leigh and Adriana, Izzie had supported Emmy through more of Duncan’s “mistakes,” “poor judgment calls,” “oversights,” “accidents,” “slip-ups,” and (everyone’s favorite) “relapses” than anyone cared to remember. Emmy knew her sister and friends hated Duncan for putting her through the wringer; their disapproval was palpable and, after the first year, very vocal. But what they didn’t understand, couldn’t possibly understand, was the feeling she got when his eyes found hers at a crowded party. Or when he invited her into the shower and scrubbed her with cucumber-scented sea salt, or got into the cab first so she wouldn’t have to slide across the backseat, or knew to order her tuna rolls with spicy sauce but without crunch. Every relationship comprised such minutiae, of course, but Izzie and the girls simply couldn’t know what it felt like when Duncan turned his fleeting attention toward you and actually focused, even if only for a few moments. It made all the other drama seem like insignificant noise, which is exactly what Duncan always assured her it was: innocent flirtation, nothing more.

What bullshit!

She got angry just thinking about it now. How on earth had she accepted his rationale that passing out on some girl’s couch was understandable—hell, it was downright reasonable—when one drank as much whiskey as he did? What could she possibly have been thinking when she invited Duncan back to her bed without ascertaining an acceptable explanation for the rather disturbing message she’d overheard on his voice mail from “an old family friend”? And let’s not even mention that whole debacle that required an emergency trip to the gynecologist where, thankfully, everything was fine except for her doctor’s opinion that Duncan’s “nothing little bump” was most likely a recent acquisition and not, as Duncan insisted, a flare-up from the old college days.

The sound of Izzie’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“And I’m not just saying this because I’m your sister, which I am, or because I’m obligated to—which I absolutely am—but because I sincerely believe it: Duncan is never going to change and you two would not,

could not—not now or ever—be happy together.”

The simplicity of it almost took her breath away. Izzie, younger than Emmy by twenty months and a near physical clone, once again proved to be infinitely calmer, wiser, and more mature. How long had Izzie felt this way? And why, through all the girls’ endless conversations about Izzie’s once-boyfriend-now-husband Kevin or their parents or Duncan, had Izzie never stated so clearly this most basic truth?

“Just because you’ve never heard it before doesn’t mean I haven’t said it. Emmy, we’ve all said it. Been saying it. It’s like you went temporarily insane for five years.”

“You’re a real sweetheart. I bet everyone wishes they had a sister like you.”

“Please. You and I both know that you’re a serial monogamist and you have trouble defining yourself outside a relationship. Sound familiar? Because if you ask me, it sounds an awful lot like Mom.”

“Thank you for that stellar armchair insight. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to how all of this is affecting Otis? I’m sure breakups can be devastating on parrots, too. Come to think of it, I should probably consider getting him some counseling. God, I’ve been so self-centered. The bird is suffering!” Although Izzie was now an ob/gyn resident at University of Miami Hospital, she’d briefly flirted with psychiatry and rarely refrained from analyzing anything—plant, person, or animal—in her path.

“Joke all you want, Em. You’ve always dealt with everything by making fun of it, and I’m not saying that’s the worst approach. I would just urge you to spend a little time alone. Focus on yourself—do what you want, when you want, without having to consider anyone else’s agenda.”

“If you even start on that bullshit about two halves not making a whole or something, I’m going to puke.”

“You know I’m right. Take some time just for you. Re-center your notion of self. Rediscover who you are.”

“In other words, be single.” Easy for her to advise from the arms of her loving husband, Emmy thought.

“Does it really sound so dreadful? You’ve had back-to-back relationships since you were eighteen.” What she didn’t say was obvious: And that hasn’t exactly worked out.

Emmy sighed and glanced at the clock. “I know, I know. I appreciate the advice, Izzie, really I do, but I’ve got to run. Leigh and Adriana are taking me out for the big you’re-better-off-without-him dinner tonight and I have to get ready. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“I’ll call your cell later tonight from the hospital, sometime after midnight when things slow down. Have a few drinks tonight, okay? Go clubbing. Kiss a stranger. Just please don’t meet your next boyfriend.”

“I’ll try,” Emmy promised. Just then, Otis screeched the same word four times in a row.

“What’s he saying?” Izzie asked.

“Panties. He keeps saying panties.”

“Should I even ask?”

“No, you most definitely should not.”

For the very first time since Leigh had moved into her building, Adriana beat Leigh to the lobby. She did so out of necessity: Adriana had returned from a relaxing day at the salon—date with the hot stranger arranged for the following weekend—to discover that her parents had all but taken over her apartment. Technically speaking it was their apartment, but considering they only stopped by for a few weeks a year, she felt justified in thinking of it as exclusively her home, where they were guests. Impossible, dreaded guests. If they didn’t like the authentic African zebra skins she had selected to replace their boring Oriental rugs or the way she’d arranged for all the lights, shades, and electronic equipment to work by remote control, well, that wasn’t her problem. And no one, not even her parents, could claim they actually preferred their hand-chiseled, specially imported Italian marble shower and hot tub to the ultramodern rainfall shower, sauna, and steam room she’d replaced them with in the master bath. No sane person, at least. Which is precisely why Adriana had to dress and flee as quickly as possible: In four short hours, her sleek sanctuary had become a strife-ridden ring of hell.

Not that she didn’t love them, of course. Her papa was getting older and, at this point in his life, much more mellow than he’d been when Adriana was growing up. He seemed content to let his wife call the shots, and rarely insisted on anything beyond his nightly Cuban and the tradition that each and every one of his children—three from his first wife, three from his second, and Adriana with his current, and hopefully last, wife—reunite at the Rio de Janeiro compound for the weeks before and after Christmas. The opposite had proven true for her mother. Although Mrs. de Souza had been relaxed and accepting of Adriana’s teen years and all her sex-and-drug experimentation, her liberal attitude did not extend to unmarried twenty-nine-year-old daughters—especially those whose predilection for sex and drugs could no longer be called “experimental.” It wasn’t that she didn’t understand good living; she was Brazilian, after all. Eating (low-fat, low-cal), drinking (bottle after bottle of expensive white wine), loving (when one can’t conceivably feign yet another headache)—these were the very essences of life. To be conducted, of course, under the proper circumstances: as a carefree young girl and then not again until after one had found and claimed an appropriate husband. She had traveled and modeled and partied through her own teen years—the Gisele of her generation, people still said. But Camilla de Souza had always cautioned Adriana that men were (slightly) less fleeting than looks. By the time she was twenty-three, she had secured a (fabulously) wealthy older husband and produced a beautiful baby girl. This was how it should be.

The thought of listening to her mother’s spiel for another two weeks made Adriana feel woozy. She stretched out on the slightly sagging lobby sofa and thought through her strategy. Stay occupied during the day, come home late or not at all, and convince them at every possible opportunity that her energies—not to mention her substantial trust fund—were going toward securing a proper husband. If she was careful, they would never know about the grungy British rocker who lived in an East Village walk-up or the sexy surgeon with a practice in Manhattan and a wife and kids in Greenwich. If she was meticulous, they might not even catch on to the gorgeous Israeli who claimed he pushed papers at the Israeli embassy but who, Adriana was certain, worked for Mossad.

Leigh’s raspy voice—one of the few naturally sexy things about the girl, Adriana was always telling her, not that she ever listened—interrupted her thoughts. “Wow,” Leigh breathed, staring at Adriana with widened eyes. I love that dress.”

“Thank you, querida. My parents came to town, so I had to tell them I was going on a date with an Argentinean businessman. Mama was so happy to hear it that she lent me one of her Valentinos.” Adriana ran her palms down the length of her short black dress and twirled around. “Isn’t it fabulous?”

The dress was indeed beautiful—the silk seemed able to think, knowing where to cling to a curve and where to drape gracefully over one—but then again, Adriana could have looked lovely in a red-checked tablecloth.

“Fabulous,” Leigh said.

“Come, let’s leave before they come downstairs and see I’m with you and not some South American polo player.”

“I thought he was supposed to be a businessman?”

“Whatever.”

The cab crept across Thirteenth Street at a glacial pace, mired in the downtown Saturday-night traffic that made a few blocks feel as long as a commute from New Jersey. It would have taken the girls only ten minutes to walk from their building on University to the West Village, but neither even considered hoofing it. Adriana, especially, looked as though she would risk injury and possible paralysis if she so much as thought about walking more than a couple of carefully negotiated meters in her Christian Louboutins.

By the time they pulled up in front of the Waverly Inn, Emmy had texted each of them a half-dozen times.

“Where have you been?” Emmy hiss-whispered as the girls squeezed through the minuscule front door. She was leaning against the hostess desk and waving in their general direction. “They won’t even let me sit at the bar without you.”

“Mario, such a bad boy!” Adriana crooned, kissing a handsome man of indeterminate ethnicity on both cheeks. “Emmy is a friend of mine, and my dinner guest tonight. Emmy, meet Mario, the man behind the legend.”

Introductions and kisses—air, cheek, and hand—were exchanged before the girls were escorted to the back room and seated at a table for three. The restaurant wasn’t as jam-packed as it normally was since many of its usual revelers were in the Hamptons for Memorial Day weekend, but there was still plenty of opportunity for fantastic people-watching.

“The man behind the legend?” Emmy asked, rolling her eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Men need to be stroked, querida. I don’t know how many times I’ve tried to teach this to both of you. They sometimes require a gentle touch. Learn when to use a firm grip and when to cover it in velvet and they are yours forever.”

Leigh popped some Nicorette. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.” She turned to Emmy. “Is she even speaking English?”

Emmy shrugged. She was used to the secrets Adriana tried to impart year after year. They were like pretty little fairy tales: fun to hear but seemingly useless in real life.

Adriana ordered a round of vodka gimlets for the table by grasping the waiter’s hand between her own and saying, “We’ll have three of my favorites, Nicholas.” She sat back to survey the crowd. According to Adriana, it was still a little early—it wouldn’t start really buzzing until midnight or so, once all the first-timers and celeb-seekers left and the regulars could commence the night’s real drinking and socializing—but

so far the crowd of thirtysomething media-and-entertainment types appeared happy and attractive.

“Okay, girls, why don’t we just get it out of the way so we can all enjoy our meals?” Emmy asked the moment Nicholas delivered their drinks.

Adriana returned her attention to her tablemates. “Get what out of the way?”

Emmy raised her glass. “The toast one of you will inevitably make that’s intended to remind me how much better off I am without Duncan. Something about how single is fabulous. Or how I’m young and beautiful and men will be beating down my door. Come on, let’s just do it and move on.”

“I don’t think there’s anything so great about being single,” Leigh said.

“And while you most certainly are beautiful, querida, I wouldn’t say almost thirty is all that young.” Adriana smiled.

“I’m sure you’ll eventually meet someone wonderful, but men don’t seem to beat down anyone’s doors these days,” Leigh added.

“At least not the unmarried ones,” Adriana said.

“Are there any left who aren’t married?” Leigh asked.

“The gay ones aren’t.”

“At least not yet. But probably soon. And then there won’t be anyone at all.”

Emmy sighed. “Thanks, guys. You always know just what to say. Your unending support means the world to me.”

Leigh broke off a chunk of bread and swirled it around the olive oil. “What does Izzie have to say about everything?”

“She’s trying not to show it, but I know she’s absolutely thrilled. She and Duncan never exactly loved each other. Plus she’s obsessed with the idea that I—quote—’have trouble defining myself outside a relationship,’ end quote. In other words, her usual psychobabble bullshit.”

Adriana and Leigh exchanged knowing looks.

“What?” Emmy asked.

Leigh stared at her plate and Adriana arched her perfect eyebrows, but neither said a word.

“Oh, come on! Do not tell me you agree with Izzie. She has no idea what she’s talking about.”

Leigh reached across the table and patted Emmy’s hand. “Yes, dear, of course. She’s got a doting husband, loads of outdoor hobbies, and an MD. Did I forget anything? Oh, yes, she matched with her first choice for residency and is in the running for chief resident—a year earlier than expected. You’re absolutely right...she sounds tremendously ill-equipped to give a little sisterly advice.”

“We’re getting off track,” Adriana interjected. “Not to be the tactful one here, but I think Leigh was just trying to say that Izzie might have a point.”

“A point?”

Adriana nodded. “It has been a rather long time since you’ve been on your own.”

“Yeah, like always?” Leigh added. “Not that that’s necessarily bad. But it does happen to be true.”

“Wow. Anything else you two are just dying to tell me?” Emmy clasped her menu to her chest. “Don’t hold back now.”

“Well...” Adriana glanced at Leigh.

“Just say it.” Leigh nodded.

“I wasn’t really serious,” Emmy said, her eyes wide. “There is something?”

“Emmy, querida, it’s like the big white rhino in the room.”

“Elephant.”

Adriana waved her hand. “Whatever. The big white elephant. You are almost thirty years old—”

“Thank you for mentioning that yet again.”

“—and you have only been with three men. Three! This is not to be believed, and yet it’s true.”

The girls quieted while Nicholas placed their shared appetizers on the table: an order of tuna tartare with avocado and a heaping plate of oysters. He appeared ready to take their order, but Emmy placed both hands atop her menu and glared. Defeated, he shuffled away.

“You two are incredible. You sit here for twenty minutes telling me that I can’t be alone, and then you switch tacks—with no fair warning—and say that I haven’t dated enough people. Do you hear yourselves?”

Leigh squeezed a lemon wedge over the oysters and delicately removed one from its shell. “Not dated—slept with.”

“Oh, come on! What’s the difference?”

Adriana gasped. “That, my darling friend, is exactly the problem. What’s the difference? Between dating and random sex? My goodness, we have much work to do.”

Emmy looked to Leigh for help but Leigh nodded in agreement. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I have to agree with Adriana. You’re a serial monogamist and as a result have only ever been with three people in any significant capacity. I think what Adi’s saying”—she was able to sneak in a single use of the hated nickname here because Adriana was distracted on multiple fronts by food, drink, and sex conversation—“is that you should be single for a little while. And being single means dating different people, figuring out who and what work best for you, and, most of all, having a little fun.”

“So what you’re really saying—let’s just be straight here—is that I should be whoring around more,” Emmy said.

Leigh smiled like a proud parent. “Yes.”

“And you?” Emmy turned to Adriana, who clasped her hands together and leaned forward.

“That is exactly what I am saying.” Adriana nodded.

Emmy sighed and sat back in her chair. “I agree.”

At the same time, in nearly the same disbelieving tone, Leigh and Adriana asked, “You do?”

“Of course. I’ve had some time to do a little self-examination, and I’ve arrived at the same conclusion. There’s only one logical way to proceed: I am going to have sex with random men. All sorts and sizes and colors of random men. All kinds of sex, for that matter.” She paused and looked at Adriana. “The level of my planned whoredom will make you proud.”

Adriana gazed back and wondered if she had heard her friend correctly. She concluded that she had, but she must have missed the sarcasm somewhere along the line—this declaration was inconceivable. She said what she always did when she had no idea what else to say. “Fabulous, querida. Just fabulous. I adore the whole idea.”

Leigh used her knife to push a bit of tuna and a slice of cucumber onto the tip of her fork and elegantly brought it to her mouth. A quiet crunch, a couple of chews, and she swallowed. “Emmy, sweetheart. We were just kidding, you know. I think it’s great you haven’t been with a lot of guys. When someone asks you how many people you’ve slept with, you don’t even have to divide by three! Now, isn’t that nice? To not have to lie?”

“I’m really not kidding about this,” Emmy said. She made eye contact with the waiter as he passed by their table and ordered three glasses of champagne when he approached. “This is the start of my new life, and trust me, it’s long overdue. First thing I’m going to do on Monday is call up Chef Massey and tell him I’m accepting the job. What job? you might wonder. The one where they want to pay me boatloads of money and give me a huge expense account so I can travel all over the world and stay in the nicest hotels and eat in the best restaurants for inspiration. Inspiration! For new menu ideas. Have you ever heard of something so ridiculous? And who’s the fucking idiot who’s been saying no the last two months because she didn’t want to desert her poor, lonely boyfriend? Yours truly. Didn’t want poor baby Duncan to feel abandoned and unloved while I jetted off somewhere fabulous. So yes, this time I’m going to call him up and take that job, and then I’m going to fuck every single solitary appealing man I meet. Foreign, sexy, beautiful men. And I do mean every last one. How does that sound, girls? Acceptable?” The waiter returned with their champagne. “So please, let’s toast.”

Adriana made a noise that for anyone less beautiful could only be called a snort but coming from her sounded exotic and feminine. Both girls turned to look and she suddenly felt out of sorts. Her friend had just announced plans for a major life change while she herself had been coasting effortlessly along the same path for years. Was Adriana’s role as the group’s jet-setting partyer in jeopardy, or had she just had one too many drinks? There was something unsettling about Emmy’s proclamation. And if there was one way Adriana was not accustomed to feeling, it was unsettled.

She held up her glass and forced a smile.

Emmy smiled back and said, “There’s just one condition. I want company.”

“Company?” Leigh asked. She gnawed her bottom lip, catching a flake of skin between her front teeth. She looked anxious. Adriana wondered why the girl always looked nervous these days, especially since everything was going so beautifully for her.

“Yes. Company. I’m willing to completely slut out if you”—Emmy pointed to Adriana—“agree to have a committed, monogamous relationship. With a man of your own choosing, of course.”

Adriana inhaled. She incorporated one of her favorite moves, which consisted of absentmindedly touching a fingertip to her lips, letting it rest there for a moment, and then graze along to the spot right below her left ear. It prompted four men at the adjoining table to stare and Nicholas to come running. She felt that familiar thrill of being watched.

The girls ordered main courses, another round of drinks, and a plate of the truffle mac and cheese to share.

“So? What do you say?” Emmy asked.

“Did my mother put you up to this?”

“Yes, sweetheart. It was all your mom’s idea for me to pledge to fall into bed with every man I meet over the course of the next year just so you’ll agree to date only one person. She’s a clever one,” Emmy said.

“Come on, people, let’s be serious for a minute,” Leigh said. “Neither one of you will actually go through with this, so can we change the subject? Emmy, you made your point. If you want to dive headfirst into another five-year relationship, that’s certainly your prerogative. And Adriana, it’s more likely that you’ll become an astronaut than date only one man. Next topic.”

“It’s not like I dared her to do something really drastic, like get a job....” Emmy grinned.

Adriana forced a return smile even though she found it difficult to laugh at herself, especially when the jokes concerned her lack of employment. Her mother’s irritating voice reverberated in her head. “Wow. Playing hardball, are we, querida? Well, guess what? I accept your challenge.”

“You what?” Emmy asked, furiously twisting a lock of hair.

Leigh’s glass halted halfway to her mouth. “You’ll do it?”

“I said I’ll do it. When do we start?”

Emmy bit off an asparagus end, chewed daintily, swallowed. “I say we take a little time to figure out the terms. By the end of next weekend, we’ll agree to have a plan?”

Adriana nodded. “Done. And that will give you”—she waved her champagne glass in Leigh’s direction—“a chance to figure out what your resolution will be.”

“Me?” Leigh’s recently plucked brows furrowed. “A resolution? Why? It’s not even New Year’s. Just

because you two are crazy doesn't mean I have to be."

Emmy rolled her eyes. "Leigh? Please. What does she need to change? Perfect job, perfect boyfriend, perfect apartment, perfect nuclear family..." Emmy's voice became nasal and singsongy. "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia," she chanted, and dismissed Leigh's look of displeasure as momentary crankiness.

"Yes, that may be so," Adriana said, looking only at Leigh. "But she'll have to come up with something. You can do that, can't you, Leigh? Think of one single aspect of your life that you'd like to change? To work on?"

"Of course I can," Leigh said in a snippy tone. "I'm sure there are a million things."

Adriana and Emmy exchanged looks, each knowing what the other was thinking: Leigh might have all her ducks in a row, but it wouldn't kill the girl to loosen up a little and enjoy herself.

"Well, you have two weeks to choose one, querida," Adriana announced in her huskily authoritative voice. "In the meantime, let's toast."

Emmy hoisted her glass like it was a lead paperweight. "To us," she announced. "By next summer, I will have prostituted myself out to half of Manhattan and Adriana will have discovered the joys of monogamy. And Leigh will have...done something."

"Cheers!" Adriana called out, again attracting the attention of half the restaurant. "To us."

Leigh clinked her glass halfheartedly. "To us."

"We are totally, completely, royally fucked," Emmy leaned in and stage-whispered.

Adriana threw her head back, half with delight and half out of habit, for effect. "One hundred percent screwed," she laughed. "Pun intended, of course."

"Can we get out of here before we begin a shame spiral the likes of which none of us has ever known? Please?" Leigh begged. The red wine Nicholas had comped them was starting to give her a headache and she knew it was only a matter of time—minutes, probably—before her friends moved from charmingly buzzed to loudly drunk.

Adriana and Emmy exchanged looks again and giggled.

"Come on, Marcia," Adriana said, shimmying her way to a standing position while pulling on Leigh's forearm. "We might just teach you to have some fun yet."

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