

Happiness

A Novel

By Ed Harris



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“The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.”

— Bob Marley

To Howard: thank you for your many years of friendship. From the sandbox as toddlers, to our hippie backpacking days, to raising families as sometimes overwhelmed husbands and fathers, you’ve been a constant and steadfast part of my life. Hope we’ll be shuffleboard partners someday.

Chapter One

Dan Goldberg awoke and blinked open bloodshot eyes. A battery of tiny pneumatic hammers pounded the inside of his cranium. The surface of his tongue had transformed overnight into sandpaper. In a rush, everything from the previous evening came back to him: the rounds of drinks at the club, the high potency Schnazzleberry strain of marijuana he consumed, and the frenetic horizontal gymnastics with the young man whose apartment he now found himself in. Dan was certain he had given Gilad a ride to the club, but he only vaguely remembered leaving with this new-found hookup. What happened to Gilad? Then he remembered: Gilad said he would take a cab home.

Dan groggily propped himself up on an elbow and took in his surroundings in the early morning light: saggy mattress, ratty sheets, and a jumble of clothing and shoes on the floor. The room emanated the funk of alley cat and spoiled food. Asleep alongside him, Dan saw clearly and without any of the wishful optimism supplied by last night's mojitos and cannabis the rather pedestrian yield of his romantic ambition. He surveyed the somnolent figure in the bed alongside him: thin, well beyond slender, more like stringy, ribs visible through his skin. Obviously Hispanic, his darkness stood in sharp contrast to Dan's dough-colored flesh in the first pale light of daybreak. Even in repose he looked wired and tense. Dan noticed needle tracks on the inside of his forearms. *What was his name again? Pablo? Paco? Taco? No, Tomás. That was it, Tomás.*

Dan felt a vague sense of an alternative path not taken at the club. Did Gilad give his hair a gentle tousle before he left? No, it must have only been incidental contact in close quarters between two friends who both happened to be gay.

Dan hoped to extricate himself from the chaotic bedroom before Tomás woke up. However, as he sat and pondered his next move, Tomás's eyes opened. The young man turned in Dan's direction and any hope of slinking away unnoticed was quickly extinguished. Tomás took in the sight of his previous night's bedmate.

"Hey, man. You were legendary, bro, genuinely pimptacular. But you probably already knew that. You look pretty Ebola-ed. Are you feel okay?"

Dan sensed Tomás forgot his name. "I'm great. I mean, I will be, in a few hours. It's Dan, by the way. I know we smoked some diesel shit, so don't worry if you don't remember. And you were pretty, um, fo'shizzicle yourself."

"Are you into morning sex at all? I mean not to pressure you or nothin'."

Dan felt an urgent need to void his bladder. Given the housekeeping standards of the apartment, he already vowed to wait until he reached the nearest Starbucks rather than risk the abode's toilet. In the revealing morning light, with an urgent need for a bathroom and plagued by a massive hangover, the possibility of further carnal activity held no appeal.

"Um, actually, I've got a ton of stuff I've got to do at home, and I'm a bit worn out from last night. No offense."

"No problemo, dawg. Do you want any breakfast?"

Dan wanted to decline, but came down on the side of politeness, despite his fear of exposure to untold manner of germs and disease should he consume food or drink in such sketchy surroundings.

"Sure. I usually have a smoothie in the morning. But I'm pretty flexible. Yogurt would be fine, or whatever."

"Sorry, cuz. Sounds like you might have a healthier lifestyle than me. All I've got are Hot Pockets and Pop Tarts. And beer. You like Corona?"

"That's okay. I'll just eat at home."

"So I'll just see you around then?" Tomás asked with a hint of eagerness in his voice.

Dan glanced at a large, florid tattoo of the Virgin Mary on Tomás's left pectoral muscle, looked away and said, "Oh yeah, sure. I'll see you at the club again."

Tomás' shoulders sagged at this remark. "Say, home slice, I hope you don't think I'm out of place or nothin', but my mom can't get to work because her car is busted. Do you think you could front me a couple of hundred dollars to help her out?"

Dan glanced at the track marks again. "Sorry, man, I'm really low on cash. I need to run, but definitely, I'll see you at the club again soon."

"Yeah, right. Damn skippy, bro."

Dan climbed into his five year-old Prius and began the drive home. He was somewhere in the sprawl of East Los Angeles. He entered "Starbucks" into the GPS on his iPhone and saw the nearest location was nine minutes away. When he arrived, he found the single-occupant men's room locked, so he used the women's facility. With a bladder stretched to the dimensions of a football, he emitted an audible sigh as he emptied it. He also made sure to put the seat down afterwards. Dan washed his hands and exited with a sense of relief when he saw no female patrons on line outside the bathroom door, sparing him potential angry glares. He ordered a triple espresso with three raw sugars, his favorite post-party morning remedy, downed the steaming beverage in a couple of quick gulps, and grimaced. Fortified by

the rush of caffeine through his central nervous system, he went back to his car. Fortunately, traffic was light for a Monday morning, and he pulled into his mom's driveway at 6:30 am. Dan hoped to make it straight upstairs, but darn his bad luck, as he came through the front door he saw Jack in the living room.

"Hey, look what the cat dragged in. Jesus Christ, Dan, what the hell did you do night last night? Whatever it was, I hope you had a good time, party animal."

Dan's eyes narrowed to pillbox slits. "Yeah, and good morning to you, too, Jack. Where's my mom?"

"She's in the kitchen. I'm headed out to that new Anaheim project. I'll be gone all day."

"What a shame."

"Yeah, Dan, I'm going to miss you, too." Then, yelling, "Connie, your fag son is home."

Dan found Connie Goldberg in the kitchen, coffee cup in one hand, facing a TV on the counter with the sound off and tuned to one of the local morning news stations. "Hi, sweetie. Why can't you be nicer to your stepdad?"

"Stepdad? Mom, he's your *boyfriend*." Dan hated the juvenile sound of "boyfriend" applied to people more than twice his age, but lacked a handier term. He certainly wasn't going to call Jack his mom's lover. "Friend" sounded too ambiguous. So, he was forced to use "boyfriend," but did so with distaste.

"We're engaged. He's not technically your stepdad yet, but he will be soon. We just haven't had the ceremony."

"Oh, really, you're engaged? When's the wedding? Let me put it down on my calendar right now."

Dan pulled his iPhone out of his hip pocket. "And can you show me your ring? I bet it's huge."

Connie sighed. "Dan, why do you always have to be so difficult? You know Jack still has to work out some financial matters with his ex-wife. As soon as they finalize their situation, we'll get married."

"Which ex-wife? Number one or number two? Are they like from *The Cat in the Hat*? Do they spring out of a box? Are they fun when it's wet outside and there's nowhere to play?"

Jack came around the corner. "I heard you, wise guy. You've got some nerve. Listen, my first wife became addicted to pain pills and my second wife was bipolar. I could have been a saint and it wouldn't have preserved those marriages, not that it's any of your goddamned business anyway. Your mother and I are in love."

"Thanks for sharing, Jack. You sure know how to pick them. You have no idea how happy I am for my mom."

“Okay, now I’m warning you, Dan. Don’t push my buttons. Connie, I’ve got to go out to that condo project down The 5 near Disney I told you about. I’m not sure what time I’ll be home.”

“Love you, Jack. Drive carefully.”

“I will, sweetie. Love you too.” Jack looked straight at Dan after he said this.

Dan and his mother stood quietly in the kitchen until they heard the screech of tires and the whoosh of acceleration from Jack’s massive pickup truck as he barreled down their quiet suburban street. Several dogs barked wildly and amid the commotion from inside the kitchen they heard the blare of a horn and the shout of “slow down, asshole.”

Connie resumed the conversation. “Dan, I don’t understand why you have to be so antagonistic to Jack, since you know we’re in love. It’s just like you to trample on me and worship your father. And the crazy thing is he’s with that cheap whore, yet I get all the abuse.”

“Cheap whore? Sarah? Mom, she’s a pediatrician.”

“Right, who just happens to have a figure men – well, straight men – drool over. I bet she stripped to pay her way through medical school. Or turned tricks. Maybe both.”

“Mom, you know darn well she was a researcher at UCLA. She worked there every summer as an undergraduate and co-authored eight research papers before she even started medical school .”

“Look, Dan, I’m not prepared to get into an argument with you over this. Trust me, your father isn’t with her because she knows her way around a Bunsen burner.”

“Mom, would you *please* stop with the issues between you and Dad. I can’t even begin to count how many times Dr. Mandelbaum has told me I’ll never get out of therapy if you continue to force me to choose sides. I love you, but I also love dad. Although I have to admit I hate both of you at the same time as well.”

“Fine, you continue to bear a grudge and let your mother suffer. And Jack certainly doesn’t want to hear me complain. He’s got enough issues of his own. So I just have to stew in my own misery.”

“Right. And since you mentioned Jack, remind me, how many kids and step-kids does he have again?”

Connie took a sip of her coffee. “He has three of his own, at least according to Los Angeles County Family Court. But I’ve lost track of how many step-kids there are. And if your ex-wife has more kids after you divorce, what are they called?”

“Someone else’s problem. Say, Mom, how about a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, honey.” Connie got up, went to the counter, opened a cabinet, reached for a Garfield the Cat mug and placed it on the counter. She then filled it from the glass carafe in her drip coffee maker, which

still contained several cups. “Black, right? So you destroy your stomach lining, just like your uncle Irwin, may he rest in peace. And look at you. For God’s sake, where were you last night?”

“I went to a club called La Victoria Coco Bongo with Gilad. In East Los Angeles.”

“Why, to broaden your cultural horizons? You suddenly have something against Jewish boys?”

“No, we heard it had a pretty cool scene. We met some people and, well, you know, I decided to drive home in the morning.” Dan took a sip of his coffee.

“Listen, mister, I wasn’t born yesterday. Your eyes look like a Visine commercial. And you smell like a dumpster. I don’t mind you moving back in after school, but this is no way to live.”

“Well, Mom, it’s not exactly like Google is salivating to hire a communications major from Cal State-Fullerton with mediocre grades. Gilad thinks his dad can help me get an entry level position with one of his clients. I probably would just be a glorified gofer, since I lack any identifiable business skills, but I’m told cute gay boys are a hot commodity. And in response to your comment about Jews, first of all I feel like I already know every single Hebraic homo within a fifty mile radius. And besides, you’re one to talk. Jack O’Brian? Of the O’Brian’s of Ireland, one of the Ten Lost Tribes? Or am I confusing them with the O’Malley’s?”

“Dan, again, no sympathy from you. You’re worse than your sister. I know Dr. Mandelbrot - *Mandelbaum, Mom, Mandelbaum* - says I shouldn’t talk about the divorce, but I don’t know how I can avoid it. I was absolutely shattered when your father left me—”

“Left *you*? Mom, *you* left *him*. What is this, revisionist history?”

“Listen, Dan. Your father left me emotionally long before I moved out. I would have thought as a gay man, you would have at least some insight into a woman’s need to feel loved. But no, now both of my children are turned against me.”

“What’s wrong with Emily *now*? I thought the two of you worked out your issues.”

“We have. But she’s so judgmental. You know her wedding is only four months away, if she actually goes through with it. Well, last time I saw her, she said to me she’s worried about someday falling out of love, the way your father and I did. She said that, right to my face. *Like you and Dad.*”

“Well, Mom, I hate to be the one to break the news to you, but it’s pretty traumatic when your parents split up. I had enough issues with my sexuality, and then to have to throw a divorce on top... well, I don’t want to stir up old wounds, but it’s tough. And why do you think Emily might call it off?”

“Wait a sec. Come to terms with your sexuality? Are you joking? You were a total fruitcake your entire childhood. You wore your gay identity like a badge. And all those tedious PFLAG meetings we schlepped to? Please, let me take out the world’s tiniest violin.”

“Fine, Mom. Have it your way. The end of my parents’ marriage was as much fun as a Lakers game. But you still didn’t answer my question about Emily.”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Go there? Mom, you were the one who brought up Emily’s name, not me.”

“Dan, honey, I hate it when you and I argue. Whatever issues Emily has with Alex is her business. I’m sorry I said anything, and I admit Jack can be a load sometimes, but so can you. I have to go to work. You’d better drag your *tuchus* upstairs and try to scrub last night off. Now give your mother a hug and tell her you love her.”

Like a good Jewish boy, Dan did as instructed.

Dan showered, put on a clean tee shirt and sweatpants and went back downstairs in the now quiet and empty house to fix himself breakfast. Notwithstanding his prior stated preference for fresh smoothies, he lacked the energy to root around in the fridge and then wash and peel whatever fruit he might find. Fortunately, Jack shared his taste for sugary breakfast cereals. Dan opened the pantry. Pay dirt! A nearly full box of Frosted Flakes. Dan poured a bowl and added non-fat milk, fooling himself into the belief he thereby achieved nutritional harmony. He then spent a couple of hours aimlessly online, changed from sweats to short pants, and left the house at 11 am for a lunch date with his father.

Dan sat in a booth with his dad at Greenblatt’s deli on Sunset Boulevard. They each had a cup of chicken noodle soup and split a corned beef and pastrami on rye and an order of fries. Martin Goldberg drank an Arnold Palmer with a slice of lemon and Dan ordered a Diet Coke. They each took a hearty bite of their half sandwiches, four towering inches of fatty smoked meat.

“So, Dan, how’s it been since you moved back in with your mom?” the elder Mr. Goldberg inquired in between bites.

“Oh, it’s only temporary, until I get on my feet. I think I might get a job soon, through Gilad’s dad, Mr. Harel. It would be some type of entry level office staffer, I guess. I’m sure it won’t pay much, but I’ve started to look for a roommate to split an apartment. I might move in with Rochelle from high school.”

Mr. Goldberg dabbed the side of his of his mouth with a napkin. “You know Gilad’s dad is loaded, right? He made a huge bet shorting subprime mortgages when the housing market tanked. Then, right at the bottom, he began to buy up foreclosed homes. I don’t know how much of the hedge fund is his own money and how much belongs to clients, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s worth over one hundred million. I’m sure he’s got a lot of chits he can call in to help find a position.”

“Yeah, I’m more worried he would find one for me and then I might fuck up and embarrass him.”

“So, don’t fuck up. It’s not complicated.”

“Look, Dad, that’s easy for you to say. You’re a partner at a successful law firm. And Emily is a chip off the old block, VP of marketing for a hot startup. I seem to be a trouble magnet. She went to Stanford and I couldn’t even get into a UC. I had to go to one of the Cal States, and even there I almost flunked out freshmen year.”

“You don’t need to remind me. I paid the tuition bills.”

Dan ignored his father’s comment. “But the thing is, I am motivated to be successful at something. I just don’t know if my success will come from meetings in conference rooms with people who are full of their own overblown egos and don’t give a crap about anyone else.”

“Yeah, Dan, you’re right. You definitely are going to hit the ground running in the business world. So if the corporate life isn’t of interest, do something entrepreneurial.”

The waitress stopped by and asked how their sandwiches were.

“A heart attack on a plate, as usual,” Martin replied. “Tia, you’ve met my son, Dan, before, right?”

Tia, with a small tower of plates carefully balanced, said, “Sure. But he gets better looking every time I see him.”

“Right, sweetie, you know how to pump an old man for tips. Tell José back in the kitchen if his plan is to send me to an early grave, it’s working. Pity neither of you is in the will.”

Tia winked and walked briskly away. Father and son attacked their lunches again. After a few minutes of vigorous chewing, Martin asked, “I don’t mean to pry into your personal life, but are you seeing anyone on a regular basis?”

“No, I’ve mostly been going out clubbing.” Dan thought about the prior evening but decided the less detail he shared, the better. “I’ve had some dates and stuff with guys, but nothing more than just some casual socializing.”

“What about Gilad?”

“Oh, he’s not looking for a job. His dream is to open up a fancy bike shop, maybe in Santa Monica or Venice Beach, if he can find someplace where the rent isn’t too astronomical.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. What about *you* and Gilad? He seems to be a fundamentally nice, sincere person. I don’t want to be critical, but when you say ‘clubbing and socializing,’ I hear partying and God knows what else. Now that you’re out of college, doesn’t it seem like you might want to slow things down and see someone on a steady basis, especially if that someone is a person you like and can trust?”

“Dad, c’mon. Gilad and I are best friends. Besides, his family hit the jackpot, as you observed moments ago. It’s out of the question. How weird would it look, first of all, to be attracted to a friend, and second of all for my interest to coincidentally happen to rise to the surface once his parents become rich?”

“Yeah, I suppose it’s not different for gays than anyone else. For us heteros, you never want to fall into the dreaded category of friend who wants to take it to the next level. I can’t believe how much time and money I wasted on Leah Wasserman in college. After every breakup of hers, she leaned on me for support, which inevitably consisted of dinner and a movie. It was always like a real date, where I paid for everything, except there was never any sex. And women are just absolute pros at how to play a nice guy for a fool. So you hang around the hoop, in hopes you’ll catch her on the rebound. And because she’s so despondent, you don’t go to In-N-Out Burger. No, you need to cheer her up, so it’s the type of restaurant you’d ordinarily pick out to make a special impression, except there isn’t even a good night kiss. God, Leah Wasserman.” Martin took a sip of his Arnold Palmer and stared off into the distance, a faraway look on his face.

“Dad, thanks. I see you want to guarantee a lifetime of therapy sessions for me with Dr. Mandelbaum. Why don’t you and mom have any boundaries? And, by the way, I am not attracted to Gilad. We’re just friends.” After making this remark, Dan looked down at his plate and absentmindedly pushed around some scraps of meat from his sandwich.

“Oh, right, like you’re the only person your age whose parents divorced. Remember that Temple father/son camping trip to Catalina Island when you were in fourth grade? Is there any dad we camped with who *didn’t* get divorced? Let’s see, there’s the Pearlsteins. Omigod, the Pearlsteins! I don’t think anyone could stay married to Naomi Pearlstein. Dave Pearlstein deserved a distinguished service award when he hit the fifteen year mark. Then there’s the Shapiros. Good old Bob Shapiro. That hooker cost him a lot more than \$500. The Roths. The Cohens. The Coopers. The Bergers. I think the only ones who didn’t split up were the Friedmans, and the reason they are still together is because they hate each other so much neither one wants to leave and make the other happy. So, yes, I’m sorry your mother and I aren’t with each other. I mean, actually, I’m not sorry we got divorced; it’s better for both of us. What I am sorry about is you and your sister got dragged into the muck.”

“Dad, I’m still in the muck. I’m absolutely covered with muck. It isn’t something that happened in the past and now is over. I want a moratorium on the topic. Please.”

Martin took another bite of his overstuffed sandwich, chewed and softly burped. “Fine. So how are you getting along with Jack?”

“The same way anyone gets along with Jack. Mostly by trying to avoid him.”

Martin took another sip of his Arnold Palmer and motioned for the check with a wave of his hand. “I admit from the two times we’ve met, he comes on a bit strong. I’m surprised as anyone your mom ended up with him. But maybe she had enough of Jews and our neuroses, our kvetching, our ability to be irritated by the slightest inconvenience. Maybe it’s easier for her to be with someone less complicated.”

“Dad, you think Jews get annoyed easily. Jack walks around in a perpetual grumpy mood.”

“I think his supposed foul temper is only for show. He owns a construction company. You think you become a successful building contractor in California, union work crews, all those city planners and local politicians who need to be greased, if you’re mild mannered? My guess is it’s not easy for him to turn it off when he gets home. Sometimes, you put on an act long enough, it starts to feel real. He’s got a lot of bluster, but I think down deep, he’s a decent guy. Your mom is a pretty good judge of character. I think she’s at a stage in her life where guy who comes home at the end of workday, cracks open a beer, leans back in an easy chair, and watches a ball game is a nice change of pace. She had enough *mishegas* to last a lifetime with me.”

Tia brought over the check and put it on the table face down. “So, you don’t want dessert today, Martin? No banana split, like usual? Just make sure you tip the same amount as if you ordered it, or otherwise Jose might just start to skimp on the sandwiches.” She gave Dan another wink and a smile before she turned and walked away.

At 3 pm Dan got a call from Gilad’s dad.

“Dan, how are you?”

“I’m good, Oren, how about you?”

“No complaints. Listen, I’ve lined up an interview for you. I’ll text you the details.”

“Thanks, Oren. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. Make sure you check out their website and show up prepared.”

“I will. I just finished lunch with my dad and told him I expected to hear from you. His advice was ‘Don’t fuck it up’.”

“Sounds like something any good father would say. I second the motion – Dan, don’t fuck it up.”

“Got it, Oren,” Dan said. “I most definitely won’t fuck it up.”

Chapter Two

Dan sat in the reception area of a company called Coastal Concepts. He wore gray slacks and a blue button-down long sleeve dress shirt. He had a 10:30 am meeting with the owner, Brad Conroy. Dan glanced at his watch: 10:47. A bored receptionist ignored him as she looked down at her lap, eyes on her smart phone, attention focused on Candy Crush. Two women, one Asian, one white, both young and pretty, walked past and out into the hallway in animated conversation. *Why*, Dan wondered, *do girls always go to the bathroom in pairs?*

Finally, at 10:51, the clickety-clack of heels, and yet another pretty young woman came out to the reception area. She walked over to Dan, extended a hand, and said, “Hi, I’m Mackenzie, Mr. Conroy’s executive assistant. I’m sorry for the delay. He’s ready to see you now. Can I get you a cup of coffee or a glass of water?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

Mackenzie took Dan past a row of cubicle-dwellers staring intently at their computer screens, one or two of them on the phone in hushed undertones. At the end of the corridor, a man wearing a Tommy Bahama golf shirt and khaki pants stood waiting.

“Hi there, you must be Dan. I’m Brad, CEO and founder of Coastal Concepts. Delighted to meet you. He extended his hand and they shook. Did Mackenzie offer you anything? “

“Oh, yes, thanks, Brad. I’m fine.”

“Fantastic. Mackenzie, I’ll have a soy latte with half a raw sugar from downstairs. Dan, you sure you don’t want coffee or tea? No? Alrighty, then.” Brad then stepped into the office behind him and said, “C’mon in.”

Dan followed Brad and was immediately struck by an impressive view of downtown Los Angeles and the ocean in the distance. Brad motioned for him to sit at a small table in the corner surrounded by several black leather chairs gleaming with polished chrome.

“Nice view, isn’t it? We started in a more mundane location, but once the real estate market tanked, we found a great sublease. The original tenant, a marketing firm, had to downsize and, well, I couldn’t say no. Speaking of the real estate crash, I had the good fortune to have a little bit of money invested with Oren. Now the economy is back in growth mode, our business has picked up, and I have a Park Avenue view with below-market rent. Ah, here’s Mackenzie with my coffee.”

Mackenzie set down a paper cup in front of Brad, said “I’ll hold your calls,” and then left, closing the door behind her.

Brad leaned forward and took a sip of his drink, then wiped off a small foam mustache. “Let me tell you a little bit about us. I imagine you already checked out our website. We’re in the party and event planning business. We’re about half corporate, half high end personal. We don’t do kids’ birthdays with ponies and balloons, and we certainly lack the resources to handle conventions. We’re kind of in a sweet spot of about 50 or so people on the low end to the occasional 300 guest wedding. I can read your mind, by the way. You hear party planning, Los Angeles, you picture Eric Clapton at some mogul’s eightieth birthday party. Not our cup of tea. We aim for a fun New Year’s event or fancy Memorial Day picnic for moderately successful companies, or the weddings and Bar Mitzvahs with a budget of fifty or seventy-five thousand.

“Some billionaire on his third wife wants to take a hundred guests by chartered plane for a three-day weekend on Necker Island, they probably should work with Bob Feldstein or Izfan Faroosh. Our business is a bit steadier and more predictable, and when the inevitable temper tantrums come along, they’re easier to handle when the bank accounts of the clients aren’t quite as oversized. But anyway, listen to me doing all the talking. Tell me a bit about yourself. What’s your connection to Oren?”

Dan sat upright in his chair. “I’m best friends with his son, Gilad.”

“Great. So, I took a glance at your resume, but figured it would be easier to talk in person. Where are you right now in terms of your career? You finished school, right?”

“Well, I graduated Cal State-Fullerton about a month ago. I took some time off, and now I’m focused on landing a full-time job.”

“Wonderful. Let me take a wild guess: party planning hasn’t been your life goal. Don’t worry. I know finding your first job out of college can be a challenge. But most businesses share a lot in common, so let’s start off with general issues. Did you take any business-related classes, like finance, accounting, or marketing?”

“Um, not really. I majored in communications and spent a lot of time at the campus food co-op.”

“Well, a co-op is still a retail store. Did you get exposure to any good business practices there?”

“They were a non-profit owned by the school, and run by stoners. We’d get a lot of the college kids who’d come in, take a look around, and say ‘screw it, let’s head over to Trader Joe’s.’ My dad insisted I get a job to generate my own spending money, and it certainly beat dorm receptionist. I didn’t want to deal with the hassle of drunken students unable to locate their IDs at two in the morning.”

Brad's hearty smile melted to neutral, like a bettor at the track who suddenly realizes Thunderbird is starting to fade on the backstretch. "Um, fair enough. How about outside of school? I noticed on your resume you spent a summer at a program in Israel. What was that like?"

"Not too bad. We studied Jewish history and took a lot of hikes."

"I see. And how would you describe your attention to detail? Our business requires a lot of focus. One screw up and a party can be ruined."

"I'm a lot better ever since the iPhone came out. Now all I have to do to is make sure to put everything on my calendar."

"What about your work ethic?"

"I'd say it's evolving. I partied a little too hard my freshman and sophomore years, but then I got my act together. First half of my junior year I got a 3.1 GPA, and then once I got the ship righted it was smooth sailing, relatively speaking.."

"Listen, Dan, I've got to be honest with you. I mean, I love Oren Harel. The guy made me an absolute fortune. But so far, I'm pretty underwhelmed. Give me something I can work with."

"Sure. No problem. I've got a sister, Emily, who is the exact opposite of me. High school valedictorian, Stanford, played varsity lacrosse, used her Spring breaks to do things like dig wells in Guatemala or mentor inner city kids. She's VP of marketing for a tech startup. Works hard and is incredibly successful at everything she tries. Like my dad. He's a big shot lawyer. Columbia Law School, Law Review, clerked for the Ninth Circuit.

"I'm more like my mom. She's definitely not Type-A, which is probably one of the reasons she and my dad split up. And she's definitely a good social drinker, unlike Emily or my dad. But here's the thing – she's pretty happy. And happiness, I believe, is what *you* are selling. It's not the hors d'oeuvres or the open bar or the light jazz trio to make white people feel good about themselves. You want your clients to be happy. And the person who is driven to get every last detail right, well, they're still important – I just walked past a week's worth of Dilbert strips of them - but ultimately they need to stay in the background. Clients don't care about who's the best spreadsheet jockey. The average Jane or Joe wants a dream they can buy into. I mean, when you get right down to it, life's a shitty proposition, and about the only thing going for it is the opportunity to party while we're still drawing oxygen, and that's where Creative Concepts comes in. You sell happiness, which is a subject I know a little something about."

Chapter Three

Dan made sure to get his parking validated by the receptionist on the way out. He checked his iPhone and saw a text message from Gilad: *You up for a bike ride this afternoon in Santa Monica?*

Dan texted back: *Need to change out of my interview clothes. Pick me up in an hour.*

When Dan arrived home he noticed Jack's pickup truck in the driveway. Dan found him in the kitchen, eating a Subway sandwich and drinking a Coke. Jack looked at Dan and said, "Wow, you clean up nice. Interview today?"

"Yeah, with a party planner. Well, a party planning company. They have a fancy office downtown and a staff of fifteen or twenty people."

"Party planner. How did you get connected to them? Although I have to admit, it does sound kinda' gay."

"The owner is client of Gilad's dad, Oren."

"Oren is one sharp guy. My construction business got absolutely killed in the downturn, and smart guys like him came in and made a killing. That's one thing I've always admired about Jews. You people have incredible business skills."

"Jack, honestly, 'you people?' Really? You can turn off the shtick, you know. If all Jews possessed incredible business skills, I wouldn't be interviewing for a job with a party planner."

"Hey, I'm just trying to give you a compliment. You don't have to get all bothered by it."

The doorbell rang. Dan yelled out, "It's unlocked."

Gilad walked into the kitchen. Dark, swarthy, full head of curly hair, tall, slender, dark, penetrating eyes, slight cleft in his chin, dimpled cheeks. He was toned, in great shape but not overly muscular. His youthful good looks stood in sharp contrast to Jack, who carried almost three hundred pounds on his six foot frame. "Hey Dan. Hello, Jack."

Jack grunted in response and went back to his sandwich.

"Hungry? I think my mom has some stuff in the fridge."

"Nah, let's eat later."

"Ok, just give me a minute to get changed."

Dan went upstairs. "So, Jack, how's it going?" Gilad asked.

"Great. Construction on my current project barely started and its already two months behind schedule and ten percent over budget. Plus, lucky me, a local city councilman suddenly discovered I was

unaware of his reelection campaign, which also just happens to be his favorite charity. So everything is peachy, thanks for asking.”

Dan came back down, wearing a t-shirt with “I Only Drink to Make You Interesting” on the front, a pair of cargo shorts and some Vans. “Let’s hit the road. See you later, Jack.”

Jack looked up from his lunch. “Yeah, Dan. I’m looking forward to it.”

They drove down The Ten in Gilad’s Jeep, bikes upright in the cargo compartment. “How’d your date go the other night?” Gilad asked.

“Oh, you mean from the club? Not bad. I definitely was a bit too caramelized, though. I shouldn’t overdo it. But I thought you and I were going to keep a lookout for each other.”

Gilad glanced into his sideview mirror. “I didn’t know you were into Hispanics. He looked like a bit of a *cholo*. Did he have a crucifix on his bedroom wall?”

“Oh no, much worse, a big-ass tat of the Mother of God on his left boob, over his heart. Fortunately, I didn’t notice it until the morning.”

“I don’t know why you waste your time screwing around with cheap guys like him.”

“Why does it matter to you? Are you going to turn into one of those disapproving puritanical friends every gay man needs like a second asshole. Actually, a second asshole might come in handy.”

Gilad looked to his left and unnecessarily adjusted the mirror. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “No, dipshit, but you can do better.”

Dan and Gilad rode their bikes along the beach for half an hour, and then stopped at a smoothie stand. The sun was hanging low over the Pacific. The air was clear and warm, the beach golden. It was easy to imagine how Cortés, 500 years earlier, might have believed he stumbled into Paradise.

Dan and Gilad took their drinks and sat at a concrete table shaded by an umbrella. A volleyball game was underway a short distance in front of them. Dan said, “The guy serving, definitely gay.”

“Yeah, look at his Speedo. Why doesn’t he just put a sign on his stomach with an arrow pointed down and the word ‘package’ on it?”

They watched the game for a few minutes while sipping their smoothies.

“Did you ever read any Hemingway in school?” Dan asked.

“A bit. The standard stuff. Why?”

“Oh, while watching that gay guy’s privates jiggle up and down, I happened to be thinking about how Hemingway, who maintained a virile, manly persona, described sex. He has this phrase he uses in

the novel about the Spanish Civil War. It's either *The Sun Also Rises* or *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. By the way, if I ever become an author, I'll never use the word 'whom' in a title. I'm just saying."

"Are you saying anything else, or am I supposed to understand your point by now?"

"No, I remember he uses the term 'the earth moved' to describe spectacular lovemaking. The main protagonist of the novel about the Spanish Civil War is an American volunteer on the side of the leftists fighting against Franco. He encounters a band of revolutionaries in the mountains and falls in love with a young girl. They play a round of hide-the-salami and afterwards they agree 'the earth moved,' meaning their sex was so transcendental it impacted our planetary orbit."

"So? He's an author. He used language in a creative and poetic way," said Gilad. "So what?"

"I think I would come up with a different description. 'The earth moved' seems so abstract."

"All right, Mr. Smarty-pants. Hemingway is one of the greatest writers in history. You barely even earned your diploma from Cal State-Chipotle. Could you do any better?"

"Yeah. I'd say their souls touched."

"Their souls touched?"

"Right. In addition to their bodies forming, as God so bluntly put it in Genesis, 'one flesh,' their souls merged together as well."

"My money's on Hemingway."

"Be that way. Here's something else. I had lunch with my dad yesterday. He said something totally weird."

"Really, what?" Gilad asked.

"He asked why you and I weren't together."

Gilad suddenly choked on his smoothie.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It went down the wrong pipe. So, what did you say after he asked you?" Gilad glanced down at the ground, suddenly intently interested in the movements of an assembly line of ants.

"I told him exactly what you'd expect me to say. We're best friends. It would just be too bizarre for us to be into each other. Then he started to reminisce about some girl he used to hit on before he met my mom. You have no idea how lucky you are your parents aren't divorced."

"Right, I get the special pleasure of listening to them yell at each other all the time."

"Oh, c'mon, your parents get along just fine. It's just Israelis don't have the same sense of privacy as Americans. Everyone's parents yell at each other. In American families, they do it behind closed doors. Speaking of Israelis, by the way, whatever happened to you and Moshe?"

“Oh, if you think it’s hard to for a gay Jew to date their own kind, it’s only a thousand times worse for gay Israelis. The culture is so macho, so queers turn into these over-the-top caricatures. And pushy? Jesus Christ, every time I turned around, Moshe found another way to take advantage of me. He borrowed my clothes. He borrowed my money. He made me inconvenience my schedule to accommodate him, but was never willing to do the same for me. I know there is a big gay scene in Israel, but honestly, I don’t know how those fags can stand one another.”

“So you’re not into anyone right now.”

Gilad once again looked down to check on the ants. Like him, they appeared to have made little progress during the conversation. “No, I’m just sitting on the shelf.”

Chapter Four

Emily's gleaming solid-granite kitchen island was filled with an appetizing Sunday brunch: bagels, lox, four types of cream cheese spreads, tomatoes, mozzarella-and-roma tomato salad, fruit salad, potato salad, egg salad, and orange juice. In the middle of the cornucopia sat a bouquet of fresh flowers in a crystal vase. A restaurant quality espresso machine sat on a counter by the cabinets to the left of the Sub-Zero refrigerator/freezer. Emily's guests were Dan, Connie (sans Jack), Emily's fiancé, Alex, Emily's best girlfriend, Ashleigh, and Ashleigh's boyfriend, Jake.

"Well, I'm glad everyone is here this morning. I've been so busy at work I don't have the chance to entertain the way I thought I would when I bought this place," Emily said. Then, with a glance at Alex, "I mean, we don't have as much of an opportunity to entertain. And Mom, too bad Jack couldn't come this morning. I so much want to get to know him better."

"It's a real experience," Dan said. "I heartily recommend it."

Connie shot Dan the stink-eye.

"So, Dan, I understand from Emily you recently graduated from college. Congratulations. And you went to, was it Chico State?" Ashleigh asked.

"Thanks. No, I went to the much more prestigious Cal State-Fullerton. If you don't have a high school GPA of 2.5 or score above the 40th percentile on your SATs, well, then you just aren't their type of people."

"Oh, Dan, you're exactly like your sister described you, full of self-deprecating humor."

"Except in order for it to be self-deprecating, you have to actually have accomplished something. In my case, it's honesty."

"What are your career plans?" Ashleigh asked.

"Well, 'career' probably makes it sound too intentional. Instead of saying 'career plans,' I'd rephrase it as I'd like to find a job with interesting people, which isn't too demanding, and pays enough to fund the rent for half of an apartment. The odds that I would find something on my own merits are about the same as winning the lottery, but fortunately, through Gilad's dad, I was able to land an interview with a party planning firm."

"Party planning?" Emily asked. "You mean like the wedding planner I'm using, Michaela Goodwin?"

"Right, but on a slightly bigger scale with more resources. Plus they do a lot of corporate events. It's probably a feminine line of work at some type of fundamental level, so I think it would be perfect for me. In case anyone forgot I'm gay."

“Good thing you reminded us,” Connie said. “Say, Alex, how are things with you at the restaurant. What’s it called again?”

“Café Tuscany.”

“Right, sorry. So how are things at Café Tuscany.”

“Well, Connie, things are going really well. I just got promoted to sous chef. It’s more money and more responsibility, so you’d think I’d be pleased. But our restaurant is part of a holding company, Food Concepts Inc., and they have this annoying executive from their corporate offices, Dmitri something or other, who’s responsible for monitoring our performance. He probably never did more cooking in his entire life than heat a frozen meal in a microwave, or maybe bring a tea kettle to a boil. He comes in about once a week, reviews some numbers with the manager in his office, and then comes into the kitchen and asks all kinds of stupid questions about how we do things. And he likes to show off how smart he is. The other day he said trying to resolve the conflict between the financial side of the restaurant business, which needs to keep cost down, and the ambition of the kitchen, which always wants to use the freshest and highest quality ingredients, was like the Treaty of Westphalia, as if anyone would know what he was talking about.”

“Actually,” Emily said, “the Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648, ended the Thirty Years’ War and led to Dutch independence and the widespread acceptance within Europe of the concept of national sovereignty. As most people who’ve taken a freshman Western Civ class would know.”

Alex frowned and sliced a bagel.

About an hour later the brunch wound down. Alex left because he had the Sunday shift. Ashleigh and her boyfriend, aware they were in a propitious time in her monthly cycle, went home to continue their heretofore fruitless attempts to have a baby. Connie had promised to meet Jack and his kids from his first marriage for his oldest daughter’s birthday. Dan and Emily were the only ones left, and began to clean up the kitchen.

“Jeez, Emily, way to put your competitive side on display with that ‘Treaty of Westphalia’ crack. You really humiliated Alex. Face it - you’re smarter than most people. So is it any surprise you’re smarter than he is. If you wanted your intellectual equal, you should have stayed with Ryan.”

“Right, I would have certainly found happiness with the world’s biggest, most arrogant prick. Good advice, baby brother.”

“No, you wouldn’t have found happiness. You would have found your intellectual equal. Oh, wait a minute! Now I get it. You were afraid Ryan might be smarter than you. And don’t bring happiness into the discussion. People like you aren’t looking for happiness.”

“And what the hell is ‘people like me’ supposed to mean?”

“C’mon, Em. You’re brimming with ambition and confidence. You want, and expect – deservedly, I’ll hasten to add - success. You’re good at anything in life you’ve ever tried your hand at. Success might be the same as happiness, but not necessarily. You know the midrash as well as I do: ‘who is rich?; he who is content with his portion in life.’ Well, people who are content with their portion don’t kill themselves to get a 4.0 at Stanford.”

“Oh, give me a break. Wisdom from a kid who partied his way through college at Cal State-Fucknard?”

“Hmm, that’s snarky, even for you. But the difference is, Emily, I’m happy. Let me rephrase what I said. I am filled with bottled up rage from mom and dad’s breakup, and I’m a little bit confused about things in the romance department at the moment. My last hookup was with a member of the 18th Street Gang.”

“Are they Hispanic? I’m not familiar with Los Angeles gang life.”

“Yes, they are, as a matter of fact. Anyway, even though at this exact moment I’m not happy, I know what happiness looks like, and the way it can get shot down by too much stress and worry, or by working too hard. I’m not about to bust my ass to get ahead at some stupid job and risk my emotional health. I’ll continue to take the slacker’s path.”

“Gee, Dan, you should write that down somewhere. Now there’s a philosophy for our generation.”

“Look, sister dearest, I have no doubt you are on your way to a ton of success. But I’m not convinced you’ll ever be satisfied with it. And I couldn’t help but notice the tension with Alex. Showing off your staggeringly huge education was no accident, I’m sure. C’mon, your sensitive little gay brother is here for you to listen as you unburden yourself.”

“Dan, butt out of my personal life. I don’t want to say anything bad about Alex. For goodness sake, we’re going to be married in a few months.” Emily’s grip tightened on the napkin she was holding and the back of her hand turned pale as the blood drained from it.

“Something’s wrong. It’s pretty obvious.”

“Okay, you win. You’ve got me started. Well, the problem is Alex is so simple-minded. I don’t mean he’s dumb. But I’ve spent my whole life around smart people. I take it for granted someone will know Monet and Manet are two different French impressionists, jejune means lacking in nutritional value, or

dull, the Pre-Raphaelites were a group of 19th century English painters and poets, , Alaska was acquired from the Russians by Secretary of State William Seward in a deal called 'Seward's Folly,' and 'uninterested' and 'disinterested' don't mean the same thing. For fuck's sake, who doesn't know the difference between not caring and not having a stake in the outcome? To be more precise, who among the men I would consider marriage material?"

"Are we trying out for Jeopardy here, or talking about Alex?"

"And then there's his job. Chef. The hours are ridiculous. He routinely comes home after midnight, and at 3 am on a Saturday. And he stinks of sautéed onions when he does. Plus, he's old enough that if he really was on a track to be a star in the kitchen, there'd be some evidence of it by now. He's thirty. Cooking is the same as sports or entertainment. If you aren't going places by age thirty, chances are you never will be."

"There's your problem, Emily. You aren't engaged to a future celebrity chef whose name will become a recognized global brand. You merely have a decent, caring, honest, hard-working man who loves you."

"That's so like you, Dan, to make me feel guilty. I know what I said about Alex sounds cold and calculating. I guess I got worn out by Ryan. I wanted to spend time with people who don't routinely finish the *NY Times* Sunday crossword puzzle, talk about their White House internship or their Fulbright. Don't tell me lowering my standards is any different from you hooking up with street kids from the projects who make you feel so superior."

"There's one big difference. Once I saw the Virgin Mary in blazing Technicolor tattooed across his skinny, hairless chest, I ran for the hills. You're the one having relationship issues, not me."

Chapter Five

Dan stood inside an empty store, previously home to an upscale coffee shop, on Albert Kinney Boulevard in the heart of Venice. He was with Gilad and a real estate agent, who were a few steps away, engaged in animated conversation. Gilad shook the agent's hand and said, "I'll be in touch soon." He then walked over to Dan and said, "Let's head outside and get some fresh air." Once they were safely on the sidewalk and out of earshot, Gilad asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure I know enough about business to have an opinion that matters."

"Well, I think the space is perfect." As Gilad said this, a young woman clad in a hot pink bikini, iPad tethered to her left forearm by a Velcro strap and wearing ear buds roller-bladed by. A few seconds later, a new Mercedes S550, so white it could make one's teeth hurt, glided down the street. "The only problem is the rent. It's outrageous. Of course, expensive rent is part of a great location. I've been playing around with the numbers, and I think I can get it to pencil out."

"Listen to you. 'Pencil out'. You already sound like a real businessman."

"Well, I've picked up some of the terminology from my dad."

"Yeah, I've learned all about 'tortious interference' from *my* dad. Which is enough to make me certain I don't want ever want to be a lawyer."

"Speaking of career goals, did you hear from the party planners?"

"The owner, Brad, sent me an email. He asked me to come back for another meeting. Given how brutally honest I conducted myself at the first one, I suspect he intends to offer me a job."

"Are you sure you don't want to go in with me on the bike shop?"

"Listen, Gilad, you and I both know your dad is floating you the money to get this off the ground. I'd feel kind of sheepish about sponging off of him."

"So you don't think this is a legitimate business venture? Do you know a high-end bike can sell for ten thousand dollars? And the people who buy them are the same folks who live in multi-million dollar homes, fill those homes with expensive art and furniture, and drive Tesla's. It's a real thing."

"I don't doubt it, Gilad. But then there's our friendship. I'd hate to see our relationship compromised, which I can't imagine we'd be able to avoid if we worked together. It's hard to deny you'd be the boss."

"Then what if it's fifty/fifty, a true partnership?"

"I'll think it about. But like I said, I don't want to put the friendship at risk."

"Yeah, I've noticed."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You figure it out.”

Chapter Six

Dan was back in Brad's office at Creative Concepts for a second visit. This time, he decided to take up the offer of a free beverage, so he requested a dry cappuccino with non-fat milk, one sugar on the side. Brad had his usual soy latte. The Pacific Ocean shimmered in the distance. Seagulls wheeled over the beach, indifferent to human concerns and oblivious to where their excrement landed.

"Dan, thanks for coming in again."

"Oh, no problem, Brad."

"How is your job search going?" Brad gave a half-smile.

"Well, I have a standing offer from a friend. But it's a startup venture, so I'm not sure."

"Really? Sounds interesting. What's the startup?"

"A bike shop on Albert Kinney in Venice Beach. The friend is Oren's son, my friend, Gilad. It's actually a pretty sensible idea. The location is killer. The bike path along the beach is just a few blocks away. The rent is a challenge, but I think between Gilad and his dad they'll figure out how to make it work."

"So what's holding you back?"

"I don't know. Gilad's a friend, and I'm worried all the douche-baggy kind of stuff you have to do to make a business successful will harsh our relationship. And sorry, I didn't mean to imply anything about you, since, um, you're a business owner yourself. I merely meant if you're the boss, then you have to fire underperformers, get into arguments with customers when they don't pay their bills, and spend time with accountants and lawyers. I didn't intend to make a sweeping moral condemnation. It's like playing on a sports team where the coach is your dad. If he gives you special treatment, then the other kids resent you. And if he chews out your ass, then you resent him. I'm worried about how a similar dynamic might play out with a friend, especially since we both know it's his money, not mine, being used to get the thing off the ground."

"I understand. I played tennis as a kid and my dad was exactly like those parents you see on TV, except I didn't have as much talent. I wasted a big chunk of my childhood hitting a fuzzy ball over a net and being constantly told I wasn't trying hard enough. And you're right; being the boss is a pain at times. I don't want to suggest anyone throw a pity party for me, but meetings with the accountants and lawyers aren't exactly fun. Anyway, the reason I asked you to come in is to discuss the possibility of joining our team."

"Great. I'm glad my candor wasn't a turnoff."

“Well, I have to be honest with you, it’s very close to the edge. But you have an assertiveness I think could be valuable, if you could learn to channel it a bit.”

“No prob. How’s this? Hi, my name is Dan and I’ll be your server tonight.”

“Overdone. I want friendly, not obsequious.”

“Okay. Here’s a retake. Our special of the night is Kobe beef paired with Maine lobster prepared in a red-wine reduction. It’s so expensive we don’t even let you order it until we first run a credit check.”

Brad smiled. “I think this might actually work out. I see you in a sales role. I think you’ve got a style that might close a lot of new business for us. I’m going to have Mackenzie draft up an offer letter and email it to you. It’s got all the standard stuff: vacation days, health plan, etc. And we need your consent for a background check. There aren’t any skeletons in your closet we should know about, are there?”

“Nope. I earned my degree from Cal State-Fullerton fair and square. And the 2.7 GPA I’m so proud of is legit. I’ve smoked a ton of weed – honestly, who hasn’t – but I’m white, so obviously I’ll never get arrested for it. I’m clean. But don’t ask me to pee into a cup.”

“No worries – we don’t drug test.”

“Hey, it’s sounding better by the minute.”

Brad stood up and stretched out his hand. They shook, and he said, “I hope you’ll join us, Dan. I look forward to your response to the offer letter.”

“Thanks, Brad. I’m very flattered a real company considers me employable.”

Dan smiled as he drove out of the parking garage.

Chapter Seven

Dan and Gilad sat next to Alice Dawson, Jack's mother, at a backyard barbecue. About thirty guests were over, an assortment of family members requiring some amateur genealogy to sort out. It appeared every branch of the clan had experienced divorce, and several of the kids had entered the world from the wombs of girlfriends, not wives. Squeals of delight could be heard coming from the kiddie pool in the backyard. Jack tended a large propane grill, his JC Penney St. Johns Bay house-brand \$9.99 polo shirt protected by an apron which read "Warning: Men Cooking." From the kitchen, a group of younger women stood clustered around the kitchen counter. Dan overheard snatches of their conversation drift over: *...delivered by...C-section...stopped going to AA meetings...caught him after she borrowed his phone and went through his text messages...*

Dan suddenly realized Jack's mom had asked him a question. "Dan, are you sure your friend doesn't want a burger or hot dog?" Alice asked.

"Oh, I'm just fine with the potato salad, cole slaw, and watermelon, Mrs. O'Brian," Gilad answered. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Please call me Alice. Mrs. O'Brian makes me feel older than I already am. And three of my grandkids are vegetarians. No, four. I forgot about Kayley. It seems to be the thing with young people these days. Any particular reason why you chose to give up meat?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mrs. O'Brian. Sorry. Alice. I guess I just fell into the habit without too much thought. Now I'm used to it," Gilad answered.

"I understand from Jack your family is Jewish, Dan. Are you also, Gilad?"

"Oh, yes."

"And Gilad, what an interesting name. What does it mean?"

"Funny you should ask. It means 'hump of a camel.' But it sounds a lot better where I came from. In the Middle East, the camel is considered noble, like the lion or the eagle. You might remember the Egyptian Prime Minister during the Six Day War was Nasser, whose first name was Gamal, or camel in Arabic."

"My goodness, how interesting. But tell me, since the Bible gives man dominion over every animal, wouldn't it would be more appropriate to eat meat? If God wanted us to be vegetarians, don't you think he would have told so?" Alice asked.

"Good point, Alice. But I'm not a vegetarian because of anything it says in the Bible. I do it for myself, not because I feel a religious obligation," Gilad answered.

“Well, how fascinating you have no interest in following the Bible. I hope you don’t mind if I ask, but I know that Dan is gay. Jack told me. You wouldn’t be his boyfriend, Gilad would you?”

“No, I’m just a friend. But I am gay. So I’m his gay friend. But not his boyfriend, although one can hope, can’t they? Ha ha. Just kidding.”

“I want to share something with you boys. My late ex-husband, Walt, battled alcoholism his whole life. But he accepted Jesus right before he died, and I am comforted by the thought he’s in Heaven right now. If Jesus can forgive the whoring and the drunkenness, well, I suppose I can, too. All I ask is that both of you keep an open heart and an open mind about Jesus.”

Dan and Gilad shifted uneasily and glanced at each other. Dan decided to speak up. “Alice, of course we respect your beliefs, but Gilad and I come from a different religious tradition.”

“Nonsense. I know plenty of Jews for Jesus,” Alice countered.

“Actually, Alice, they aren’t Jews for Jesus, they are former Jews who converted to Christianity. People who believe in Jesus are Christians. Jews are on a different team in the interfaith softball league” Dan said.

“I won’t argue with you. And I understand you don’t want people to discriminate against you, either as Jews or because of your sinful sexual preferences. But why do you gays have to take the institution of marriage and redefine it. That seems like it’s going too far.”

“I agree, Alice,” Dan said. I don’t think it’s appropriate for marriage to be redefined by the courts.”

“Thank you,” Alice said.

“I personally am opposed to Loving vs. the State of Virginia.”

“What are you referring to?” Alice asked.

Dan stood up. “It’s the 1967 case in which the US Supreme Court overturned Virginia’s ban on interracial marriages, thereby allowing a black man to marry a white woman. Too much judicial activism for my taste. Well, it’s been a pleasure chatting with you, Alice, but Gilad and I need to freshen our drinks.”

As Dan drove to the new apartment in Sherman Oaks he and Rochelle agreed to share, he noticed he had three missed calls from his mom and three voice mails. He decided he would not listen to the messages while driving. When he arrived at the apartment, Rochelle was in the living room, a joint in one hand and the sound of running water audible from the bathroom in the hallway.

“Hi, Dan. My friend Elana is over. We’re hanging out. Want to join us?”

“I’d better call my mom first. She’s pretty steamed.”

Elana came out of the bathroom. She was a tall, pretty brunette, clad in a frilly strapless red top and denim cutoffs containing only enough fabric to end in the same place as her buttocks.

“Elana, you know my roommate Dan, I think.”

“Yeah, your fag friend from high school. Hiya Dan. Rochelle and I were just talking about whether we should get boob jobs. What do you think?” Elana thrust out her Goldilocks-and-the-Three-Bears bosom, neither too large nor too small, but just right, and turned from side-to-side.

“Don’t ask me. Ask your boyfriend.”

“Asking him would be worthless. He’s a total pig. Besides, what guy wouldn’t want his girlfriend to have a bigger rack?” Elana asked.

“Sorry, but I don’t have the energy to get caught up in your female insecurity issues. I have problems enough of my own,” Dan said. “Pass me the joint, Rochelley-belly. I need some stress reduction.”

Dan took a deep hit, and then passed the state-of-California-legally-sanctioned medication to Elana. He coughed. “Isn’t this a non-smoking building? If they catch us we’ll get kicked out and lose our security deposit.”

“Don’t get your panties twisted into a knot,” Rochelle said. “I’ve disabled all the smoke alarms. And this is an exception. Next time we’ll use my vaporizer. I haven’t unpacked it yet, and I’m not sure which box I stashed it in. And worst case, we’ll get Elana to give the building manager a blow job. She’s blown guys for a lot less.”

“Look who’s talking, featured member of the slut-of-the-month club. Besides, my dad’s in the legal department over at Universal. Some lowlife apartment building manager gives us a hassle, I’ll get daddy involved and he won’t know what hit him. Speaking of which, you know what my dad told me recently? He said with every new screenplay they play Kardashian bingo.”

“What’s that?” Dan asked.

“They score how many times the name Kardashian is mentioned. He’s says he’s seen the joke about the new app that allows you to tell the Kardashians apart six times.”

“Like Queen Victoria, we are amused,” Dan said. “And even though this conversation is engaging, I have to leave you lovely young ladies and call my mother, before she hires a drone and starts carpet-bombing our neighborhood.”

Dan went into his bedroom and sat on his new bed, purchased for \$299, mattress and box spring included, from The Bed King, and dressed in brand-new Ikea sheets. He speed dialed and put the call on speaker phone.

“Dan. Thank God you called back. I’ll stop phoning the local hospitals. I hadn’t gotten beyond the letter ‘A.’ I’m sorry to have bothered the good folks in Antelope Valley.”

“Hi Mom. Sorry I missed your calls. I was in an area with bad cell reception and then once I saw the voice mails, I figured I would call back when I got to the apartment.”

“Dan, I’m your mother. I know when you’re lying. So please cut the crap. You knew I would be mad and you weren’t ready to talk.”

“Why would you be mad?”

“Let’s see, how about for rude behavior as a guest in the home of my mother-in-law and your step-grandmother? And about religion. Did you have to make fun of her?”

“Mom, please. She’s not your mother-in-law and she will never, ever be my grandmother, step or otherwise. And in regard to religion, she started to condemn both Jews and homosexuality. Trust me, I acted with restraint.”

“Dan, your definition of restraint is forty spangled dancers in the opening act instead of sixty.”

“Hey, Mom, you’re in pretty good form today.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t blow smoke at me. Anyway, good luck at work.”

“Thanks. I start on Monday.”

“Just don’t be a smartass like you are with me.”

“Great advice. Love you, Mom. Bye.”

Chapter Eight

Sunday night. Alex came home from work at 11 pm. Emily was in bed, leaning against five pillows, MacBook Air propped open on her lap.

“Hey, Em.”

“Hey yourself. How as work?”

“Not too bad. Apparently, Kirby found out from Dmitri we’re on track to make our numbers for the month. He treated the kitchen staff to a couple of bottles of 2007 Mount Eden cabernets.”

“Is that supposed to be a good wine?”

“Um, fuck yeah.”

“I wouldn’t know. My favorite wine is Manischewitz. Besides, Dan does enough drinking for the both of us. Average it out, and the kids in my family imbibe in moderation.”

“Are you hungry? I brought some cauliflower soup and poached salmon home. I put it in the refrigerator.”

“You’re sweet, Alex, but it’s a little too late for a full meal. I have to get up early to finalize a big presentation for tomorrow.”

“Did you have anything to eat?”

“I had some of the leftovers from brunch. It was plenty.” Emily tilted the laptop cover towards her and shifted her weight. “By the way, you weren’t maybe a teeny bit upset by what Dan or I said at the brunch, were you?”

“You mean where you made it obvious I’m not as brilliant as you? No, I enjoyed the experience. Listen, Emily. I know who’s better educated – you or me - and I’m fine with it. And I also know you’re driven. You need to be the smartest person in the room. I’ve been with you long enough to know your ego requires it. But at least you don’t rub it in my face. I mean, not on a daily basis. And Dan always needs to make it clear he could have been just as stellar in school as you, except he lacked the motivation. It’s a sibling rivalry I want no part of. I’m tired of being caught in the middle of it.”

“Alex, I’m sorry. I know my brother and I can be a pain sometimes.”

“I don’t care. I’m not marrying Dan. I’m marrying you. I *am* marrying you, by the way, right?”

Emily’s scalp suddenly felt itchy. She resisted the temptation to scratch wildly. She feared if she spoke her voice might crack and betray her emotion. “Why would you bring up the marriage, Alex. Are you getting cold feet?”

“Don’t bullshit me. I may not have been smart enough to get into Stanford, but I’m not a dummy, either. When we first started dating, you constantly remarked how ‘uncomplicated’ I am. You meant it as a compliment, but now I’m not so sure. Yes, I like to watch TV. It’s not a crime, you know. When I go to work, I talk to regular people about regular stuff like - believe it or not - television. I’ve never met Barack Obama, Rahm Emanuel or Michael Bloomberg, or been on anyone’s list of most promising young future money grubbers.”

“Do you think I’m a money grubber?”

“No. I genuinely believe you are one of those people who claim they don’t actually care about the money, except as a way to keep score. But I know you keep score. And you sure care about winning.”

“So what are you saying, Alex? Out with it.”

“I’m saying what you see is what you get. I shouldn’t have to defend myself. I work pretty damn hard at a real job. I like what I do and it gives both me and our customers satisfaction. You do what, exactly? High speed networks? Until we became an item, I never felt bad about myself. Now I’m always feeling badly.”

“No you aren’t.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel.”

“I’m not telling you how you feel. You don’t feel badly, because badly is an adverb. Adverbs modify verbs. For example, if you play golf badly, it means you are hit a lot of poor shots and make a bunch of triple-bogeys. But if you feel badly, it means your ability to feel is impaired. What you meant to say is you feel bad.”

“Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then you ‘re wrong. What I really meant to say is go fuck yourself.”

Chapter Nine

Mr. Goldberg found himself back at Goldblatt's deli, this time with Emily. A careful application of makeup could not conceal her puffy eyes, evidence of hours of crying.

Tia came by with menus. "Hey, Emily. You okay, sweetie?"

"Oh, it's nothing, Tia. Just some fiancée issues."

"Well, all I can say is any guy who isn't grateful for a hot dish like you doesn't deserve your affection."

"Thanks, Tia. You're very sweet."

"What can I get you? Martin, the usual?"

Martin fidgeted. "No, I'll do white meat turkey breast today, and put light mayo on the side."

"I'll have Greek salad and a cup of tea," Emily said.

Tia spun and went off to the kitchen. Martin reached across the table and grabbed Emily's hands.

"What's wrong, Emily?"

"I had a huge fight with Alex."

"So? Everyone has fights."

"But sometimes you say things you can't take back."

"I don't want to pry, but who needs to do the taking back?"

"We both did. But I started it. Dad, it's your fault. Don't raise your eyebrows. You always celebrated my academic achievements, built up my self-esteem, and cheered me on at every opportunity."

"Yeah. I see what you mean. What a terrible father I was."

"No, don't be sarcastic. I'm like you and you know it, and Dan is like mom. For God's sake, your career is the business of winning arguments, which is great if you happen to be a lawyer, but not so much for everyday life."

Tia came back to the table and set their lunches down. "You forgot to say dressing on the side, Emily, but I had José do it for you anyway. Enjoy."

"Thanks, Tia."

Emily ignored her lunch and continued. "Dad, let me tell you about the last argument I had with Ryan before our breakup. We were in Paris, fresh off a visit to the Louvre, and got into a stupid about art. I think Ryan just wanted to get me worked up, but he said Norman Rockwell was as good as Rembrandt, Michelangelo, or any of the other famous artists whose works we saw. Norman Rockwell?"

Give me a break. He constantly sought out opportunities for us to pointlessly bicker so he could show off his cultural depths.”

Martin took a sip of his Arnold Palmer. “Emily, I hate to rain on your parade, but Ryan had a point. Rockwell’s technique can compare to anyone. You know he had a rocky life – three marriages, and his own battles with depression. His idyllic scenes are dripping with irony; an Arcadia that never existed. And his iconic painting of the little Negro girl, Ruby Bridges, being escorted by US Marshalls during the integration of the New Orleans school system is absolutely heartbreaking. She’s a perfect symbol of innocence, her dark skin in contrast with her simple white dress, surrounded by four government agents, their faces not visible, and the “n-word” scrawled on a wall splattered with rotten vegetables. Rockwell put the face of an angelic little black girl on the Civil Rights movement. This is what those backwards white people feared, the picture said with towering moral authority – an eager little six year old girl with a notebook and ruler walking to school. It’s hard for any person with a shred of human decency to look at his painting and not fight back tears.

“Rockwell made art accessible, and ordinary people took great enjoyment from it, hence his enduring popularity. He wasn’t some conceptual artist who smeared feces on a canvas or put a urinal on display. But in his own quiet, calculating, even dare I say, subversive way, he was more important in winning freedom for African-Americans than anyone gives him credit for. He didn’t merely paint schmaltzy scenes. Sometimes the emotionality pulled you in for a punch in the gut.”

“Well knock me over with a feather, Dad. When did you become such an art critic?”

“What, I can’t have a life outside of the legal profession?”

“No, of course you can. And even worse, you make me realize what a stupid snob I was with Ryan. I’m tired of turning everything into an argument. I hate myself right now. And I may have pushed Alex too far.”

“Nonsense. If you love each other, you’ll get past this.”

Emily checked her phone repeatedly throughout the afternoon. No texts from Alex. Usually he sent her several in the course of a day. She considered texting an apology, but then thought about the sting of what he had said to her the night before. She pulled her BMW into garage at 8 pm, a relatively early evening, given her workload and the traffic in Los Angeles.

She rode the elevator from the parking level to the lobby. The wait for the next elevator took twice as long as usual. She fought the temptation to recheck her iPhone, and tapped her foot on the floor. Finally, the elevator doors opened. She pressed her floor and then hit ‘door close’ three times.

Emily's heart was pounding with trepidation when she turned the key in the lock of her door. "Alex, you home?" she called out. "Alex? Alex?" No answer. She hung her jacket in the hall closet and listened for sounds of life in the condo. No one in the bathroom. No TV or music playing. "Alex?" she said again, this time the rise in her voice sharper, higher, a trace of fear contained within.

In the kitchen she saw a piece of white printer paper in the center of the counter. Breathless, she walked over, hesitated for a second, and then picked it up. A message was scrawled in blue ink.

I moved some of my stuff out. I'm sleeping over at Gabe's. I'll come back in a few days when you are at work and get the rest of my clothes. You win, Emily. I hope you find someone who comes up to your standards. I really do. Sorry it wasn't me. Have a happy life. Alex.

Emily gasped for breath. She fumbled for her phone and speed dialed Dan.

"Hey, sis, what's up?"

"Can you come over right away?"

"Um, is it urgent? I'm kind of at a party at the moment."

Emily could hear the sound of Daft Punk in the background, and voices laughing. "It's never been more urgent. Alex left me."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter. Because I was a bitch. I belittled him and made him feel like crap one time too many and this last incident was the straw that broke the camel's back."

"But belittling is your trademark. Why do you think I turned into such a slacker? No one can compete with you, Emily, when you're sporting your brain boner. At least I'm gay. I don't mind being emasculated."

"Dan, please, not now. I have to get off the phone and barf from anxiety. I'll leave the door unlocked. You'll find me in the bathroom with my head in the toilet bowl."

"Got it. One more bong hit and then I'll be right over."

When Dan got to the condo forty-five minutes later, he found Emily in the kitchen, at the counter, perched on a designer stool, in her pajamas. Dozens of wadded up tissues littered the floor. An open carton of gelato sat in front of her, and she had a bottle of white wine in her right hand. As Dan entered, she lifted the bottle upright and took a large swig.

“Put the wine down, Emily. You can eat all the gelato you want in your misery, but we both know you can’t handle booze. Trust me, you won’t be a happy drunk.” He took the bottle from her hand, which offered no resistance, and set it on the counter out of arm’s reach. “Looks pretty fancy. Did Alex bring it home from work?”

“Fuck, yes, damn him. He has a great palate. I couldn’t name any labels besides Gallo and Manischewitz if my life depended on it. He can expound on the under-appreciated merits of Muscadet as if he were Neils Bohr on the subject of quantum mechanics.”

She took a tissue, blew a large honk, wadded it and let it drop to the floor, where it joined a hundred companions. “Give me the wine back.”

“I’ll decide whether you can have more or not. Right now, I say *not*.”

“Dan, what am I going to do? The wedding is in just a few months. Everything’s booked. I’m even going to send out real, dead-tree invitations, although with an email address to RSVP. We have a website for the event. I’ve already picked out the dress for me and bridesmaids, the DJ, the caterers, the honeymoon is booked...” Emily grabbed another tissue.

“Slow down. How do you know it’s over?”

Emily picked up the gelato container, and slid the note underneath to Dan. “Read it.”

Dan did. “Damn. Harsh. Did you see it coming?”

“I did after his last words to me yesterday were ‘go fuck yourself’.”

“Alex said ‘go fuck yourself?’ Doesn’t sound like him. He’s a pretty mellow dude.”

“Dude? Where’d you just come from, white-people land?”

“Sorry, I slipped into hetero-speak. But you get my point. It seems out of character. If this were a mystery, I’d say there must be some plausible explanation as to why his fingerprints were on the water glass next to Colonel Mustard’s bed the night of his murder.”

“You’re right. It’s not like Alex. At least, it wasn’t until he moved in with me. I just absolutely rode him to death. I always had to be right about everything. We both know green politics are a total crock of shit. So what? Who cares if he’s against plastic bags? Of course every person with a scintilla of intelligence knows when you take market forces out of the economy, you may do more harm than good. What the fuck does it matter if Alex is in favor of wind power, which means the slaughter of millions of birds, including for fuck’s sake goddamned bald eagles. Let’s shred the eagles to confetti, why don’t we? I always had to get in the last word. ”

“In other words, you were yourself.”

“Thanks, Dan. You’re a real comfort.”

“Hey, you’re the one who called me. What can I do to help?”

“First of all, how about a little sympathy?”

Dan put his arm around Emily’s shoulder and gave a squeeze. Then he bent over and picked up all the tissues. As he was down on his hands and knees he could see her arm start to move. He quickly popped up.

“Uh, uh. This is not a problem the solution of which will be found at the bottom of a wine bottle. Even a...” turning and looking at the label “...Spottswoode Sonoma-Napa Counties Sauvignon Blanc. Hmm, impressive. You know what my friends like to drink? Pabst Blue Ribbon. It has the advantage of being cheap, but ironically so.”

“Dan, honestly, this is no help at all.”

“Ok, sorry. I’ll turn off the sarcasm. Let me ask you a very sincere question. Do you love him?”

“What do you mean, do I love him?”

“Emily, this isn’t *Fiddler on the Roof*, with Tevye asking Golde, ‘do you love me?’ and then a montage of shtetl Jews singing and dancing? It’s a pretty simple question. Do you, or do you not, love him? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with a decent, honest, caring, kind, good-hearted man who isn’t able to recite the dictionary definition of ironic and who can’t explain the particulars of the Missouri Compromise? Who isn’t aware Thomas Jefferson believed in Deism and not Christianity? Who—”

“SHUT UP! ENOUGH, DAN! ENOUGH!”

Emily blew her nose in another tissue and then said, “You can stop already. I’m not stupid and you’re cruel.”

“Right. But the issue isn’t me. It’s whether you think Alex is stupid. And if you were cruel to him.”
Next time, see if you can get the pebble out of my palm before I close my hand.”

Chapter Ten

Dan's car wound higher and higher into the Hollywood Hills on his way to the home of Camille Carpenter. He passed by massive homes perched upon expansive lawns, gaudy structures devoid of any architectural restraint, half-hidden behind lush landscaping. They seemed to shout "Look! Here lives a rich person!"

At last, Dan arrived at his destination, navigation on his iPhone reliable as usual. Steve Jobs may have been a difficult person to work for, according to the popular biography Dan read on his iPad, but he bequeathed to humanity the power of the gods, available at a swipe of one's fingertips. Ever the expert at Los Angeles traffic, Dan timed his drive perfectly. He was exactly three minutes early. He popped a Clonazepam and surveyed the domicile in front of him. He immediately spotted the addition which failed to blend seamlessly in with the original, a faux Southern plantation house magically transported to the edge of the continent, where land, money and vanity meet the mighty Pacific. *God, the sex in a place like this must be incredible*, Dan thought to himself.

Today represented his first client call. Brad said he would experiment with Dan in a sales role and see what happened. Training consisted of little more than advice to promise anything and constantly upsell. Dan got out of his car, hit the automatic lock out of habit, and strode past the bougainvilleas and to the front door. He rang, and within seconds it swung open. Dan was greeted by an attractive blond woman, forty-ish and dressed in a warm-up suit. He immediately suspected the archetype of California beauty standing in front of him was the second wife, or perhaps even the third. "Hi, are you from the party company?"

"Yes, I'm Dan."

The woman extended a hand, gave Dan's a half-clasp, and said with a smile, "I'm Camille. Please do come in."

Dan entered the foyer, and took in the interior at a glance. A center hall with a double-staircase, steps winding up in a curve on either side, both met at a landing twenty feet above. "Wow, I bet those steps keep you in shape."

Camille laughed. "Actually, we usually take the back staircase off of the kitchen. But you're right, it is a workout."

A stout, middle-aged Hispanic woman came into view from around a corner. "Lupita, we'll sit in the backyard. It's such a nice day, seems a shame not to. Please bring something out to us."

"Yes, Mrs. Carpenter," Lupita said, and then retreated out of view.

“Follow me, Dan,” Camille said, and then led him through what appeared to be a seldom-used living room, then a family room, and finally to French doors and out to a tiled-patio alongside a swimming pool, where a table shaded by the house stood invitingly in the shade. “Please sit down. Lupita will be out here in a moment with some refreshments.”

“Thank you, Camille.”

“Any trouble finding the place?”

“Oh, no. Ever since GPS, it’s pretty hard to get lost. Like indoor plumbing and air freshener, I don’t know how people ever lived without it.”

“Oh, look at you; aren’t you funny? And young. Mike told me when he moved in, and he and his first wife entertained, his guests would constantly get lost trying to get up here.”

Dan silently congratulated himself on his ability to recognize a trophy wife. And, as requested, Lupita appeared, with a silver tray and tea service.

“Thank you, Lupita. You can just set it down here. I don’t remember if I mentioned it, but I have a lunch date at the club and then will be playing tennis in the afternoon. And Mr. Carpenter and I are dining out tonight.”

“Yes, thank you missus Carpenter.” Lupita went back into the house.

“What’s your pleasure, Dan? Coffee, tea, or something cold?”

“I’ll have a cup of tea.”

“I’ve got, let’s see, I think this one is Raspberry Pineapple Luau White and the other is White Ayurvedic Chai.”

“I’ll go for the raspberry, thank you.”

“Loose or strained?”

“Strained, if it’s no bother.”

“None at all.” Camille opened a small canister, scooped out some tea leaves, placed them into an open egg-shaped strainer, then swung the bottom half to the top, closed the clasps, placed the metal oval into an empty cup, and poured hot water from a carafe over it. She then lifted a plate an inch into the air and said, “Can I offer you a scone or muffin? They’re from that new organic bakery everyone is talking about. Flying Aprons, I think it’s called.”

“Oh, no thanks. I usually start out in the morning without much of an appetite and then build momentum as the day goes along. So tell me about the party.”

“Well, it’s for Mike’s sixtieth birthday.”

“Great. What should I know about Mike?”

“Let’s see. Where should I start? He got married early, and then divorced just as fast. He married his second wife, Lisa, and they were together about twenty years. He has two adult kids, one a boy and the other a girl, and his daughter has two of her own, so he’s a grandpa. His kids aren’t crazy about me, but at least they tolerate my company politely. Mike owns a regional chain of carpet and flooring stores. Business fell off a couple of years ago but is booming now. He’d actually be loaded if it wasn’t for his two ex-wives.” Camille’s face took on the impression of someone who had over-bet their hand at the poker table, and only realized their mistake when it was too late to fold.

“And when were you thinking of having the party?”

Camille responded with a date just shy of three months into the future.

“Well, it’s tight, but I’m sure we can pull it off. We’d probably need to hold it here. It might be challenge to get a really great outside venue with so little lead time. Your house seems perfect, by the way, for a party. About how many guests do you think you’ll entertain?”

Camille quietly did some math in her head. “The divorce complicates things a bit. Between business associates, friends from the club, family...oh, and then there’s the question of who’s willing to travel. I’d say somewhere around eighty to a hundred.”

“Perfect. Plenty of room here. Now, what about the theme? What are Mike’s interests?”

“You mean besides money, golf, and sex, in that order?” Once again, the sense a bluff had been overplayed, and Camille was engaged with a different kind of math, one involving the calculation of alimony vs. the loss of Lupita.

“Sex unfortunately will be hard to pull off, unless you want to hold a swingers key party. And golf makes for a lousy theme. Try this idea on for size. If Mike is about to turn sixty, then he was born during the Eisenhower years. Prosperity. A chicken in every pot. The golden age of old-fashioned TV shows. Kids in bobby sox drinking milkshakes at Doc’s malt shop. Polite, well-mannered Negroes who took the discrimination against them with quiet stoicism. I think I see it coming together. And since Eisenhower spent more time on the golf course than in the Oval Office, we could even weave golf into the decorating somehow.”

“Well, I don’t know. It sounds a bit, old fashioned maybe?”

“Oh, don’t you worry, with the right DJ, we’ll blow the roof off this joint.”

“I guess. You seem so certain.” Camille shrugged.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Camille. Now, our pricing, which typically includes all the food, drink, decorations, valet parking, set up and breakdown, generally runs around \$100-\$150 per person. But Mike is only going to turn sixty once. I think we’ll want to pull out all the stops on this one.”

“It seems a bit pricier than I thought.”

“You don’t want the last Mrs. Carpenter to hear from her kids you don’t know how to throw a party, do you? Now, let’s start talking about how many hours the bar will be open, and why booze is the last place you want to try to cut costs.”

Dan downed his raspberry tea, shook Mrs. Carpenter’s hand, and was shown out by Lupita. He traveled back, this time losing altitude, and the closer he got to sea level, the less garish the homes became. Taking a detour, he stopped at the apartment to smoke some weed and make himself a smoothie, and then returned back to the offices of Creative Concepts at about 2 pm. At the entrance, the receptionist, Chloe, looked up from the Facebook app on her smartphone and said Brad wanted to see him right away. Dan threw his biker bag on the chair in his cubicle and continued down the hallway in nervous anticipation. Brad was waiting for him, a big smile on his face. As Dan approached, he started to clap. “Holy shit, Dan. What did you say out there? Mrs. Carpenter completed our online contract and agreed to fork over \$27,000. \$270 per guest. We average \$115. How did you do it?

“I figured out what might motivate her.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“I got her competitive juices flowing in regard to the former Mrs. Carpenter. And I pitched a retro 1950s theme.”

“1950s. Brilliant. Welcome to sales, young man.”

Dan went downstairs to the coffee shop with two of the young women in the office, fellow cubicle-dwellers Tani and Li Jing. They brought their drinks to the table. “Boy, Dan, you sure hit the ground running,” Tani said.

“Yeah, and please don’t take this the wrong way, but how did a complete slacker like you close a big piece of business on your first sales call? Li Jing asked.

“Don’t worry. I wear my slacker label like a badge of honor. I’ve always assumed any success in life is tainted if you work too hard for it. Anyone can be an eager beaver. I prefer taking the path of least resistance.”

“Very clever,” Li Jing said.

“Hey, you want me to file a sexual harassment suit my first week on the job? Don’t tempt me. My dad’s a lawyer.”

"I'm only yanking your chain. Plus I've got a hall pass on gay jokes because I have two lesbian moms," Li Jing answered. "To restore some karmic justice to the universe, I've resolved I'm going to adopt a couple of white kids."

"Sounds like a plan," Dan said.

"And I know all the bad lesbian jokes. Like what do you call a lesbian with long fingernails. Single."

"Cute. I have to share we gay guys aren't very fond of lesbians. No offense to your two moms, by the way, who I'm sure are upstanding members of the community. But in general most lesbians hate men and don't dress well. I love men and would commit an act of senseless violence for the right pair of shoes."

"Both my moms wear sweats. *Outside* the house."

"You have my sympathies. What's your deal, Tani?"

"I went to Amherst as an undergraduate and have a master's degree in public policy from Tufts. All of which is perfect training for my role as events coordinator."

"A rich boyfriend could come in handy."

"Tell me about it. Mine, Russell, works in the accounting department of North America headquarters of a Japanese conglomerate. They sell copiers, medical devices and own a chain of department stores. You know what happens every time the yen fluctuates sharply?"

"No, what?"

"He works late, and I spend my evenings torn between plans for either murder or suicide."

"Sounds like fun. I'm gonna love working with you guys."

Chapter Eleven

Dan sat in a therapy session with Dr. Lev Mandelbaum. A bald man in his mid-fifties with a salt-and-pepper goatee and heavy black-framed glasses, Dr. Mandelbaum's style would have suited Alan Ginsberg. Dan imagined his therapist stumbling out of a Negro-filled Harlem bar in the height of the beatnik era, the poem 'Kaddish' taking form in his mind, wondering how many times the word 'balls' should be repeated for maximum shock effect. Dr. Mandelbaum's mien resembled Buddha on a diet, beatific but aware of his cholesterol. He sat in one of the two easy chairs which faced each other, legs crossed, not like a gay man, but in an intellectual manner. His Yale Medical School diploma hung framed on the wall, alongside a Winslow Homer seascape.

"So, Dan, it sounds like you've made some progress."

"Yeah, Dr. Mandelbaum, things seem to have taken a bit of an upswing. I've discovered I'm actually pretty good at sales, which shouldn't really be a surprise, since it's just slinging bullshit, when you get right down to it. Once you embrace the fact that the essence of closing a deal is stroking someone's ego, it's easy-breezy."

"Well, some responsible people have genuine business ethics."

"I'm sure. That must be why a bottle of soda pop with three cents-worth of ingredients cost four dollars in a restaurant and seven at a movie theater."

Height-weight-proportional-Buddha scratched his goatee. This exchange wouldn't make it into the Sutras. "Tell me how it's going now that you've moved out of your mom's home."

"Oh, totally chill. My roommate is a good friend from high school, Rochelle. Thank God the apartment has two bathrooms. We like each other's company but pretty much head off in separate directions. Everything's been peachy so far."

"And how about things with your mom and Jack? Not their relationship with each other, which is none of my business. I meant how are you getting along with them?"

Dan was silent for a moment. "Better, since I moved out. Although I gave Jack more ammunition to hate me when I pissed off his homophobic elderly mother. She tried to convert me to Christianity and made a crack about gay marriage, and I dished back in turn. I don't care how old she is. She could be 150 for all I care. Rude is rude."

"Were you rude?"

"Well, sometimes *frum* Christians annoy me. The overwhelming majority are like Reform Jews: religion is a compartment in their lives. They give presents on Christmas, eat ham on Easter, and believe

in God in a vague, noncommittal way. Sure, I cheated on my taxes and my wife, but I believe in Jesus, so I'm saved. Like a Triple-A card in your wallet. If I get a flat tire, I'll call a toll-free 800 number and some poor slob who can't afford regular dental care will change it for me. What gives me the heebie-jeebies are the ones who take religion seriously. Like Orthodox Jews, who believe God gets a pain in his kishkas every morning a Member of the Tribe fails to wrap *t'fillin* and pray for the redemption of the *Beit HaMikdash* in Jerusalem. Sincerely religious Christians seem to fall into two categories: they hate us because they think we killed Jesus, or even worse, they love us, because they believe once we convert *en masse* the End of Days will arrive. Fortunately, no one, Christians or Jews, takes religion seriously anymore. Well, Muslims do, and they hate Jews because they think we stole a seven mile-wide strip of sand from them. For peace to break out, we need all the Muslims to move to America and get secularized like the rest of us. Once they get addicted to Starbucks and start driving kids to soccer games they'll lose their religious zeal."

"Dan, our sessions have a limited amount of time. Let's try to get back on point. Did you apologize to Jack's mom or to Jack afterwards?"

"No. His mom 's an old lady. If I'm careful, I can probably avoid seeing her until she shuffles off this mortal coil. And regarding Jack, since I've moved out its pretty easy to get along with him. If you think an apology is absolutely mandatory, then I'll grunt in his general direction next time I see him."

"It's up to you to decide if your behavior rose to the level of a social infraction requiring apology. And what's the status of your, um, 'partying?' You know in general I frown on, I don't want to say abuse, but perhaps over-use of alcohol and pot as a solution to life's challenges."

"Of course you do! It's bad for business. And since you asked, I've cut way back on weed. In college, I got high every single day, same as my last two years of high school. And I only drink, well, get totally shit-faced, when I go to clubs. As a responsible member of the taxpaying class, I can't afford to be too wasted to function. The days of wine and roses, I am sad to say, are in my past. I can't blow off showing up at work the same way I could decide not to bother going to class."

"Well, a sense of responsibility regarding work and better personal habits are encouraging, I suppose."

"But you're one to talk, Dr. Mandelbaum. You've got me on Clonazepam for anxiety and Ambien for sleep issues. When it comes to the wonders of pharmacology, you seem like quite the advocate of altering one's natural body chemistry."

The jolly gleam in fit-Buddha's eyes dimmed. "Dan, we've been over this before. I prescribe extremely moderate doses, and for very specific purposes."

“Right. They also happen to be boner-killers. I’m a young gay man in my early 20’s. You want me on Viagra to counter libido-killing effects of this stuff.”

“Dan, I can’t tell you what to do. I can only advise.” Buddha-who-uses-the-treadmill took a sip of his green tea.

“I’ll tell you who could use some advice: my sister Emily. She and Alex recently broke up. From what she told me, it’s essentially her fault. She’s so goddamned arrogant and feels a need to wear her intelligence on her sleeve. Her idea of a good time is debating public policy. I think Alex finally snapped. He’s a good guy. In fact, I could probably envision him as the one, between the two of them, to put his career on hold to be a stay-at-home dad. He’s your basic nice guy, no overweening ego. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, but certainly no dummy. Emily is crushed.”

“And does this intellectual arrogance perhaps run in the family, Dan?” Buddha apparently decided to take a poke at a vulnerable soft spot.

“Funny. Very funny, Dr. Mandelbaum. Of course it does. My Dad’s a lawyer, Emily is top-of-the-class in everything she does. And with your powers of analysis, I’m sure you can read me like a book. I knew I’d never be able to measure up, so I’ve decided to use contemptuous mockery to hide my insecurity. Along with a boatload of weed and a Clonazepam chaser. And aren’t you forbidden by the Hippocratic Oath from gratuitous criticism?”

“Trust me, Dan, my comments were extremely mild as far as criticism goes. But getting back to Emily, does she have a professional therapist she has access to? I certainly don’t think it’s advisable I see another member of your family, but I can provide a referral if you’d like.”

“No, Emily would never see a shrink. She’s too proud. And the pity is she barely drinks and doesn’t use drugs. She’ll probably take it out on the yoga mat.”

“If she changes her mind, let me know.” Buddha took note of the clock on the wall. “Well, it looks like our time is just about up. See you next week, Dan.”

“Looking forward to it, Doc.”

Chapter Twelve

Dan and Gilad met Emily for dinner after her 7 pm yoga class. They went Ninjin in Santa Monica for sushi.

“My treat, Em. I’m making big bucks,” Dan said. “Well, not yet, exactly, but Brad has already started to talk to me about a raise. He said he’s thinking of a some type of commission structure on top of my base salary. I am the first full-time sales person for them. Until me, he went out and did all the client schmoozing and the cubicle-dwellers handled all of the detail. I just closed the Naomi Fleiderblum Bat Mitzvah. They’re going to hold it at Shutters on the Beach, not far from here. Total price tag around forty-five thousand and our profit after expenses will be around twenty thousand. I’m feeling flush, for the first time in my life. Dinner’s on me, guys. Order whatever you’d like. As long as both of you keep it under thirty dollars per person.”

“Thanks,” Emily said. “So, Gilad, I heard about your plan for the bike shop. How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. I signed the lease, or more precisely my dad co-signed it. And I’ve started to put in motion all the different pieces required to actually get the venture launched. I need to become a licensed reseller for the right manufacturers, get the space built out and hire a couple of people. I’ve been working my ass off. I asked your stupid brother” –sidelong glance – “to come in as my partner and help shoulder the load, but I guess the party planning business was his burning life ambition. Who knew? I think I’ll be ready to open in about two months. And I’m pretty lucky my parents are willing to lend me the startup funds. It’s a real loan, with an interest rate, payment terms, the whole shebang. My dad’s a meticulous businessman, if nothing else. He gave me some advice. He said the challenge for any storefront retail business is to get enough foot traffic. He suggested putting in some type of high end coffee shop or boutique restaurant. I think if I plan it just right, I can add a food business without too much extra expense. And we’ve got the space. I just need to find someone who might want to come in and run the restaurant.”

Emily twirled her agedashi tofu around with her chopsticks. “I know someone who would jump at an opportunity to do something entrepreneurial involving the restaurant business. Unfortunately, we’re not exactly on speaking terms. Alex came over last week while I was at work and cleared out the last of his possessions, and he left a check for his half of this month’s Internet and cable bill. The condo’s in my name, anyway. And I need to figure out what to do about the wedding. It seems crazy to think we could still get married after this. We’re gonna lose a ton on the deposits, and dad already paid for the wedding dress. What do you do with an unused wedding dress, anyway? Do I keep it and tell whatever guy I

eventually marry I happened to have it picked out?" Emily picked up a napkin and held back a small sob. "Sorry, fellas. Plus I suppose unless I want to be a total shit, I have to return the engagement ring. I know Alex doesn't make a ton of money, and it must have been a financial sacrifice for him." Another sob, this time not held back.

"What do you think about trying to get back together? This isn't too different than the plot of your average romantic comedy. What would Jennifer Aniston do in a situation like this?" Dan asked.

"I don't know about Jennifer Aniston, but I'd have to go crawling back on my hands and knees. You know that's not my style."

"Do you love him?" Gilad asked.

"I hate to admit it, most of all to myself, but yes, I do. He's grown on me. He's sweet, affectionate. He always did little extra things, like bring home good leftovers from the restaurant. So he works evenings. Big deal. I get into the office by 7:30 am. By the time I get home after yoga class, you can pour me into a glass. I'm already too old to go out on the town and party at night. Like some people we know, right, Dan? Anyway, the reality is I usually spend a couple of hours on email or prepping for meetings the next day. If Alex were home, I'd probably be a bitch to deal with, same as in the office. It's probably healthier if I have a chunk of time by myself at the condo to clear my head."

"And you say Alex might be interested in something entrepreneurial?" Gilad asked.

Dan and Gilad went out for a coffee after Emily left. They sat out on the sidewalk. They could hear the sound of the Pacific in front of them, even though they couldn't see the ocean in the dark. "I have a question for you," Dan remarked. "What do you think is worse? Taking a dump in a public restroom, or being next to someone doing it?"

"I don't know. Both are nasty. I'd say being next to someone. Usually the stink is disgusting."

"Here's what I don't understand," Dan said. "America put a man on the moon before you or I were even born. How is it possible in the 21st century, in the wealthiest and most free nation on earth, I have to smell someone else's shit? You ever hear of a book called *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair?"

"No," Gilad answered.

"It was written about a hundred years ago. It was an exposé of the meat packing industry, and how absolutely gross and disgusting the practices were back then. In those days, when you ate a hot dog, you might have a rat or a worker's finger from the factory ground into it at no extra charge."

"Thanks for reinforcing my vegetarianism."

“No prob. After this novel got published, Americans were understandably outraged. The FDA got formed partially in response. Why don’t we have a similar outrage today? How much would it cost to put private self-cleaning high tech Japanese toilets, with walls and doors extending down to the floor, in every public restroom in America? You could probably make a profit on it, and charge money for advertising and sponsorship. The big soap and personal care product companies would be salivating over the opportunity. And you could have screens with ads playing while you’re in there. In the middle of the 20th century our grandparents used to hear from *their* grandparents how much harder it was in the old days, when they had to use outhouses. Well, at least they had those outhouses to themselves. I imagine someday we’ll tell our grandkids when we were younger, you had to listen to other people farting and shitting, and would choke on their smell. The Nasty Years, they’ll be known as.”

“You’ve got a point. Say listen, Dan. I’ve been thinking about something.” Gilad flecked a non-existent speck of dust off his shirt. His foot tapped nervously on the pavement. The Pacific surf continued to pound the shore, the mighty body of water indifferent to the affairs of two young Jewish homosexuals.

“What? What’s up? No, let me rephrase my question: wassup? No, even better: ‘sup?” Dan looked intently at Gilad, as if he was seeing him for the first time. Notwithstanding all the lightered commentary about bowels, he felt his own rumble and shift.

“Oh, nothing. I was going to ask you something about this concept I had for combining some type of restaurant into the bike shop. But I’m a bit worn out. We can talk about it some other time.”

Chapter Thirteen

At work, Emily's boss, 11Network's CEO and founder, Niraj Bhargava, called her into his office, a much more modest affair than Brad's at Creative Concepts. True to their startup roots, the space, located in a characterless and bland four-story office building, resembled the administrative space of an auto dealership. "Come in, Emily, and shut the door."

Emily's pulse quickened. Unannounced, closed door meetings were often the harbinger of bad news. She took a seat.

Niraj put his elbows on the desk. "Emily, I'll get right to the point. You're one of our most valuable executives and without question a core contributor to our success. But this is a small company, and it's impossible not to hear things. There's a lot of complaints about your management style from your team. We have high performance expectations, so it's easy for bosses to be demanding. The board is demanding of me. Don't think I take the pressure lightly. But there's a difference between demanding and unreasonable.

"I don't want to get into specifics, because this isn't a performance review; it's only advice. One of the reasons you run a department and are a VP is because you are smarter, hungrier, and more qualified than the people who work for you. But you don't have to rub their faces into your superiority. When people kill themselves on a presentation, and then you rip their work to shreds in a pre-meeting review, you're not doing them a favor. We've got a shot – a very realistic shot – at going IPO or getting acquired, and afterwards you and I both will be financially set for life. So this conversation is not an exercise in goodwill or benevolence. I want you to be a more inspiring, positive leader so both of us can get rich."

"Thanks, Niraj. I appreciate the candor. And it doesn't come as a surprise. You're not the first person who told me I can be overbearing."

Niraj knitted his brows. "Hmm, I hadn't realized anyone on your team had spoken to you directly."

"No, I was thinking about my personal life. My fiancé and I broke up recently. I haven't brought it up at work because, well, because frankly it sucks and it's unprofessional and I don't want to be one of those women who cries in the office and then doesn't get taken seriously."

"I'm sorry to hear about the breakup. And I respect your desire for privacy. I realize I'm speaking out of both sides of my mouth on this. I know I am a pain at times as a manager myself. I probably need to soften my rough edges a bit as well. Anyway, here's what I've decided. Your job is safe – you don't have to worry about that. You are beating your numbers and everyone on the board likes you. Everyone but

Vinod, but I think he hates all of humanity on general principle. But I want you to take a week of vacation to decompress and when you get back to meet with an executive coach who specializes in working with really bright, high energy performers to improve their leadership skills. His name is Hiro Tanaka. I've personally used him in the past. Don't worry, he's not New Age-y or anything. He's a solid business professional who understands how to help grow talent. You know how when you go into Starbucks and order a latte at the register they look as happy as if you just gave them a surprise birthday present? Do they think they really wet their pants in excitement when someone in a coffee bar orders - hold onto your hat - coffee? Of course not. They're trained to be friendly because it's good for business. It's not complicated. Anyone can be an asshole. But you don't have to act like one."

Emily took this in in silence. She felt her body tense. Then she exhaled, with a sense of defeat. "You're right, Niraj. I've been a total bitch. I hate having such a blind spot."

"Don't worry, it happens to everyone at some point. Everyone with oversized ambition, to be more precise. I don't know where you can get away on short notice. I suggest Maui."

Emily simmered in frustration for the rest of the afternoon. After work, she headed over to the yoga studio. The class was taught by Morgan, who looked like she had been poured into her Lululemons. Her luminescent blond hair was pulled back into a bun. Her figure resembled a gymnast who never bothered to lose weight: elastic, flexible, and with curves in all the right places. She radiated an inner calm. Given Emily's mood on this particular evening, it took every ounce of restraint not to walk to the front of the room and strangle her instructor.

In the Janu Sirsasana pose, Emily pushed. Morgan, who appeared to have been born without sweat glands, admonished the class to push harder. Repressing the temptation to grab the nearest fire extinguisher and bash Morgan's head in, Emily instead turned all of her inner rage to attaining a perfect pose. Suddenly, she felt like her hip was being wrenched out her socket. The peaceful calm of the studio, silent except for the soothing voice of Morgan and the grunts of her students, was broken by a shrill scream: "FUCK!!!! YOU DIMWITTED, AIRHEADED, COCKSUCKING, SKANKY CUNT! MY FUCKING HIP HURTS! COME HERE SO I CAN SNAP YOUR NECK!"

Martin, Connie and Dan crowded around Emily's bed in the emergency room of the UCLA Medical Center. Through the thin curtains, they heard the sound of Spanish coming from both sides. Emily sat propped up, with Martin seated to her right, Connie to her left, and Dan standing at the foot of the bed. *Dios mio*, a sobbing female voice exclaimed repeatedly. The curtain pulled open and a middle-aged

female nurse, with a lumpy figure not accentuated by hospital scrubs, asked, "How are you feeling," glancing down at her chart, "Ms. Goldberg?"

"Like I want to pull my thighbone out of my leg and use it to beat my yoga instructor over the head. But not as intensely as I felt about it an hour ago."

The second cousin of the Pillsbury Doughboy, the one who went into nursing, replied, "If you feel better, that would be pain medication kicking in. Dr. Belskaya needs to review the MRI and the X-ray results and will be in soon to check on you."

After the curtain pulled shut, and timing her remark after the next *Dios mia*, Connie turned in Martin's direction and asked, "Are you eating enough? I know why you're with the floozy, and believe me it's not her cooking."

"Actually, Connie, I'm on a bit of a diet. My doctor said it would be a good idea if I took off a few pounds."

"The doctor who charges you money to take your clothes off, or the one you share a bed with and does it for free?"

Emily stirred. "Mom, really? I'm laying here crippled and you still can't give it a rest with the cheap shots about Dad's girlfriend? Besides, it's not like you locked yourself up in a monastery."

"Monasteries don't take Jews."

"It's just a figure of speech. The point is you guys each have a new person in your life. The Thirty Year's War ended. Get over it."

Connie emitted a large sigh and Martin studied the monitor Emily was hooked up to. Another *Dios mio* and then the curtain opened again, revealing a dark man of medium-height who badly needed a shave and a good night's sleep. "Hi, I'm Dr. Belskaya. You must be Emily."

"Yes, doc, I'm the one in the bed. My loving family is here alongside me."

Dan slid around to Connie's side to make room. Dr. Belskaya flipped open a folder and looked down at some papers inside. "I've got good news for you. The X-ray came back negative and the MRI indicates a severe sprain but no torn ligaments. Let me guess. Yoga?"

"Yep," Emily replied. "But the good news about the extent of my injuries doesn't diminish my resolve to murder the instructor."

"You'd be surprised how many yoga injuries we get in here. It's supposed to be a gentle sport which harnesses the natural energy of the body or some type of bullshit. But hey, the Communists banished my grandfather to Siberia for growing turnips. It's a crazy world. The problem in your case is women are usually more flexible than men, young women even more so. So when the instructor, ignoring both

common sense and the basic architecture of the human body, urges you to ‘push past the pain,’ she overlooks the fact God has given you only one set of hips. Although nowadays modern medicine can replace them.

“I’m sending you home with a prescription for pain medication and a pair of crutches. Unlike your yoga instructor, I advise you listen to your body. If you’re in pain, rest until you feel better. You’ll be sore for a while, but take it easy and before you know it you’ll be ready to scratch the top of your head with your foot. But I urge you to resist the temptation.”

After Dr. Belskaya left, a discussion ensued regarding the logistics of transporting cars and people to Emily’s condo. Dan agreed to drive Emily home in her car, and then have Martin bring him back to the hospital parking lot to retrieve his Prius. Meanwhile, Connie planned to stop at Whole Foods and stock up on provisions. Emily was taken down to the lobby in a wheelchair and winced in pain when she got into the front passenger seat of her BMW. During the drive, she recounted the conversation from earlier in the day with Niraj.

“Wow, so your life has taken a really sudden unfortunate turn for the worse,” said Dan.

“You don’t have to sound so pleased about it,” Emily replied.

“I’m not. But maybe the universe is trying to impart some wisdom.”

“Right, as if you aren’t cut from the same cloth. You don’t fool me one bit with the hipster slacker pose you are always so busy maintaining.”

“Please, do not ever, ever call me a hipster again. If I could, I’d take a fire hose to all of them, like Bull Conner did to the Civil Rights marchers of the 1960s. After the revolution, trust me, I’ll have men in their twenties with long beards and porkpie hats arrested on the spot. And anyone with those big hollow round earrings and giant droopy earlobes will be summarily executed.”

“Hey, Dan, take it easy with the car. Just because you can drive fast doesn’t mean you have to. Jeez, what am I going to do now? Niraj suggested Maui, but I don’t want to go there alone. It will dredge up stupid memories of when I was there with Alex. Plus, I can’t surf or scuba dive until I heal.”

“This is where a substance habit could come in really handy. They’ve got badonkadonk weed out there. You could do a lot worse than sit on a balcony watching sunsets and getting high.”

“Not exactly my scene, Dan. Plus, if I go anywhere, I’d like some company.”

“Anyone you can call? Don’t look at me. I’m only a few weeks into my new job. I can’t ask for a vacation yet. How about mom? She could probably get off from work.”

“I don’t know. Between my breakup with Alex and her inability to get over the divorce, we would probably get on each other’s nerves. Too bad I don’t have any really close girlfriends.”

“Here’s what I suggest. Go to New York. Stay in a fancy hotel in midtown. Dine in nice restaurants, take in some movies and shows, do some shopping. Cousin Jackie lives there, and I’m sure you have a bunch of friends from college and all those Jewish teen trips we took. You can take cabs everywhere if your hip hurts.”

“Not a bad suggestion. I’ll consider it.”

Dan’s cell phone rang. Emily answered it for him. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hi, Emily. Tell Dan after he takes you up, I’ll be waiting for him in front of the building. Your mom will get you set up in the apartment and we’d probably just get in each other’s way. Plus, I want Dan to be able to get back to his car.”

“Sure thing, Dad.”

Emily hung up. “Yeah, in each other’s way. A perfect summary of the relationship between mom and dad.”

Dan parked the car in the underground garage. He walked around to Emily’s side of the car. She got out, and with the aid of the crutches, made her way to the elevator. As they opened the condo door, Dan’s cell phone rang again.

“Hi, Dan. It’s mom. How are you guys doing?”

“Surviving. We just got here.”

“Good. Ask Emily is there’s anything special she wants from the market.”

Emily could overhear the conversation, and shook her head from side to side.

“She said you decide. You know what she likes. Get her one of their store-made lasagnas. The kind loaded with gooey fat and tomato sauce. Perfect for a patient who needs cheering up. And kale salad. Lots of kale salad.”

“Okay. You get her into bed and tell her I’ve got my spare key and I’ll be there soon.”

“Deal. She’ll be waiting for you.”

Dan went back downstairs, and found Martin in his Mercedes, parked in front of the building loading zone. “How is she?” Martin asked as Dan slid into the car.

“About as well as could be expected. In the car ride over, she shared with me she received a dressing down from her boss this afternoon. Apparently, and this came as somewhat of a shock, not only fiancés, but worker bee underlings resent being patronized and disrespected. So the visit to the ER

is the cherry on top of a very, very shitty week for her. The good news is the CEO ordered her to take a week of mandatory R&R, and then is going to send her to some sort of executive coach who teaches clients the hard-won wisdom that the average person doesn't like being yelled at. I suggested she go to New York and maybe see if she could hang out with Cousin Jackie."

"Good idea. She could use a change of scenery. Might help her out."

"Plus, I'm not convinced things are 100% over with Alex. He's the first boyfriend of hers who didn't make me want to retch. How many times did Ryan say 'just because I got a perfect score on my SATs doesn't mean I'm better than anyone else?' For once, she's with, or *was* with, a genuinely decent human being. An apology might go a long way. If she could just swallow her pride."

"Emily, apologize? I'd love to be a fly on the wall when she apologizes for the first time in her life."

Emily landed at LaGuardia on a Sunday afternoon. Her pain had subsided sufficiently to no longer require the ingestion of prescription-strength pain killers, and now she was able to hold the discomfort in check with Advil. As she sat in the cab en route to Manhattan, the gritty nature of New York struck her, as it always did, as a sharp contrast to Los Angeles. She was glad her father had decided to pursue a career on the West Coast, allowing her to grow up in sunshine and amid plastic-surgery enhanced beauty.

Emily booked a room at The Plaza and decided to splurge for a Central Park view. Her driver, a cheerful Sikh man, tried to engage her in pleasantries, but after a couple of short, noncommittal responses to his questions, decided the path to an optimal tip was silence. After forty minutes of aggressive driving, they pulled up to the front entrance of the hotel. Emily was greeted by a doorman and the malodorous stench of animal waste emanating from the horse-drawn hansom cabs standing in a row alongside the entrance to Central Park. A few minutes later she reached her room, with the view as promised. She separately texted Dan, Martin, and Connie to let them know of her safe arrival. Then, she transmitted one more message, to Cousin Jackie, confirming their dinner date for the next evening. Connie lived on the Upper West Side, and they planned to meet at Boulud Sud, normally well beyond Jackie's budget as merchandising manager at Macy's and living in a shared two-bedroom which consumed over 50% of her take-home pay.

Emily ordered room service – a burger and fries and a slice of apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, possibly the most calories she had consumed in a single meal since her visit to Disneyland as part of her Bat Mitzvah week celebration. She decided to skip Netflix and the experience of a movie-on-a-

laptop, and ordered *No Strings Attached* from the hotel pay per view service, figuring she was in the precise frame of mind Aston Kutscher romantic comedies were made for.

Emily woke up relatively pain free. After a shower and another room service meal, this time a more sensible choice of non-fat yogurt, fresh fruit, and orange juice, she decided to take a walk through Central Park. The weather was gorgeous, sunny, warm but not too warm, and with relatively low humidity by New York standards. The horses continued their habit of defecating wherever and whenever they felt appropriate. However, in morning sunshine Emily took the foul odor in good cheer. She found a park bench and watched roller bladers and joggers go by. A steady stream of dark nannies propelling white babies in strollers was interspersed among the sweaty athletes. As lunch time neared, she decided to wander down Fifth Avenue.

She found a crowded Starbucks to have lunch in, sat down, and took out her iPhone. Niraj had told her not to go on email, and Emily had, for the first time in her career, turned on the “out of office assistant” feature, which sent an automated reply to incoming messages informing them she had limited access to email and would respond the following week. Emily figured she could at least read what had been sent to her and decide whether to reply or not. At the top of her inbox was a message from Niraj whose subject was “Emily, I Hope You Are Not Reading This.” Defeated, she logged out and went online to see what was going on in the world. Then, feeling an increase in pain in her hip, she decided to go back to the room and enjoy the view. However, once upstairs, she changed out of her clothes, put on a fluffy bathrobe, laid back in the bed, and channel surfed. After two hours of aimless television consumption, she took a short but restorative nap.

Emily took a cab from the hotel to the restaurant, to give her hip a rest. She showed up first, and Jackie arrived a few minutes after her. The two young women embraced, then took a half step back and, with their arms still clasped, absorbed the sight of each other. “Oh my goodness, Emily, you look prettier every time I see you. Alex must be crazy to have broken up with you.”

“You look fantastic yourself, Jackie. Listen, dinner’s on me. Let’s get caught up.”

“How did you even manage to swing a reservation?”

“I tipped the concierge at the Plaza forty bucks and let him work his magic.”

They focused on the menu before settling in to serious conversation. “I’ve been on prescription pain meds and still have a bit of jetlag, so if you don’t mind, I’m going to just have sparkling water,” Emily said as Jackie picked up the wine list. “But why don’t you order a nice bottle, have a couple of glasses here, and take the rest home with you?”

“Not a bad idea,” Jackie responded. “Thanks, Emily”

When the waiter came back to the table, Emily ordered Salade Tropezienne with artichoke, fennel and celery, and a main course of cedar grilled rouget with fennel. She didn’t have the slightest idea what type of fish “rouget” was, and decided rather than Google the information she would take her chances. Jackie selected Mediterranean fish soup and chicken with Moroccan couscous.

After their food order was taken, Jackie consulted with the sommelier, and they conferred with a level of serious discussion appropriate for negotiating the borders of post-World War Two Europe. Finally, she settled the boundaries of Czechoslovakia, and ordered a crisp French white which paired well with fish, a charming Blanc de Blanc with notes of oak and springtime.

The sommelier brought the wine. Jackie took a deep sniff over the rim of the glass, took a small taste, allowed just a moment of anticipation to transpire, and then gave the pronouncement of “excellent.” The sommelier smiled and filled Jackie’s glass. Emily put her hand over the top of her glass. “Sorry, no wine for me tonight.” The sommelier tried, and mostly succeeded at not frowning.

Jackie raised her wine glass and Emily her water and with a clink, they toasted “l’chaim”. Then Jackie said, “So, Emily, I was really shocked you called off the wedding. I had thought you and Alex were just perfect for each other. Especially after Ryan.”

“I’m not sure I’m perfect for anyone. Apparently, people find it easy to resent me. How come when men are ambitious it’s considered a virtue, but when it’s a woman strives for the top, they say she’s a bitch? Plus, the wedding isn’t exactly called off. It’s sort of in limbo.” She shrugged. “Not really, but I like to pretend to myself it still is.”

“Anything is possible. You’re being too hard on yourself. Trust me, Alex will crawl back begging for another chance.”

“Jackie, I know you mean well, but I wouldn’t bet on it. But enough about my pathetic tale of woe. What’s up in your life, romantically speaking? Are you still seeing Isaac? He works at Time Warner, right?”

“Yeah, he’s in their marketing department on the movie side of the business. I’ve only been going out with him since freshman year of college. Why did my parents have to send me to Brandeis, anyway? I’m just kidding. But sometimes I think we’re too used to each other. He hasn’t popped the question yet, but if he doesn’t soon, then I may have to take action and force a breakup. Or a marriage.”

“You guys never moved in together?”

“Not yet. I think we probably will once my lease is up. Although given the stratospheric level of rents these days, I expect finding a nice apartment in Manhattan will be a real challenge. And there’s no way

I'm ever going to live in Brooklyn. I'd move to New Jersey first. Someone needs to shoot me the next time I hear about the latest locavore restaurant or authentic pasta store with, you know, soul, where the yeast isn't just yeast, but a spiritual exercise in cleansing the soul and body."

"Jackie, you think Brooklyn is bad, then you wouldn't last a New York minute in California. Everyone is sincere in a completely phony way. You throw in the face lifts and boob jobs and the ridiculous amount of money people spend on their cars, all to dull the pain of sitting in freeway traffic."

"And you drive what, my dear cousin?"

"A BMW. Did I forget to mention we're all hypocrites?" Emily smiled.

"So you think it's really over with Alex?"

"Unless I perform an unnatural act, and beg for forgiveness, and resolve to change."

"Yeah. It's probably over."

They exchanged pleasantries over the meal. The waiter brought over a dessert menu, and they decided to share a chocolate-caramel ganache, and requested two spoons when they placed the order.

"Hey," Jackie said between spoonfuls, "I think the guy over there is checking you out."

"Which one?"

"Turn your head very slowly. On the other side of the room, three tables over to your left."

"There are two guys sitting there. Which one do you mean?" Jackie asked.

"Duh. Not the dumpy guy. The good looking one."

Jackie pretended to be studying a painting hanging on the wall while taking in the fellow diner's looks. Dark, rugged and handsome, he looked like he could have graced the cover of a romance novel. Jackie blushed and turned away.

"So?" Jackie asked.

"Jesus Christ, he's smokin' hot."

Just then the waiter came by with two glasses of fine cognac. "Compliments of the gentleman who said he does not wish to disturb your conversation." The waiter also set down a business card on the table. "The gentleman said he hopes you will call him."

Jackie snatched it up. "Impressive." She handed it over, and Emily read: *Cliff Matthews, Managing Director, Real Estate Finance, Atlantic Capital.*

"Good looking *and* rich. Sir, just a second, my cousin wants to give you her card to return to the young man."

Emily dug into her handbag. *Emily Goldberg, Vice President, Marketing, 11 Networks Data Solutions.*

Jackie drank her cognac. Emily's glass sat untouched.

An hour later, back at the Plaza, Emily's phone rang. She saw Cliff Matthew's number on her caller ID, and answered. "Well, Mr. Smooth Operator, you apparently have some nerve."

"Hi, Emily. I didn't mean to come off as overly forward, but I didn't want to lose the chance to meet you. Are you free perhaps for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Let me check my calendar. Hold on a sec. Emily held the phone at arm's-length and silently counted to twenty. "I can make it work."

"Great. How about Del Pesto? Say 8 pm? I can pick you up at your hotel or meet you there. Whatever you prefer."

"How do you know I'm staying in a hotel?"

"Because your business card says you work in Los Angeles. I'd be surprised if you were telecommuting as VP of Marketing. So I'm guessing you're on a business trip."

"Then you aren't as smart as you think. I'm in New York on vacation."

"Even better. It won't be a school night for you."

"I'll meet you there."

"Do you want me to text you the address?"

"No, they invented the Internet since you sent over a fancy glass of booze, so I think I'll just Google it."

"Hmm. I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

The next day, Emily did some morning shopping, and then saw a matinee show of *Mamma Mia*, figuring she was in the perfect mood for Scandinavian pop star love story schmaltz. She hadn't packed two separate dresses, and didn't want to wear the same outfit two nights in a row. So, on the way back to the hotel she stopped at Bergdorf Goodman and sprang open her wallet for a new little black dress which seemed custom made for her athletic good looks.

"Wow, look at you," Cliff said as she got out of the cab in front of the restaurant, where he was standing waiting on the sidewalk. A knowing glance at the host, and they were whisked to a prime table in the center of the dining room. "Be careful what you order. You know what they say about Italian food. Two days later and you're hungry again," Cliff remarked as they examined their menus.

Emily chose salad and lobster with artichoke, Cliff an appetizer of charred octopus and a main course of truffled beef.

“If you were thinking of wine, you should just order by the glass. I’m not much of a drinker. I’ll just have water tonight,” Emily said

“Sounds good to me. I’ll just ask them to give me a glass of whatever they think goes well with the food,” said Cliff.

“So tell me a bit about what you do, Cliff.”

“Oh, it’s really a bit tedious. I work with a private institutional real estate firm. We’re mostly focused on New York, although we own some properties in other markets. We’ve got about \$30 billion in assets under management, which sounds like a big number, but in single office tower can be worth over a billion, so we’re a mid-tier player relative to the really big boys. But we’ve made some pretty good bets, and right now have a couple of condo projects in Manhattan which have already presold more than double their construction cost. Listen to me. It’s sounds like I’m boasting.”

“No, Cliff. It doesn’t *sound* like you’re boasting. You *are* boasting. Don’t worry, I haven’t heard unbridled male ego in a long time. Boast all you’d like.”

Back at the hotel, Emily undressed in the bathroom while Cliff waited for her in the bed. They embraced, and their hands explored each other’s body. Both satisfied everything was where it was supposed to be, Cliff put on a condom and mounted. Emily felt his weight, substantial, rugged. He smelt faintly like a barbershop. After two minutes of increasingly frantic thrusting, he shuddered, and then rolled off of her. He lay on the bed and gasped, like a fish out of water. After a short while, he recovered his poise. “Wow, you were spectacular,” he rasped.

“Was?” Emily asked. “You might be done, but I’m not.”

Dan looked at her. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m saying exactly what you think I’m saying.”

“I’m not a teenager anymore. I don’t think I can rally the troops for an encore.”

“There are other ways to invade Russia.”

“Um, I’ve got a cold sore. I don’t think I can take the low road.”

Emily fixed a jaundiced eye on him. “Oh yes, I heard that an outbreak of cold sores was going around the city. Get the fuck out of my hotel room.”

“Later, in bed, Emily finished the job herself. She thought of what a gentle, compassionate and patient lover Alex had been. Even on their first night together, he made sure, like Philippides, he would

finish the route from Marathon to Athens, regardless of how grueling the personal toll. Emily fell asleep to the sad thought she no longer shared her bed, or her life, with Alex.

Dear Reader, if you enjoyed this so far, please continue on and purchase the full novel at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Yours truly,

Author Ed Harris

