

## **Jules Rushes In**

### **Aspen**

Snowflakes, big and fluffy, dance from the sky in spirals before dusting Aspen's old, brick buildings and cobbled streets. Jules tilts her head back, opens her mouth and catches one, then another, on the tip of her tongue. One flake lands on her eyelashes, causing her to blink and tear. She gently wipes her watering eye, smearing mascara down her flushed pink cheek. She looks at Ajax Mountain, the white powder sparkling in the late afternoon sunlight, proud to have made it down in one piece, more than once. Tom stands behind her, his hands around her waist, hugging her. She laces her fingers into his, melting her body into his, and leans her head back onto his shoulder. The two rock very gently together.

“Are you having the happiest birthday ever?” she whispers.

“Absolutely,” he responds, with a slight ear nibble.

“Good! Now let's go toast 45, old man!” she teases.

She turns her head and he covers her mouth with his. The kiss is both sweet and sexy. With a pat on her black, snow-pant clad derriere, he tells her he is ready to go and they walk in step to Ajax Tavern.

It is still early for the après-ski crowd, but because this is their first ski day, Jules requested to keep it to just a half day. They have three more days in Aspen and she does not want to push too hard on the first. Tom was patient as she slowly navigated the easiest trails and, with some Merlot-inspired confidence after lunch, a few of the more challenging blues. An avid skier and boarder, Tom typically blazes down the bumps of the black diamonds during his frequent jaunts out west. But, on their first ski holiday together, they spent the day on the easier slopes. He helped her by carving “s” curves.

Jules appreciates his willingness to forego the temptation to shred down the black trails, to guide her down the Ajax's version of bunny trails. He is sweet, attentive and patient. A welcome change from the easy-to-meet, impossible-to-keep players she has dated. With Tom, she is heeding the advice of her happily married friends: date the players, marry a nerd. And though they have been dating only six months, they have already been talking about their future for the last three. She knows it: he is the one.

Jules and Tom walk into the tavern, the blast of warm air greeting them before the hostess does. The room is rustic chic in classic Aspen, and Ralph Lauren, style. Jules and Tom take two stools at the bar, facing the base of the mountain and give their backs to the smattering of the restaurant guests. He orders their wine and they watch the skiers, dapper in their cream and beige cold weather couture, begin to gather at the tables with friends for drinks and conversation at the outdoor tables, just on the other side of the oversized glass window. Inside, the fire keeps the room toasty. Two wine glasses are set in front of them.

"Two Merlots. Here you are," the brunette bartender with girl-next-door beauty says with a smile.

"Thanks," Jules and Tom offer at the same time, as they lift their glasses and toast. "Happy birthday, sweetie," Jules says with a quick kiss on the lips.

The bartender turns with a flash of naturally highlighted hair that any Madison Avenue colorist would envy. "Is it someone's birthday?"

Tom, uncomfortable with the attention, answers with a nod.

Jules adds. "Yes, it's his birthday today. We came here to celebrate."

"Nice! Where are you in from?"

Again, Jules answers, "From New York. Manhattan."

“Yeah? I spend some time in New York myself.”

“Upper East and Upper West,” Jules says, indicating herself as the former and Tom as the latter.

“The city’s great. But, for me, it’s all about the mountains in the winter and the beach in the summer. I go east, to Long Island.”

“Oh! Tom has a place out east, in Amagansett. Do you know it?”

“Of course! I work at Stephen Talkhouse!” She offers a quick handshake, “I’m Marcy. Nice to meet you.”

“Amazing!” Jules responds. “Isn’t it, Tom?”

“Yeah, that’s amazing,” he adds quietly, with a smile and a nod.

“We go there all the time for the live music. We’ll have to look for you this summer,” Jules says, about to take a sip of her wine. “I’m Jules and this is Tom.”

“Nice to meet you. And this round is on me. Happy birthday!” Marcy says, before heading to greet a new patron who has joined her bar.

Jules steals another look at the budding scene outside and then catches the quickest glimpse of a profile, but knows without a doubt. It is Mark.

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Jules has anticipated this moment since Tom's first mention of a birthday celebration at his favorite ski resort. This is not the first run-in with her ex-beau since arriving the previous afternoon. Last night, Jules saw Mark, a regular on the Aspen social circuit and in the *Aspen Peak* social pages, arrive at the Caribou Club. She managed to gracefully duck around the dark corner of the private club's crowded living room without Tom's notice. This very morning, as she and Tom headed to Poppycocks for their famous waffle breakfast, they nearly bumped into Mark as he left the coffee shop, his walk, a self-assured swagger, unmistakable.

Jules and Tom are sitting at the bar so she has the perfect view through the window as Mark approaches the restaurant door. She is desperate to avoid him. Short of sinking through the floor, Jules is certain to come face to face with Mark as soon as he enters the tavern. She starts to blush, nervously in anticipating the coming moment with her ex. Her heart begins to race at the thought of having to introduce him and her adoring, though less confident, boyfriend. While Jules and Mark only speak occasionally, Tom would have no trouble picking up on the chemistry that is still very strong between them.

Mark looks good. Very good. It's possible he actually looks younger now than when he left Manhattan and the stress of his high-pressure investment banking position a few years earlier. His hair is more than a little grown out, the chestnut brown waves accented with the perfect touch of natural gold highlights. His tan is deep from daily visits to the slopes. His stylish sunglasses are just reflective enough to hide his eyes but not the object of his gaze. This is all by design. As are the perfectly coordinated cream ski clothes that only a European has the confidence and the physique to pull off. He pushes through the tavern door while on his cell phone, his gait smooth even in ski boots. Jules watches as he continues on the short path that will

lead him to pass within touching distance of the end of the bar, where she sits, a literal sitting target. She tries to determine how she will respond, probably with feigned surprise.

“Jules?” Tom says, in order to get her attention but she fears, getting Mark’s as well.

The paper napkin peels from the bottom of Tom’s wine glass, drifting to the heavily scratched hardwood floor. Jules leans over on her stool to pick up the napkin, synchronized exactly as Mark passes by. Still leaning over, with only her blond hair concealing her face, she has an unobstructed view of Mark as he walks to the back of the restaurant, looks around as if searching for someone, then circles back toward the front of the restaurant, directly for the door. She starts to straighten up, napkin in hand, and waits just a moment before dropping it again as she watches Mark hesitate inside the door.

“Jules? Are you okay?” Tom asks, noticing she is having a tough time with coordination.

Finally! Mark exits the tavern and passes by the windows, probably having located his caller elsewhere. The close call has Jules’s heart racing. She needs out.

“Yes, but I suddenly feel a little funny, like a little light-headed. I need to go.”

“It’s probably altitude illness. Let’s get you in bed for a bit before dinner,” he says with a smile indicating that he has thoughts other than a nap.

“I could use some fresh air and a hot bath,” she says as she hops off her stool and nearly runs to the door.

“Jules, wait! I’ll be right there!” Tom says, pulling out his wallet for a tip.

“Just meet me outside,” she calls over her shoulder. She walks outside and attempts to take a few deep breaths, the thin air having an uncomfortable, nearly claustrophobic effect. She takes a few steps, searching for what she now wonders may have been a Mark look-alike. At the same time, she searches one of her many jacket pockets for her sunglasses, hoping they will not

only provide a little protection from the glare but also from being spotted by her ex. She is so caught up in scanning the crowd of beautiful people while donning her glasses that she literally rushes into the back of one of them.

“Sorry” she says, distracted.

“Jules? What are you doing here?” It is Mark. *Sweet Jesus.*

“Oh, hi, Mark,” she tries to sound slightly surprised and not at all panicked about literally running into the very man she is desperate to avoid, the one person who could potentially ruin Tom’s romantic birthday get away. She wants to hurry this along but Mark is not cooperating. He rushes nothing and touches her elbow as he leans in to give her a firm kiss hello. On the lips.

“I meant to call, but...,” she trails off.

“But...you’re not alone,” he finishes her sentence. The slight turn of her head to offer her cheek and her harried tone have not gone unnoticed. He still knows her so well.

“Ummm, no,” she starts. “Well, yes, I’m here with someone.” He looks at her, silent, waiting for her to continue. And so she does.

“He’s a great guy, Mark, you would love him. Actually, you probably wouldn’t. Anyway, it’s his birthday and he wanted to come here and I tried to suggest somewhere else, but he pretty much insisted.” She is rambling, partly due to the rush of seeing Mark, partly because she wants to finish before Tom spots them.

“No wonder we haven’t spoken in a while. You must be in love,” he says, enjoying her obvious nervousness, which he reads as as the obvious: she still has feelings for him.

“Well...I am.” She hates her inclination to tell too much, but keeps on going. “I want this to be an amazing trip for him. I don’t want to ruin his birthday and our weekend by having a weird thing here, okay? I’m going to get going. It is great to see you! And, you look great! I will

call you when I return to New York, okay? And you should definitely let me know the next time you're in town so we can, umm...have lunch or something."

"What happened here? Have you been crying, love?" he asks, moving almost deliberately slowly, pretending to be oblivious to how he's been relegated to a lunch date and how desperately she wants to wrap up the conversation. He wipes the smeared mascara tear on her cheek from earlier. An intimate gesture, for sure, but hardly a surprising one for Mark. It's been years since they have seen each other and months since their last call, but Mark still clearly feels comfortably intimate.

As she had feared, they have an observer. Tom is fast approaching. She smiles at him as he lumbers toward them in his clunky, unfastened ski boots.

"Ah, there you are!" She kisses Tom's cheek, as much for his benefit as Mark's. "Tom, meet Mark Whittaker. Mark, Tom DeMarco." *Funny, this Mark and DeMarco thing.*

The men eye each other. It's primordial. The once over, or more accurately, twice plus over, they give each other is so obvious that Jules nearly bursts into laughter. Tom, feeling or feigning himself superior, is the first to offer his hand, "It's nice to meet you. Jules has mentioned you."

Mark, in his most charming accent and with a smirk that could be mistaken for a smile, replies, "Yes. I'm surprised Jules hasn't mentioned you."

Jules is quick to hook her arm into Tom's, to offer him reassurance and to make a point to Mark.

"Well, as I was saying, what a nice surprise to run into you, Mark! We've got early dinner reservations so we've got to run."

"Of course. I'll be seeing you," Mark says before walking away, confidence personified.

*Was that a wink?*

The competition between the men continues beyond the conclusion of their strained encounter. Out of character, Tom sarcastically comments, “I know you don’t mind older guys, but not *that* much older.” She suppresses a laugh at the irony since the two men were born within months of each other. And, frankly, Mark is aging more than a bit better than Tom. No matter his age, Mark’s appearance is difficult to criticize: he is classically good looking with an amazingly full head of hair, bright green eyes and both the tan and relaxed demeanor that an early retirement and ample savings allow.

“Tom! You two are the same age, but you’re the one I’m crazy about!” She leans into him, putting her hand around his waist. She notices he doesn’t reciprocate.

“I don’t like that he said you hadn’t even mentioned me to him. And, why are you still in touch with him anyway?” he asks. Jules finds his vulnerability endearing.

“Please...that is just so like him. He was making it up to unnerve you. He’s probably just jealous,” she says, because she believes it to be true. They walk the rest of the way to their hotel without speaking. It’s a comfortable silence.

They arrive at the St. Regis, admire the roaring, crackling fire and debate curling up in the oversized leather couches. Instead, they decide to return to the room for a nap. Once inside, Tom draws a bath while Jules peels off layers of clothes. As she places her iPhone on the desk, she notices a new text message. The message is from Mark: U could do better. She is amused at his little jab. She hears Tom busy in the bathroom and responds: What makes you so sure? Within seconds, her phone buzzes again, alerting her to a new text: BC you dated me.

Smiling, she turns off her phone and walks into the bathroom, lit only by the candles Tom has placed throughout the room, and joins him in the bubble-filled tub. They soak for a



while before the water cools slightly and their playful, mutual washing heats up dramatically. They move to the bed to make love tenderly, Jules willing herself not to think of Mark and his more aggressive style, and doze off in each other's arms. His shallow snore lulls her to sleep.

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## **Après Ski Trip**

Back in New York, Jules plops down in the Aeron chair at her desk, regretting that she didn't heed Tom's suggestion to extend their Aspen weekend. After a crazy hectic fourth quarter, it's dramatically slowed down at the office. Many of her fellow sales colleagues arrive late, wearing sunglasses to hide their obvious holiday party hangovers and cut their already abbreviated workdays even shorter to finish their last-minute shopping. Before tackling the hundreds of emails that await her, Jules calls her friends, anxiously awaiting a post-trip report.

"Madeleine, it's me," she says, excitement in her voice.

"How was it? And, more importantly, how does it feel to be in love with a man on the brink of a mid-life crisis?"

"The whole trip was perfect, except..."

Madeleine jumps in, "Performance issues? You know there are prescriptions for men his age."

"No!" Jules laughs. "No, we are definitely fine that way. But, I ran into Mark, literally *ran* into him, and had to introduce them."

"Oh, I would have loved to have been a fly on that wall!"

"It was awkward. And funny, the way they sized each other up so obviously and made snarky comments about the other to me. Tom handled it really well. Imagine being in his shoes?"

She switches on her computer.

"Imagine YOU being in either of their shoes! It would drive you crazy. Still in love?"

Madeleine asks, ready to wrap up the topic.

"Very much so, Madeleine. It's just so easy with him."

"Great! Now, let me fill you in on my excitement, which surely trumps your jet-setting

off to Aspen for the weekend. We have a trustee dinner this week and with my recent promotion, I'm now fully in charge."

"You are an amazing hostess, it's just for a much larger group."

"I know but it's my first, so..."

"It will be perfect, I promise."

"Oh! There's the florist! Speak later!"

Jules hangs up, opens her notebook and gets to work.

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## **The Holidays**

Christmas is Jules's favorite time of year. She gets so caught up in the holiday spirit that she even manages to smile at the tourists as she weaves her way around the hordes of them, here to see Manhattan dressed in her finest, with just a sprinkle of powdery snow for a picture-perfect effect. It is her first Sunday in the city in quite some time. Tom is out west for another snowboarding trip. She wakes early, taxis to SoulCycle just in time for the start of the very popular 8:30 class, takes a quick shower and grabs a coffee at the next door café before racing to meet Sloane for some holiday shopping.

She takes a peek at the glamed-up windows before entering the 58<sup>th</sup> Street entrance of her favorite department store, Bergdorf Goodman. Though the store has just opened its doors, there is already a festive hum of holiday music and the crowd of shoppers, mostly New Yorkers, who lay down their cards for perfect, albeit pricey, gifts.

She makes her way through the display of the store's collection of bags, pausing only a moment to stroke the exotic skin of the Nancy Gonzalez bright orange piece for spring, and winds through the jewelry displays before taking the elevator down to The Beauty Level. The doors open and Jules breathes in deeply. The room, sparkling, lightly perfumed and abuzz with soft, feminine voices, appeals to her every sense.

She crosses the floor, smiling as she and Etta, the manager of the La Mer counter, make eye contact with one another.

"Hello, Jules. How are you? Doing some holiday shopping?" she asks, with her pronounced Austrian accent.

"Yes, Etta, that's the idea. But I always seem to find my way here!" Jules says as she

opens the big white jar of the line's signature cream.

"I've got to stock up. The jar at my boyfriend's house is nearly empty."

"It shows where you're spending your time these days," Etta smiles.

Jules smooths some over her face, knowing the extra coat will protect her skin from the dry, cold winter air.

"Of course. Anything else? Did you get our postcard and my voicemail about the eye cream?"

"Yes, that's the other reason I'm here!" she searches her bag for the announcement of the new eye cream launch. With her sensitive skin, Jules is a La Mer fanatic and a new introduction is worth exploring.

"You never can start too early with the eye cream. That's what I tell all my girls," Etta says as she scoops a tiny drop of the precious cream onto a silver applicator and raises her hand to Jules's face.

"May I?" she asks, as she pats the cool, silky cream into the eye area. "Never tug, always gently pat," she reminds her, "This skin is very delicate."

"Are you buying product already?" Sloane announces her arrival to her closed-eye friend. "I'm not even late!"

Jules smiles as she opens her eyes to see Sloane, who leans in and gives her a peck hello on the cheek.

"You look younger already, honey."

"Thanks! I believe it's time to use a daily eye product. I'm starting to see the signs."

Jules looks into the mirror, turning her head one way, then the other, as if expecting instant results. "You still have a few years."

“Sweetie, I’ve been using eye cream since high school. You know my mother’s motto: better to actively maintain than delay and need to take drastic action.”

“Can I help you with any product then?” Etta asks Sloane. She is an excellent salesperson, never pushy, always waiting for the appropriate time to make the offer.

“Sure! I’m always ready for the next best thing. I’ll take one of these eye creams,” she says while patting some of the cream onto her eyes. She wears no make-up and is striking. Perhaps her mother’s advice is to credit. They put down their American Express cards and Etta heads to the register to ring up their sales.

Jules tells Sloane, “I bought two. One for my place and one for Tom’s.”

“Do you want him knowing you’re so old you need eye cream?”

“As if he will even look at the jar! Try as I might, I can’t even get him to use any product. The man shaves with soap!”

“Ouch!” Sloane responds as Etta makes her way over and hands them both their bags—telling them she threw in a few samples—their credit cards and receipts.

“Okay, shoe department?” Sloane asks, as she puts Etta’s contact information into her iPhone.

“Yes, and then we really should shop for others! I still have a lot to buy.” Jules checks her phone and sees that Tom has sent a text. “Especially for this one, who just asked for your phone number,” she says, showing Sloane her phone.

“Thank you, Etta. See you soon! Happy holidays!”

“Merry Christmas! I’ll be in touch!” Etta calls out, as she smiles at her next customer.

Sloane looks at the phone as they walk towards the elevators. “Jules, you know, of course, what this means!”

“Sloane! Maybe he just wants to get your thoughts on what I’d like for Christmas.” Jules hits the up button to call the elevator.

“Jules, how can you be so naive? Okay, we must skip the shoe department and head directly to Harry Winston, where you will show me *exactly* what you want so I know just what to tell him. Thank *goodness* he came to me. Now, honey, I know just how to handle this. I will not rain on your little parade and ruin the surprise, but I will definitely give you some kind of tip so you know to get your hair blown out and a fresh manicure on the day he’ll drop to bended knee.”

Sloane is so caught up in the excitement that her Southern accent and mannerisms are becoming more pronounced.

“Sloane, please! You know I would love for this all to be true, but let’s think for a second. And definitely stop off on the second floor,” she says, as they walk through the gilded doors of the elevator. “A little retail therapy as we talk this through.”

Upstairs, the girls take to one of the plush couches, drop their bags and await the harried salesman. Sloane excuses herself to visit the powder room and Jules has time to herself. With Christmas quickly approaching, Jules and Tom discussed the coming holiday during their last drive out to the house.

Jules had told him that she already has all the nieces’ and nephews’ gifts bought and wrapped. Jules replays their conversation in her head:

While telling Tom how much she was looking forward to the holidays with family, she was nervous about assuming they would be together on Christmas. So, when he asked, “Would you like to spend the holiday together?” Jules felt surprisingly happy and reassured.

“Of course! I’d love to, but let me check my calendar,” she had responded with a laugh. In his car, speeding down the Long Island Expressway, she had started to imagine their first big

holiday together. She has decided to buy him eight gifts, in recognition of Chanukah, but to give them on Christmas. She has already bought the backgammon set they can play together, a book for their quiet nights at the house and concert tickets. She still has five left to sort out but has some clever ideas in mind and finds herself lost in thought.

“Jules? Honey?”

Sloane is standing in front of her, the confused salesman balancing at least six shoeboxes in front of her.

“Oh, yes, sorry. Here we are!”

As the man kneels down and lowers the boxes to the floor, Sloane teases, “Better get used to a man on bended knee, Jules! Since my grandmother, Mimi, we Masters women have had insights into matters of the heart. Tom will propose...by New Year’s, if not Christmas.”

“Honestly, Sloane, I don’t know. I was just thinking...wouldn’t he want to visit with my family if he were going to propose? Tom knows that we celebrate on Christmas Eve and then we have a family breakfast—steak and eggs, fresh-squeezed juice, freshly baked Christmas cookies—on Christmas Day, before everyone scatters in a million directions. I told him I could leave around noon to meet him.”

“Okay, well, what did he say?” Sloane models the bright yellow patent leather Valentinos.

“They’re fun but maybe it’s too hard to tell know if that yellow is going to be your signature color this spring.”

Sloane nods in agreement and takes them off. “Well?”

“He said he’ll be in Long Island, at his cousins’ house, for dinner. That I could take a train there, meet and have dinner with his family. After, we can continue on to the house, for a



quiet night and gift exchange by the fire.” Jules looks at Sloane while she takes a turn modeling black patent leather peep toe Christian Louboutins. “What do you think?”

Sloane jumps off the couch, takes Jules’s hand and squeezes it, “I think we ought to be looking at those in white satin!”

Beneath her calm composure, Jules is growing increasingly excited. *Does Tom have something big in mind?* Sloane is all but certain he will be on bended knee beside the Christmas tree and makes a convincing argument. Jules wonders if Sloane has a clearer perspective than she possibly could. Or some inside scoop.

Jules talks Sloane out of ring shopping—for fear of jinxing anything by acting prematurely—and promises to get back to her with some designs, *just in case*. She walks with Sloane to Café Boulud for her brunch date before she continues with own her shopping. As Jules walks uptown along Madison, she remembers that she and Tom did agree that dating one year is plenty of time to know if what they have is marriage material. And they are clearly on an accelerated timeline. They had just marked six solid months of most nights and nearly every weekend together.

She does think it curious he had asked for Sloane’s phone number. As one of Jules’s best friends, and having shopped a few times at Harry Winston herself, it would be only natural for Sloane to help Tom with a ring selection. And Jules has kept something that could be very telling from Sloane: Tom had asked Jules what she thought of a friend’s engagement ring just last month.

His Christmas Day plan seems very well thought out, balancing family obligations and alone, romantic time. Tom never plans, that is usually Jules’s role. Her mind is racing with possibilities. She needs to speak with someone more pragmatic. She decides to call Madeleine.

“How is my favorite fertility woman?” Jules asks when Madeleine answers.

“Oh, please. It’s my whole life! I take my temperature all the time now! You should see the charts I’ve got going on over here!”

“It will be worth it, I’m sure. Care to hear my latest?”

Jules fills Madeleine in on Tom’s perhaps innocent request for Sloane’s phone number and their plans for Christmas Day. Madeleine is as logical as Sloane is romantic, so Jules values her thoughts on this.

“Well, Madeleine?”

“Break out the chuppah! Our girl’s getting married!”

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## **Christmas**

Despite all her holiday cheer, the annual throng of tourists in the city in the weeks leading into Christmas turn Jules into an absolute Grinch. But, this year, she is too preoccupied to notice. The time passes in a flurry of last-minute shopping and online ordering, wrapping, card writing, cookie baking and the general holiday madness. Still, she cannot put out of her mind both Sloane and Madeleine's genuine conviction that Tom is about to propose. And, though neither has said a word since—nor did Tom explain his interest in getting in touch with Sloane—Jules wonders if they are conspiring to keep the moment a surprise for her. She is more mindful than ever of her manicures.

All the anxiety gives way to a sense of calm when Jules returns to her parents' home and enjoys her family's traditional gift exchange on Christmas Eve. Her eight nieces and nephews are thrilled with her presents for them. The following morning, she over-indulges on her father's famous Christmas Day breakfast and enjoys an extra mimosa, figuring she can sleep it off on the three plus hours on two train rides—Sea Girt to Penn Station, Penn Station to Long Island—she will take today. Her parents drive past the decorated homes to the train station, remembering holidays past. If Tom had asked her father for her hand in marriage, he wasn't giving away a thing.

On the train, Jules feels the butterflies in her tummy start to stir. She realizes she is a tad nervous about spending the holiday with Tom's family. There will be nearly 20 people at the table and she will be the only outsider. She had only met his parents briefly. They were kind and soft-spoken. She'd met only one of his siblings, his sister, but she would not be there. Jules carefully selected her outfit and spent extra time primping, to make a good impression on his family, she tells herself. Or maybe it's the possibility of the ring. As the conductor announces

another town, the name unimportant to her because she will take this to the last stop, she wonders if this is the day she will get engaged. She knows Tom would want it to be a private moment. For that she is relieved, because she cannot imagine how she will react and certainly doesn't want an audience. She starts to visualize the scene, probably at the house, in front of the fire, and then stops herself. She calls Madeleine, always a calming—or distracting—factor, to discuss.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Jules is so glad to have caught Madeleine at home.

“Merry Christmas! How's your holiday?”

“Last night was so nice. Everyone loved the gifts. And my father made his traditional, delicious Christmas breakfast.”

“Yum!” Madeleine interjects.

“I ate entirely too much—especially for the dress I brought for dinner tonight—and rolled myself onto the train to meet Tom.”

“Ah, the meeting of the whole extended family for Christmas dinner. No pressure there.”

“No, none at all. What are you doing today?”

“The traditional. A double-feature followed by a Chinese dinner. My only pressure is figuring out which movie to see first. I expect you're fully preened for *the* introduction?”

“New outfit, full on hair—which will drop before I get half way there—and fresh mani, pedi and wax.” Jules hesitates but cannot stop herself from asking, “Madeleine, do you think he may really have something, well, umm...*significant* planned?”

“It all makes sense to me. You two have been inseparable since June and you've already had ‘the talks’ about where to live, kids, rings...plus, no need to remind you, the man just turned 45. It's time for him to get started if he wants to be a father.”

“Did Sloane say anything to you, Madeleine? She hasn’t said a word to me and it’s killing me! She would tell me if they discussed a ring, right?”

“I haven’t spoken with her, honestly.”

“Or, maybe he wanted to talk to my father? He knows how old-fashioned my father is. He would definitely ask for my hand.” Jules begins to build a very convincing case aloud.

“As close as you and Sloane are and as emotional as your father is about his baby girl, nobody would ruin the surprise of a proposal, including me. But I really don’t know a thing,” she says. “You have to call me, I don’t care the time, and let me know.” For the woman who is always fast asleep well before the 11:00 news, this is a big offer.

“Of course, I will! Enjoy your movies and dinner!” “Call me!” Madeleine repeats, as they hang up the line.

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Jules meets Tom at Oyster Bay station, where they exchange quick kisses then hurry to transfer her bags of gifts and clothes from the frigid cold station platform into his empty and immaculate car trunk. They climb into the idling BMW and he gives her another kiss and a smile, “Merry Christmas, Jules” before putting the car in gear.

*He has something up his sleeve. I can feel it.*

They chat about her Christmas so far and the gifts they’ve given and received. Then he launches into a DeMarco family run-down, which he finishes as they pull into the driveway. She is surprised by how quickly the ride passes and feels a pang of panic. Unbuckling his seat belt, he senses her hesitation and looks at her.

“They will adore you, don’t worry.” He pats her hand and gives her a kiss.

“I hope so!” she musters a smile and buttons her coat before climbing out of his car.

Their timing is perfect: not so late that it’s rude, but not so early that she has to make small talk with the aging great aunts and grandparents, most speaking in Italian. Jules hands the hosts, Tom’s first cousin, Robert, and his wife, Lisa, a gift of Ralph Lauren votive candles, which they enthusiastically receive. Jules notices just a slight nod and barely visible raised eyebrow from the hostess to Tom. In exchange, Robert hands Jules a glass of Italian red. Too quickly, she takes a sip and recognizes it as a Brunello, probably one of the bottles Tom brought.

Soon, the generation of older men put down their playing cards, the women set the hot serving plates mounded with aromatic, Italian-American specialties on the table and everyone takes their seats. Just as the napkin unfolding and the wine pouring begin, Robert clinks his fork gently to the side of his glass. The teens seated at the other table are the last to comply with the request for quiet in order to make a toast. Robert stands.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming and celebrating this holiday with us. We are so blessed to all be together tonight. And, let us welcome Tom’s lovely friend, Jules, to our dinner,” he says, looking directly at her. “We are happy to have you.”

Jules raises her glass and offers, “Thank you for having me” in response.

He continues, “With this holiday, we are reminded of how fortunate we are to celebrate together. So, I would like to take a tradition that we usually reserve for Thanksgiving and use it here, tonight. Let’s each of us name one thing that we are grateful for this year.”

*What a sweet tradition. But, this could be rather awkward. How much do I say about Tom in front of this room of his family I’ve just met?*

Lucia, who Jules just learned, is a kind aunt, an excellent cook and a heavy breather, says something in English with an Italian accent so thick, Jules cannot make it out. A younger cousin and her husband announce they are pregnant and a round of cheering, kissing and blessings erupt.

*That’s a tough act to follow. But, we are getting into the most personal of issues.*

Jules takes another sip of her wine. They are moving around the table in a counter-clockwise direction, meaning Jules will follow Tom. At least she’ll get the benefit of hearing what he says and how he manages it in front of his family. She misses what the other say, caught up in her own words. Finally, it is Tom’s turn.

“I am grateful for something new in my life this year, that has changed my life as well as my outlook and made me very happy.” She is smiling and starting to move her hand closer to his on the table. “Every day starts with sunshine, which puts a smile on my face.”

She looks at him, smiling.

“I moved into a new apartment with lots of windows. It overlooks the park and has

spectacular views. I'm thankful for my new apartment," he concludes.

She is stunned. She doesn't even hear the rest of what Tom says but pulls her hand away and concentrates on fighting the flush that is burning up her neck to her cheeks and keeping the smile glued on her lips. Not sure what to do with her hand, she lifts her glass to her lips and takes a little more of the red liquid that she hopes will take away the sting. On display in front of a room full of strangers, his whole family, she has been slapped in the face and is trying desperately not to show it. She only notices Tom is finished speaking when his cousin, gently chides him, "I would think you would be thankful for the beautiful blonde sitting at your side."

*Bless you, Robert.*

Jules knows she must quickly regroup and come up with a new answer. Desperate for an appropriate answer and praying for her voice not to crack, she clears her throat.

"I am grateful for my grandmother's health. She has had a difficult year and we are lucky she is doing much better."

She waits, an eternity, for the others to finish before excusing herself to the bathroom, where she dares not to let herself cry but catches her breath and splashes her face with cold water.

The rest of the meal is much less dramatic and certainly less insightful. Jules is completely unable to enjoy the delicious traditional Italian meal. Instead, she chokes down some bread and pushes food around her plate. She indulges in a little too much wine and not enough food but is careful to restrain herself to ensure she does not become noticeably tipsy in front of his family. She is not sure if Tom notices, nor does she care. The family offers them both warm kisses, hugs and pinches on the cheeks on their way out the door.

They ride in silence, as Tom navigates the affluent neighborhood. Once they are on a



country road that seems familiar to him, he breaks the silence,

“So...” pregnant pause, “Did you enjoy meeting everyone?”

“Yes, they were all so kind. And welcoming,” she tries to sound normal, natural.

“Mmm-hmmm,” he agrees.

She cannot let today’s revelation go unmentioned and dives right in.

“That’s a nice tradition, voicing your gratitude each year,” she says, wincing at her very passive-aggressive approach. She needs to know yet is afraid to know at the same time.

He pulls the car to the side of the road and Jules stares out the window, at a rambling white house with black shutters. He takes her chin and guides her face to look at his. He looks her in the eyes and speaks.

“Jules, you know you are the most important thing that happened in my life this year. You *know* that, right?”

She nods. *Don’t cry, don’t cry.*

“I just didn’t feel it was the time or place for it. I keep my private life private. My family meddles enough without invitation.” He takes her hand into his, kisses it and she already feels tremendously better. If only she had known this during the dinner, the last few hours would have been entirely different. She looks out the window and sees the white lights woven into the garland gracing the front door flicker on as Tom puts the car back in drive. She smiles and wipes away a tear of relief.

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The eastern Long Island roads and highways are very quiet and they make the trip from Oyster Bay to Amagansett in just over an hour. Once they arrive, they settle into their routine. They unpack the car and Jules places her bags into her side of the closet, folded clothes into her dresser drawers and her new La Mer products on her bathroom shelf as Tom waters the plants and starts a fire. He had packed some cheeses and olives which Jules begins to arrange on a platter as he uncorks the wine and fills the glasses Jules sets before him. WEHM's eclectic mix of music is their soundtrack.

Tom gets comfortable on the rug in front of the fire and makes an audible little exhale as he reaches for his glass on the coffee table. He smiles at Jules and takes her hand, pulling her down next to him. He wraps his arm around her and she nuzzles into his neck. Jules starts to feel the effects of her second round of wine drinking for the day, and knows she could be seduced by one deep kiss just as easily as she could succumb to the drowsiness that is tempting her to sleep. She starts to kiss Tom's neck, with soft little bites and he pulls her closer. His breathing changes obviously. She relishes that they have such a sexual charge between them, that some well-placed kisses are well understood.

“Wait,” she says, interrupting herself.

“What, are you going to get a condom?” he teases as she unfolds his arms around her and heads to the bedroom.

“Maybe better,” she smiles, returning with his eight Chanukah/Christmas gifts.

“Wow! Jules!” he scrambles up from the floor, looking truly impressed with her stack of color-coordinated wrapped gifts. “I’ll be right back! I kept yours in the car so you couldn’t steal a peek.”

While he runs out, she quickly checks her teeth (rubbing at the red wine stains), hair (slightly tousled, that messy look that he loves) and makeup (quickly gloss the lips, wipe away black mascara circles starting to form under the eyes). She hurries back to the living room as he enters with a small, brown bag. Not Tiffany's robin's egg blue, no Cartier red, nor a Harry Winston signature. But that signature pumpkin orange with blue handles. A Louis Vuitton shopping bag.

He hands her the bag and kisses her on the lips.

"Merry Christmas, Jules. I hope you like it."

She holds out hope that maybe this is a rouse to fool her. She looks inside and finds a small, flat box. Still hoping and half-expecting this is all to throw her off, she looks up at him and sees an earnest, expectant smile. Removing the lid, she sees a piece of paper. A gift certificate to Louis Vuitton. A generous one.

A gift certificate. The most impersonal, I-didn't-know-what-to-get-you gift of all. Generous as the gift is, this is hardly what Jules—or any woman—wants or expects from the man she hoped would propose. She also notices the purchase date: December 24th. He literally ran into the store the day before, while she had been thinking, planning, buying and ordering his eight gifts for weeks now.

"Thank you. This is so...generous."

"I wasn't sure what to get for you and I called Sloane. She said you love Louis Vuitton. You can pick out a bag or something for yourself. I really didn't know what to get you."

*Sloane told you the brand and still you couldn't select something for me?*

Jules is a bit embarrassed as she moves the stack of well-thought out and meaningful gifts in front of him. It is clear that, though he may have been more generous in spending, she has put

more thought and meaning into his gifts. The new backgammon set, the game in which they compete most aggressively. The new book—signed—from his favorite author that he had mentioned wanting to pick up, but never got around to. A framed photo of their first sailing trip, in Newport, over Labor Day weekend. Each of the eight gifts has special significance to him or them as a couple. He is delighted by each one as he unwraps and opens it. He repeatedly tells her she shouldn't have gone to so much trouble. She stops herself every time she starts to believe him.

After Tom opens the last gift, Jack Johnson concert tickets to his upcoming show, which required her to pull major strings, he leans in, takes her into his arms and tells her,

“Nobody has ever done anything as thoughtful as this for me before, Jules. Thank you.”

While she knows he means it sincerely, Jules feels uneasy and uncertain.

*Why do I have such pangs of doubt about this?*

She nearly shakes her head to clear it of these thoughts.

*He did what he thought was generous. You did what you think is generous. Sometimes those are not the same. Be patient.*

Tom initiates sex and they make love, in front of the fire, with the wrapping paper all around them. As he drifts off to sleep, she untangles herself and covers him with a throw blanket before going to the bedroom to put on her loungewear and a pair of cream cashmere socks. She notices she has a message on her phone. It's from Madeleine: Call me!

Jules checks to make sure Tom is sound asleep. His deep breathing confirms he is. From the bedroom, Jules gazes out at the rough surf and the dunes, with the sea grass blowing nearly horizontal by the strong winds, and dials her friend.

“Hi. It's me,” she says, trying to sound happy, but sounding flat.

“No ring,” Madeleine knows without even having to ask.

“No. It was a gift certificate to Louis Vuitton. A generous one.”

“A gift certificate? Oh, Christ.”

Jules’s voice starts to sound strained.

“It’s bad, isn’t it? Be honest with me, Madeleine, because I trust you completely to be honest with me. And, because I have a sinking feeling in my stomach.”

“It’s nice and generous and all those things but...it’s impersonal. And a bit lazy. How are you?”

“A little deflated. Maybe I was just expecting too much. We did both say we’d give it a year before taking the next step. It’s just, I thought...” she trails off.

“Deep breath, Jules.”

Jules does as instructed and practices a deep yoga breath before telling Madeleine about the roller coaster ride before even getting to the gift exchange tonight from the family’s gut-wrenching confessional at dinner, Tom’s explanation that he keeps his private life private and now the deep-meaning versus deep-pocket gift exchange.

Madeleine comforts her. “I don’t love the paper gift but look at it this way: you are heading in the right direction. He wanted to spend the holiday with you. He wanted you to meet his family. And you two have been together only six months, as intense as those six months have been. Give it time. Don’t rush things.”

“You’re right. I know, you’re right.”

“Of course I am!” Madeleine chides. “Listen, we don’t want to him overhear this. And, I have to run...they are serving our wonton soup now. Let’s talk when you are back in New York and we can fully analyze.”

Jules wishes her a good meal. She brushes her teeth and thinks about Madeleine's honest perspective, before returning to the living room to snuggle up with her would-be fiancé in front of the fireplace, enjoying their first of many Christmases together.

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## **Wendi**

As employee number five, Wendi Waldman Epstein, WWE—her monogram and signature, which the staff joke and draw unflattering parallels to the Wicked Witch of the (Upper) East—is quite accomplished. She has been promoted three times to become the Head of Fashion and she has exceeded budget every year, providing her with hefty bonus payouts and a healthy share of equity in the company. She presents herself flawlessly every day, in an enviable couture wardrobe, acquired almost exclusively at cost. Her perfectly styled pitch-black mane typically befits her frequent dark moods — they’re so bitter, you can almost taste them coming. Her screaming fits are legendary. Today’s would prove no exception. This morning, en route to a sales call with Vera Wang’s digital director, Wendi’s aggressively passive-aggressive questions begin, unremarkably enough.

Wendi asks, “What’s their rate?” without even looking at Jules, instead busy looking for their Uber. The question comes off casually, almost like an after-thought.

“\$13,000 for fashion. \$21,000 for home. \$34,000 for both jewelry and fragrance,” Jules answers, thankful to have memorized the numbers that morning.

“How many times this season did we feature Vera Wang couture?”

“Three,” Jules knows since she and Channing had reviewed them together, last night.

Jules slides into the car after Wendi.

“Really? I don’t believe you,” Wendi says, now looking at her, challenging her.

“Yes, three. I checked. As did Channing.”

“Hold on,” she says, annoyed, phone already in hand, punching in the number to her office with her wrapped fingernails.

“Channing, tell me, how many times we featured Vera? Oh, and don’t tell me the number Jules may have told you. How many times you *know* her designs were on the landing page?”

“Thanks,” she says, with a sigh, as she tosses her phone into her bag.

“I don’t believe either of you. I will check when I return to the office and you better be right.”

*Or what?* Jules thinks but does not dare ask.

She looks out the window. *Just 10 more blocks to go.*

“Are they up or down?”

“Scheduled to be up 25% over last quarter.”

Jules is proud to have built the business, especially after Wendi had managed it until just a few months ago. And relieved she had reviewed the numbers one last time mere minutes before ordering the Uber. And grateful that her somewhat untrustworthy memory is serving her well this morning. Not since advanced calculus has she memorized so many numbers to serve her for one hour, only to be completely forgotten afterwards. But, in this moment, she is hitting all the questions right on the head. No easy task.

“How much is she running with our competitors? All of them?”

Anticipating this question, but not looking to test her memory much further, Jules pulls the overview page out of her bag and shares it with Wendi. Her early-to-bed last night at 11:30 and rescheduled downtown dinner with Sloane is paying off. Jules feels confident, prepared and even a little smug. Until...

“How much of this is fashion versus other categories?”

Jules is stung. She had broken down the budgets by category. She knows it.

*Where is the summary page?* She feels herself starting to flush, the redness creeping up



her neck and to her cheeks as she desperately shuffles through the papers in the folder, praying for divine intervention. Or a head-on collision.

“Umm, hold on, I believe I have it.”

Wendi, with a shark’s ability to smell blood in the water, is onto her.

“You *believe* you have it? You *don’t* know if you have it? You don’t *know* these numbers without shuffling through stacks of paper to find them? How can you manage this account and not know the *exact* budgets each of your competitors has in each category?”

The rest of the ride is pure, unadulterated hell. Thank goodness the fashion district is only blocks away.

*Please, please do not miss this light. Please, God, do not let Seventh Avenue get congested,* Jules silently prays. *Please let me survive this!* These are the moments that wake her in the middle of the night, even on weekends. Especially on Sundays.

Within months of starting at Style, Jules realized she had two lines of defense with Wendi. One: invite a colleague along who could perhaps get business from the client for another category and whose presence ensured the conversation wouldn’t get too ugly. Two: feign interest in Wendi’s weight (“You look so skinny! Are you in your size 0s again?”), personal life (“Hear from your hedge fund ex? He is so clearly still in love with you!”) or family (“Is the baby sleeping through the night now? And, how are the school applications going? I have connections at Dalton. I could put you in touch with them.”). But, there are days when these diversions are not enough. There are days when Jules is emotionally drained and on the brink of tears as she walks into the client’s or agency’s office, puts on her big smile and says, “It’s so nice to see you!” to her saviors. Today is one of those days.

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## January

January is mostly a blur of indistinguishable long, dark days and even longer, darker nights. The month starts with resolution-based delusions and draws to a close with the eve of Jules's birthday.

The bridal stores and designers are never busier than Engagement Season—the weeks between Christmas and Valentine's Day. After calling their mothers and best friends, the newly engaged call their favorite atelier, the one they secretly selected and visited months before. The first six weeks of the year are like the opening weekend box office numbers: they signal the health or death knell of the coming year.

Jules is careful to only call those clients she knows will be pleased to hear from her. And those she believes willing to take her call. It all depends on their ads having excellent placement—landing page—in the latest bridal feature. What she had not anticipated is the well-intended questions from clients, who truly believe any single woman should have a happy change in status during this time.

“Will I be taking your measurements for the muslin soon?” asks Elizabeth Fillmore, genuinely sweet.

“Do you need to pay a visit to the salon to share something other than the new materials?” Mark Ingram hints, not subtly.

“Nope, but you will be the first to know!” Jules replies, as chipper as possible.

“So happy you love the placement and story! Of course, your creative looks too beautiful to be anything but front and center. I'll be in touch in a few weeks,” she says, moving off the topic.

Jules needs to talk with someone who will discuss anything but engagements and gowns. She starts to dial Sloane, before remembering she's still in St. Barth's, having extended her stay when music industry friends invited her to more than a few moguls' mega-yachts. Jules tries Maria. Maybe she can sneak in a few minutes even if she is still away with her brood, "enjoying" the holiday break that they extend into the second week of January.

"Happy New Year, Maria! How are you holding up?"

"I'm hiding, in the bathroom," she confesses. "Can you believe my mother-in-law questioned having the girls out of school this week? I try to be nice by bringing the girls for a visit, because I honestly dread her comments on my cooking and housekeeping when she pays us a visit, and still I get criticized. What will they miss in school at this age? Coloring between the lines? Cookie eating? Collective napping?"

"Maybe the trip's a little long, with the drive and two visits?" Jules suggests to her normally unflappable friend.

"It's not ideal, but I can get the visits in with my parents and his and play the good daughter and daughter-in-law and kill one ball of wax."

"You mean kill two birds with one stone?"

"Jules, I have no mind left. Mixing metaphors is just the tip of the ..." she hesitates, "of the iceberg?"

Jules stifles the laugh, "Yes, the iceberg. That's right."

"Try it. Just *try* driving to Florida with a husband who feigns deafness, until his phone beeps with a message, and four girls under eight, arguing over which Disney princess they are."

"Okay, honey, try to get some rest before your hiding spot is discovered. Let's talk when you can lock yourself into the sanctity of your bathroom at home." On cue, Jules hears a small

voice, repeatedly calling, “Mommy, mommy, mommy,” without any change in tone or cadence.

“I know you think I have the life of leisure, Jules. But sometimes I don’t even know how the hell this all happened to me. I was pre-med.”

“And now you’re a pediatrician! If a nap’s not possible, how about a cocktail?”

“Mother’s little helper. Perfect!” As they end their call, Jules can hear Maria calling “Coming, sweetheart!”

Not exactly the distraction Jules had been hoping for, but a welcome break from the incessant talk of the blushing brides-to-be her clients are grateful for, but already bemoaning. As she starts to dial Madeleine’s number, it literally pops up on her screen.

“Happy New Year! I was just dialing your number!” she greets her friend.

“Do yourself a favor. Don’t. I’m miserable.”

“And self-aware. What’s going on?”

It’s not like Madeleine to be so down. Jules sits back in her chair and spins to face the window. The throngs of tourists are noticeably thinner now that the holidays are over.

“All I do is take my temperature and measure out shots in ccs! Not to mention the hormones are turning me into a raving lunatic!”

“Madeleine, I know it must be difficult, but your doctor did warn you about the mood swings so at least there’s comfort that it’s normal.”

The gray day outside allows the windows to be very reflective. Jules can see Channing standing behind her. Spinning around, she sees the color is drained from her assistant’s face.

“Madeleine, remember, it will be worth it. Can I call you later?” she says, distracted by what she is about to learn.

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## **The Milk Mess**

Channing speaks, her voice trembling. “The milk.”

Jules jumps from her desk while breathing, “For Christ’s sake,” in a whisper.

“I’m so sorry,” the shaking audible in her voice.

“No, not you, Channing! This! This is so ridiculous that she has you involved in this in the first place.”

“Can you please help me? She will kill me!” she says, sounding nearly sick with worry.

Twice a day, like clockwork, Jules sees Wendi emerge from the privacy room and hear a saccharine sweet call for Channing. Post-pump, Wendi hands off a little Ziplock bag of freshly-pumped milk to her assistant, who drops it in a waiting miniature Barney’s bag and walks it down to the office kitchen, holding it at arm’s length, only when she’s certain she is out of Wendi’s range of sight. She had once tagged the bag with Wendi’s name, but Jules pointed out to her that, unlike Blue Print bottles and The Zone staples like Laughing Cow cheese and low-fat mozzarella sticks, there is not too much confusion as to whose bags of breast milk is in the shared refrigerator.

Sometimes, Channing must retrieve the bag of freshly pumped liquid and send it via messenger or, when especially lucky, deliver it personally to Wendi’s nanny at home. Her privileges had been suspended recently due to gross neglect. A month prior, Channing sent Wendi into a fit of unspeakable rage when she inadvertently ruined a bag of the precious commodity. Taking advantage of the rare opportunity of being permitted away from her desk to make the delivery, Channing stopped in the women’s room. She set the bag of milk on the counter. The bag apparently so resembled a bag of liquid soap used in the soap dispensers that

the cleaning woman attempted to load the bag into the dispenser while Channing was in one of the stalls. Channing was able to stop her mid-process, but the bag had already been punctured. The desperate assistant ran down the hallway, a trail of milk behind her, asking everyone for a plastic bag. When she finally broke the news to Wendi, the screaming was heard all the way down the hallway. It took weeks for Wendi to reinstate Channing's milk-carrying privileges.

This time, the messenger had confused the two packages that Channing sent out: the milk intended for Wendi's home inadvertently went to Mark Ingram's atelier rather than the box of the new Style swag for his salon. Just an hour after their earlier call, he rang Channing to discuss the mix-up, which he found hysterically funny.

"What do I do?" Channing asks.

She is ghostly white, too concerned with the consequences to see the humor.

"First, thank your lucky stars it was Mark Ingram. He is a sweetheart and his shop is nearby. Pick up some chocolates from Maison du Chocolat on your way. Have an Uber meet you at the salon where you collect Wendi's package and run it up to her place and leave it with the doorman. Take the box intended for Mark with you and hightail it back here before Wendi's meeting breaks."

"Will the doorman tell her when she gets home tonight?"

"Don't think twice about it. But, call the doorman in advance and tell him you have a drop off and pick up, so he will be ready for you."

"And, Mr. Ingram? Will he say anything to her?"

"Mark? Has he ever taken a call of hers, never mind actually *called* her?"

"Thanks, Jules! I owe you!"

"Channing, you haven't done anything wrong! Do you have all of the addresses and

phone numbers? Order an Uber and take my American Express for the chocolate. And bring us back some!”

“Thanks!” she says, as she takes the card from Jules while pulling on her coat, rushing out the door.

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## Happy Birthday, Baby?

February is not a New York favorite. But for Jules, it has its highlights. She celebrates her birthday on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. And, since she counts herself among those lucky in love this year, she will also celebrate Valentine's Day just two weeks later. She has recovered from Tom's surprise non-proposal at Christmas and her hopes are buoyed by her friends' assurances that he probably chose to wait for a less obvious and more personal occasion. Given their still blossoming romance, Jules eagerly anticipates all the celebrations and surprises February has in store and tries to put getting a ring out of her mind.

Few people have the distinction of marking their birthday on the only national holiday that celebrates a rodent. For as long as she can remember, Jules has been teased about how memorable her birthday, Groundhog Day, is. Over time, she's grown to embrace it. She takes Punxsutawney Phil's early morning shadow sighting, marking spring's early arrival, as a good omen for her birthday and the coming year as well. This year, she is focused on turning 34, her favorite number. Good things are coming this year.

With her mid-thirties in full swing, Jules may be paying a little more attention to the talk of aging ovaries, though she knows there is no need for alarm. She and Tom have discussed starting a family right away, agree on raising the children Jewish as well as hiring a nanny so Jules can maintain a foot in the working world. She continues taking her birth control pills, despite Sloane encouraging her to skip them *accidentally*. She knows she and Tom will agree, together, when there's no need to be careful.

Jules and Madeleine, born two weeks apart, have celebrated their birthdays since they were study-abroad flatmates junior year. Since London's drinking age is more of a suggestion



than an enforced law, Jules's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday was not the bacchanal event it might have been at home, though it included plenty of stops at trendy clubs, too many cocktails from friends and well-wishing strangers alike, and a stomach-flipping checkered taxi ride back to the flat. Two weeks later, Madeleine's day was as refined and elegant in London as it would have been at her small, private college in the States. She enjoyed a very civilized dinner with expensive wine and tasteful gifts, concluding at a respectful hour. Thirteen years later, their annual ritual includes a day of pampering at a spa, then an early dinner at one of the hippest restaurants in Boston's South End and always, with Madeleine, lights out well before midnight. While this is in stark contrast to Jules's typical celebratory nights out, she enjoys her visits to Madeleine's and relishes the good night's sleep these visits guarantee.

Every year at this time, Madeleine and Jules call, with calendars open, to sort a plan.

"I am sure you'll want to do something with Tom, so don't worry if it doesn't work this year," Madeleine offers.

"Madeleine! As hard as this may be to believe, this will be our thirteenth year celebrating together. We are not skipping this."

Jules is careful to balance long-lasting friendships and her beau. She has seen the absent-friend-until-my-shower routine and has vowed to avoid any behavior even remotely resembling it. She flips through her day planner—she still prefers paper—until she finds the correct week. They agree that Jules will visit Madeleine in Boston the weekend between their two birthdays.

With this set, Jules starts filling in her calendar. She plans a visit to her family in New Jersey, for her father's special birthday dinner, including her favorite hazelnut cake, which he buys every year from a not very local bakery. And, she and Tom can celebrate her birthday eve and birthday night. The celebrations will continue into the following week with drinks and

dinners with friends until her visit with Madeleine.

“I can’t wait! Don’t forget to ask your friends about the new places in town and book us a reservation and our spa appointments,” Jules suggests to Madeleine, as she jots the dates in her calendar.

“I will. Though this year, we will have to change things a little.” “An announcement?” Jules asks, expectantly.

“Just a very sore thigh right now.”

“You know,” Jules thinks aloud, “If I give you a hand with those hormone shots, one could say I practically helped you conceive! Not to mention all the positive energy I bring your way, even when you are a little impossibly hormonal.”

“One could not say that,” Madeleine laughs.

“Let’s be sure to schedule lots of shopping time. I haven’t been to the Barney’s across from the train station. Assuming you are up for it. And, please don’t ask me abide by the ‘no gifts until the baby’ policy. You know I won’t be able to resist buying just a little something.”

“You are welcome to buy things for me!” Madeleine suggests. Jules senses that Madeleine may be hesitant to talk too much about the pregnancy until the proper time. They change the topic to figuring out the rest of their plans, including train schedules and meetings spots at the station, before hanging up.

On the eve of her birthday, Jules spends a mellow Sunday at Tom’s. They catch a foreign film at the art house on his block then enjoy a late-night steak frites at Café Luxembourg, their favorite local bistro. Monday morning, the sun is streaming in through the windows, despite the frigid temperatures outside. Jules wakes to a discussion on NPR about Phil seeing his shadow. The prediction that spring will come early this year is welcome news. The elephant plant, with its

enormous leaves overhanging Jules's side of the bed, cries two tears, overjoyed with the news. Both land on her arm. She feels the cool little drops roll down her arm just as Tom pulls her next to him and gives her sweet kisses to rouse her. They promise nothing more. The time is announced on the radio and Jules knows they have little time for sex, unless they skip their morning exercise routine.

“Happy birthday, honey!” he wishes her. “Don't forget we have dinner at 8.”

“Tonight? Sorry, I have plans,” she teases.

“Well, break them, because I want to celebrate and spoil you today.”

“Mmm...” is all she answers, cuddling into him.

He spans her playfully and then, a bit to her disappointment, jumps out of bed and is dressed in a tee shirt and shorts within minutes.

“Get up, sleeping beauty, and get your day started!” he encourages her before leaving for his daily swim. She stays put, ignoring his cheerleading for a few minutes.

Winter mornings, Jules struggles to get her runs started. She dreads the cold February air awaiting her, snarling “Good morning!” in the gruffest tone. At the start, the air will slap her face and make her eyes tear, her nose run and her throat burn. But by the time she hits the one-mile mark, she will find it exhilarating. She reminds herself of this as she hurries to get dressed. Even the room feels chilly after she emerges from the down-blanket cocoon of Tom's bed. After pulling on her running clothes and shoes, she adds a layer with one of Tom's snowboarding fleeces, splashes water on her face, brushes her teeth just long enough to freshen her breath and pulls her hair into a low, messy and loose pony tail. She enters the living room, half expecting a surprise—flowers? A card?—but finds everything as it was last night.

She takes the elevator, with its ultra-quick closing doors, down to the lobby, walks

through the recently renovated lobby and out the revolving doors. She crosses Central Park West and enters the park, heading south on the running path, within minutes. Soon, her conscious thoughts trail off, and her mind goes into running mode. The rhythm of her breathing, her footsteps and the music blaring from her iPhone put her in a trance that she can only break after the Big Loop's six miles.

An hour later, back upstairs, she sees she's missed a few calls. The birthday greetings from her family have begun early. They contribute to her being late to the office, which is an explosion of birthday decorations, more appropriate for a pink-crazed tween. Channing had not missed a single detail: balloons cling to the drop-tiled ceiling, the smell of fresh muffins and coffee compete with the bouquet peonies, her favorite flower. Even her screen saver is a hot pink birthday cartoon message.

"Good morning, birthday girl!" she chimes as Jules walks in.

She hands her a list of names. "So many friends have dropped by. And, Maria called me because she couldn't get through to you. She's at home, with her youngest, under the weather."

"Sorry!" Jules interjects. "She covers all her bases."

"Not at all! Oh, and these just arrived for you," Channing says with a smile.

The unmistakable fragrance of white lilies, another favorite is intoxicating. The florist, Mille Fiore, designs the most spectacular bouquets and adds the loveliest little touch: tiny droplets of dew cling to the petals, as if the flowers were just picked from the garden. No wonder he was so smug this morning, she smiles as she pulls off the ribbons, releases the cellophane and opens the card, "Happy birthday! Love, Mark." *Mark?* She rereads it and yes, it is written quite clearly, Mark.

"Thank you, Channing!" she says, knowing her face is obviously flush, her assistant

waiting for a reply.

“I pretended they were for me when I brought them up on the elevator. I just love Tom. If only I could find a guy like him!” Channing gushes. Jules opts not to correct her as she turns to leave.

“Oh, I nearly forgot, in all my preparations,” she turns on her heels. “A charming Brit called the main number and they transferred him to me. He didn’t leave a message, just said he’d call back.” She turns and heads to her desk, pleased with showering Jules appropriately on her birthday and her mood elated on the start of a week sans Wendi, away on vacation.

The rest of the day at the office is filled with phone calls and emails from clients and visits from well-wishing colleagues. Roy, the only guy on the sales force, takes her to lunch at her favorite local steakhouse, Ben Benson’s, where Jules indulges in a tomato salad with blue cheese dressing and a big, juicy New York strip. They catch up freely, without concern of being overheard. She relishes the pure testosterone of the restaurant and being one of the few women in the room, so unlike the sorority-like atmosphere of the fashion start-up offices.

She leaves the office early to get a head start on primping for her birthday dinner, at a still undisclosed location, the surprise adding a level of excitement. Ninety minutes before Tom is due, she bathes in her signature Hermes Pamplemousse Rose body wash, taking the time to breathe in, enjoy the fragrance and her day, and look forward to the evening. When the water turns tepid, she jumps out and while her skin is still damp, she applies a liberal coating of Clarins Body Treatment Oil, which provides the perfect touch of glisten. She blots off the excess with her towel and finishes with a light but full-body spritzing of her signature grapefruit rose fragrance.

With her hair freshly styled at Dry Bar, she gets to work on her make-up. While applying

liberal amounts of La Mer, she inspects her skin thoroughly in the mirror. *Not bad*, she thinks. Though she recognizes looks are truly just skin deep, Jules embraces a bit of vanity, knowing that looks do count—and, more importantly, she feels better when she feels healthy and looks good. Alas, when her thirties hit, there was no escaping that she needed a bit more than a healthy diet and plenty of sleep and water. The quarterly visits to Dr. Levine help—quite a bit—to smooth and plump appropriately. She applies a little more make-up than usual, including a layer of foundation and powder as well as a little extra color on the eyes, the smoky charcoal helping her blue eyes pop. A little blush to the cheeks, Orgasm by Nars, and a light gloss before an extra coat of mascara, courtesy of Maybelline. She stands back and takes a look. Her eyes sparkle, as only a happy woman’s do. It suits her, as Mark would say. She could still pass for 20-something. Okay, maybe 29, but still within that coveted decade. She thinks she even noticed the just-out-of-Princeton intern, Jeremy, give her a sly once over on the elevator today when he wished her a happy birthday.

She considers the choices in her compulsively organized closet and opts out of her traditional little black dress, instead choosing something Tom has never seen: a baby blue cashmere wrap dress. The color complements her fair winter complexion and the cut makes her feel both sexy and demure. The wrap design is kind to her 34A-sized breasts. If only they were bigger, she muses, not for the first time, to balance the fullness in her legs, hips and derriere. She turns before the mirror and smooths the fabric across her still quite taught tummy, though it certainly would benefit from a little extra running. While massaging in a touch of the Clarins Bust Beauty Gel from the sample the sales woman tossed into her bag, Jules recalls her asking, “Is the skin in your décolletage getting tissuey?” *An ounce of prevention*, Jules thinks, while adding a little more.

Tom calls to say he is downstairs. She pulls out the Velcro curlers, tosses them into a bag and back under the sink. *Never let a man to see the tricks of the trade*, Sloane always says. She pulls on her silver Prada sandals, despite the frigid temperatures outside, admires her new pedicure and grabs her coat and bag on her way out the door. Her heels click on the tile lobby floor and she rushes down the steps, where Tom waits. He helps her into the car and she pulls her long coat in behind her as he closes the car door.

“Are you having a happy birthday, beautiful?” Tom asks as he leans over, inhales her scent momentarily, then kisses her.

“Yes! And, I do believe it is about to get even better.” They catch up on her day, including the birthday surprises at the office. She omits any mention of the much-commented-upon bouquet. The car turns left on Park Avenue, heads south a few blocks, then makes a right onto East 63<sup>rd</sup> Street and stops at the light on Madison Avenue. Jules knows their destination: Daniel, New York’s ultimate special occasion restaurant. He means to impress her. And he does.

“Daniel? How nice!” she coos into his ear.

“I wanted to take you somewhere really special, where you haven’t been before.”

Second omission of the night: she celebrated her birthday at Daniel a few years ago, with Mark.

She responds by leaning in to kiss him, murmuring, “Mmmm ...” while doing so.

They pass under the glass awning and enter the grand foyer, down the carpeted steps and past the lounge. It is filled with elegant and well-dressed couples, a family that appears to be from out of town—their clothes a little fussy by New York standards—a group of executives, likely celebrating the close of a deal and two women who appear willing to help any of those men continue the celebrations in private. The maitre d’ greets them warmly, takes their coats and

sweeps them into the dining room, where they feast their eyes on its supple decor of soft gold, rich Bordeaux and deep sapphire blue.

Once seated, Jules and Tom flirt over glasses of champagne, which they drink after he toasts her. They make their selections from the extensive winter menu that celebrates black truffles and discuss wine pairings for each course with the city's most celebrated female sommelier. They enjoy the decadent, New French cuisine, served in three flawless acts. The meal is matched only by the equally opulent dessert, also a three-part study in perfection. Jules feels completely taken with the meal and the man she shares it with. When the waiter opens the basket of white cloth clad homemade madeleines, Daniel Boulud's signature dessert finale, Jules nearly slips.

"These are my favorite..." she trails, unsure if she just alerted Tom to the fact that she has been here before. He doesn't appear to notice.

"What's your favorite?" he asks, somewhat absently. If he did notice, Jules's biting into one of the delicious, crusty cookies, exaggerating the experience, distracts him.

"The madeleines. They are Daniel Boulud's little surprise and delight, just when you think it can't get any better," she shares before popping another into her mouth.

"Speaking of surprise and delight, just when you think it can't get any better," he says and takes her hands into his across the table.

"Mmmhmm," she says, a smile curling on the outer corner of her lips, as she tries to discretely swallow her mouthful of crispy, buttery heaven.

*Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God. Is this happening?*

"You surprise and delight me all the time, Jules."

"I do...?" she asks, able to speak again.



*Breathe, breathe.*

“Yes, and just when I think it can’t get any better with you—with us—it does.”

“Tom, I feel the same way,” she feels her palms start to dampen. If only she had gone to the women’s room between the meal and dessert. He gently kisses her fingers, only adding to her moist-palm anxiety.

“I’d like to surprise and delight you,” he says, a bit nervously, she thinks.

*This is happening. This is happening!*

“I thought about what I could get for you that would be so memorable and also show you how I feel about you.”

*Just say it! she pleads, silently.*

“I, well, I didn’t really get you anything,” Jules cannot tell if he is being sincere or teasing her. Her silence signals him to continue.

“Since you like to travel so much and I know you would probably like to go somewhere warm, I will treat for a weekend away.” She sits up a little straighter, unsure what to say. She probably isn’t being fair to him. If she hadn’t run to the dermatologist and had forehead injected just a few weeks ago, he would have probably noticed more non-verbal cues, like her eyebrows coming together, as she tries to make sense of what she is hearing.

“I didn’t want to book anything because I don’t know what your calendar looks like,” he continues, making matters worse.

“And you know I have a few more weekends of boarding out west, end of the season and all. Let’s plan to go in April or May.”

Jules focuses on forming a convincing smile, which probably appears weak, and hesitates before speaking.

“Thank you for a truly lovely dinner. And, I can’t wait for our weekend together,” she musters.

Maybe it was all the different wines that left her so confused. Or, is she seeing things more clearly than ever? She had no idea that he had more boarding trips planned. Planned and booked, apparently. Clearly, it is not his intention to invite her to any of them. Nor had he asked her along to any of the four trips out west he had made since his birthday in Aspen. And, though he claims it is her calendar he is unsure about, isn’t it his availability that is in question? What is the point of a warm weather get-away if they are going to wait until it’s already warm?

She is hurt. There is no getting around this. Ring be damned, where are the flowers? Some token gift? This, after the vertigo-inducing Happy Birthday balloon-blowing she had done for him in Aspen’s high altitudes? The thoughtful gifts she had gone to so much trouble for their Christmas/Chanukah celebration? And the hints and innuendo he had made leading up to his “birthday surprise?” While the meal was the height of New York fine dining, she leaves Daniel feeling queasy.

As they head through the park, back to his apartment, Jules swallows the thought of telling him that she’d prefer to stay on her side of town, in her own place, for the night. She wants to clear her head and sleep on this before reacting. Always one to trust her instincts, she can’t sort how she may just have a wrong take on this and hopes that tomorrow morning will start with as much hope and giddy expectation as this morning did.

Central Park is a contrast in black hardwood trees and white, hard packed snow. Tom pulls her close and gives first playful then urgent kisses. He is feeling amorous. She feels obliged. She realizes this is the first time intimacy with him will feel perfunctory. Of course, in their eight months together, there have been plenty of times when he initiated sex, playfully

coaxing her. Tonight is different. In his living room, overlooking the park, she leans back and tilts her head to allow him to better kiss her neck. No goose bumps. She participates but connects with him only physically. When he finishes and she pretends to as well, he falls off to sleep quickly, the red wine causing him to snore lightly. Jules looks at him, then focuses past him, out the window, hoping 34 will be her lucky year despite its uncertain start.

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## Night at L'Absinthe

Maria calls early in the afternoon with disappointing news; she must cancel their dinner plans because one of her girls has a tummy ache. Jules is unsure which of the girls is not feeling well because she has trouble keeping track of Maria's daughters.

"Sorry, Maria. Which one is it?" Jules confesses.

"My third, Calliope. Third child, third letter of the alphabet," she teases, knowing Jules only sees them on occasion because Maria prefers to visit and escape to New York.

"You had four in how many years? They do look alike, you have to admit. All those beautiful brunette waves."

"True! Really, Jules, I am so disappointed. I was so looking forward to finally getting into the city, having a meal that someone else prepared and isn't interrupted with screams for attention."

"I know, me too. Promise we'll reschedule soon?"

"Yes, but I am at the mercy of these overscheduled and overpriced babysitters. You have no idea the extortion! For the past five years, I have been dealing with morning sickness, diapers, formula stains and temper tantrums. Can you believe the former Queen of Scheme on the London Scene is a stay at home mom with *mommy* jeans designed to hide a perpetually post-baby bump belly?"

"Grass is always greener, QOS. You know I am ready for a commitment and, in a few years, a baby. Maybe not the suburbs, but the rest...."

"Yes, and you and Tom are nearly there! Then you'll know marital bliss and the joys of motherhood," she adds, teasing.

Jules can hear the phone bumping against Maria's chin. She's probably trying to soothe the child who sabotaged their dinner plans, by rocking her gently, back to sleep.

"I hope so! For my birthday, he took me to a very nice dinner but didn't bother with any sweet little gestures. He didn't even give me a card or pick up flowers."

"Not even bodega flowers? See? The courtship is over! Already he's getting lazy. It proves he's comfortable. And he's not going anywhere. Trust me. Now, where and when are we going to dinner? I need something to look forward to. Desperately."

They reschedule dinner for a few weeks out. Jules fills Maria in on Madeleine's IVF attempts and her plans with Sloane for Valentine's Day, a holiday that is always trying for her friend, who is again mourning a tragic break-up. Jules is happy to keep her company on what can be the most dreadful of holidays.

"Maybe we are acting like an old, married couple already," Jules says. "We are having an après-Valentine's Day dinner. So romantic, isn't it?"

"To avoid the crowds and the ridiculous prices? Ari and I have been doing that for years," Maria offers.

"No, he'll be out of town. Is it wrong for me to feel slighted?"

"Where will he be?"

More bouncing of the phone and the small whines of a discontented child, looking for her mother's full attention.

"Out west, of course. I know he loves snowboarding, but I'll be glad when the season's over. He has promised to take me to a romantic dinner out at the beach immediately upon his return."

"Imagine how much money Tom would save on hotels if only he and Mark could be

roomies,” Maria points out.

“Bite your tongue! One chance encounter was one too many!” she laughs alone, as Maria is distracted by the calls, getting louder, in the background.

“Do you hear this? Bye, love! Can’t wait to see you!” Maria manages to sneak in before hanging up the phone.

With an unexpected free night, Jules decides to give her sallow complexion a little boost. Though she is typically extra careful with her skin, nothing makes her feel and look a little more alive during the long, cold winter than getting a little sun kissed, just a touch of color to the cheeks, compliments of a quick visit to a tanning salon. It’s her dirty little secret. She hurries up Third Avenue, with the cold winter wind at her back, pushing her along.

She enters Portofino Sun Center and the too-tan man behind the counter greets her warmly. He gives her big smile, proudly displaying a mouth filled with big, Formica-white Chicklet teeth. HOLLYWOOD in big, block letters, sitting high on the hill, instantly flashes in her mind. They discuss how much time she should tan to put just a hint of warmth on her ultra-fair skin. She puts thoughts of the rise of melanoma and irreparable damage due to sun exposure out of her mind as they finalize their negotiations and agree upon eight minutes.

She enters the closet-sized room, disrobes and lays on the cool, plastic bed, careful to cover her eyes with the little strapless, plastic goggles and her entire face with a towel. The ultra-violet purple lights click on and the loud fans instantly follow suit.

Jules tries a few frozen poses in the coffin-like bed, in an awkward attempt to get an even, full-body tan. By minute four, she cannot ignore the panic she feels over the peril she is certain the virgin-white skin on her bottom is in, pressed flat against the glass and definitely new to this kind of exposure. Careful not to let the rough, nubby towel and the little goggles with

questionable protective abilities slide off her face, she grabs the hand towel on the floor, arches her back slightly and maneuvers the towel under her, attempting to keep it even as she lowers herself onto it. She tries to settle down and relax but notices there is an odd odor.

*Can you actually smell flesh burning under UVA- and UVB-safe patented lights?*

She checks the red, digital clock on the wall: six minutes. She jumps out, just shy of the time Mr. California working the front counter originally suggested, but still plenty of time to provide her luminescent skin with a little glow. She pulls her clothes on quickly, eager to escape the burning-flesh scent that trails her down Third Avenue.

With a rare and completely free night, Jules walks south down the avenue, weighing her options. With no new releases of interest in the theatres and all the shopkeepers pulling down their metal gates outside their glass windows, she thinks of restaurants. She walks past the Irish pubs that dot the Upper East Side avenues when it hits her: *L'Absinthe!* She is long overdue for a visit to the charming, classic brasserie she frequented much more often before she met Tom.

Located midway between the 68th Street/Lexington Avenue subway station and her apartment, the brasserie is perfectly situated for a stop on her way home for a glass of wine or steak frites at the bar. As a regular, she had befriended the very French and equally charming chef and proprietor, Jean Michel, as well as the bartender, Kareem. She prefers to visit the restaurant alone because it's like catching up with old friends.

She pulls open the frosted-glass door and rushes into the warm gold and mirrored art nouveau room. The young, smiling Brazilian hostess, with a beautiful and likely natural tan gives her a big smile as she approaches. She takes Jules's coat and greets her with a double-kiss and smokey-voiced greeting. Kariley knows not to ask if Jules would like a table or would be joined by others; she knows this guest prefers to dine alone, at the bar.

Jules smiles at Kareem when he spots her through the flowing floral arrangement. She weaves through the tables in the front room and reaches the nearly full bar. They both lean over the zinc top to exchange cheek to cheek kisses in greeting.

“Ahhh, Jules!” he says, his French accent thick. Only native speakers recognize him as an Algerian who spent many years living in Paris.

“Kareem! How are you?”

“Fine, but it’s been too long, you know,” he says, as he pours Sancerre into the glass before her.

“You are absolutely right. Too much time on the Upper West Side,” she explains, as she climbs onto the stool.

“Ah! It is because of HIM!” he jokes, in mock jealousy. “Sorry, I’ll be right back,” he says, as he meets one of the waiters, ready to call out his table’s drink orders, at the service end of the bar.

Jules turns on her stool to watch the room of well-heeled patrons enjoying their meals and conversation behind her. She shifts back to face the bar and sips from her wine glass as she admires the restaurant’s namesake next to her: an absinthe glass set, sugar cube atop the silver strainer balanced on the mouth of the glass, waiting for the clear liquid to be poured. She puts down her glass and plays with the display, and recalls tasting the once-banned hallucinogenic liquor after hours, just once, from Kareem’s private collection. The ice clouded the drink and made it viscous as the licorice aroma released. Kareem keeps his own bottle safely stored in the back of one of the lower cabinets, secured with nautical-style latches that catch every time he opens and closes them.

Above the bar, the antique clock is permanently set at 7:20, a time Jean Michel believes



people feel most relaxed. The bar is especially busy tonight and the waiters take turns rushing to Kareem with their drink orders. Some nod with a smile at Jules, who they recognize, as they speak. In between filling glasses and uncorking more bottles of expensive French wine, Kareem and Jules catch up on the last few months. Jules confesses that she just celebrated her birthday, knowing Kareem will spoil her with an endless glass of champagne and the most delicious Grand Marnier soufflé. And he does.

Jules feels fidgety. She cannot get comfortable on the stool but she cannot leave now that her birthday soufflé has been ordered. Her jeans feel especially rough against her skin. They are growing increasingly uncomfortable and are becoming downright painful. She prepares for the longest 20-minute soufflé delay and tries to ease the discomfort by repositioning herself, to no avail. Her skin is prickly, on fire. She already regrets the “safe tanning,” surely, the culprit for this sensation. She needs to cool herself and asks Kareem for a large glass of iced water. After cupping the glass with both hands, she slides her newly cooled hands discretely to her burning skin, under her sweater, one in front and the other in back. The cold offers temporary relief. Jules wonders, if you listen carefully, she could hear the water drops sizzle on her skin.

With her back to the entire room of patrons, she realizes there is no way to reach the burning skin a bit lower unless she is willing to provide some inappropriate exposure in the process. She looks around the bar and notices a recently vacated stool, around the bend and against the wall, where she may be able to subtly sneak her hands down her pants without getting the notice of the dressed-to-impress patrons. She gets Kareem’s attention and tells him she would like to move around to the other seat, to clear the path of the waiters and busboys carrying heavy trays of spicy steak tartar, rich bouillabaisse, Jean Michel’s signature roasted chicken and selections of stinky, pungent cheeses.

Safely ensconced in the corner, with her back to the wall, Jules scans the room to see if anyone has her in their sights while again cooling her hands. She subtly arches her back and runs them down her pants. She nearly sighs audibly in relief. She looks around again, while icing her hands. Kareem is pouring, the waiters are rushing by, and those at visible tables are engrossed in conversation. She cannot get enough of her hands on her bottom and, in between sips of the champagne set before her, continues to alternate her hands on the iced water glass and on her burning skin. Whether the champagne is to credit or her actions provide too much relief to care, Jules becomes less discreet about her furtive activities until she notices someone approaching the bar, a slight smile on his face.

*Has he seen me?*

She offers a quick flash of an embarrassed smile in return and pretends she had been adjusting her sweater.

The distinguished looking man, probably in his late 50s, stands at the corner of the bar, resting his foot on the brass footrail, half-facing Jules, clearly trying to get Kareem's attention.

*Oh, no. Please do not get comfortable. I need my privacy!*

She cups her hands around the glass, anticipating his departure and hoping this will somehow cool down the rest of her body. He does not leave and it does not help. Kareem comes by, places a napkin in front of the new patron and returns with a martini straight up, with a twist. Her new neighbor gives a slight nod and lifts the glass, as in silent cheers to Jules, before taking a sip.

*He's not going anywhere, she realizes, panic rising.*

"Nothing like it," he says, after finishing his first sip, holding up the glass, admiring it while twirling it in his fingers.

“Yes, that’s my drink, too,” Jules agrees.

“Then allow me to buy you one. Though it looks like you are having some champagne this evening.”

“Yes, it’s from Kareem, the bartender.”

“Oh, a special occasion?” he asks.

*He is definitely not leaving!*

“I celebrated my birthday earlier this week.”

“Well, happy birthday…” he trails off, waiting for her name.

“Jules,” she offers.

*Please leave,* she begs as she smiles.

“Craig,” he reciprocates.

“Nice to meet you, Craig.”

It is Jules’s turn to raise her glass before taking a sip. Craig offers his in return and they clink. Kareem hears the greeting from mid-bar and his protective instinct kicks in. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches. This is one of the many reasons Jules enjoys it here.

“An elegant place,” Craig says, surveying the room.

“Yes, it is,” Jules agrees.

“What brings you here?”

“I live locally,” she responds, revealing nothing. “And you?” she asks, to be polite.

“I’m here with colleagues and a client. They’re at the back table. We like this place. The staff and the management are very discreet.”

“Discreet? What kind of business dinner is this?” she asks, intrigued.

“We work in music. Our clients are recognizable. And we can’t afford a Page 6 mention

tomorrow.”

“That recognizable?”

*This could be interesting.*

“An icon,” Craig says, before taking another sip from his martini.

“So, why the dinner?”

“We’re negotiating a contract extension. A very lucrative one. But, we need to address some of his recent...extracurricular activities.”

“Oh? That sounds very mysterious,” Jules is curious but doesn’t want to appear inappropriate. Or at least not obviously so.

“I’m in sales. I encourage the bad behavior. It’s good for headlines, which is good for business. But, when it starts to interfere with his ability to perform, then the concert promoters start their whisper campaign to the press. And that can complicate things.”

“Really?” Jules is fascinated but tries not to appear too interested so that said bad boy’s behavior and identity may be revealed.

As if on cue, Mick, a little unsteady on his feet, appears behind Craig. Jules sits up a little straighter. She is excited to meet one of the Glimmer Twins. The man is a legend and has been since before she was born. She is more than a bit star struck.

“Well, there you are!” he spits at Craig, the “th” sounding as if he is trying to blow off something stuck on his tongue, the “are” overemphasizing the rolling “r” as only Brits can.

He is smaller than Jules would have expected. Much thinner, too. He looks aged, the lines in his face deeper than she would have imagined. While she is very familiar with the artistry of the unsung heroes in make-up, lighting and imaging, the photos of his face must get a bit more “refreshing” than most.

“Who is your lovely friend?” he asks Craig, while looking directly at Jules.

“Mick, this is Jules. Jules, Mick,” Craig says cordially, but clearly irritated by the interruption in their quiet conversation. And, his companion’s hanging on him for balance.

*As if I didn’t already know*, Jules thinks.

“A pleasure to meet you,” she says, trying to act unimpressed, extending her hand for a handshake.

“The pleasure is all mine, darlin’.”

He takes her hand, as if to shake it, and then raises it to his lips, stopping just before kissing it. He pulls his head back subtly, as if trying to better focus.

“Speaking of pleasure, is it difficult to masturbate with nails that long?” he asks, with a wicked smile crossing his lips.

“Excuse me?” Jules asks, figuring she must have misheard him.

“I would think just to the fingertips would be more comfortable for you.”

Craig is already trying to remedy the situation, taking Mick by the shoulders, with a firm “Easy, Mick.” She knows she had, in fact, heard him correctly.

“I said, it must be difficult for a woman to masturbate with long fingernails,” he raises his voice, which draws the attention of many of those eating at nearby tables. When Jules looks around, she realizes they have the attention of nearly everyone at the tables in the main dining room as well. Kareem is on the other side of the bar, looking to see how he can help quiet the situation, quickly. Craig gives an embarrassed smile that says “sorry,” like the parent of an unruly toddler throwing a tantrum. They are quickly joined by other middle-aged men in jeans, sports jackets and expensive shoes, who had lost track of their charge. They deftly move the group out of the restaurant and into the SUV idling at the curb. Craig offers what sounds like

“Nice to meet you” on his way out the door. Within seconds, the restaurant resumes the typical clatter: silverware clanking against plates, wine bottles being uncorked, conversation and laughter at a dull roar.

Jules, a bit stunned, looks at Kareem and asks, “Did you hear that?”

Kareem apologizes but Jules assures him there was no way he could have anticipated that, the oddest question anyone has ever posed to her. Because the night cannot possibly get more interesting, or strange, she decides to ask for her tab. Kareem refuses any payment for her birthday champagne and dessert, so Jules drops a twenty-dollar bill on the bar as they kiss-kiss goodbye. She collects her coat from Kariley, who has it ready, and steps outside to the cold night air.

Waiting for the light on the corner of Second Avenue, Jules checks her phone and finds four missed calls. She checks her messages. Maria called to confirm the babysitter is arranged for their rescheduled dinner. Tom called twice, “Just checking in. Where are you?” And Mark, “Belated birthday wishes, love. I’m just back in from Hong Kong.”

At 10:30, it’s too late to call Maria. Mark in Aspen is a safer bet. He’s either preparing to go out or just starting dinner. He will appreciate his fellow Brit’s concern about her ability to masturbate, even if he is decidedly unimpressed by celebrity. He answers by the second ring, indicating he must not be on a date.

“Hello, love! How was your big day? I was thinking of you, somewhere in the midst of a hellishly long flight.”

“It was very nice, thank you,” a smile in her voice. She hopes she doesn’t sound as tipsy as she feels. The walk home is always the test and she concentrates on walking along the seam in the pavement on the sidewalk. No trouble keeping the straight line, no weaving, but a tad slow.

She would score a B.

“I feel obliged to ask. What did the man who doesn’t deserve you do for you?” he teases.

“We had dinner at Daniel. It was perfect,” she tries to sound convincing.

“Very pretentious, too. Plus, we did that years ago. Annndddd...anything else?” he asks, prodding.

“We’re going to take a long weekend together. His treat.”

“Of course, it should be his treat! But, what did he get *you*?”

“The weekend away. And a lovely dinner.”

“Reservations? Jules, tell me, amuse me, why do you bother with this guy?”

“Because he adores me and he isn’t going to run off and retire in Aspen just when things are getting serious,” she quiets him.

“Touché, love.”

“Now, let me tell you about what happened tonight,” she changes the subject.

She tells him of meeting Mick, his concern for her most personal safety—“And my nails aren’t even long!”—and how it was over as quickly as it began. Mark, of course, has met Mick before, at some cocktail party in Los Angeles. He laughs about how rock stars can be so offensive to women, and how rather than give them a well-deserved smack across the face, instead call and brag to friends about the encounter.

“What was gallant boyfriend’s reaction to hearing that his very beautiful girlfriend must not only visit bars on her own, but suffer the abuses of rude, though very famous rock stars?”

“I haven’t returned his calls yet,” she admits.

“You called me first? That’s very interesting, isn’t it?” more a statement than a question.

“Call me when you are all tucked in and let’s talk a little more about those nails. I

wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

Jules giggles at his attempt to resume their phone sex relationship, which was matched only by their very naughty e(rotic)mails, and wishes him a good night as she enters the lobby of her building.

Once upstairs, she gently strips off her clothes. She briefly inspects the damage in her full-length. She inhales upon seeing it; it's bad and it will clearly be days before she'll sit comfortably. She finds French pharmacy apres-sun lotion and applies liberally before pulling on her softest cotton lounge pants and tank top and climbs into bed. She nearly gets up to find her phone to call Mark back, but stops herself, knowing exactly what the second call would signal to him.

Tom, she decides, can wait until the morning.

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## **Weekends Away**

March, in like a lion and out like a lamb, is greeted completely differently by Jules and Tom. She is energized by even the tiniest hints of spring's approach and her mood lifted by the days growing longer and warmer. This helps make her morning runs in the park a bit easier, where she delights in finding the little yellow faces of daffodils poking out of the hard, frozen ground. Tom is a little quieter and even slightly sullen. She notices he checks snow reports out west every morning and mourns the imminent end of another snowboarding season.

The first weekend of the month, Jules makes her annual long-weekend visit to her parents on Florida's west coast. It's a lovely, relaxing time, celebrating her mother's birthday and visiting with her parents, who enjoy a camp-like camaraderie with their snowbird friends: tennis and swimming in the morning, lunch poolside, early cocktails and hors d'oeuvres at the clubhouse before heading out for early dinners, movies or concerts.

Jules and her mother catch up while sunning by the pool. Jules applies layer upon layer of SPF45 sunscreen to her fair skin. She is shades lighter than her mother, who is deeply tanned after more than two full months of wintering in southern Florida.

"Tell me, how are things with Tom? And why are you here, alone, rather than together somewhere?" her mother asks, getting directly to the point.

"I just wanted to see you, of course," Jules answers, pulling her hair back to apply sunscreen on her ears.

"You should have brought him. So much time apart, when you have a new boyfriend? You spent Valentine's Day with your friends?"

"Mother, please, we did celebrate. Just a little late because he was snowboarding on the

actual day. We went out to his house and had a romantic dinner in town. Don't worry, everything's fine. Tom's just not big on Hallmark holidays."

"I don't like Tom being away on Valentine's Day. Men are on their best behavior while courting. His lack of romanticism so early on doesn't sit well with me, even if he does consider it 'a Hallmark holiday.'"

"True, true." Jules agrees, and picks up her book.

She knows her mother makes a good point and doesn't want to defend Tom's bad behavior. People in relationships must make each other a priority. Jules holds her parents' marriage in high regard: after 40 years together, her father still surprises her mother with romantic gestures like bringing home fresh flowers and planning romantic getaways. They have something Jules hopes for herself and so she must admit that her mother clearly knows a thing or two about what it takes to have a successful relationship. She notes her mother's direct and honest opinions and "tough love" advice.

A few sun-filled days later, Jules returns to New York relaxed, well rested and eager to see Tom. Weekends away always prompt especially passionate nights for them. Upon landing at Newark, she is delighted to hear Tom's voicemail, asking her to call as soon as she lands.

"Hi sweetie! We've just landed and are taxiing. How are you?"

"Welcome back! I'm great!"

He sounds very happy to have her back. She notices he is nearly shouting over the especially loud background noise.

"I can't wait to see you! Where are you? It's so loud."

She realizes that she is shouting in response, in the still quiet plane cabin.

"I'm at LaGuardia," he tells her, excitement in his voice.

“Oh, no! You are so sweet! But, I flew United, into Newark.”

She speaks in a lower voice and stifles her laughter about the mishap. He does not respond. She hopes he will not be upset with himself for botching the surprise. Neither one of them is especially good on details.

“Tom, it’s the thought that counts, really.”

“Yeah...no...well, I’m boarding a flight to Aspen. They just got another six inches of fresh powder.”

Deflated, she responds, “Another trip out west? I was looking forward to seeing you.”

“Jules, this could be the last trip of the season,” she practically mouths his response with him. This is the third time in less than a month she’s heard these very words. And, of course, the follow up, “I’ll be back in a few days. I’ll miss you, Jules.”

“Okay, safe flight.”

She wants to hang up before the chill in her voice becomes apparent. But it may be too late. His snowboarding jaunts are obviously irritating to her but she knows it would be selfish to begrudge him his favorite sport. Plus, she literally has just flown in from an extended weekend away. She likes that they have their life together and still maintain their own lives, too, she reminds herself. But, her mother’s questions about what kind of surprises he plans for them, versus himself, ring loud and true in her mind.

She disembarks with her carry-on, walks quickly along the moving sidewalk and outside, where the bone-chilling cold smacks her still-sunscreened face as she waits in the taxi queue. With cooperative traffic, she is through the Lincoln Tunnel and on the Upper East Side, in her quiet apartment, within 40 minutes.

She feels a tinge of loneliness. She misses her parents. She misses her boyfriend. She

cannot help but feel Tom is acting strange. Or was she just especially let down that she thought he was meeting her flight, only because he could not wait to see her, either? She takes a bubble bath by candlelight. After, as she smooths on body oil, even in the dim light, she notices how the light tan already appears to be fading, the cold air draining her color. Adhering to the early-to-bed, early-to-rise routine she established in just four days with her parents, she gets under her covers, the cool sheets bringing about a quick shiver.

In an effort to avoid her tendency to obsess, she distracts herself by picking up the book she started during her trip. Candace Bushnell's latest will be a fun and welcome distraction, she thinks as she settles into her pillows. She reads the page and then rereads it. Nothing registers. She rereads it and still no recollection. She cannot focus. She blames it on the post-getaway blues, because it's an easier culprit than more relationship analysis. The most effective cure? Book another trip!

She will start planning her birthday get-away with Tom. He will be available again soon, since one of these trips *really* will be the last trip of the season. She calls Sloane to catch up on their parents' visits as well as get some romantic getaway suggestions. She is surprised when Sloane picks up on the third ring, a rarity for her to answer at all, even on a Sunday night.

"Not screening tonight, Sloane?"

"Hi, honey! I was on the line with my mother, who was further chastising me, and I thought it was *he who shall not be named* calling. Again. It's got to stop. He showed up the other night. Drunk. It's a long story that I do not want to bore you with right now. How are you?"

"Great. Just back from visiting my parents in Florida."

"Are you okay? Or do you want to stick pins in your eyes?" There is real concern in Sloane's voice.

“No, nothing like that. The visit went well, until my mother started getting a little too personal on the questions about my personal life.... How was your visit to the farm?”

“Virginia was great. My stepfather was trying to kill pheasant most of the time. My mother was trying to kill me.”

“Oh, sorry. Do you want to go first?”

Jules has heard a number of Sloane’s mother’s philosophies, many enlightening, others humorous, all of them poignant. Their favorite mantra: marry the first time for love, the second for money and the third for companionship. Given their late start, Jules and Sloane wondered if they are meant to jump right to money. And they both love that it is considered *de rigueur* that a woman marry three times.

“No. Your call, you go first. Any words of wisdom imparted to you this weekend?”

“Basically, I should consider ending things with Tom because he was away snowboarding on Valentine’s Day. It was thoughtless and unromantic. She said it explains why he’s still single at 45 and that he’ll likely always be single. That about sums it up.”

“Huh. Impressive.” Sloane considers before she shares, “My mother offered to pay to have my eggs frozen. Over dinner. Unsolicited. I win,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Oh, God! Did she really? Absolutely, you win!”

Jules always finds comfort in sharing war stories with Sloane, who keeps a healthy sense of humor in the face of even decidedly unfunny situations.

“I confess, it’s disappointing that Tom missed Valentine’s Day, even if it is a silly holiday, but then he more than makes up for it in the sweet gestures for no reason at all, like running out to pick up my favorite muffins while I ran during our last weekend together out east.”

“Of course, honey, you see that as sweet when really, it’s just sabotage. He’s trying to fatten you up so other guys won’t hit on you which means he’s serious about you.”

“Sloane! You are hilarious. But it’s that kind of gesture, or waking me with, ‘Good morning, beautiful.’”

“That is sweet,” Sloane adds, sincerely.

“You know, but even though he’s the sweet, sensitive type, the kind of guy you marry...recently, I’ve had vague feelings that things in our relationship are changing, even with his doting gestures.”

Sloane is surprised. “I am telling you, a few trips to hang out with the guys out west does not a fall from the pedestal make, honey. Which is very different from him looking up to you, like the leprechaun of a man I call my boyfriend. He has to look up to me. And everyone else for that matter. The little bastard.” She exhales a deep yoga-type sigh that says *Let it go*.

Sloane and Pierce aka “The Leprechaun” have a complicated relationship. There is a lot of love. Codependent, twisted love. There has been for years, sprinkled with dramatic break-ups, grand, romantic gestures to win her back and plenty of stomach- flipping rollercoaster rides in between. He is a small-statured, Irish-born and bred Wall Street savant with all the material trappings: the Upper East Side brownstone, the ocean-front Hamptons house packed with a garage-full of foreign-made toys, even a personal shopper at Cartier. Yet, for all of his wealth and possessions, he lacks one very important thing: empathy. Sloane is determined that if she looks long enough and is patient enough, she will find it.

There is clearly something that keeps them going back to each other for more. True love? Masochism? Sloane is as ready as Pierce is reluctant to walk down the aisle. Recently, The Leprechaun’s cold feet issue escalated into heated words, after too many Johnnie Walker Blues

for him and too many Veuve Clicquots for her. Pierce confessed that though he loves her, he is concerned he cannot commit and he's going to see a therapist.

"You don't need a shrink, Pierce, you need a jeweler!" Sloane screamed, as she ran down the front steps of his brownstone, dragging her overstuffed bags and confused little Yorkie behind her. That was more than a month ago. And, true to their cat and mouse game, in recent weeks, Pierce has been spotted walking down Sloane's block, visiting her restaurant haunts and even daring to buzz her ringer late one night, begging for her to let him in.

Jules knows Sloane and Pierce are far from over, but how and when it will end is anyone's guess. No doubt, the drama is taking its toll on Sloane, who is becoming a bit reclusive and perhaps battling an eating disorder as a result. Her therapist prescribes her mild uppers for the mornings, anti-anxieties to get her through the day and something to help her relax and sleep at night.

"By the way, between my mother and the awful woman at the La Mer counter, I wanted to die this past week," Sloane changes the topic.

"Etta?" Jules asks. "What could she possibly have done wrong?"

"It started off innocently enough. As it always does. She called to tell me of a new spring promotion they are running. Spend \$300 and get a gift bag, blah, blah."

"I think she's been trying to reach me, too. I have some messages I need to check."

"It may interest you to know that when she called to tell me about the promotion and to schedule an appointment, she mentioned that she's been trying to get in touch with you. And, I mentioned that you were out of town."

"Okay..." Jules says, failing to understand the problem.

"She was surprised that I wasn't with you. She literally said, 'Oh, you didn't go with

her?’ and I said, ‘No, ma’am. I didn’t. She is down south, visiting her family.’ And you know what she said? ‘I assumed you two were together.’ Like *together*. Jules, people are starting to think we are *lovers!*”

“Well, we’d be decidedly lipstick lesbians!” Jules says, laughing about the misunderstanding.

“Really, can’t a girl go shopping with her friend for some beauty products without being confused for a lesbian? The pressure on a single woman in this city! I just cannot *stand* it!” Sloane says in mock stress.

The conversation turns to ideal spring destinations when Sloane’s phone begins beeping, a call ringing in.

Sloane excuses herself, “Lord, give me strength! Something is wrong with my phone but I think this time it may really be him. It’s torturous. Let me deal with it, sweets,” she moans and promises to call Jules later.

Since it’s past her usual nighttime med time, Jules is pleasantly surprised when Sloane calls back within a few minutes.

“False alarm. It was my mother checking in on me. She’s probably wondering if her continued words of wisdom have put me in the loony bin. Speaking of loonies, I have to tell you about yesterday’s changing room fiasco!”

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## Changing Room Fiasco

Sloane reminds Jules of her college friend, Caroline, from Duke, who has a renewed love in her life, Carter.

“You know them...another on-again-off-again couple and this on-again time, things have been going really well. Naturally, Carter was taking Caroline out for her birthday and she wanted to knock his socks off to remind him why they were on again. She had gone through the full primping ritual and had her hair blown for good measure.”

“Naturally,” Jules adds.

“As a girl should, of course! After all that spa time, she headed to Intermix to pick up something suitably sexy and demure, as I insisted and assisted.”

“You’re a fantastic stylist, Sloane.”

“Thank you, honey. Anyway, the store manager, who I know well, greeted us at the door and showed us the latest arrivals. I shared it was *the most important* birthday night and we had to find just the right look.”

“Dressing for a special birthday celebration!” the saleswoman said, overjoyed, as if it were *her* birthday. She quickly began packing the closest fitting room. I added a few of my own selections, which, combined with the store manager’s, included roughly half the pieces in the store. So...Caroline pulled on one thing then the next and I’m not sure why she bothered with the blow out. The clothes came off the rack and into the fitting room in a frenzy. The other customers in the shop tried in vain to get assistance. No chance.”

“I can only imagine,” Jules said.

“People may have been annoyed. The woman in the fitting room next to Caroline’s was

decidedly neglected and her friend acted as a runner to find her selections in other sizes and colors. While Caroline was trying on one thing after the next, I was bragging to the store manager how the love of Caroline's life was finally coming to his senses."

As she listens, Jules wonders if the possible fairy tale ending Sloane wants for Caroline reflects her own love story hopes.

"'Carter is simply smitten with this little Southern belle,' I told her. 'This man has done his share of dating these tough, cold New York women and he's finally ready to buy the ring and hit the aisle.' And on and on I bragged. Neither of us noticed that the dressing room next to Caroline's had gone silent."

"Hmm...this is getting interesting," Jules says, curious where this is headed.

"Suddenly, our very sweet and pleasant shopping expedition turned into something worthy of the evening news. The woman in the next fitting room tore aside the curtain and burst out, 'Who are you? Why the hell are you having dinner with my fiancé?!'"

"No!" Jules interrupts.

"Yes! Jules, I assure you, both Caroline and I stood *completely* paralyzed. I just could not comprehend what was happening. The woman flashes her hand in front of Caroline, adding insult to injury, and I saw a healthy-size diamond—easily four carats, by my quick assessment—on that awful woman's left ring finger!"

"Oh, no! What did you do?"

"Nothing! I was speechless. Frozen. But, Caroline swallowed deeply and, bless her heart, managed to blurt out, 'Are you engaged to Carter McCullough?' Before the woman could answer, Caroline made a mad dash for the door. Naturally, the enraged fiancée was not going to let this woman escape without understanding just what the hell she had stumbled upon. So, she

chased Caroline through the store and out the front door, onto Madison. The security alarms were going crazy and the other customers in the store stood and stared as I ran after them, as did the store manager, worried about the designer duds the two customers were wearing.”

“Hilarious!” Jules laughs. “Can you imagine if you were that store manager?”

“Or some poor soul walking down Madison? There was this *simply horrible* screaming match on the sidewalk and luckily, I had grabbed Caroline’s clothes and bag on my way out the door. And, called out to the store manager to charge my American Express for Caroline’s items. I needed to get her away from the fiancée and home, right away.”

“Definitely,” Jules agrees.

“The not-so-fortunate fiancée came to her senses about the scene they were creating and started down Madison Avenue with her friend’s—and the store manager’s, naturally—encouragement, to return to the store. You could see her shoulders shaking as she sobbed.”

“Poor thing. Of course, I feel sorry for Caroline, but imagine if you were the one engaged to this guy?”

“Pshaw! I really felt for her. The creep is engaged, or *was*, and still leads Caroline on!”

“What did Caroline do?”

“Well...I wound up taking her out for her birthday and bought her the outfit, too. Anything to keep her from staying at home, popping too many of those little anti-anxieties we’re all on and downing them with a bottle of champagne.”

“Honestly, this is the worst birthday experience I’ve heard of. Poor thing.”

“Jules, speaking of those ‘antis,’ I’m so sorry, sweets. I took some when my mother called the first time and they’re starting to kick in. Mind if we catch up later?”

After they hang up, Jules thinks herself rather silly. Of course, Tom would never pull a

stunt like Carter's nor drag things on and on like Pierce. He is just a bit introverted and maybe a little too into his snowboarding, but he is good, kind, honest and hardly the creepy, scheming kind of guy who would break her heart like that. Jules considers what some of her friends are dealing with. And friends of friends, for that matter. So, he could use a little work on celebrating romantic holidays, even if they were "artificial." She decides to teach by example. *You get more bees with honey*, as the old adage goes.

She decides to run by Paper Source to pick up a card then drop by Whole Foods to stock his refrigerator and pantry with his favorite things before he returns home. She will treat herself—and him—to a few new lacy things. When his flight arrives in a couple of days, they will have been apart a week. She wants to ensure their little reunion is a memorable one.

She sends Tom a text: "Hope you're having fun, baby. xoxo" She turns off her light and settles into bed, a smile on her lips.

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## **Tiffany & Co.**

The following afternoon, Jules takes advantage of a canceled client meeting and leaves the office a little early to get started on her errands. Across Sixth Avenue, she drops in the card store and picks out something fun and flirty. She hops on the uptown M10 bus that takes her up the avenue then west, to Columbus Circle. She enters through the revolving doors of the Time Warner Building and takes the escalator down to the perpetually packed Whole Foods, where she picks up a few items, including strawberries for them to share in bed. On the walk just a few short blocks to his apartment building, she picks up a nice bottle of Barolo. The doorman greets her while pushing starting the revolving door and makes small talk as he loads her bags onto the trolley. Vito, with the thick Italian accent, locates Tom's keys on the board and drops them in her hand as she hurries by.

“Ahh, a romantic woman who likes to surprise the man. He is very lucky!” he says, with a wink.

She visits Tom's so regularly that, long ago, Vito and the other doormen stopped calling to announce her visit and now hand over his keys without a word. Upstairs, Jules lets herself into the apartment and, pushing through the door that sticks, enjoys the faintest smell of Tom upon entering. It's a clean smell, mostly mild soap and deodorant with a very subtle undertone of chlorine, from his daily swims. Scientists say smell is one of the most important senses in recalling memories and she is surprised by how true this is. The combination of being back in his apartment and enjoying the smell of him makes her realize how much she misses him. She stops and hesitates for just a moment, smiling about her pettiness in being upset about his affair with his snowboard. The season, thankfully, is drawing quickly to a close.

She turns on the lights and enters the spotless 1970s style kitchen, unpacks the three grocery bags, putting everything in its place. She and he are both compulsively neat, so she understands his need for order. She hides the strawberries and whipped cream in the produce drawer, where he is less likely to spot them. She will keep this as her little surprise for their first night together.

She waters the plants in both the living room—one near the chocolate brown leather couch, the other beside the windows overlooking Central Park—and the bedroom—one on his side of the bed, near the park view windows and the other, the elephant plant, on her side of the bed. All are dry from the radiator-forced heat and having missed their regular watering. Years earlier, she'd read that speaking nicely to plants makes them happy and helps them grow more quickly and beautifully. Ever since, Jules has put this into practice. She spends a little more time with the elephant leaf plant, because his base requires more water and, as her bedside companion, he is her favorite. She feels that his regular tears indicate that he is a sensitive plant. A silly thought, but still her deeply held belief.

“Don't cry, Mr. Elephant. He will be back very soon and we will both be very happy,” she soothes him.

She hangs the dry cleaning she had collected from the doorman, careful to respect his color-coded closet system. She gives one last look, ensures the place is in order and within fifteen minutes of walking in, is walking out of the apartment, turning off the light switch near the door. As she is about to close the door, she realizes she nearly forgot to leave the card she had bought. She flips the switch back on, walks over to the heavy, mission style table and drops her bag to find the card. She scribbles a quick "Welcome home! Care to explore my slopes?" The message is flirty and promises more. Perfect. Since last night's talk with Sloane, she cannot

possibly hold onto a grudge about this trip, though she secretly prays it will be his last of the season. As she places the card on top of the small pile of receipts and paperwork, she notices a white envelope embossed with the classic Tiffany and Co. logo. *Tiffany's*? She lifts the card to confirm that her eyes were not playing a trick on her. She drops the card on the table and hesitates, for a fraction of a second, before picking up her new discovery and opening it, careful not to make any incriminating tears or folds to the thick ecru paper. Inside, she finds a receipt for a \$34,000 item.

Her heart begins to race. Her hands start to shake. She reads the receipt again and drops it on the table. A wave of heat washes over her and she feels light-headed. Without even realizing it, she drops to the bench, staring at the paper. She starts to feel queasy and overwhelmed with emotion.

*Oh...my...God!*

After a few minutes of letting this discovery sink in, she picks up the discarded white envelope to replace the receipt, careful to fold it correctly on each crease.

*Be calm. Breathe.*

Her hands are shaking, now almost uncontrollably. She feels anxious. About the pending proposal? About ruining the surprise? About getting caught? That's silly, he's more than half way across the country. Nevertheless, she is eager to put everything back in place.

*Rule number one: Do not panic.*

As she tries to recreate the pile of paper exactly the way she found it, she catches a glimpse of the American Express receipt now on top.

*Was that there? I'm in this far, might as well...just one last little peek.*

But this receipt is not from Tiffany nor is it for \$34,000. This one is for \$400 flat. No tip,

no name of establishment.

*That's odd*, she thinks, as she takes a closer look.

She is able to make out that it was from Thursday at 12:13 am.

*Think. Think. Thursday night.*

Hadn't he mentioned Thursday night dinner with his parents when they spoke over the weekend? Yes, she is certain she recalled thinking him an excellent son—which foretells him being an excellent husband and father—because he sees his parents as often as he does. She was also somewhat relieved that she was out of town. She likes them, very much, but other people's family dynamics take some getting used to.

*There is no way they would have been out until after midnight especially with his parents drive home to Long Island.*

Plus, his father always insists upon paying for dinner, something Tom is accustomed to but still makes Jules uncomfortable. And, she wonders, what kind of restaurant doesn't print its name and address at the top of the charge receipt?

In search of more clues, she checks the next receipt, a cash withdrawal from POM POM diner, at 12:28 am for \$200. This, too, strikes her as odd. Why would he venture all the way to Eleventh Avenue in the 50s for cash, especially at that time of night? She cannot *not* check into this. There is something not sitting right about all of this and she is determined to figure it out. She logs into his computer and pulls up google. Brucey, apparently a regular, provides an entry that informs her:

Cheap, cheery and nice quality. Nothing special here just good standard food, exactly what you would expect from a diner. Highly recommended. Pros: perfect for those who have *blown their wads* at the establishment across the street.



At the top of the screen, an unsolicited You Might Also Consider list displays Robert's Steakhouse. She clicks through to the link. Editorial Description: The restaurant inside the Penthouse Executive Club offers classic American fare, along with fine wines, cocktails and female entertainment; reservations required.

She catches her breath like she's been punched in the stomach. A strip club? He said he was having dinner with his parents! And, she had actually felt a bit guilty for missing it. And he provided details on the night and dinner, every detail from where they went, family news, how his mother liked the book Jules had bought for her. He even texted her afterwards, wishing her a good night, saying he didn't want to call in case she was already asleep.

*That lying bastard!*

He knows *just* how she feels about these clubs. He told her it had been years since he had been to one, under the typical guy pretense: my buddy talked me into it. And he went once, he said, as the best man to his childhood friend, how could he refuse? Other than those two times, he claimed he had not been. He found them "degrading to women." What was the point, he had added, appearing fully enlightened, of getting turned on by a woman and not being able to do anything about it?

Jules and the girls have discussed their boyfriends' or a husband's penchant for sneaking off to strip clubs. Whenever it comes up, they roll their eyes, as if to say, *What can you do?* But, after a conversation with Sloane, Jules spoke to Tom and he assured her that this was nothing for her to worry about. She trusted him, completely. Not that she ever thought she had to worry about this with Tom. After all, he had been pretty conservative sexually, refusing even her mild suggestions to experiment in the boudoir.

Hundreds of dollars on his credit card and extra cash in his wallet? Did he stop at the

diner for cab fare home? Or did he return to the club to tip out in cash? Her mind races so fast she cannot keep up with the images and the emotions.

And then the truly bitter irony hits her. Not only had he lied to her prior to the evening, but the “reservations required” policy also meant that this was no last minute, drunk, impulsive decision. He was an expert liar. And, he was going to propose to her. Her head begins to spin and she starts to feel lightheaded. She runs to the bathroom just in time to be ill.

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## **Jules Has a Plan**

After careful discussion and weighing of countless options, Jules has devised a strategy with her trusted board of advisors. She must speak with Tom and allow him to explain. After all, they have both put too much into this relationship to walk away over what *may be* a misunderstanding. But, Jules decides upon her own twist, which received unanimous support from the entire board, other than Madeleine. Three out of four is quorum and that works nearly as well as unanimous, anyway.

After ignoring his calls, neglecting his voicemails and not answering his texts for a few days, Jules finally picks up Tom's call on his second day back from Aspen.

"Hello," she answers, nonchalant.

"Jules! Hi!" he tries to sound chipper but she can read the panic.

*Good.*

"Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you!"

*"Care to tell me where you've been?"* she thinks but instead answers, "Oh, just crazy busy. You know how I get sometimes."

"Oh, good. I thought something was wrong. But, when I got home and saw all the things you had left in my apartment and couldn't reach you, I was worried."

"No need to worry, Tom," she says, wincing at how saccharine sweet her voice sounds, even to her ears.

But did her words send an unintentionally sinister message? She's always been a terrible actor and doesn't want to sound upset. She must get off the phone before her voice betrays her.

"Um, listen, we have a lot of catching up to do but I've really got to get going. I'm

running late.”

“Do you want to come by tonight? It’s been so long…”

She jumps in before he can add a sweet little pet name. “Tonight? Okay, I can drop by after work,” her heart races as she anticipates the confrontation.

“Drop by? How about I make dinner? A little homemade gnocchi?”

*Oh, he is on to me.*

“Your homemade gnocchi is my favorite,” she says, because it is true. Already, she can feel her resolve to confront him faltering.

“I’ll have it ready by 7?” he asks, probably still wondering what went wrong while he had been boarding the blacks out west.

“See you then,” she says, a little too cheerfully.

When she hangs up the phone, her hands are shaking. She hates conflict, even just the thought of it, with Tom. They haven’t even had a spat. His mild disposition and willingness to concede if ever there was close to a disagreement made a full-blown fight almost unthinkable. As upset as she still is, days later, and as resolute as she has been in talks with her friends, she still hopes that seeing him will change everything. Could she honestly be preparing to end things with the very man she thought was her future?

Before dialing, she listens for Wendi, who sounds very engrossed in a conversation from what Jules can hear down the hall.

“Madeleine, it’s me.”

“How are you holding up?” she asks.

“I have to be quick because Wendi is back and though on the phone right now, you never know. We just spoke, very briefly, but I think he may know something is up,” she whispers

quickly.

“What would give him that idea? The fact that you have given him the cold shoulder for days when you normally talk or text countless times in any given hour?”

“Okay, so he knows something is up. Maybe he should. He probably thinks I’m just miffed about his trip to Aspen.”

“Right! He should know only you are allowed to take long weekends away,” she teases.

“Okay, okay. Listen, I am going over there tonight for homemade gnocchi,” Jules interrupts.

“His grandmother’s recipe? Do you think you can get him to write it down before you write him off?”

“Are you entertaining yourself? Because this is serious.”

“Jules, you’ve been nothing but serious for the last dozen conversations. And, it’s not like I’m relishing what’s about to come. A little levity, please?”

Madeleine makes a good point. She always does.

“Sorry, it’s just that I’m just shaking over here. You know how I am with confrontation. And, I’m nervous about seeing him tonight.”

“You’re just going to ask him a few questions and talk. That’s all. As far as how you get the information from him, you know where I stand.”

“Yes, I know.” Jules knew she would stand her ground.

“Please understand when I say this: I would love to be the one you call if you need someone to talk to tonight. In fact, you really should learn to open up more and communicate better,” she jokes. “But, this hormone thing leaves me so exhausted, I’m lucky I can get out of my clothes before I collapse on my bed. So, if you need a late-night ear, I suggest you try Sloane.

Early morning, I'm all yours. Okay?"

"I understand. And you've been so amazingly supportive, really. I appreciate it. I hope to visit soon. That way, there will be no escaping my endless discussion of my troubles."

"Promise me you will. But only after you're done with your mopey phase. Because, really, I have enough emotional swings on my own, I don't need you add to it."

"Madeleine!" she laughs, knowing how the message is intended.

"Okay, okay. Come up whenever you like. I will be happy to have you."

"That's more like it, thank you."

"Listen, good luck. Whatever you decide is the right thing."

"Thanks. I will talk to you, but not after 7 pm or before 7 am."

"I'm all yours!"

During the course of her call with Madeleine, Jules notices that Wendi has grown a bit quiet. She elects to play it safe—she's had enough drama already today—and skip another call, deciding to email instead. She sends Maria a quick note, as she imagines she's got more than her hands full with a sick baby. With that update, that only leaves speaking with Sloane, but not until she learns where Wendi is and what she is up to.

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## **Nonni's Gnocchi**

“Hey, Channing,” she says as she approaches her assistant’s cube. Jules knows that Channing spooks easily when people come up unannounced, as Wendi often does, as if to catch her up to something.

“I was thinking, would you be interested in a coffee run for the team, if I treat?”

“Sure!” Channing replies. Far from finding this task demeaning, Channing enjoys running out, if only to get break from the barrage of requests called out from Wendi’s office. And, other than managing one of Wendi’s personal errands, coffee runs are deemed the only acceptable excuse for Channing to be away from her desk.

“Listen,” Jules lowers her voice. Channing looks past her and gives an almost imperceptible nod, as if to signal “Coast is clear.”

“I need to run out for a quick visit to my colorist before dinner tonight. Would anyone notice if I headed out at around 5?”

“Not a chance. In fact, you may even consider booking a 5:00 appointment tonight. I would skip the Sally Hershberger salon, though. I hear they are super booked at that time.” This, of course, refers to Wendi’s whereabouts at 5:00.

“I see, thanks. I don’t cheat on Stephen, but I appreciate the tip.”

Jules hands her a \$20 bill for the coffees, finds Roy on the phone and mouths “Coffee?” before returning to her own desk. She dials the Oscar Blandi salon. Getting Stephen on the phone and explaining the circumstances behind the hair 911, Jules easily gets him to agree to stay late.

“Let’s make sure that man is eating his heart out while you are eating Nonni’s gnocchi!”

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## Highlights

Stephen is the perfect antidote for Jules's pre-potential break-up jitters. He greets her with a big hug and a glass of champagne. She tells her story as he divides her hair into sections, paints surprisingly small portions of it with white, chalky-looking frosting and wraps around her head with expert precision. He listens, nods and makes regular eye contact via the mirror as she retells the story, which she has rehashed so many times that it's lost some of the emotion. When she finishes, with the edited version of the story and the glass of champagne, Stephen responds.

"Let me assure you of two things. One: the decision is yours if you want this man in your life. Two: I have not a shred of concern that if this is not the man to walk you down the aisle, there will have no shortage of suitors in active pursuit. And, for whom, may I add, I am happy to keep you appropriately gilded."

"Stephen, why is it that you understand women so well?"

"Because I have 15 years of experience listening to my clients' stories. And sadly, they are remarkably similar. Plus, I know men. I am one and I date the bastards, too."

He carefully unfolds the tinfoil to examine the first section to see how the color is coming along.

"You so understand, thank you. That's probably why I look and feel better after I see you."

"And that's why I charge you so much. Now, let's go get you rinsed, glossed and styled. And, make sure you flip your head between your knees before they set the blow out with spray. Let's get a little sexy mussing into these beautiful, blond locks."

Her hair looking naturally blond and effortlessly styled, Jules is out the salon door and inside a taxi on Madison within minutes, heading home to freshen her make-up and change into a new outfit. She will be running a little late to Tom's but better to have him await her arrival.



She has so pre-occupied herself with the primping and preparations that it's not until she is crossing Central Park in a taxi that she thinks to get nervous about what the coming hours have in store. She notices that her hands are shaking as she sends Tom a text: On my way! She deletes the exclamation point before sending.

Tom, who prefers calls to texts, tries to ring her back immediately. She lets it go to voicemail to avoid any telltale jitters giving her away.

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## Finally Seeing Tom

Pulling into the building's covered drive, the taxi has barely stopped before one of the doormen greets Jules. She smiles as she takes long, confident strides through the lobby. While she believes she radiates sexy confidence with her head-to-toe winter white outfit, fresh hair and barely-there make-up, she has butterflies in her stomach that make her feel borderline ill.

She exits the elevator on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor and rounds the corner, grateful for the champagne and pep talk Stephen provided. As she presses the doorbell, the door swings open and there he stands, a big, happy smile plastered on his face.

“Jules! I’ve missed you!” his arms out, for an embrace.

*I hate you for doing this to me*, is all she can think.

“Well, look at you!” she says as she pushes past him, offering her cheek rather than accepting the hug and kiss of a couple who have missed each other for over a week. She drops her bag on the couch and returns his smile as he moves into the kitchen, looking confused.

“Don’t mind if I don’t help you off with your coat, but I don’t want to touch you in your pretty outfit. My hands are all flour and dough.”

*Touching’s not allowed in the clubs either, is it? Okay, okay, stop it!* she chides herself. She removes her coat and drops it next to her bag.

“How’s it coming in there?” she calls from the living room, looking around the room—the big, potted plants, the brown leather couch, the masculine wood furniture and oversized TV—realizing this may be the last time she will spend any time in this room. Or maybe even spend any time with him.

“I’d be lying if I said it was easy. But it’s nearly done,” he says.

*Lying? Interesting word choice there, Tom.* Her heart is in her throat.

“Mind if I pour myself some wine?” she asks, as she enters the little galley kitchen and picks up the bottle of Barolo that he has open on the counter.

“Help yourself. So, how are you, Jules? It’s been a week!”

*Either he is oblivious to my complete personality change or he’s pretending not to notice in hopes it will soon change. I can’t decide.*

“Well, I’ve been better...” she says, trying to look him in the eye.

He doesn’t look up to return her gaze. He is rinsing his hands in the sink, having just drizzled the last of the homemade salad dressing over the big, wooden bowl of fresh greens he’s just tossed.

“Really? I’m sorry to hear that. Let’s talk about it over dinner.”

He stands before her, the wine bottle in one hand, the salad in the other, waiting for her to move.

*Oh, he knows all right! He’s playing this like, No big deal. How ridiculous.*

“Well, maybe we should talk about it right now.”

She does not move from his path. He finally looks her in the eyes.

“Okay, let’s do this.”

He squeezes by her and walks into the living room where he puts the wooden bowl and wine bottle down on the Shaker style dining room table. They stand looking at each other across the table.

“Tom, someone told me they saw you at Penthouse Club recently, coming from one of the private rooms. Please tell me this is a case of mistaken identity.”

*One, two, three...the hesitation signals guilt. But, will he lie when confronted about his*

*lying? Which would be better? I this entrapment, like Madeleine claims? Maybe.*

“Yes, but Richard talked me into going, to keep him company. But that’s the first time I’ve gone in ages and....”

“Never mind that. This was the night you told me you were having dinner with your parents? And you described in detail what you did and where you went?”

She is amazed by her ability to sound calm in spite of how her heart has lodged itself in her throat at “Yes.”

“Jules, that was the plan. But they couldn’t make it in and Richard and called and, well, I know how you feel about those places so I just didn’t mention it.”

“And so you figured you were covered. You lied about everything that really happened that night. In such detail! And yes, you *do* know how I feel about those places. And, I thought I knew how *you* felt about them. At least if you *admitted* you went....” She is getting excited and her voice is borderline shrill.

“What the hell do you want? I just admitted it! Don’t I get any credit for telling the truth?” he interrupts her, his voice unusually high and tight.

“Oh, I am supposed to give you credit for being honest that you lied? Seriously?”

“Look, I’m sorry you found out. Okay?”

“But, that’s the difference, isn’t it? You’re not sorry that you lied! You’re not sorry you went! You’re sorry that I found out. And that you now have to take responsibility for your actions.”

“Jules, *what’s* the difference? You’re splitting hairs. You’re impossible!”

“Character, Tom, that’s what! Character is how a person behaves even if they know they will never get caught. And I’m finally seeing your true character.”

He stands silent across the table from her. His eyes, usually with a little twinkle in them, instead look heavy with tears, as if he is about to cry. She is shaking with emotion. Rage? Anger? Hurt?

“I do everything you want. I play by ‘Jules’s Rules.’ That’s what Richard and I call them. I say the right things. I do the right things. And, you know what, Jules? I’m tired of it. I’ve changed everything for you. Who I am. What I am. For you. And still it’s not enough.”

“You changed who you are? Don’t you dare say that!”

“It’s the truth. I gave you what you wanted.”

“What the hell are we doing here? Who am I in love with then?”

“Your perfect guy, Jules. Everything you wanted. I’m tired of being the answer to your goddamned romantic fantasy of a happy couple. Because I’m not even sure who is happy.”

“I am *not*. And I sure as hell don’t care if you are. You’re not honest about where you go and what you do. You’re not even honest about who you are? *Jesus Christ, Tom!*”

She collects her coat and bag and is heading for the door. She hesitates before opening it, wondering if this is really happening.

“Jules?” he says quietly, sweetly.

*Did I imagine it?*

“Jules?”

*No, it’s real.*

“Yes?”

*Please stop this before it’s too late. Tell me we are just being ridiculous.*

She turns around.

“Would you please not tell Vicki? It would create a real problem for Richard.”

She shakes her head, looking directly into his eyes until she slowly, without uttering a word, turns and walks out the door, allowing it to slam behind her.

She gives a weak smile to the same doorman and tries to pretend everything is fine as he helps her into a taxi, only minutes after he helped her out of one. She looks at her hands, still shaking with all the emotion, so not to have the “final glance” as the car pulls away from Tom’s building.

*Stop being so melodramatic!* she tells herself. *You will make up tomorrow. Or in a few days.*

Without any experience of fighting with Tom, it’s hard to estimate the recovery time.

*Or will we make up at all? Do I want to?*

The taxi passes the Tavern on the Green as it enters Central Park, heading east. Jules automatically pulls out the phone. No missed calls, no texts. She thinks of whom to call when she gets closer to Fifth Avenue and her signal will be strong again. She decides she cannot drag her friends through tonight’s drama. Not yet anyway. She puts her phone away. She still needs to think this through herself. And, if it all changes tomorrow—or in a few days—she will have spared them the minute-by-minute updates. She types: Big drama. I’m fine. Talk tomorrow. And sends the message to Maria, Sloane and Madeleine. She owes them some kind of status since, after all, they all knew about the gnocchi make-up or break-up dinner.

At only 7:30, she’s going to need something to fill her time. She decides to go to the gym and hit the treadmill. A good run will help her calm down and think things through. It will be a terrible waste of a blow out and beautiful make-up, but at least those at the gym will appreciate it, which is better than sitting at home, alone. Within minutes of getting out of the taxi, she has changed into her lulu Lemon pants, sports bra and fleece and is headed down Lexington Avenue

to Equinox. She pulls open the heavy glass doors and is greeted by a smiling staff member, the smell of clean mixed with scented candles and a club edit of a Mariah Carey song, a little too fast and a little too loud.

*Perfect*, she thinks, as she hands over her card.

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## Going Home

“Don’t cry, miss. You will see everything differently in the morning,” her taxi driver says, with a thick, patois-inflected accent.

“I’ve had an awful day.” She checks her cheeks, salty and wet with perspiration and tears.

“I imagined there was a reason for a taxi for such a short distance.”

“Mmmhmm,” she offers in response.

“It’s a fine line, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” She asks, trying to discretely wipe her runny nose without a tissue, since she is now aware that he is looking at her in the rearview mirror.

“A fine line between love and hate. Because passion has two faces.”

“That is very true. And there is also a fine line between being in control and being a sobbing, inconsolable wreck. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you worry, miss.”

“Thank you. You are very kind,” she says as the taxi slows then stops in front of her building and she pays the driver, including a generous tip.

She tries to hide her red, swollen face and rushes past a neighbor, willing herself to keep it together until she is inside her apartment. She wants nothing more than to stop: stop crying and stop thinking about how dramatically her life changed with just two found receipts.

Since the run didn’t provide the desired calming effect, she knows just the thing to numb herself: a little self-medication. She searches through her old prescription bottles, considering her options: Vicodin, Toradol, Percocet, anything to knock her out for the night. Her phone rings and even though she does her best to ignore it, after the third ring, she gives in to the urge to check. It



is Sloane, just the woman to talk to at a time like this.

“Sloane, there is absolutely no way I would have picked up for anyone else.”

“Jules, I’ve been trying you since you sent that text. I didn’t really believe it, sweetie. Why haven’t you picked up? I’ve been worried sick. I was wondering if I should call 311 or 911.”

Jules laughs. “Sorry, I went to the gym to get a run in. Phones strictly prohibited. I felt so good and then I realized I was gasping for air on the treadmill because I was upset about this. And I just wept hysterically in front of this very nice taxi driver. It just dawned on me...it’s done.” Even saying the words gets her choked up again.

“Better to be a sobbing, puffy-face mess in front of some poor soul driving the taxi you climbed into than that lying coward. Don’t worry, honey. You’re in good company because this makes two of us,” she commiserates.

“Please tell me your story first. I am so sick and tired of my own. This level of emotion is just exhausting.”

“There really is nothing new to report. You have heard it time and again. The Leprechaun got another case of cold feet and it was my fault for letting him back into my life, anyway.”

“You know how sorry I am, really,” because Jules can empathize with Sloane’s heartbreak more now than ever.

“You know what I wish, Jules? I wish he would die penniless, alone and soon. That is my wish. Both him and Tom.” And, just like that, she has said her piece. Jules isn’t sure if she’s joking and decides not to ask.

“Tell me about that creep. Were you right about the strip clubs?”

“Yes, unfortunately. You know the irony? He had bought me a ring and it didn’t even

come up. If I hadn't gone over there with the groceries and the best intentions and found the receipt that led to this fight, he probably would have proposed. And I would be engaged right now." She starts to cry.

"Don't fret over it. He probably spent as much money on cover charges and tips as he did on that ring. He'll be back. You know this. I know this. They always come back."

"I don't know if I want him back. What I do want is some sleep and I was just going through my old bottles. What do you think, the Vic, the Perc or a little Toradol?"

"Tread a little more lightly, sweets. Get your hands on Tylenol PM. That will do the trick without any threat of that ugly and highly unflattering stomach-pumping routine."

While Jules rifles through the rest of her bottles, Sloane tells her they both need a little cheering up and she is just the one to help. Martin Rothschild, of *the* Rothschilds, is hosting a little something at the family estate and Sloane is on the guest list. It will be one of the most talked-about soirees and there will be plenty of eligible men to meet, Mr. Rothschild excluded, of course, whose recent nuptials were covered in detail in the *Times*. Sloane runs through the list of bold face names she knows are expected.

"Can you believe, I was planning on taking Pierce? What a waste of a plus one that would have been!"

Jules starts to feel the calmness wash over from the just-downed tablet.

*Could the pill already be working? Or is it just my anticipation of it that has me breathing a little more deeply?*

Within a few minutes, when her responses take a little longer than usual, Sloane knows it's time to let Jules get to bed.

"We'll talk again soon, Jules. Just get through the next few days as best you can and with

whatever it takes. Let me know if you run a little low. I've got plenty here and I'm just two shakes of a lamb's tail away."

Jules mumbles a thank you and goodnight.

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## **The Morning After**

The following morning, Jules wakes with a remarkable sense of calm and a comfortable balance of acceptance and denial. She stretches in bed, lengthening her body with her arms above her head and her toes pointed. She likes the hint of soreness she already feels in her thighs and credits the great five mile run she did on the front row of treadmills, maximizing the coifed hair before it dropped, soaked in sweat, and the beautiful make-up, before it ran down her cheeks and was wiped away with a nubby, eucalyptus-soaked towel. A full seven hours is her ideal night of sleep and the extra bit helps her feel that much more refreshed. And, she'd hate to admit it, but she sometimes sleeps better alone. But, she'd never concede that to Tom.

*Tom.*

Then it hits her: last night. She feels the wave of emotion, best described as sinking, when she thinks of Tom and how they fought. What they said. And what they didn't say. No trying to stop her, no telling her he was sorry for hurting her and lying to her. No telling him it's okay, no please don't ever do it again.

*Breathe, breathe...*

She catches herself before it washes over her. She decided during last night's run to give it time before taking it all in, letting full-on acceptance and mourning creep in. They both said hurtful things and maybe, with a little time, they will both calm down and make up. They will talk and laugh about their first fight. But what if it's real?

*Relax, Jules.*

She has always told her friends the same thing Stephen confirmed last night: in the end, it will be your decision if you want him back.

“Don’t waste your pretty on it,” he said as he inspected her color and kissed her on each cheek before sending her on her way. And Stephen knows men better than she or any of her friends do...or pretend to.

She’s tempted to call out sick but knows being busy is the best approach for the day. She forces herself to get ready and get to the office.

Riding the M66 through Central Park, Jules gets a text from Madeleine to call her with a quick update. Jules reaches Madeleine, also on her way to work.

“Oh, Madeleine. My bus is passing his building right now,” she greets her friend when she answers. Jules looks up and down Broadway for a chance sighting of Tom, even though he is probably still having his morning swim.

“First, you are going to have to find another route to work. Second, I’m not going to sugarcoat this. The sooner you recognize the end of this chapter, the sooner you can heal and move on.”

“Jesus, Madeleine!”

“I’m sorry, Jules. I sincerely am so sorry. But, you are too good for him. He knew it, too, and resented you for it all along. That is why, in my opinion, he was sneaking around behind your back. After he put you up on that pedestal, he slowly tried to chip it out from under you. Just like the British tabloids do.”

“I don’t know...” Jules says, trying to think the idea through.

“You need a change in scenery. And, definitely no more bus rides past his building. Get away from New York. Come up here for the weekend. We can head to the beach, get some lobsters and catch up on a month’s worth of *New Yorkers*.”

This idea appeals to Jules’s sense of spontaneity.

“Perfect! Let me check the fares and I’ll let you know which flight I’ll be taking.”

As soon as Jules arrives to the office, she drops her bag, turns on her computer, and—resisting the urge to immediately check her emails to see if he’s written a heartfelt apology, begging for forgiveness—signs onto Kayak.com to check her travel options. She dials Madeleine to review the flights and all the transportation logistics. Once it is all sorted, she books the flights, excited about the prospect of a relaxing weekend with her friend away from this all.

With that done, Jules remembers, “Oh! I almost forgot to tell you ... I got in to see Dr. Levine the other day.”

“Did you just get a little freshened up? What good timing!” says Madeleine.

“Yes, well, it wasn’t like I planned it because I didn’t want to visibly fall to pieces in front of my boyfriend,” replies Jules.

“I understand. You have to keep up appearances at work. No wrinkly foreheads to give away your stress in the sales meeting.”

“Perish the thought!” Jules agrees.

“You should see if you can write this off on your tax returns. Botox is necessary for your work.”

“That *is* a good idea. But I needed a chaser, actually. My right eyebrow muscles are *strong*. But, the other reason I went was because I had this horrible, beneath the skin pimple that was so bad, it was giving me headaches. I have had this thing for years, really. I’ve seen it in pictures.”

“Yes, it’s something I’ve been meaning to talk with you about,” Madeleine teases.

“Laugh all you want, but wait until you hear this. While my doctor was examining my every pore, she asked my age. When I told her, she just nodded and made a non-committal

‘Mmmhmm...’ I asked her what that meant and she responded, ‘Women your age tend to develop cystic acne.’ I burst into tears. I’m not sure if it was ‘the women your age’ or the ‘cystic acne’ but it was *horrible*. I am so embarrassed but she really could have been a little gentler in breaking the news, don’t you agree?”

“Better make sure you don’t show her that *horrible* scar on your derriere. That would really traumatize the good doctor.”

“Madeleine, that’s our little secret!”

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## **Screwed in Paris**

Madeleine loves to tease Jules about how she got “screwed in Paris.” During their study abroad program’s spring break, Jules and Madeleine agreed to meet up in Paris midway through the holiday. In the weeks preceding their rendezvous, Jules traveled with a few other friends living abroad, sleeping on trains or in youth hostels, in their clothes, stiff and itchy in the morning, paying and praying for a hot shower. It was fun, despite the occasional stolen camera, bum-pinching Italian and the search for potable water for brushing your teeth. It was, as her parents liked to say, a trip that “built character.”

Madeleine, on the other hand, was fortunate enough to have friends living in idyllic European locales and clever enough to schedule her entire break visiting them. Jeannie was staying in Aix en Provence and Maha was studying in Paris and living with cousins at one of their many residences along the Seine. Madeleine stayed with both friends and worked on her French, while enjoying the best of city and country living.

Jules was delighted that Madeleine’s hosts, Maha’s family, had encouraged her to take advantage of the vacant guest rooms in the apartment and invite a friend. Jules was even more impressed when she called from the train station to say she had arrived and would be to the apartment on Boulevard JFK shortly and Maha’s aunt and their host, apologized that the driver had the day off.

Jules was escorted into the very elegant and formal apartment by a valet in uniform, with Madeleine looking very French chic in jeans, a turtleneck sweater and flats, right behind him. The girls exchanged excited hugs as Jules dropped the bag that had been her constant companion and albatross for the preceding month.



Madeleine brought her into the kitchen, where the entire family was sitting at the table, speaking in Arabic. As the girls entered, they immediately switched to English, the slight British lilt revealing their European boarding school educations. Introductions were made with warm kisses to the cheeks. Jules was invited to join them at the table, while an incredible Continental breakfast of fresh juices, strong coffees, Indian teas, French breads and pastries was set before them, an incredible change of pace from Jules's previous four weeks, she mused as she tore apart her chocolate croissant, sipped her dark roast coffee and started to exchange stories with Madeleine about the weeks since they had last seen each other in their London flat.

After everyone enjoyed their meal, Madeleine showed Jules to her room, spacious and painted navy blue with French doors of leaded glass, overlooking the Seine. Jules stood and admired the river which sparkled in the late-morning light. There was very little furniture, but the few pieces in the room were rich mahogany with incredible detail, undoubtedly French antiques. Like the rest of the apartment, the room was understated and tasteful. Jules unpacked her things, which all seemed a bit more wrinkled and unkempt in this very civilized environment. She changed into the white, fluffy Christian Dior robe hanging in the closet. With her toiletries in hand, she dropped by Madeleine's room.

"I am going to take a long, hot shower that does not require payment, does not have a line of strangers in towels waiting for me to finish and does not have me searching for my flip flops to avoid getting some kind of fungus. I may be a while."

Madeleine yelled "Enjoy!" to Jules, already halfway down the hall.

The bathroom was also decorated in deep blue hues. The soft light gave the mosaic tiles the glow of precious stones. Jules hummed to herself as she disrobed and turned on the water, inspecting her skin in the Venetian mirror. She could not remember being so excited for a

shower. She stepped beneath the hot water, enjoying the hard pounding on her back. After a few minutes of savoring this experience, she opened her eyes and noticed the seat in the corner of the shower. She adjusted the showerhead so she could sit and soak it all in.

Jules picked up her razor and began to address her very-neglected legs. The one-time stubble had been allowed to grow for so long that it was actually quite soft and silky. Just as she finished shaving the one leg and began to lather up the other, she was startled by a sudden fall. BAM! She landed on the shower floor, the water beaming directly into her face.

*Oh, God, no! The shower seat!*

She quickly stood and, regained her bearings before turning to inspect the damage.

*No! No! No!*

Embarrassment would not begin to describe the feeling of literally ripping something out of someone's walls—due to your own weight—within an hour of having been welcomed into their home. She turned to her right and saw nothing. She turned to her left and still, nothing.

*Where is that damned seat?*

It was only then that the throbbing pain began to register. With great hesitation, Jules reached around to feel her bottom.

*OH MY GOD! NO!*

The fiberglass shower seat was firmly screwed into her right cheek! She tried to calm herself and think clearly before the overwhelming wave of panic, already starting to swell, took hold. She had visions of the rusty screw piercing her flesh, then the weight of the fiberglass seat—which must have weighed at least a few pounds—and how it would rip her tush, tearing muscles and plenty of fat along the way.

She grabbed the seat behind her, with both hands—an awkward position, to put it

mildly—and pulled. Nothing. She realized she must replicate both her leg’s and bum’s positions when she fell in order to remove the rusty screw. She took a deep breath, lifted her leg, bent it at the knee and pulled again, as hard as she could manage. The seat fell to the shower floor, the long, rusty screw facing up. Within seconds, the water on the shower floor was bright red, the puncture wound bleeding profusely. Jules had never been one for the sight of blood, especially her own. She started to feel hot and dizzy.

She yelled, “MADELEINE!” before leaning against the shower wall and blacking out.

The sound of Madeleine banging on the door and yelling woke her.

“Jules! Open the door! Do you hear me? *Open the door!*”

Jules was confused and consciousness. She had no idea where she was or how long she had been out. There was more yelling and banging on the door.

“Jules, *please*, open the door now!”

In a weak voice, she responded, “Okay,” and pulled herself up, carefully stepping over her assailant, lying innocently on the shower floor, and unlocked the door. Still reeling, the few steps exhausted her. She slumped onto the bathroom floor, still naked, still bleeding.

The door flew open and Madeleine stood there, trying to understand what had transpired. Behind her, the entire Aziz family also stared at her, all speaking excitedly in their native Arabic. The 10-year old boy pushed his way to the front, his jaw dropped. The father, also staring, covered the boy’s eyes while ushering him away, taking one last peak himself at Jules as he did so. Jules could only imagine what she must have looked like to them, the dirty-haired American with unwashed clothes at breakfast, splayed out naked and bleeding on their bathroom floor. At least she was freshly showered now. Thankfully, Madeleine had the presence of mind to throw a towel on her.

Jules began to explain what had happened, but the fiberglass shower seat on the floor and the blood-curdling scream painted the picture for her. Realizing they were gawking, the rest of the family left Jules and Madeleine to get her up and clothed. Jules could not bring herself to don the beautiful, white robe, fearing her blood would stain it.

She wrapped herself in the blue towel as she shuffled into the bedroom and wondered aloud, “What am I supposed to wear? I have a hole in my cheek! Everything is going to kill.”

Madeleine, who found humor in Jules’s habit of wearing matching bra and panty sets (*You never know what will happen. And, if something does, you want to look good, just in case...*) added a little levity by suggesting, “NOW you finally get to test out your sexy matching bra and panty set theory!”

By the time Madeleine returned to the guest room with the suggestion of heading to the American Hospital, Jules had managed to get into her clothes, with, of course, a big Band Aid under her lacy panties.

In the end, Jules required only a tetanus shot and careful application of topical antibiotics until the deep wound healed. Madeleine was kind enough to play nurse for a month and assisted with the medicine and bandages. All that was left was a great story and a small scar that Jules blamed for preventing her from ever pursuing a career as a nude model or porn star. But Madeleine insists that her art-directed shot of Jules in the Rodin Gardens, posed next to the posteriors of the sculptures, and Madeleine’s favorite photo of the series—Jules next to the seated *The Thinker* (as she was unable to sit comfortably for weeks)—would have won awards. It is framed and prominently displayed in Madeleine’s study.

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## Recovery

Jules walks home from work through Central Park. She calls Sloane to apologize for practically falling asleep mid-sentence during the previous night's call and to thank her for her condolences, even if she hopes they may be premature. Sloane reminds her they are going to Martin Rothschild's party next Friday night and suggests Jules shop for something fabulous to show off her heartbreak-diet thin body, as there will definitely be plenty of potential suitors in attendance.

"Honey, you always look your best when you're miserable. It's Mother Nature's way of attracting new men. It's part of the mating ritual."

"Thanks, I guess. Have you been watching Discovery Channel lately?"

"It's just another one of my theories, proven."

"You know I'm probably down 10 pounds already. I've been so upset since finding that damned receipt, never mind anticipating the big talk."

"Show it if you've got it!"

Jules is especially busy at work and throws herself into it to distract herself while secretly and insesently checking her phone for the much-anticipated but not-yet-received call of apology and reconciliation from Tom. She books her calendar with client lunches and dinners, which easily fill her days and evenings and pleases Wendi. She finds it a terrible waste to order appetizers and entrees at some of Manhattan's chicest restaurants, since Jules only pushes the food around on her plate and nibbles on a few forkfuls during the course of the meal. But, it is a good distraction. Typically, very open with a number of her clients—who are more like friends than professional associates—she sidesteps any questions about Tom by saying he is getting the

last days of the season in.

On Thursday, Jules surprises herself when she realizes she is genuinely excited for the party. She squeezes in dress shopping post-lunch and before returning to the office. She overspends at Saks, but is unable to resist how the Missoni knit dress and sweater hug her slightly narrower silhouette. Plus, she imagines Tom's eyes widening ever so slightly in appreciation when she wears this to their make up dinner...then stops herself from going any further with the fantasy. Of course, she can always return it if buyer's remorse sets in later. She relishes the distraction of focusing on getting ready for a party and actually forgets—if even for just a few minutes and without having to will herself to—about her disaster of a love life.

Jules rushes from work to an especially effective stress-reducing and tummy-tightening run at Equinox, then dashes home to begin the full session of primping. She bleaches, scrubs, exfoliates, oils and deep conditions. She skips only the skin inspection since she does not want to tempt the bathroom surgeon in her. No, there will not be any red, blotchy spots from extraction tonight. With her hair still setting in Velco curlers, she carefully pulls on the Missoni dress and checks herself in the mirror. The knit clings to all the right curves, including her thinner hips, her still full ass and small but perky breasts. She decides the 34A demi-cup bra could use a little extra support in getting her breasts to fill and spill out. She digs into the back of her lingerie drawer and unearths the rubber chicken cutlets that help her little breasts actually create cleavage. *Ah, much better.* She pulls on her demurely sexy peep toe Manolos, touches just a little more cologne on strategic pulse points and smiles at herself in the mirror next to her front door. She checks herself one last time, feeling good at the reflection in the elevator mirror, before dropping her keys with the doorman and wishing him a good night.

Sloane is waiting in the back seat of an Uber outside Jules's building. Jules slides in

beside her and the driver heads uptown on Third Avenue to the highway that will take them to one of the season's biggest events on the social calendars. During the ride, they take the opportunity to catch up more fully on their lives though Sloane is careful to skirt the emotionally charged topic of Tom; there will be no raining on their parade. Sloane's only slip is when she confesses that drugs, heartache and stomach viruses are her secret to staying in a size two and Jules should thank Tom for the way she fills out that Missoni dress.

The nearly hour-long ride passes quickly and they are through the gate and on the sprawling grounds before Jules and Sloane even realize they have arrived. Given that it is already dark, the tremendous sculptures on the property—underlit in dramatic fashion—interrupt their conversation as the car meanders along the lane in the expansive, terraced gardens.

The party is in the Playhouse, a separate estate dedicated to sports and recreational activities, from bowling and basketball to water sports. As the car comes to a stop, a uniformed staffer opens the door and welcomes them to Pocantico Hills. The girls are careful to watch their heels on the cobblestones as they make their way to the building entrance. The grand doors open to a room glowing with soft lighting, beautiful faces and the low din of cocktail party chatter over a three-piece band. Suddenly, the days mourning Tom feel like a tremendously long time ago and a tremendous waste of time. The night's opportunities provide Jules and Sloane the subtle surge of adrenaline that gives a woman that lightest flush on her cheeks and that very appealing cat that ate the canary look in her eye.

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## **The Playhouse**

From the ornate stone foyer, Jules and Sloane take in the scene. They are at the home, or one of the many homes, of American royalty. Jules is more than a little pleased with herself for the transformation from a splotchy-faced, heartbroken, sobbing mess just a few days ago to a poised, confident woman mixing with one of the country's most recognized families and their friends. As she scans the room of elegantly dressed guests, chatting and laughing in small clusters, she is most interested in the company of someone in particular: an older woman with an unusual yet highly recognized name. Jules imagines she can learn quite a bit from—or be quite entertained by—Sugar, the respected Rothschild family matriarch, who has had her share of experience suffering from the indignity of men's behavior. Her husband, Aldrich, was notoriously unfaithful and died while in the arms of his young mistress, after an apparently all-too-exciting liaison. Sugar had Aldrich's body cremated within hours of the incident, to keep the medical examiners from doing a full autopsy and discovering the exact cause of his heart attack. Then, just as now, she holds her head high. And, here she stands, nearly 30 years later, regal and self-assured, right beside Jules. Jules smiles at Sugar, who shakes her hand, introduces herself and offers her a glass of champagne from the tray held by the waiter standing discretely at her side.

“What a lovely party. Thank you for having me. I'm Jules Kennedy,” Jules says, to get the conversation started.

“Why, thank you, Ms. Kennedy. We are so glad you were able to join us. How is it that you know Martin?” Sugar responds. Despite her rank and privilege, she is remarkably affable and immediately puts Jules at ease.



“We have a mutual friend in Sloane Masters-Hollingsworth, who knows Martin through the foundation.”

“Ah, yes, I believe I recall Ms. Masters-Hollingsworth from our annual gala. A lovely woman. I take it she married the Irish gentleman with an English surname after all?”

“Actually, the second family name is her step-father’s. She and Pierce no longer see each other. She is single...we both are.”

This is the first time since the break up that Jules has said these words aloud. It stings. She takes a sip of her champagne to wet her tightening throat and fight the welling tears. This does not go unnoticed by Sugar.

“What a shame. I often wonder why there are so many beautiful, accomplished, single women in New York these days. I suspect it’s that too many hold men to impossible ideals.”

“How so?” Jules asks. This is the first time she has heard a woman blame one of her own for their single status, rather than point the finger at the men. She watches Sugar’s classic red-lipsticked lips carefully, taking copious notes, mentally.

“It’s quite simple. Boys will be boys. You have to allow them their dalliances and welcome them back with open arms when they are through with them. They soon grow tired of chasing others and appreciate what they have at home. To punish them for following their natural urges is like getting upset when the weather changes for the worse. It is just a natural cycle and if you remain patient, it always comes around in the end.”

Jules finds the advice as intriguing as distasteful. She wants to ensure she understands.

“You suggest that women allow their boyfriends, fiancés, husbands—whomever—to have their cake and eat it, too?”

“Darling, what I am suggesting is that you not worry about indiscretions, as long as they

are discreet. Just enjoy what you have together and do not concern yourself with what you do not.”

As Jules considers this idea, blatantly misogynistic, Sugar asks, “Have you met some of the nice gentlemen here?” and more quietly, “I would like to properly introduce you to my son, Martin.” The twinkle in her eye indicates there is some intention behind the introduction.

Sugar scans the room, searching for her son. Jules knows Martin married the daughter of Russian immigrants nearly a year ago. *The Times* gave their nuptials a full page, naturally. The tall, elegant and much-photographed blonde was nowhere in sight this evening. If Jules had to venture a guess, she imagines the young Mrs. Rothschild is hosting a charity event in the city. Is Sugar encouraging women to pursue her married son? Jules spots Sloane, who reads the confused look on her face.

“Good evening, Sugar. It’s a pleasure to see you again,” Sloane chimes, as she takes the woman’s hand for a ladylike handshake.

“Would you mind terribly if I steal Jules away? I’m going to powder my nose and would love her to join me.”

“Of course, ladies. There is a powder room just to the right of the main entrance. Enjoy your evening. Be sure to return so I can make that introduction,” she says, looking pointedly at Jules.

Sloane whisks Jules away and immediately pulls her friend’s arm up before her, laughing, “There you were, chatting away with Sugar Rothschild and you have your tags hanging out of your sleeve!”

Jules bursts out laughing. “Oh God! Was it obvious?”

“*Yes!* I saw it from across the room! But, at least it was on the outside arm so maybe Sugar didn’t notice.”

As soon as they enter the women's room, Sloane tries to help Jules tear off the tags. Jules stops her.

“Don't! This is Missoni and definitely a retail therapy purchase. I may return it.”

“Well, at least for now, let's pin those tags up into that sleeve. You cannot walk around all night with your to-be-returned tags slipping out.”

As if on cue, the bathroom attendant provides Jules with a safety pin. “Sorry, I know it's tacky, but...” Jules tells the woman, who nods silently.

“That is hardly the worst secret that will have to be kept tonight, miss,” the bathroom attendant adds, without judgment. She then busies herself, stacking fresh hand towels on the counter. Jules imagines this woman, relegated to a powder room in one of the family estate's many bathrooms, knows more than anyone gives her credit for.

Rick Reif, another foundation friend of Martin's, catches Sloane and Jules as they rejoin the party. He invites them on a tour of The Playhouse, which boasts a billiard room, racquetball and basketball courts, an Olympic sized swimming pool and several lanes of bowling. The bowling alley is the scene of the most cheering, ribbing and drinking, so, naturally, Rick and the girls end the tour there. After watching a few frames, Jules agrees to join the game already in progress. She slips out of her high heels and into the antique leather bowling shoes, forgoing any socks.

The men are keeping score and the rivalries among the crowd of Ivy League athletes are apparent. While Jules enjoys being naturally athletic, it has been years since she saw the inside of a bowling alley. But, she is not one to play the incapable girl card when it comes to sports. She enjoys surprising impressing men with her athleticism.

To cheers of encouragement from Sloane, Rick, Martin and the other half dozen men,

Jules sheds her sweater and tosses it to one of the antique wood benches before selecting a blue, marbleized bowling ball. She feels just a little nervous with all eyes on her. She takes three steps, swings her arm back and then forward, releasing the ball entirely too early in its arc. The ball lands with a loud thud and travels slowly down the alley, veers off to the right yet still manages to knock down all but one pin.

*A spare! Not bad!*

The guys cheer and Sloane teases, “And you claim you don’t bowl,” half to Jules and half to Rick, obviously flirting with him.

She plays a few more frames, none with the same results as the first, but still maintaining her own. The rounds of drinks between frames helps her feel looser and everyone less concerned about keeping score. In between bowlers, Jules jumps over the adjoining alley and to the bench for a break. Martin refills her glass before joining her on the bench, sitting closer than necessary. They introduce themselves and strike up an easy conversation. He is attentive about refilling her glass and his own as well.

“Here’s to your talent with blue balls,” Martin offers as a toast, clinking his glass with hers with a sly smile. “Would you like me to show you around? I’ll take you for a walk around the grounds.”

Before she can answer, he continues, “Great! Allow me to get your sweater. It’s probably gotten chilly.” He walks across the room and picks up her sweater, the bell sleeves pulled inside out from Jules’s dramatic removal earlier. The pinned tags now hang from the sleeve are visible to Jules. And, following her eyes, Martin looks down at her sweater and notices them, too.

“You must have forgotten to remove these.” He gives a quick tug on the plastic tags, though for Jules, the moment passes in slow motion as she tries to find her voice to protest. The

safety pin pulls through the delicate knit with ease. Jules looks at the torn Missoni sweater, then Martin, holding the tags in his hand. He has no idea that his one move just committed her to a rather large investment.

“Uh, thanks,” she attempts to sound nonchalant as he helps her into her sweater. She turns to Sloane, who is totally absorbed in what Rick has to say, and gives a quick, “See you in a few,” before leaving with Martin.

With enough presence of mind to know what she is doing and enough champagne to allow her to ignore her good girl instincts, Jules joins Martin for a walk through the billiard room, past the great room and through the grand foyer before exiting The Playhouse. The crisp night air starts to sober her, but Martin’s lips are upon hers before that can happen. The surprise is sexy but the kiss sloppy, too much tongue, much too much hot saliva. But Jules is flattered that a man wants to kiss her so desperately and, she would probably have to admit, probably even more so when that man is a Rothschild. She kisses him back, tasting the scotch, certainly a smooth, expensive malt that has turned very sour on his breath. She pushes out of her mind everyone—Tom, Martin’s newlywed wife, Sugar’s words on dalliances, her own feelings about infidelity, the many people who could walk outside and see them—to enjoy the kiss.

Jules loses herself in the moment and allows Martin to guide her slowly backward, pushing her back against the building’s cold, stone wall. He uses enough force that it causes her to catch her breath. He takes this as a sign that her excitement is growing and he starts to kiss her more aggressively, now all over her face, biting her cheek, not lightly. Jules tries to find his mouth with hers, the force of the bite crossing the line for her. His hands begin to roam, aggressively. He is pulling at her clothes. She is enjoying this less and worrying more. Then, panic sets in. Not because things are out of control, though they are definitely tittering on the

brink. There is some reassurance in knowing that there is a staff member within earshot, probably pretending not to notice what is obviously happening in the dark recess of the building. Rather, it's the realization that Martin's hands are in dangerous proximity to the explants that leads Jules to push—hard—against Martin's chest and send him stumbling back a few steps.

“Easy, there,” Martin says, a smile still upon his lips. He starts to step forward, not waiting for encouragement.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to push so hard. We should probably get back inside.”

*Why do I feel compelled to be polite, even in the midst of something so inappropriate?*

“Of course.” He reaches his hand out, as if that was the intention behind moving forward, and helps her step through the plants and onto the slate walkway. Jules runs her fingers through her hair, smooths her dress and wipes her fingers under her eyes to remove any smudged eye makeup. While opening the door, the uniformed staff member greets them, “Good evening, miss. Good evening, Mr. Rothschild,” without any hint of knowledge or judgment on what he assuredly knows transpired.

Jules rejoins the party, wondering if anyone noticed Martin's and her shared absence. Sugar catches her eye and it is clear: she did. She gives Jules a slight nod of the head and raises her champagne flute just a touch in silent acknowledgment. Jules finds Sloane easily, given Rick's 6-foot-5 frame.

Jules whispers, “I think it is time to go. I never like to outstay my welcome at a party.”

Sloane finds her phone, dials the driver who is waiting on the grounds and asks him to pull the car around. They say quick goodbyes to Martin, Rick and their new bowling friends. The last farewell is to Sugar Rothschild, who looks as patrician and composed as she did at the start of the evening.

“Sloane, it is always a pleasure to see you. And, Jules, I hope I will see you again. A lovely shade of pink, those tulips, aren’t they?”

“Excuse me?” Jules imagines the woman may be as tipsy as she is.

“I so enjoy gardening and getting my hands in the dirt. Though some of us prefer to dig in with our heels,” she adds. Both Sloane and Jules look down and see a limp pink tulip petal impaled on Jules’s heel.

Before Jules can formulate a response, Sugar wishes them “Safe home, ladies.”

Once inside the safety of the car, Sloane chatters about the evening, mostly about how Rick flirted with her and she with him. Jules tries to stay focused, but she has trouble with motion sickness when she has had too much to drink. She is worried about how she will make it through the hour-long ride, especially on a champagne-filled stomach. She starts to feel warm, one of the early indicators of perhaps getting sick to her stomach and definitely the hangover to come. She removes her sweater and turns to focus on Sloane’s face, rather than the movement outside. Sloane continues to share her stories excitedly, while Jules concerns herself with calming herself with phrases like, “*You’re okay*” and “*Breathe in, breathe out.*”

Sloane interrupts her story abruptly to ask, “Jules, did something happen tonight? Are you okay?”

“Of course, other than having about 100 too many glasses of champagne. Why do you ask?” the last question a tip that there is something more to the story.

“Honey, your boobs are totally uneven. You are so much bigger on one side than the other.”

Jules looks down and realizes that a chicken cutlet must have slipped out when she and Martin were playing outside the Playhouse.

“Bowling?” Jules and Sloane say at the same time.

Jules does not want to admit to herself, never mind Sloane, often the victim of her boyfriend’s cheating, that she knowingly kissed a married man. That she may have done much more than kiss a married man if she had not stuffed her bra with soft plastic breast explants. She adjusts herself to face forward and slinks in the seat to get comfortable. She asks Sloane to tell her more, to tell her all, partly because she is having trouble speaking and partly because she is having trouble believing what she learned tonight, from Sugar’s words to her own actions.

Eventually, Sloane’s soothing voice and Southern lilt along with the car’s gentle motion lull her to sleep.

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## **Just Run Already!**

It's a hectic week leading up to the site's soft relaunch and Jules walks in the door of her apartment at nearly 8:30. She dials Maria, who steers the conversation to Jules—managing her stress, actively cheerleading to motivate Jules to get to the gym.

“You know it's the best way to keep your mood and energy up, which you really need, especially with all the stress at work.”

“Thank you for not even hinting his name.”

“Oh, I wouldn't dare. But, honestly, you have been doing so well and you need to continue to take good care of yourself, even if you don't always feel like it.”

“I know...but it's very tempting to stay in. I'm beat.”

She is stretched out on the couch, feeling very content.

“Hitting the gym is like married sex. Even when you're tired and you may not feel like it, once you get started, you're glad you did.”

Jules chuckles. “Expressed as only a happily married woman of nearly ten years could!”

“You know what you need?”

“Please be kind.”

“You need a goal, Jules.”

“Yeah, like keeping the heartbreak pounds off.” Jules sits up on the couch, pulls her running shoes closer and starts to put them on.

“I'm thinking bigger. More about a goal that you must train for. You are definitely motivated by goals. How about a marathon?”

“A marathon?”

She sits up at the suggestion.

“Putting that fool’s ridiculously off-base comment to the side, and believe me, I know how that upset you, you’ve talked about running a marathon for ages.”

“Sure! After a beautiful November Sunday afternoon, enjoying Bloodys and Mimosas while cheering on the runners along First Avenue, I always swear I’ll do it next year. Half of New York does.”

“I believe it. But, you’ve talked about this since college. Why not just do it, as the slogan says?”

“Interesting, Maria. I will definitely check it out. This is not something to take lightly.”

She finishes lacing up her shoes.

“Aren’t you already running about five miles a few times a week?”

“About that. And I love it. But, a marathon is entirely different and a serious commitment.”

“Don’t tell me commitment-phobia is contagious, Jules!” Maria teases before adding, “Don’t wait another minute. Go run those five. Or more. This is going to be the start of something very good. Plus, it’s oddly quiet in this house right now. And that can’t be good.”

Jules and Maria say quick goodbyes with promises to continue the marathon discussion by the week’s end. Jules pushes a brush through her hair, pulls it into a low ponytail, admiring Stephen’s fine work, and grabs her iPhone, cash and keys before walking out the door.

Jules thinks training for a marathon would be just the thing to distract her from her heartache. Running always provides tremendous stress relief and would help her get into shape while potentially exposing her—and her newly toned legs and gluts—to potential suitors: athletic men!

Outside, the Upper East Side streets are quiet and the night air refreshing. Jules pulls

open the heavy glass doors of Equinox, feeling inspired and a bit tired. She swipes her membership card and trots up the metal stairs, grabbing a eucalyptus-soaked towel before jumping on a treadmill in the middle of the back row. With the marathon and finally pursuing a goal she's had since college in mind, she sets the distance to six miles. She completes the run easily and exactly in an hour.

A Beyoncé remix blasting in her ears, she mouths goodnight to the still perky woman with the staff tag around her neck at the front desk and walks home briskly, feeling strong and happy.

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## **Equinox: Day and Night**

It's already 6:30 am and Jules has slept through her alarm. She is determined to get her scheduled run in, even if it will be fewer miles than her training schedule calls for. She pulls on her running clothes while running the toothbrush over her teeth, brushing too hard and too fast. Afterwards, she throws cold water on her face, if only to wake herself, as it does little to wash off last night's make-up. She arranges her hair into a messy ponytail while sprinting the few blocks, the bag of work clothes bumping against her right hip with each stride, to her home away from home, Equinox Fitness. She waves as she passes the staff at the entrance desk, who know her so well they no longer require her to swipe her ID.

Textbook addictive personality behavior, Jules replaces one interest with another: a marathon for a man. The refocus makes her feel empowered and strong. Religiously following the New York Roadrunners First Time Marathoners program, she looks noticeably more toned and is keeping off the heartbreak-lost pounds. This minor weight loss is also the result of fewer late nights out. The five-times weekly early morning alarms offer a lot of incentive to skip the second or deeper round of drinks. Which, in turn, also keeps her from flirting, drunk-dialing and texting the wrong men. Jules is a woman with a mission and she is preparing, if a bit compulsively. Aside from running, all the time, she is reading Jeff Galloway's books on marathon training. She has selected a new wardrobe of running clothes, shoes and gear, including a too-high-tech heart monitor. She will inquire about getting a weekly training session with Ramon, the famed marathon trainer at the gym who helps the most serious runners with their conditioning. And, she has joined New York Roadrunners for long runs where she has met a running partner, Rebecca, also a first-time marathoner.

After she drops her bag in the women's locker room, she climbs up the metal staircase

and scans the room. She sets up on one of the few vacant treadmills—music on, water in holder, towels within easy reach—and gets her run started. She loves how running allows her to lose herself in her thoughts.

Sloane’s stories from last night about “Captain Hook”—is there really scoliosis of the penis?—were outrageously funny. So were the theories they discussed about how Sloane could actually have sex with her new love interest, despite his “curve”: slip him several Viagras, fashion a splint, penile implants, try various positions...each elicited more laughs than the next. It entertained them, and the table of men next to them, over one too many bottles of warm, cheap wine.

Jules is red-faced and sweaty within minutes, burning maximum calories with her limited time. She catches someone approaching out of the corner of her eye. It is the tan, buff and decidedly not red-faced or sweaty George, the well-known Greek Equinox devotee.

All smiles, he climbs onto the treadmill beside hers and greets her in his thick accent, “Baby! How are you? I saw you had a very funny smile on your face.”

“Hello, George” she tries to time her speaking with her breathing, to make it sound much more effortless than it is. “I was just remembering a funny story a friend shared. How are you?”

“I am so happy, honey, now that you are here, finally, my darling.”

“Good, good. I got a late start today,” she manages between deep breaths.

“Of course, it is hard for a man to let a beautiful woman like you leave his bed,” he offers as an explanation.

She doesn’t even pretend to protest, happy for his wrong assumption. Since rejoining the single scene, she’s only had a few false starts at anything remotely posing as romance or even the prospect of no-strings-attached sex. Better to let him imagine she has a number of suitors than

admit to the total absence of anyone or anything of interest in her life or bedroom. She has her pride, after all.

She redirects the conversation to ask about him.

“You look great, George. Where have you been?” knowing the answer.

He has just returned from Easter in Greece. This, of course, translates to wandering around the Greek Isles on a friend’s yacht with a few beautiful women. He is tanned to an enviable shade of Mediterranean bronze with a touch of pink, indicating the color is still fresh. Jules notices the stark difference in the shades of their skin tones, especially on her white, desperately-in-need-of-a-wax legs.

“Next time, you will come with me. A beautiful woman like you is always welcome. You’ll join me for dinner, next week,” he adds, a statement rather than a question.

With that decided, he leans over and gives her a quick peck on her flushed and sweaty cheek before returning to the weight-lifting area.

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Walking into the office, Jules can feel the mood in the air. The stress level is off the charts and her post-run calm is immediately forgotten. With only one look at Channing's face, Jules knows the group assistant is embroiled in today's drama. Channing has apparently committed the ultimate gaff: she has picked up sandwiches for a client lunch rather than having them delivered to the client's office.

Roy knows this is not protocol, but the deed was done and he planned to deal with it. He would arrive at the client's office a few minutes early to set up the spread. Wendi arrives fresh from her morning coffee and spies the food delivery on Channing's credenza.

"What is *this* doing *here*? This was supposed to be delivered to the client!" Wendi shrieks, the pitch and volume rising with each word.

Roy is quick to sense that Channing is on the verge of tears and takes the hit.

"I thought we would walk in with it," he offers, non-chalant.

Wendi is only further enraged.

"*This is not the Style way!*" she repeats, again and again, the mantra of a madwoman. She continues until she notices the company president's assistant coming down the hall. Then, donning her best smile, she strokes her hair, provides a sweet "Good morning," and returns to her office. A few minutes later, Roy, juggling multiple platters, and Wendi, carrying only her Hermes bag, leave the office.

Despite the success of the client meeting, hours later, Wendi is still fuming over what Roy and Jules dub "The Great Sandwich Incident." True to form, she cannot and will not let it go. Later that afternoon, during the infamously painful weekly update meeting, she continues her onslaught on Roy, now considered an accomplice in this heinous act.

Jules can hear them in her office as their voices escalate.

“Really, Wendi, it’s not that big a deal,” he tries to assure her.

“Well, I think it is,” she counters, nearly shrieking.

“Well, I think you’re wrong.”

The words hang in the air an extra beat. Then, silence.

Later, Roy recounts the events. “Wendi’s skin took on a sallow tone, the blood drained from her face, resulting in a slight greenish hue. Her head could have very easily exploded, given the smoke streaming from her ears, like the manhole covers in winter in the New York streets,” he laughs at his poor analogy.

“Her veins pulsed and looked as if they could have popped out of her Botox-smoothed forehead. It was all Incredible Hulk-like. She slammed her hands flat on the table as she bolted out of her chair. I physically pushed my chair back, to get out of belting range.”

“Really?” was all Jules manages to interject.

“I really thought she was going to take a shot at me. My reaction apparently brought her back to her senses. She slowly took her seat, checking to see if she had snapped off one of her wrapped nails.”

“‘You are driving me to smoke, Roy,’ she said as she opened a desk drawer to search for her emergency stash. I reached into my pocket, pulled out my pack of Marlboro Lights and offered, ‘Here, take one of mine.’”

Jules chuckles.

“The fury started to take hold again and you could almost hear her silent counting in her head, probably wishing she could count out loud, a lesson from her Anger Management class, I or II, I’m not sure. The countdown is my favorite because it allows enough time to make an escape.”



Jules nods in agreement.

“After the requisite 10-second wait, she said, through gritted teeth, ‘I’m glad you find this funny’ and stormed out of her office.”

The day wraps at 8:30. Business is soft in anticipation of the relaunch and they are all calling in favors to close this month up with higher rates and higher revenues, despite drops in the key stats and increased rates to advertise on the site. After clearing her desk and cramming her things into her over-stuffed bag, Jules exits her work space. Across the hallway, Channing is working with her head down, apparently still not recovered from the morning’s drama. She looks up and gives Jules a sad smile.

“How much longer are you planning on working?”

Channing holds her finger to her lips then points in the direction of Wendi’s office. In a whisper, she answers.

“I don’t leave until she does.”

“She’s still here? I haven’t even heard her.”

“She just returned from getting her hair blown out. Industry event.”

As if on cue, Wendi emerges from her office, dressed in a Roberto Cavalli leopard-print dress with a plunging neckline, exposing her oversized implants. Jules understands why men gawk.

“Ohhhhh...you’re still here?” implying much more surprise than necessary.

“Yes. I’m just leaving,” Jules tries to cut the conversation short.

“Good! I need a ride to the Waldorf and don’t have any money and I never give them my credit card. And easier to skip Uber,” omitting the fact that she’s been banned from the service for an impressive tirade aimed at a driver. She blamed it on post-partum mood swings. “Drop

me. It's on your way home anyway," she flashes a big smile, satisfied with her problem solved.

Jules chases down a taxi on Sixth Avenue while Wendi, in tall, strappy Gucci, heels, plays the damsel in distress on the sidewalk. Within a block of the short taxi ride to the hotel, Wendi tells Jules, "Channing is out."

"What? She didn't mention she was leaving!"

"She's just not working out. I've given her so many chances, but after the nightmare day I had, which was entirely her fault, I have no other choice."

"You mean about the sandwiches? Wendi, it was a mistake. The caterers are actually the ones responsible."

Wendi reapplies her lipstick in her compact mirror, rendering her speechless for a few seconds.

Jules continues, "Really, I think you should reconsider. Besides, not every assistant will babysit for free or dog sit when you go away for weekends."

Channing's willingness to help Wendi with personal issues—even if out of fear of the repercussions for not—is one of her strongest selling points.

"Aren't you and Scott heading out of town for a weekend away?"

"Mmm...true. Maybe I'll give her just one more chance," Wendi considers before she begins berating the taxi driver, "Hey! Stop this stop-and-go driving! You are making me sick!"

After dropping Wendi, Jules decides to return to Equinox, not satisfied with her morning run of three miles when the program called for six. Splitting the distance in half with a 12-hour break is certainly not what the schedule intended, but at least she could stay on track with her weekly mileage.

The Upper East Equinox at 9 pm is pleasantly quiet. The ladies who lunch but do not

sweat are absent, perhaps supping on Madison Avenue, in French bistros and brasseries. They are replaced by a pleasant-looking mix of Type A's: obsessive/compulsive women, already too thin, trying to be ever-thinner; marathon runners in training; Wall Street bankers who take a few hours' hiatus for dinner with young wives and children and a quick work out before returning to their work.

Jules is glad for the nighttime crowd at the gym. This group is more serious about getting their work out in and getting their nights started. She completes her second three mile run of the day in 27 minutes, a consistent 9-minute mile. Not fast, but good for her.

Jules takes an additional mile to cool down on the treadmill, both exhausted and rejuvenated, already deciding to enjoy a leisurely steam and shower before heading home. She smiles as she passes the few others on the machines and can tell by the way they look that she screams confidence. She notices she has a few admirers today. She caught more than one looking her way.

*No man problems are going to bring me down. No way.*

She slows her gait, rolls her shoulders back and lifts her chin.

*They are looking, alright. Yes, gentlemen, take a second look.*

Even the women are checking her out. She *feels* it. Even in this competitive gym with some of the city's most beautiful people, she is really getting attention. She and her fragile ego relish it. The combination of the regular running, the freshly re-gilded hair and the touch of fillers and freezers to the face: absolutely riveting, obviously.

Jules trots down the two flights of stairs to the women's locker room. As she strides past the mirror at the entrance, she discovers the reason for her new-found attention at the gym; the Maybelline Very Black mascara has run down her face, in a twisted, goth look that is entirely out

of place against her fair skin and butter blonde highlights, pulled into a tight ponytail. She heads to the sink, grabs one of the still-warm, perfectly folded towels from the nearest bin and tries to clean under her eyes. She is wearing waterproof today and it's really giving her a fight coming off. She notices she and one other woman are the only two in the locker room. Even the cleaning staff has gone for the night. They exchange quick smiles and nods to acknowledge each other. At her locker, Jules strips off her sweat-drenched clothes, the woman walks past and then stops short, retraces her steps to stand a few feet in front of Jules. Jules looks up, naked to the waist of her running pants, with only the heart-rate monitor strap secured tightly around her ribcage, tight under her A-cup breasts.

“What is that?” the woman asks, moving towards Jules, hand outstretched as if to grab her breast.

“Excuse me?” Jules asks, backing into the door of the locker behind her, slamming it shut with her back.

“That. What is that?” she asks, now inches away from touching Jules, who grabs the towel off the bench to cover herself.

“Oh, that is my heart rate monitor. I can take it off and show you. But, I'm really sweaty right now.”

“I've never seen one before,” the woman says, seemingly annoyed by Jules's covering it. She dismisses the conversation with, “That's okay. I have to dry my hair anyway.”

“Okay,” Jules replies, confused because here hair is not only bone dry, but styled as well.

Uneasy with the only other guest in the locker room, Jules decides against the steam and shower plan and struggles to pull her wet clothes back on over her sticky skin. As she throws her towels in the laundry, she spies her locker-room friend, standing naked at the counter, squatting,

with the hair dryer directed up, between her legs.

*That's the hair she had to dry?*

“Have a good night!” the hair dryer wielder calls over the high-pitched humming and smiles at Jules who picks up her pace towards the exit.

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## Wendi's Whereabouts

“Christ, Madeleine, that is the only person I’ve been naked and alone in a room with for entirely too long. Not to mention the closest anyone has come to touching my breast, accidentally or otherwise,” Jules recounts to Madeleine the next day.

“I really need to get out of this rut.”

“Yes, well, I’ve conceived a child and haven’t had sex in ages. So, consider that before you complain to me.”

“Madeleine? Is it true?”

“Yes, I’m expecting! Can you believe it?”

After so many procedures, hormones and injections, Madeleine is overjoyed to have conceived.

“Congratulations! I am thrilled for you!”

“Thank you! I wanted you to be one of the first to know.”

“I’m still in a bit of denial that this is really happening. And I need to get this confirmed by my doctor. Until then, let’s talk about something else. How are you coping these days?”

“There are only so many wedding shows a single woman should attend—especially one who is trying desperately to focus on every other aspect of her life—and wedding couture designers she should meet,” she says while scanning her list of messages from Channing, calls she should be returning.

“I’m sorry,” Madeleine offers.

“On the bright side, business is up and I’m building an entirely new revenue stream, but it’s just so damned depressing, talking weddings all day. Never mind the other issue we discussed,” Jules says, alluding to her boss, since the walls have ears in the office.

“No names,” Madeleine reminds her.

“Exactly. And market is just around the corner. Painful.”

“When can you switch off bridal?” Madeleine offers.

“I’ve agreed to a year before I can even be considered for another category. And even though it feels like a lifetime, it’s only been months. If I manage to survive until my anniversary date, then I will apply away. In the meantime....”

Suddenly, there’s a messenger standing in front of her, confused about where to find Channing.

“I’m sorry, honey. I have to take care of something. I believe Channing is busy guarding the men’s room door. I’ll call you back later, when I can talk.”

“I have no idea what that means, but this I’ve got to hear.”

Jules apologizes with a quick, “Sorry! And congratulations!”

Wendi is not one for the inconveniences of life, like walking down the hall to use the women’s room. Time is too precious to waste getting to the appropriate rest room. Daily, she sneaks into the men’s room, while Channing “volunteers” to stand guard and ask the men, in barely a whisper, “Please just wait one moment. Wendi will be right out.” This has been going on for months and the men, though only a handful on the floor, are losing their patience.

With Channing’s return, Jules turns her attention to her hit and hot lists. She has over 200 clients to call on, each with a number of contacts: the designer herself (or, in a few cases, himself), the business manager (usually a spouse or relative of the designer), and, occasionally, an agency. The hit list can get overwhelming. More importantly, she needs to focus her time and efforts on her hot list: clients and prospects that are actively advertising with her competitors and have the collection of new dresses, the creative campaign and the cash to support the new

weddings launch. It's a competitive field, especially given that her site's rates are the most expensive in the industry and the number don't support the premium pricing. But, the lunches and dinners at the city's chicest restaurants and regular spa visits with clients help build relationships even if it all leads her friends to tease her about how challenging her position really is.

She makes a few calls to schedule lunches and a few to appease nervous designers.

"Yes, edit loves your collection.... I just have no influence on what they feature in on the site. Church and state between edit and publishing here, strict company policy," she assures one designer.

"Of course, I will do my best to ensure your creative runs on the landing page. It's so beautiful, I'm sure the editors will want it there!" she tells another.

And, "I understand this is a difficult season for you. Let me speak with the business office regarding your rates and contract. And let me say that I am very much looking forward to your show and reception at the St. Regis!" she enthuses to one of her biggest clients.

Jules reminds herself to keep a smile on her face, which makes her sound cheerful and sincere when really she wants to scream, "A grand event at the St. Regis? You owe us six figures! Stop with all the flash to the industry when the industry knows you are driving your wife's business into the ground!"

She needs someone she can be genuine with, not fake her smile as she speaks on the phone. Time to take a break for a quick visit with Roy, who she hasn't seen yet today. After a morning of client calls, she wants to make the most of the hour or two-hour reprieve while Wendi is at a lunch appointment.

"Hey!" Jules mouths to Roy, on the phone, as she walks in and immediately takes a seat.



The “Okay...okay...okay,” rolling his hand in a forward circular motion, as if to speed it up, indicates that he is finishing the call. She stares out the window until he gives his final, “Right, okay, bye.”

“JK, how are you?” he asks, as he puts the phone on his desk.

“I needed a break from dealing with clients and figured I would take a breather while Wendi is at a client lunch. How are you?”

“Client lunch? Since when does an associate publisher even have a client list? If she’s not taking one of us along, whose client is she seeing?” Roy asks, perpetuating his long-standing argument that Wendi is secretly meeting a lover.

“Oh, here we go again.... Maybe she is seeing one of her old couture clients. Maybe she takes them to a nice lunch every once in a while to ensure she gets a good seat for the shows at Fashion Week.”

“I’m not buying,” he tells her.

“Roy! She has to try to stay on those private friends and family lists! Who would want to give up getting couture discounted? Not me. And definitely not her. You know how expensive her clothing habit is.”

Wendi has a wardrobe to envy. She obviously has closets full of clothes from the Italian designers who know best how to flatter a woman’s petite figure, size 2 hips and large breasts, implants or otherwise. The labels bear all Italian men’s names: Dolce & Gabbana, Giorgio Armani and Roberto Cavalli. The shoes and bags are designed and made in Milan: Prada and Gucci.

“Speaking of her clothes,” Roy continues, “Do you notice how she always wears her tightest, lowest-cut dresses and her highest, spikiest heels on the days of these *client lunches*?” he

creates quotation marks in the air around the final two words.

“Come on. That is such a weak argument! She dresses like that every day. Is that the best you can do? If so, I’m not buying.”

Roy looks up, indicating that someone is standing behind her. Jules’s heart skips a beat as she wonders if it is Wendi and, if so, how much she has heard.

*Just enough to bury me,* Jules thinks.

“Channing, tell us, did Wendi ask you to gather any promo items or other gifts for her clients?”

Jules is sitting in one of Roy’s guest chairs and Channing now stands next to her. Channing has a feline ability to move silently, unnoticed. Jules’s heart is still racing from the surprise. She promises herself to be more careful about what she says aloud at the office.

“Roy....” Channing says with a smile that demonstrates this is awkward for her. “I heard what you were saying. I sit only a few feet away, you know.”

While Channing is trustworthy, Jules is careful about speaking like this in front of her. Jules has been on the receiving end of Wendi’s grilling sessions and worries the soft-spoken assistant would crack under that pressure—to avoid the full-on slaughter—and give them up.

“Uh huh. So, no. And, did she bring anything other than her bag with her? Ask you to send out any materials to a client’s office this week?”

Channing remains silent but starts to blush.

“That really doesn’t mean anything.”

Roy jumps in, “Okay, so I’ll take that as another no. Still not buying, Kennedy?”

Jules laughs. Though she would never admit it to Roy, he is starting to build a convincing argument. Wendi, who values preparedness as much the most diligent Boy Scout, would be

enraged if any of them ever went to a client lunch without an armload of materials and bags of meticulously wrapped gifts.

“And where is she dining this afternoon?” Roy presses.

“When I asked her where I should make the lunch reservation, she told me she already took care of it.”

“Really! Is this like her?” he asks, confident he knows the answer.

“I make her reservations, even when she and Scott are going out for dinner. But I do need to cancel their dinner reservation. Scott is extending his business trip.”

“Need I say more? No issues, no gifts, no reservations and—let’s not forget—no husband!” He slams his hand down on the desk then smiles. “Damn, I am good.”

As silently as she had entered, Channing leaves the office to return to her cubicle. Jules enjoys Roy’s bravado.

*Maybe Wendi is having an affair. Should it be so surprising? She talks incessantly about her investment banking ex and the lifestyle she had with him: the private planes, the exquisite jewelry, the numerous houses. It was no secret that her current, second marriage, is the result of Wendi “mistakenly” getting pregnant after knowing Scott only three months. Maybe she has her regrets. And, anyway, who cares?*

Far more interesting is Channing’s willingness to contribute to the debate about whether Wendi is having an affair, even if by unintentionally providing information. Because, despite the challenges of working as Wendi’s administrative assistant, Channing always appears respectful of Wendi.

“Okay, okay, one could *deduce* she is having an affair. But, you still have no actual proof. Give me something concrete when you have it. Now, I’m going to make a few calls before the

lunch/liaison/whatever ends and she returns to the office.”

“Well, when you hear these guitar licks playing from down the hall, you know ‘The Bitch is Back.’” He cues up the song on iTunes, jumps out of his chair and plays his worst air guitar, head thrown back, eyes pinched shut, hips jutting forward.

“Stop! I hate air guitar!” Jules yells over the music as she leaves Roy to his best Elton.

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## **Sloane is Missing**

Jules settles back into her desk and slides the mouse to wake her computer from sleep mode. She has only a few emails, probably because clients only occasionally return emails and they are especially quiet now, preparing for market. She signs into her personal email and notices that this account is rather light, too. Especially from Sloane, who usually sends recommendations for the newest restaurant openings or invitations to the best charity galas. She realizes it has been at least a week, maybe a couple, since she and Sloane have spoken, which is unusual.

Sometimes, it takes a month for them to find a date that works on their calendars, especially when they are in relationships, but they forgive each other this travesty of female friendships. In between, they always talk or at least email or text every few days. She thinks back and realizes Sloane has not returned her calls in a couple of weeks. Maybe it just feels longer because she is no longer spending time with Tom to distract her? Maybe Sloane is tired of playing soothing, comforting therapist to Jules's heartbroken wreck?

*No, this is what we do for one another. Always.*

She tries to squelch the sinking feeling that something is wrong.

Jules dials Sloane's cell which immediately sends her to voicemail. Just like when she calls her most challenging clients, she forces a smile as she leaves the message, making her voice sound light and chipper.

"Hi, honey, it's me. I'm sure you are with your mother, down in Charleston or at the farm, where you don't get reception. Or, maybe you've been whisked away by some sexy Spaniard or mad Englishman. Or, even that man finally came to his senses and just had to take you to meet his family in Ireland. Anyway, just give me a call because I miss you. And, I have an extra ticket to one of the hottest shows at fashion week. You have to call me to find out whose show it is. But,

he's big! Call me! Bye!"

That would get her. Sloane loves hitting the circuit with Jules, so she will return that call right away. As she ends the call and adds Slaone's name to her calendar as a reminder to check in again at the end of the week, she hears the unmistakable guitar riff coming down the hallway. If it's an affair, the passion is already fading. She's only been gone an hour and a half. They're already down to quickies.

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## **Matter of Trust**

Maria and Jules sit across from each other in a booth at JB Winberries, a casual bistro in the heart of Princeton. The university is on spring break, so the quaint town is a bit more quiet than usual. Still, they cannot help but feel old when their co-ed waiter asks for their drink order.

“Thank God he didn’t say ma’am,” Maria whispers, before the waiter even rounds the corner.

The wine they ordered is set before them on the table within a few minutes. Jules raises her glass to toast Maria, who cheerfully offers, “Happy break up brunch!”

Jules furrows her eyebrows in response, which Maria notices right away.

“To the doctor with you! I saw that grimace.”

“I know, Maria. It’s just still a little tender.”

“Listen, you need your girlfriends to be your shoulder to cry on but also to give you tough love when you need it. I’m going to give it to you straight: move on.”

“I know. You are right, Maria. And you—and Sloane and Madeleine, too—have been angels. I just don’t have it in me yet.”

“Jules, get out there and kiss a frog. Don’t let *him* be the last one you’ve kissed. It only makes a sentimental girl like you entirely too weepy,” she says, making eye contact over the rim of the wine glass.

“Have I ever steered you wrong? Trust me. Cut your losses.”

Since their study abroad days in London, Jules has always admired Maria’s natural abilities in math and science and, by extension, her ability to look at even romantic things objectively. But, more importantly, taking absolute truths into account, she shares her thoughts

and suggestions directly and usually with a humorous twist.

Maria appears to have everything in life she lacked as a child and therefore wanted to have as an adult: a happy marriage to her college sweetheart and a mansion in the suburbs, filled with beautiful, young children. She and Howard have it all and more; with smart investments in the tech industry, he has already retired from full-time work and consults on occasion, when the project grabs him.

Jules notices that Maria is nearly done with her Chardonnay, which had been a generous pour. And, they haven't even ordered brunch yet.

"It is such a treat to get out and enjoy a meal with big people. Really, if I watch another Wiggles DVD, sing another Elmo song or drive to another Chuck E. Cheese in my Mommy Minivan, I will lose it."

"Says the mother of four, young and beautiful girls with a very involved husband."

"Let's just say...." She takes a quick sip and then sets the glass down on the wood table, etched with names of those seated there before them. "Let me put this into terms that will speak to you. Having a stay-at-home husband as well as four girls is a bit like meeting a great-looking, successful and thoughtful guy who has an enormous penis. *Enormous*," she gestures with her hands, nearly knocking over the glass of wine. "It's exactly what you thought you always wanted but sometimes too much is just too, too much."

She shakes her head in slow, knowing way.

"God, Maria, I miss you," Jules says, laughing at the analogy.

"Look at how completely different our lives are. You have so much drama. All I have is carpools. Yet we can still relate."

"True, true," her friend agrees.



“You have this great husband, who wants to be with his kids so much, he semi-retired in his 30s. While I’m still trying to figure out how and when—let’s not underestimate when—I am going to meet a good guy, never mind if he’s well endowed.”

“It’s not all champagne and flowers, Jules, believe me.” Maria cranes her neck to see if she can find the waiter, presumably to order brunch or another glass of wine. Jules takes another sip, but in enjoying their wine, like their lives, they are pacing very differently.

“Call me jaded, but I know I am becoming one of those women who has trust issues. I mean, after what Tom pulled...” she hesitates, then shakes it off. “I really don’t want to, can’t get into it again....”

“Thank God!” Maria interjects.

Jules smiles before continuing, “Okay, let me just say this. I realize how I trusted that man when he lied so convincingly. And more than once. A lot more than once.”

Jules sits back, her body hitting the straight-backed wooden bench.

Between the pregnancies and breast-feeding over the last six years, Maria has had rare occasion to relax.

“With only a few sips, I am already feeling this,” she admits to Jules. “So, before the second glass of wine arrives, just a word on trust. Sometimes, you just have to have faith in someone. Just believe that they are good and trustworthy.”

“Maria, please do not give me all your sob stories from boyfriends long ago to try to make me feel better. It’s condescending.”

“The relationship grass is always greener, Jules. Look, Ari is home more than any other guy you and I know. But, he just took this project in Los Angeles. He’s there nearly two full weeks a month.”

“I thought you told me you encouraged him take it.”

“I did! But, when your husband is living the good life in expensive hotels and client dinners at the “it” restaurants in Los Angeles with all the beautiful people and you are by yourself with a bunch of sick, whining kids, exhausted from lack of sleep because your one-year-old has an ear infection that kept you up all night and you’re lucky to pull on sweats, never mind Lulu Lemon, on in the morning and the phone rings at 7:00 am and it’s a woman crying, asking for *him* and you don’t know her voice or her name, then you better trust your husband with everything you have. Because you’ve got nothing else.”

Jules is speechless. The glass of wine allows her exhausted, stressed and hormonal-from-lactating friend to be honest. And Jules is getting her first real peek under the covers into the reality of the dream life in suburbia she thought Maria lived.

“You don’t know her name? Maybe it was something work related?” Jules tries.

“The woman was a hysterical mess. Nothing at the office would make someone that upset. And they all have each other’s cell phone numbers, even if they wanted to reach each other at 4 a.m. on the coast.”

“Did you look at the caller ID? Did she call from an LA area code?”

“I don’t know and I didn’t look. The point is, I trust him. I know that he loves me and his family and would never do anything to jeopardize that...never,” repeating the word more for her own benefit than for Jules’s.

Maria looks up from her wine glass, her eyes welling with tears.

“Enough of that. Why don’t we order those pita chips with artichoke dip?”

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## **Bridal Market**

Jules rushes onto the sidewalk in time to hail the taxi racing up 67<sup>th</sup> Street. She is relieved to not that have to run along First Avenue in her impossibly high heels. She tosses her bag onto the back seat, jumps in behind it and immediately pulls out her iPhone—already flashing the 15-minute reminder—and looks up the address to the Novotel for the taxi driver. She is thrown back against the seat as the driver slams on the gas. The streets are remarkably quiet and the taxi travels all the way to Park Avenue before she sees another taxi. She will be oh-ing and ah-ing over countless bridal gowns today. Today, the first Sunday of April, marks the start of bridal market in New York.

As they speed down Fifth Avenue, Jules feels more confident that she will make it to the first show on time. She looks down at her phone and notices a new message. It's from Wendi: "Don't be late. Reply immediately so I know you are on time and I can get back to sleep. I AM on vacation. WWE."

Jules laughs at the irony of Wendi's message and the painful "pep talks" last week about the importance of market while periodically interrupting herself to call Channing to remind her to confirm her wax, manicure and pedicure appointments prior to her St. Barth's trip. And, the timing of the trip itself, taken the same week as *the industry's most important week*. Her fingers tap a quick reply: "All set, thanks. No need to lose any sleep."

Market is the industry's command performance gathering twice annually. Over the course of four days, the industry turns out for long days with 8:30 starts—especially early for the editors whose workdays typically start closer to 10—with carefully applied make-up and the occasional black-lensed and oversized Chanel/Fendi/Tom Ford sunglasses hiding the bags under their eyes.

The retailers, from Manhattan's most exclusive ateliers and tony boutiques in affluent urban centers around the country to the managers of the bridal salons from Bergdorf's to Bloomies, also gather for the festivities. And this season's hottest influencers. The media and the buyers create a group of stylish young women that, as a whole, stick to the uniform: clad in black, donning expensive bags, hair carefully blown out or slicked back in low, sleek ponies. They smile, make small talk and stifle yawns. Of course, it is exciting that the world's most talented designers and the young, soon to be "it" names, are about to reveal their new collections for next fall. But, after a number of designs, designers and days, this fabulous white dress after that spectacular gown are like a flurry of snowflakes during a blizzard, each beautiful and unique but difficult to distinguish.

Jules's taxi comes to an abrupt stop in front of the breezeway adjoining the hotel. Already, there is a long line of idling town cars and a sprinkling of company vans that will flock from one show to the next. Not to mention the sponsored London-style double-decker bus. Jules jumps out of the taxi and onto the line to get cleared by security, pulling her cream-colored heavy-stock invitation out of her bag. She eyes the buffet tables, already two deep at the coffee urns, everyone looking for something to wake and warm them at the season's premier event. Jules has time for just a sip of coffee before taking her seat next to her editors, mid-way down the runway, in the front row, an honor bestowed on the best editors, influencers and their posses. They smile and nod at one another and exchange quick kisses on the cheeks among those close enough, as the music starts, cuing everyone to double-check that they've turned off their electronics.

The violins start, their notes delicate. The first model appears, to the warm welcome of the photographers who immediately begin snapping rolls and rolls of photos, their cameras clicking at the far end of the runway. For the next thirty minutes, Justina McCaffrey's ballet of light, billowy dresses is modeled by anorexic-thin dancers en pointe, so cold their bodies

involuntary shiver, their skin goose-bumps and their nipples poke through the sheer fabric almost as obviously as their hip bones and rib cages do. They dance and pose to classic ballet music familiar to Jules, though she cannot name the composer. In unison, the heads of all in attendance follow each woman as she gracefully glides past them, ending in an impossible pose, which she holds for the posse of photographers, and then turns back to the head of the runway. She holds one final stance—three-quarter profile, hand on hip, shoulders back—providing the photographers their long-lens shot, before the next model makes her appearance and is on her way. In the few seconds delay between each model, the editors and buyers, again in unison, look down at their programs and jot notes about which pieces to pull for the photo shoots they are scheduling or which designs to order for their salons. Jules, having no real notes to make for her role on the sales team, instead writes an impromptu to-do list, small enough that neither of her neighbors can make out.

The show ends with Justina making an appearance at the top of the runway, surrounded by her girls in the gowns they last modeled, to the applause of all attendees. She takes a bow as those in attendance clap while grabbing their bags and pulling on their spring coats, mostly Burberry trenches, and rush to Justina to offer congratulations on the show and hand their business cards with their dress requests scribbled on the back. Within minutes of the show's conclusion, the compliments are all doled out, cards shared, cars jumped into and taxis hailed. And the fleet moves, en masse, to the next show.

One show's delay can wreak havoc on the rest of the day's timing. And, there are schedule conflicts made by either naïve newcomers or deliberately by the more aggressive designers, willing to bet on their industry relationships and challenge their rivals, often former employers or partners. Though it sounds like the makings of a day of single-girl bliss—running

around the city's most spectacular spaces and getting glimpses of the most beautiful bridal designs—the 15-plus hour days of rushing around the city on a diet of champagne, coffee and sugary petit fours in a skirt and heels take their toll. By the final hours of the day, the shows are multi-media spectacles to revive the visibly exhausted editors and buyers. The opening day's final show, hosted by Amsale, rivals any *New York Times Vows*-featured Manhattan wedding. In the Time Warner Center, there are carving stations, a caviar bar and cocktails being passed by dozens of tuxedo-clad waiters. Jules chats with Mindy, whose sweet demeanor belies her clout; she decides which designers will adorn Bergdorf's blushing brides.

“Mindy, from today's shows, who do you like?” Jules asks, alternating her weight from one high-heeled foot to the other.

“They all showed beautiful dresses in their collections. I need to focus on balancing our whimsical, sleek and modern with traditional while always keeping my brides in mind,” Mindy muses, revealing nothing.

“And there are still three days to go!” Jules says, already imagining which shoes she can wear tomorrow that will provide some comfort to her nearly numb feet, already on fire.

“Tell me, Jules, what will you wear?”

Jules is caught not paying attention.

“Excuse me?” she asks.

“I have something in mind for you.”

Jules does not know how to respond.

“For a dress. Something tells me we'll need to spend some time together, in the salon,” Mindy adds, with a smile.

“No, no. We broke up. It's over, completely over. So, I won't be coming in. Not anytime

soon, anyway,” she says, her voice beginning to crack.

“Oh, Jules, I am so sorry! I didn’t know.” Mindy touches her hand and is looking into her eyes, which are now brimming with tears.

“No, I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry. I think I’m just exhausted.”

“Of course you are! Let’s get you out of here,” Mindy says, taking Jules’s cocktail out of her hand and puts both their glasses onto the tray of a passing waiter.

“And seeing those dresses all day today really heightened my emotions.”

“Of course it did! You shouldn’t be subjected to days of bridal dresses when you are dealing with heartache. If we leave now, we can beat the rush to the elevators.”

Limping along on her sore feet, which now radiate pain, her shoulders slightly slouched from exhaustion, Jules exits with Mindy, accepting a gift bag that is handed to her on the way out. Stepping outside onto the curb, Mindy’s driver spots her and pulls up.

“Do you have a car here?” she asks.

“No, I’ll just get an Uber or hail a taxi. If my feet weren’t so sore, I’d walk home.” She adds, “I live just across the park, in the East 60s so I’m close.”

“I’m happy to drop you. It doesn’t look like there are too many taxis. How can anybody they get through this mess?” she asks, referring to the three-deep line up of town cars waiting for their passengers, still upstairs.

Jules feet scream, “Take the ride!” And, enjoying her rapport with Mindy, who probably has comforted many jilted women in her career, Jules slides in next to her host and smiles at the driver, who closes the door behind her.

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## **Sloane's Request**

A few days later, after an especially long day at the office, Jules walks into her apartment, drops her keys in the ceramic cache on the table near the door and remembers to pull her phone out of her bag before dropping her overstuffed Neverfull to the ground. As she pulls her jacket off, she checks voicemail and is relieved to hear a familiar, happy voice.

“Jules, honey, please call me. We are overdue for a Prince of Wales night. Can you make it tonight at all? Please tell me you're available. Call or text and let me know. Ciao, love!”

Jules is delighted by the suggestion. She is more than ready for a POW night, as she and Sloane refer to them still. The custom started while they were in London, when they would visit the pub—the very one Prince Charles was known to frequent—across the street from their flat. It quickly became their local. They would slip out together, no other flatmates invited nor even privy to their little rendezvous, and enjoy a glass of cider along with a chat in private; everything from silly gossip about their fellow study abroad students to their rollercoaster love lives in London and at home, to their loftier aspirations in terms of career, family and their personal hit list. They continued the practice immediately after graduating college and arriving in New York. Though the Prince of Wales is miles away and years ago, Prince of Wales nights can take place at any venue. The meetings are a sacred and requests for POW nights are given priority, always.

Jules is eager to speak with Sloane after finally receiving an email a few days before. It turned out that Sloane's MIA status covered a rehab stint in Malibu. Sloane, who promised to call upon her return, sounds surprisingly nonchalant about the experience.

Jules rings Sloane back.

“Hey, sweetie!”



“How are you, Sloane?” Jules asks, a little too heavy on the *are*.

“Super, honey!” she answers, “Happy to be back!”

“You sound great! Are you feeling...okay?”

“You know, Jules, I was a train wreck. I had pills to go to sleep, pills to wake up and pills to get me through the day. I just couldn’t swallow another one.”

“So you decided....” Jules isn’t sure how to phrase anything or how sensitive this is for Sloane to share.

“I decided I needed to stop numbing myself and feel the pain so I could work through it.”

“And?” Jules prompts her, realizing she is only offering transition words.

“I felt the anger, resentment, the rage. I used to think of what he did to me. But the best way to get through something is straight through. And I did. Now I reframe it, because it is what I participated in. And I will never play that role again. Not with him, not with anyone.”

“Good for you, Sloane!”

*A little too peppy.*

“Sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound so chipper. I’m just not sure what to say.”

*And, there is that tremendous guilt. How could I have not spotted that one of my dearest friends was so in need of help?*

“I know you don’t. And thank you for being so honest about it. It’s been a lot of hard work, every day. I appreciate your support. So, let’s start by making a plan to go out. Just because I’m clean, I don’t have to be a social pariah.”

“Before we move on. I’m not really sure how to say this....”

“Just say it, Jules.”

“I know this isn’t about me—at all—but I’m so very sorry that I didn’t realize that you

needed help.”

“Oh, sweetie! There was no way you could have! I was the master schemer with my little habit. I hid it really well, from everyone, including you. Just wipe that thought right out of your pretty head, right now. Do not even go down that path, promise?”

“So, I can go back to being completely self-absorbed sans guilt?”

“Absolutely! Now, when can we get together so I can hear about all that I missed while I was getting my life together?”

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## Training

Walking along Lexington the next morning, the day is bright and the sidewalks are already bustling. Jules sips the iced tea she's picked up from the gym's café. She looks up the avenue for any taxis For Hire, takes a deep breath and enjoys how optimistic and in control she feels. Running is good for her mind and body, even if she's begun to hobble from her increasing weekly mileage. As she waits for the light to change, she catches a glimpse of *him*, coming down the side street, about to cross Lexington Avenue. Heading for her is the rumored-3 percent body fat demi-god of trainers, donning a black t-shirt, black running pants, his long, black hair trailing behind him, his blackened-lenses preventing anyone from making eye contact. As he crosses the avenue, swift and smooth, Jules admires his gait, his physique, him. He is *the* trainer to get, if you run and if you could manage to get on his booked-solid calendar. The man runs three-hour-and-change marathons, several a year, and trains aspiring and experienced marathoners from all over the city for the first Sunday of November. Jules watches him pass, waits three beats, takes a last glance for an available taxi then follows him through the glass doors. She speaks to one of the chipper staff wearing "Greet" t-shirts about how to secure an appointment with the marathon-trainer extraordinaire. Within minutes, she has secured a rare and much-coveted 7:00 am appointment on Ramon's calendar.

During the 10-minute taxi ride to work, Jules hears her phone beep, indicating a new voicemail. Her call log reads Maria, a name that rarely appears on the missed calls list since she usually has little time to reach out to anyone beyond pediatricians, kindergarten administrators and Brownie troop leaders. Without even checking the voicemail message, Jules rings her back, eager to take advantage of the fleeting opportunity to reach her perpetually harried friend.

Maria picks up on the second ring. The usual chaos apparently is in full swing behind her.

“Hold on,” she answers in greeting.

Jules can hear footsteps, the background noise falling out and suddenly, quiet—remarkably quiet—for Maria’s house.

“Okay, we need to talk,” Maria says, getting right to business. “I only have a few minutes in here before they will stand outside the door, crying for me.”

“Are you in the bathroom again? I can’t remember the last time your house was so quiet.”

“Yes, in the bathroom, as usual. It’s the only place I get any peace and that lasts for five or six minutes, tops.”

“Oh, Maria....”

“Listen, I know I live a life of leisure,” a fact that Jules finds debatable, given Maria has precious little leisure time, raising four girls, “but it’s not always as charmed as it looks. I want to talk with you about something and don’t want the kids to hear.”

“Okay, shoot. The clock’s ticking and they won’t give you long,” Jules says, as she digs in her bag for her wallet, preparing for her taxi’s arrival at her office’s entrance.

“I’m going to get right to the point. Do you think it’s weird that Ari didn’t have his phone on last night? He’s traveling on business and he *always* keeps that thing on but I tried to reach him and it was turned off.”

“Did you ask him about it?”

“Not directly, but I did mention I was trying to get through to him and that it went right to voicemail.”

“What did he say?” Jules whispers to the taxi driver “Can I have nine dollars back,

please?” as she slides across the back seat and collects her things.

“He claims he had it off because he was conserving the battery.”

“You don’t find that feasible?”

“Jules, he lives and dies by that piece of plastic. I swear, I even heard it beeping in his pocket during one of the girl’s births.”

“Maybe he was just trying to conserve the battery, like he said. How long is he away?”

“Three days. But, that’s the point. Think about it. Could a phone last for three full days anyway? Remember, he claims he forgot his charger, that’s why he had to turn it off for the night.”

“An iPhone? Last for three full days?”

“Yes, one that he has on all the time.”

“I hate to say it, Maria, but I doubt mine would. But he may have a better one than I have. It’s very possible.”

“Jules, maybe he turned it off after our good night call because he didn’t want to be interrupted? What if my husband is having an affair?”

“Do *I* think he is having an affair?”

People are rushing past Jules, who is standing outside the building entrance. She smiles at a few familiar faces while she talks and lowers her voice, just in case anyone overhears.

“Oh, Maria, I don’t know. That is a pretty dramatic conclusion to come to after one night of not being able to reach him.”

“But that woman who called...” Maria reminds her.

Roy walks by and, seeing she is engrossed in her call, he taps his watch, to remind her of the time. Jules checks her watch. It is already a few minutes after 9:00. Jules envisions Wendi’s

explosion for her being late on a morning she actually arrived on time. But Maria has always made herself available for her and her crisis du jour. And, now that Maria has shown even a crack in her bliss of married suburban life, she needs reassurance. And she needs Jules to provide it.

“People are starting to get divorced. My brother cheated on his wife, which I would have said was unimaginable. My brother-in-law’s wife left him for a woman. And one of my friends here in Stepford is involved in a ‘flirtation’ with a married man. Am I immune? I don’t think so.”

“Oh, honey. It’s our Queens of Scheme days in London coming back to haunt you. I’m sure the explanation is much less complicated than the two of us can envision, as history has demonstrated to us, again and again,” Jules suggests, trying to add some levity to what is clearly a very real concern for her friend.

“Okay” Maria answers, her voice flat, unconvinced.

“I am sure this is all just a misunderstanding and everything will be fine when he gets home and you talk. Just don’t panic and come to any crazy conclusions. Okay?”

“Okay” Maria says again. “He’s home this afternoon and probably we’ll talk once the kids are in bed.”

“Call me when you get this all figured out. I bet we’ll laugh about our ‘Suspicious Minds’,” the Elvis reference meant to lighten the tone for her distraught friend. There is knocking, growing louder and more impatient, and urgent calls for “Mommy” in the background.

“You would think he has enough women in his life,” Maria remarks before yelling, “Mommy will be right there, sweetheart!”

And, in sotto voce, before hanging up, “Thanks, Jules.”

Jules imagines Maria opening the bathroom door and being greeted by a grinning,

gorgeous child with a ratty blanket in her hand. At the same time, Jules pushes through the revolving door and runs through the lobby, catching 9:12 on the digital clock as she rushes through the turnstiles, thankful for the security guard who swipes his card for her, saving her from nearly emptying her bag in an effort to find her employee identification. She hits the 26 button several times, knowing this does not speed the elevator door closing, and prays that nobody else enters the elevator, interrupting her express. As she exits the elevator, she dashes for the doors, rubbing her bag against the security sensors. She tries several times, offering up different sides of the bag, before Channing appears on the other side of the glass door, a nervous smile on her face.

“Good morning, Jules. I’m going to Starbucks, want anything?”

“She’s here, huh?” Jules asks, knowing the answer.

“Yeah and....”

“She’s looking for me, notices I’m not in and is already in a bad mood,” Jules asks, betting she’s right on every count.

“Afraid so. But, she has a 9:30 conference call so maybe you can avoid her until then,” she says, trailing off.

“Moods like the weather.”

She holds the door open as Channing passes, “Iced decaf with skim for me, please, extra light. Here, let me treat.”

“Roy already got it, thanks. See you in a bit.”

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## Prince of Wales Night

Later that week, Jules arrives at L'Absinthe a little early to avoid having Sloane wait for her at the bar. She sits and sips—a sparkling water with extra lime—and does some quick math. Sloane will be out of rehab for a few weeks by the time Memorial Day arrives. Jules wonders if would it be callous to ask if she will still go out to the beach house they had booked that summer. She had not expected to be back in a share house, given the plans she and Tom had for their future, including out east....

*You are moving on. Yes, this summer is filled with promise!*

She reviews her moving-on efforts: flirting and kissing a married Rothschild in the flower beds at the family estate; the earnest attention of a charming bon vivant who is either a shipping tycoon or a Greek mobster; and some late-night requests from Mark to resume their relationship, to which she doesn't have any idea how to respond. Maybe she hasn't exactly moved on, but she is feeling ready to. And weekends out east provide so many easy ways to meet people and perhaps a potential love interest.

For Jules, the Hamptons is a place of comfort. Of course, there is the scene and the celebrities, the overcrowded clubs and the overpriced restaurants. Returning to Long Island's east end is like pulling on her favorite jeans and comfy, white t-shirt. It had been a part of Jules's summers—and more recently, spring, falls and dead of winters, too—for over fifteen years. She first hit the beaches south of the highway in her freshman year of college, with her then-beau, at his parents' white on white on white post-modern home in East Hampton. She and Max spent a lot of time there, some of the visits his parents had known about and some they hadn't, including the night she lost her virginity.



She stares at the antiqued mirror behind the zinc bar as she remembers the frigid cold late January night with such clarity. They planned every detail: his visit to White's Pharmacy in town to buy the condoms and assorted birth control accoutrements, even though she had started the pill two months prior. The sense of anxiety during the candlelit dinner he shopped for and prepared. The extra glasses of wine she drank to calm her nerves at McKendry's, a worn-out Irish bar with tired-looking customers, mostly local fisherman, and the only area bar open late in January. The car ride in complete darkness, other than the bright white stars that pierced the sky, back to the house. She remembers trying to act both the passionate lover and confident woman while nervously anticipating the actual event and awkward in not knowing how to help the rather inexperienced Max. And, she cannot forget the act itself—finally, all the way—and the sweat on his brow, either from fear that he was hurting her or the excitement of finally deflowering his girlfriend of four months.

She thinks back to the following spring, when she visited the house with her beau and his family, ostensibly for “her first time,” and how she pretended not to know her way around the house, asking where the guest room was, where they kept the flatware. After a full afternoon of Jules's awful acting, Max pulled her aside and whispered, “They know we've been coming out here since winter. I had to borrow the keys.”

Was it any surprise as to why his parents never seemed to care for her? She had the sense all along, but those first few hours at the house sealed her fate. She had wondered aloud, on more than one occasion, if his parents didn't like her. It was confirmed when Max offered a reassurance, “My mother is seeing a therapist now and she doesn't resent you... anymore.” When Jules had shared this and other Albright incidents with her London flatmates, the girls teased that his parents would slip her the extra cash to extend her semester into a full year

abroad. But, to their chagrin, she returned the following summer. And though she and Max didn't stay together much longer, they did make it through the summer leading into their senior year, spending much of it out at the house.

Now, like then, the Hamptons are not about the scene, the clubs, the dressing up, the photos of bold-faced names in the free weekly glossies. For Jules, the Hamptons are about the beach, and barbeques on the beach, dinners out, dinners at friends' and friends of friends', running around in jeans, running along Further Lane and now, this summer, *not* running into Tom. She just hopes Sloane will be there with her. Jules decides to broach the topic gently. As her little daydream comes to a close, Sloane rushes up and gives Jules an air kiss on the cheek and a warm hug hello.

Kareem sets a fresh glass of sparkling water in front of Jules, which Sloane notices immediately.

"You are adorable! It's okay if you enjoy a drink. I'm the one who had to clean up. That doesn't mean you need to as well. It's this Suboxone I'm on. If I mix it with alcohol, it won't be pretty."

"Okay. But, I've been trying to get myself into better shape and running a bit more so I've been cutting back."

"If you promise. Anyway, it's very sweet of you."

And, though they both know it's bad luck to toast with glasses filled with water, they do so anyway.

"To you," Jules says, looking her friend in the eyes, giving her a wink.

"To friends," Sloane says in return. "And to summer!"

They agree to continue the tradition of dinner at the bar. Kareem sets their split order of

medium rare steak frites before them. He knows to bring the white ceramic side dishes of French mustard and mayonnaise without them having to ask.

“God, we are such regulars they know our condiments?” Sloane notices.

“Such creatures of habit.”

“We really should head downtown more often. But, I just love our romantic little Prince of Wales nights here,” Jules confesses.

“Seems like you and I will be each other’s dates a bit more often these days.”

“And I’m happy to have them! But, we should think about our plans for the summer house. The Hamptons is great place for meeting guys.”

“Mmm, right,” Sloane responds, revealing nothing, between bites of fries, after dipping them in the house-made mayonnaise.

“We have the first weekend in June. I haven’t met any of the others, but my friend Eric is a total sweetheart and a prominent anesthesiologist, so I bet there will be some doctor friends to meet. I know he wanted to get some women into the house.”

“Jules, a man’s the last thing I need right now. I was so messed up after him,” she still does not speak Pierce’s name, “I am on self-imposed hiatus. I’m still working through a lot.”

“I totally understand. You need to take care of yourself. We both need to take care of ourselves. We’ll keep it nice and easy this summer. Plus, I am going to be training for the marathon, so I’m happy to skip the party circuit and focus more on running, beach time and good dinners. And, I promise, we won’t go anywhere where we might run into Pierce,” as if it needed to be said.

*Yikes! I said his name.*

A look crosses Sloane’s face and then disappears.

“Sorry, I slipped. But, it’s kind of silly, you know, that we cannot say his name. Like when I mentioned my assistant *pierced* her nose and you nearly burst into tears?”

Jules exaggerates the situation because she and Sloane both tend towards being overly sensitive post-break ups.

“Please, Jules! I had to say ‘the day after today’ instead of TOMorrow. Do you have any idea how annoying that was?” Sloane counters, her sassy self again. They will have a good summer.

“Touché. I’ll call Eric and confirm we’re in. Then book cars for the weekends we planned. And, I’ll schedule my summer Fridays so we get a head start on our weekends. Oh!” she says, realizing she wanted to update Sloane on her pending trip to Madeleine’s. “Guess where I am headed this weekend?”

By the time a Grand Marnier soufflé arrives, they’ve fallen right back into where things left off.

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## **Jules's Nightmare**

Jules's screams wake her from her nightmare. She opens her eyes, relieved it was just a dream. She is covered in sweat and bound up in her ridiculously high thread-count linens. She yanks at the Anachini Egyptian cotton that mummifies her. Already she feels better, though her heart is still pounding. It is twenty past 5:00 and she fears resuming the nightmare by falling back to sleep. She sits on the edge of the bed and gulps down some water from the glass next to her.

It was Tom. She still thinks about him. Or at least her subconscious does. When did things love-related get so complicated? She remembers how fun it all seemed in London. Maria would mark the Cosmopolitan love days on the kitchen calendar for the four of them. They'd buy everyone's monthly love horoscopes—99 pence for the plastic-wrapped paper scroll—and squeal with laughter about how awful they were. And, her favorite, they all read the women's magazine features on love and sex just before bed to try to encourage sexual dreams. She knows Maria is probably awake—she is awake at all hours of the night—but Jules decides to call her post-Equinox visit, when she has time to sort through the meaning of her dream and may be thinking a bit more clearly. Within ten minutes, she is handing her membership card to the too-chipper-for-this-time-of-the-morning woman behind the counter.

Safely installed on a rear-row treadmill, ear buds in, light jog started, Jules allows herself to reflect on the nightmare. She and the girls are in the London flat, though it looked different in the dream. They are in the living room, talking, when Jules gets a call from Tom, who is in the area and asks to see her. She agrees, the curiosity about the reason for his London visit overriding the pain she fully anticipates in seeing him again. She knows—even in her dream—

that deep down, she's secretly hoping he's going to ask to reconcile.

Without any segue, the next clip in the dream is of Tom sitting on a couch, which is covered with an Indian cotton throw, in a dark, bohemian living room. Incense is burning and sitar-heavy music is playing. There are others there, but they do not seem to notice Jules and Tom talking. Actually, Tom is talking, bragging really, while Jules sits there, stunned into silence. He is moving to Los Angeles, he tells her, because he is in love. But, then, the beautiful face of a brunette sitting next to him appears, she leans forward for the first time, giving life to the long, thin, denim-clad legs that Jules noticed but paid no mind. Tom is in love with a woman based in LA and they are going to marry. He wants Jules to meet her and be happy for him, for *finally* finding someone he feels a deep, spiritual connection with. Jules is unable to speak, smiling as she struggles to get up off the floor, where she is sitting, then letting herself out of the apartment and running down the narrow, winding stairs.

Flash forward: Jules finds herself back in the sanctity of her flat, with her friends. She tells them of Tom's finally confessing his love, but for someone else. The man who would not move across the park to the east side for her is moving to California for someone else. And, she is expected to be delighted for the emotional breakthrough Tom is finally experiencing.

Her friends soothe her, tell her all the things friends want to hear, need to hear, from each other. Jules remembers not crying, though. Just numbness, surrounded by friends, kind words offered to comfort her, someone stroking her hair. The front doorbell rings but sounds distant. Next, Sloane stands in the doorway, with Tom behind her. She and the others clear the room to give Jules and Tom privacy, throwing compassionate looks over their shoulders as they leave. She remains seated in the same position on the couch and looks up at Tom. His face is devoid of emotion and he simply utters, "Jules," as he comes towards her, almost lunging for her, as if to

embrace her. She hates being the recipient of his pity. She thinks she spots a quick flash of silver in his hand—a knife?—and, not wanting to reveal what she sees, quickly jumps from the couch and feigns a smile.

She remembers vividly trying to bring one of her friends into the room or to have them call for help, without alerting Tom. She smiles and says, “Tom.” Then, an excuse for exiting the room, “Care for something to drink? I could use some wine myself,” she offers.

“Please, I just want you to be happy for me. You have no idea how fucking hard it was for me to get over you,” he tells her. His voice is calm but the rage is just below the surface. Was she mistaken about him carrying a knife?

“Let’s be happy for one another, okay?” Again, he comes at her, too quickly, too forcefully. She is backed into the corner and since his hands appear empty, she allows the hug, in hopes of pacifying him. He takes her into his arms and for a second, it feels good, comforting. And then, she feels pain, a sharp and unmistakable stab. And she wakes, screaming.

She is soaked in sweat for the second time that morning. Her heart is pounding much more than usual after five miles. CNN and Today Show’s bubbly hosts can no longer distract her. She needs a friend. It’s almost 6:00, nearing the time she can call Maria. She opts for a steam, which she which she rarely has the time for, and showers before dialing any numbers. She is impressed with all the early risers on the Upper East Side, noticing how the gym is getting crowded so early. The locker room is still empty enough for her to ignore the no cell phone signs posted everywhere to sneak in a call to Maria, who is, as expected, wide awake. Jules tells her she requires a little junior psychologist session, as she raises her voice for Maria to hear over the complaining, crying child in the background.

“Is this a bad time?” Jules whispers.

“No, it’s fine. It’s like this all the time here,” Maria says, her voice so soft, Jules imagines the phone has slipped below Maria’s chin as she bounces the baby on her hip.

Jules provides the highlights, doing her best to exclude her own interpretations and awaits her friend’s response. It is quiet a moment too long for quick-minded Maria and Jules checks the phone, to ensure the connection is still good. As she returns the phone to her ear, she hears Maria say “Huh” in response.

“Huh? Did I miss something?” Jules asks.

“No, just ‘Huh.’ Because even in your dreams, you cannot decide if Tom stabbed you in the heart or in the back.”

“Huh” is all Jules responds before admitting defeat to the baby, who has worked herself up into a deafening wail and promises to call Maria later.

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## **Chatham**

Thursday afternoon, Jules gets an early start on the weekend by sneaking out a bit early for JFK and jumping on one of the afternoon shuttles to Boston. An hour later, she is running through Logan International, her duffle bag flying behind her, and just catches the quick connection to Hyannis. Cape Air's tiny six-passenger propeller plane has two pilots. Both look as if they could be college students. Jules loves the adrenaline rush from flying on such a small plane. She erases thoughts of how fast the plane is going, impact upon hitting the water and all the frightening facts from physics that she has, thankfully, long forgotten.

During the 40-minute flight, the deafening hum of the propeller engines acts as a soundtrack to the brilliant orange sunset over the still-frigid Atlantic and the eastern-most points of Massachusetts. The plane glides gently down lower, banking left before touching down on the small landing strip. Within minutes, the pilot, who doubles as the baggage handler, pops the door open. Jules skips down the few metal steps onto the tarmac, collects her bag out of the wing of the plane and waves to Madeleine, who is waiting for her inside the tiny terminal. Jules rushes in, drops her bag and they give each other a big hug. Jules pulls back to admire Madeleine's slightly puffy belly.

“Look at you! You are such an adorable pregnant woman!”

“Yes, I feel just adorable! Bloated, cranky and hormonal is more like it.”

“Please, I get puffier with my period. And no crankiness this weekend! Let's go get some chowder and let me see what you've done to the house!”

After a lot of excited chatter over a seafood dinner at an authentic lobster shack, Madeleine takes Jules to her favorite spot: her little home in the woods in Chatham. Madeleine

and a handful of friends purchased the house with just \$25,000 each, ten years ago, when she relocated from the West Coast to Boston for graduate school. One by one, for relocations, relationships or to invest in other properties, Madeleine's housemates sold their shares. And Madeleine bought each one. The sole owner of the 1960s house and expansive wooded property for a year now, Madeleine started renovations last fall. Now, it is nearly complete, just in time for the baby.

Madeleine shows Jules to her room, with its original pine panel walls, a renovated bathroom and a new set of sliding doors and skylights that provide unmatched views of the woods and the stars. Jules unpacks her bags, sets aside her gift for Madeleine and returns to the living room, where her friend has already poured her a glass of wine and a fresh fruit cocktail for herself. The fire is starting to crackle. Jules presents Madeleine with her favorite snacks from Zabar's, including ruggelach for her sweet cravings.

"To hell with my next weigh in!" Madeleine laughs before taking a bite.

With the fire acting as a very effective sleep aid, the two start to get drowsy within the hour. They head off to their rooms and Jules opens the sliding door to let in the night air and sounds. The cicadas serenade and the gentle night breeze chills the room. In the closet, she finds her favorite blanket of Madeleine's, a modern, funky twist on the traditional patchwork quilt. Her sister, Deborah, made it for her years ago and Jules has always coveted it. It is a thoughtful touch, as is the box of Jordan almonds, Jules's favorite sweet that Madeleine has left by her bedside. She washes up and slides under the sheets, confident that this is already shaping up to be one of her best weekends of the season.

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Both early risers, Madeleine and Jules wake before 7:00 the following morning and meet on the outdoor brick patio, where Madeleine has already gotten half way through the current *New Yorker* and a cup of English Breakfast tea, a habit developed in London.

“Are you on the current issue? I am beyond impressed,” Jules greets her friend.

“Please! I alternate between current and back issues. At this rate, I may be able to catch up by retirement.”

“Never has a magazine subscription caused me such anxiety. Every week, that damn thing is in my mailbox and it makes me feel inadequate. Tell me, what kind of person can keep up?”

“Nobody I know. I’ve decided I may have to give it up once the baby arrives. I think my life will be more about *Goodnight Moon* rather than ‘Shouts and Murmurs.’”

“I’ll give mine up in solidarity. That way, we can both fall into the same abyss of ignorance.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Only for you, Madeleine,” Jules smiles as she does a few quick stretches. “Mmm. I slept so well. I always do out here,” pulling her cream cashmere cardigan around her, to warm her against the chill still hanging in the air.

“I may get myself a tea. Would you like more?”

“Any chance you could be talked into making your famous Dutch pancakes which are really German pancakes?”

“Happy to!”

“I’d love that. I have plenty of lemons on hand though we may have to use granulated

sugar rather than powdered sugar for the topping.”

“That works for me. Let me get started!”

“Should I offer to help? Please say no,” Madeleine jokes.

“I can manage it just fine. You relax and I’ll take care of it.”

Jules turns on the oven and finds the old, cast iron All Clad pans easily enough as well as the mixing bowls and measuring cups, though she has made the Dutch/German pancakes so many times, she could easily prepare them without the measuring tools. She whips up the batter and pours it into the two pans, which already have butter bubbling in their bottoms. She notes the time on her watch and pours herself a cup of tea, adding a heaping teaspoon of sugar and a dash of milk.

“Would you like me to freshen up your tea?” she calls out to Madeleine.

“That would be great, thanks!” Madeleine replies from the patio.

Jules shuffles, focusing on her overflowing mug and the very hot tea pot, careful not to trip on the lip of the sliding glass door. She sets down her drink and fills Madeleine’s mug nearly to the top, leaving room for the milk.

“Oh, I forgot your milk. Wait here, I’ll get it,” Jules says just before taking a big sip from her steaming tea and stepping back into the living room. The hot liquid tastes simply awful and she runs to the kitchen to spit it out into the sink. Madeleine catches this from her seat outside and asks, “Morning sickness?”

“God! I think I added salt instead of sugar!” She is still spitting into the sink, trying to rid her mouth of the taste.

“Did you get it from a Mason Jar in the pantry? That’s sea salt, not sugar. Perfect for grilling, corn on the cob and green salads. Not sure I’d recommend it for tea, though.”

“Awww, Madeleine! That means our Dutch/German pancakes are ruined! I added two tablespoons of salt for each. They’ll taste horrible!”

Rather than scrapping the salty breakfast, running to the grocery store and starting from scratch, they decide Jules will run—literally—to pick up breakfast at the general store while Madeleine showers. Well aware of her friend’s lack of direction, Madeleine suggests Jules bring her cell phone, in the event she gets turned around.

Jules is excited and energized to explore a new running path, especially after hitting the loops in Central Park far too many times already, even if it’s still early in her training. The unfamiliar terrain makes each mile feel long since she is unsure of her progress in covering the distance. She breathes in the salt air, heavy with pine fragrance, still a little cool, as she runs along the wooded, quiet road. She is pleasantly surprised to arrive at the store, three miles away, in 26 minutes, a bit faster than her usual pace. She paces in front of the store, allowing her body to cool down and her breathing to slow. She attempts to fix her hair and wipe her sweat-drenched brow with her running shirt before giving up on looking presentable.

She enters the store and is greeted by the smell of the freshly baked goods and the squeaks of the wide-wooden planked floor beneath her feet. On her way to the counter, she bumps into a tall man in the Cape Cod uniform: khakis, an Oxford shirt over a t-shirt with a slightly frayed collar and a tattered, old baseball cap. It immediately strikes her how attractive he is, in that can’t-be-bothered way, and that he dares to wear a New York Yankees baseball cap in decidedly Red Sox country. Jules feels a hint of a smile on her lips at seeing the navy blue and white cap but, imagining what a sight she is, looks down at her feet so not to make eye contact. She waits for the lone storekeeper to take notice and help her with the task at hand, selecting baked goods for her botched breakfast.

Her cell phone rings, disturbing the shop's tranquility and provoking a look from the shopkeeper. She silences the ringer as she looks at the screen to see who is calling. It's Madeleine, checking on her.

"I'm here and I'm fine," she whispers into the phone, trying not to draw any further attention to herself.

"You found your way just fine? Good! You know I worry about you outside of the Upper East Side."

"Haha! I'm fine! I'll just retrace my path back. I'm leaving in a few minutes and I'll have a bag of some very tasty treats. You may want to put on another pot of tea."

Jules selects a half dozen of still warm pastries, scones and muffins, pays and walks outside, the old screen door's rusted spring creaking at the strain of being opened, then slamming hard behind her. She fiddles with her iPhone, knowing it will help her motivate for the second half of the run, made a bit more challenging with a small paper bag of scones and muffins. Her phone rings again and she answers without looking.

"Did you have any last-minute requests? I am just steps away from the store."

"Yes, I'd like a week's vacation, with just my husband, no little darlings. Jules, where are you?"

"Maria! I thought you were Madeleine. I'm here for the weekend and ran to the market for our breakfast."

"Please send her a big kiss from me! And tell her I have plenty of tips for childbirth, if she'd like. After four, I consider myself an expert."

Jules is relieved to see Maria is coming around a bit on Madeleine's single-mother-by-choice plan.

“Of course, I will. How are you? And to what do I owe a phone call during your few precious moments of free time?”

“You were right about Mick over Paul.”

Jules and Maria had a long-standing friendly debate, which started over breakfast in their London flat, about which rock legend they would rather date or, more appropriately, bed.

“What? Why are you finally seeing the light, after all this time?”

“First of all, Sir Paul is not aging as well. While I’m still very much in love, I must concede, he’s starting to look like an old man—dyed hair, the waddle under the neck, just old. And Mick, as you can confirm or deny based upon your encounter with him, is definitely aging but in a sexy, dirty kind of way. The lines on his face actually work for him. And he can still pull off the leather pants, even in his 70s.”

“I told you he was very sexy, in his quintessential bad boy way, just as I’ve maintained all along. That cannot be enough for you to cede a thirteen-year-old debate, though.”

“What triggered it was I finally got to listen to control the music in the car the other day. I was flipping around the radio stations and some soft rock station, on satellite radio, was playing ‘Let ‘Em In’. You know the lyrics.”

“Of course!” Jules sings along with Maria.

“Someone’s knocking at the door

Somebody’s ringing the bell

Someone’s knocking at the door

Somebody’s ringing the bell

Do me a favor, open the door and let ‘em in.”

Still outside the general store, she paces as she sings into her phone. The tall Cape Coddie-

Yankee drops down the steps, taking the set of four in just two strides. Unfortunately, he passes just in time to hear Jules's tone-deaf rendition of Paul McCartney's song.

"Wasn't that when he was with Wings? That's not exactly his finest writing," Jules offers as consolation.

"True, true. But, let's look at a similar theme and how Mick, with Keith's help, treats it. 'Can't You Hear Me Knockin'" is hot pursuit and ravaging the woman, not politely suggesting someone open the door.

"Similar theme? Are you writing a thesis on this?" Jules teases.

"I know! Really, do you know the lyrics?"

"I'm the Mick Jagger fan, remember?" Jules sings, louder this time:

"Can't you hear me knockin' on your window

Can't you hear me knockin' on your do-or

Can't you hear me knockin down your dirty street, yeah."

Just as she finishes, the Yankees fan pulls his old, battered Ford pickup truck alongside her, his black lab sticking his head out the window, in greeting. She feels her face instantly flush, knowing he must have heard her attempts at singing. The situation reminds Jules of those instances in which you sign along with the radio and it drops out, revealing that you are, in fact, faking every other word, in a shrill, screechy voice. He is looking at her, waiting for her full attention.

"Hold on, Maria," she interrupts her friend, putting her phone to her still damp chest. She smiles at the Yankee.

"Good morning. You new around here? Or is this a stop on your concert tour?" he says, with not a hint of the New England accent Jules expects.



“Ouch!” she laughs. “I’m visiting with a friend,” she replies, surprising herself with her intentionally vague and therefore coy answer.

“I couldn’t help but notice the only other car in the lot is the shopkeeper’s. Your friend couldn’t lend you his car? He’s making you walk?”

*The masculine pronoun. Clever man! I’ll play along.*

“The car is a manual transmission, which I don’t know how to drive,” then adds, “And, she knows I like to get in a good run in the morning. Thank you for the offer of a ride,” she adds, “assuming that was one.”

He smiles at her directness, “You have a good one, then.”

He shifts the navy blue truck into gear and pulls out of the lot, slowly, so not to kick up the gravel. Jules takes a moment longer to enjoy the little serendipity encounter with a surprisingly good flirt before returning the phone to her ear, only to discover Maria has already hung up. Jules makes a mental note to call her when she returns from the Cape.

The phone’s clock indicates that she’s been gone an hour already and Jules realizes how long she must have been keeping Madeleine waiting for breakfast, just as the poor thing is getting over morning sickness. She tucks away her phone, loops the plastic bag around her wrist, resets her heart rate monitor then finds her music on her phone and starts to jog along Highway 6A. Jules makes her way along the winding road with pin-thin pine trees for 13 minutes, according to her watch, which is far too long without making a turn onto some quaintly named road dotted with weathered, shingled houses. She often has trouble following directions in the reverse. She starts to walk, unsure if she should forge ahead or retrace her steps to see if she has missed the turn. She pulls out her cell phone and dials Madeleine, who does not answer.

*She’s probably in the shower. Or passed out from hunger.*

“Hey, it’s Jules. If you could remind me of the name of the street I turn off to get back, that would be a big help.”

*Okay, then, you’re on your own. You can figure this out.*

She elects to continue forward, even though nothing feels familiar. And everything feels familiar. A few more minutes pass and she tries to call Madeleine again, but now her phone has lost its signal. She decides to keep following the road for another five minutes, watching for some sign, before she will turn around and head back to the general store. She is walking now, heart rate monitor off and already pulling off bits of one of the muffins she bought for their breakfast. Five minutes later, she turns around and starts back for the store. Lost in her too-loud music, she doesn’t hear the truck pull up beside her. She jumps at the sight of it out of the corner of her eye.

“You’re from New York, aren’t you?” It’s the Yankee again.

“My God! You scared me!” She screams, over the music in her ears. She removes the ear buds. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“You’re from New York,” more of a statement than a question. “Get in,” he says, already leaning over and opening the passenger side door. “Baldrick! Stay!” he commands the very eager black lab, the self-appointed welcoming committee.

“Is it that obvious? I thought I blended in a little better. Don’t I strike you as a nice Chatham girl?” she offers, as she climbs in, noticing how wide her thighs look as they flatten on the seat, beside his longer and thinner khaki-clad legs. The inside of the truck is neat but there is a faint wet-dog hair smell about it nevertheless.

“Not a chance. And a Chatham girl wouldn’t walk, never mind run back to the store, unless she forgot something. Where are you headed?”

“8 Doane Road,” she says, proud to remember the address.

He laughs as he does a U-turn, taking her back in the same direction she had originally set out on. “Take a city girl out of the city ...”

“That’s why we have taxis to take us home. It works out perfectly.” She is petting while trying to gently push away the eager lab, obviously determined to lick her face. “Baldrick is his name? He’s very cute. And very persistent.”

“Yes,” he says and elbows the dog in the chest, to force him back. “Very much like myself, he’s both very cute and persistent. I’m Peter. What’s your name, New York girl?”

“Jules, and what makes you think I’m from New York?”

“You cannot make a very good argument that you’re not, with those fish belly white legs and all those black running clothes. You’re deliciously urban.”

*Fish belly white? Deliciously urban? Am I offended? Flattered?*

For the remaining few minutes of the drive, Jules coaxes out of Peter, who is a bit more than reticent, that he is a Connecticut native who summered on the Cape as a child, and after a few years post-college in New York and then Paris, inherited—*pleasant surprise!*— his grandmother’s summer cottage, where he has lived ever since. He pulls into Madeleine’s driveway and Jules thanks him for the ride while bidding Baldrick farewell. Her skin sticks a little as she slides off the seat then hops down, out of the truck.

“Thanks so much. I was completely turned around there for a minute and....”

“Sure, no problem. Don’t be a stranger.” Again, he smirks and pulls away, only Baldrick looking back as they drive off.

*Huh! Completely disinterested.*

Lips slightly pursed, eyebrows raised (*time for a visit to Dr. Levine*), she turns and heads

inside. Madeleine is reviewing paperwork from the office, listening to classical music.

“Don’t you listen to anything with a beat?” Jules asks, a line she uses frequently to tease Madeleine for her musical taste, decades older than her chronological age.

“Now I can say that it’s soothing the baby. What took so long?”

“Didn’t you get my message? I got lost on the way back. Totally turned around in all this damn nature.”

“It’s two turns off the main road, Jules. Really, it’s not that complicated. But, I’m glad you are safe and sound. And you have food!” she says, taking the bags out of Jules’s hands.

“You found your way back, so you couldn’t have been too far off the path.”

“I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. I got a ride from some Yankees fan originally from Connecticut, named Peter, drives a pick-up truck and has a black lab, Baldrick. Know him?”

“Peter? Name doesn’t sound familiar and I don’t think I’ve written out a check to him. The only people I know out here are those I pay and those I drag out here with me. Otherwise, I’m a complete hermit.”

“Already preparing to be the eccentric, old woman who lives alone in the woods. Thank goodness you don’t like cats.”

“That’s right. Now, let’s eat! I’m starving!”

To the outdoor wooden table Madeleine carries a pitcher of freshly brewed iced tea—Paradise Tropical Tea, another of Jules’s favorites that Madeleine prepares for her every visit—which they enjoy with the muffins. Once they finish their light and late breakfast and clear the table, Madeleine returns to her work and Jules goes off to the outdoor shower, one of her favorite spots at the cottage. She returns to the patio in a white tee and dark jeans and black Havanias,

scrub faced and hair still wet, with a pile of work of her own.

Jules and Madeleine engage in parallel play: each works, reads or daydreams without any obligation to talk to the other for hours at a time. On occasion, they ask each other random questions, such as, “More iced tea?” or “What are you watching on Netflix?” or “Did you know it takes a lobster seven years to grow its first pound?” Hours pass in silence interrupted by such random stream of consciousness. It is a testament to their friendship.

Jules pours over the make ready of the beta site, noting which designers the editors blessed with features and which they did not. She has an Excel spread sheet open, with the designers’ names and their credits in columns. She flips through the site and logs every one. Once complete, she alphabetizes the list by name and winces as the newly organized chart displays that once again, the industry heavies—Monique Lhuiller, Ines di Santo and Vera Wang—dominate with a mere sprinkling of up-and-comers and non-advertisers thrown in for good measure. She lets out a deep sigh, which causes Madeleine to look up. Jules gives a quick shake of her head, as if to say, “Nothing,” while anticipating the phone calls from her regular advertisers who will be disappointed when they realize the editors failed to fall in love with their latest collections. Romona Keveza, Elizabeth Fillmore, Jenny Lee and Judd Waddell, all regular advertisers running multi-page portfolios of their expensive and fashion-forward creative, are right to complain. Jules knows this. And, unfortunately, Jules also knows she will be the recipient of next week’s calls, the regret and upset voiced in varying levels, though she has no control over what the editors select. It is one of the most frustrating aspects of her position.

“Okay, I’m ready for a break. There are only so many white dresses a single woman should have to look at before she has a ring. How are you coming along?” she asks Madeleine, after at least three hours of little chatter and a lot of progress.

“I could use a little stretch and time to clear my head. Would you like to take a walk?”

“Only if you come along or I leave a trail of breadcrumbs!”

They walk down the hilly road, gritty with crushed shells and packed sand, that gradually levels out and deposits them on the bay beach. It’s low tide, so they kick off their flip-flops and venture out onto the wet sand, still rippled from the water’s currents. The cold quickly numbs the bottom of Jules’s feet, the skin too sensitive from the brutal callous shavings the blade-wielding pedicurist delivers weekly.

Over the shrill screams of delight from the children around them, the friends speak of their London flatmates: Maria’s suburban bliss with her brunette brood of four, Sloane’s difficult times that, thankfully, appear to be behind her. And their trials and tribulations, mostly of men, morning sickness and momentary pangs of panic that a single woman about to have a child is likely to experience.

Madeleine appears painfully aware of, yet unconcerned about, Maria’s apparent disapproval of her decision to become a single mother by choice. Jules tries to cool the sting by reassuring her, “Friends don’t always agree with each other’s decisions.”

“At least they should always support them.”

Jules nods in agreement and remains silent.

Inevitably, they return to one of their favorite topics: their next meal. Will they stay in and make dinner, as they often threaten, or find a local shack and leave the cooking to the experts?

“Allow me to remind you, I was promised a relaxing weekend and a lobster dinner. And homemade, full fat, mint chocolate chip ice cream, with rainbow sprinkles. Or jimmies. Or whatever you call them up here.”

Just as the decision to dine out and alfresco is made, Jules feels something under her foot, something gelatinous and perhaps alive. She shrieks, jumps straight up and her legs start running—all in one movement—resembling something out of a cartoon. Madeleine, not even sure why, but inspired nonetheless, joins her friend in the race to dry sand, laughing at the image of them: Jules, screaming and running with her sticky from salt-water hair whipping her own face, Madeleine chasing behind, laughing so hard, she collapses in the sand.

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Back on the patio, they towel off their sandy feet. Jules pours Madeleine another glass of iced tea and a glass of cool Sancerre for herself.

“What do you say we skip the showers and head to an early dinner? I’m starving! I’ll blame it on ‘my condition,’ of course.”

“You know I can eat at any time, even if this will qualify us for the early bird special,” Jules teases. “And even though I am sure I look absolutely beautiful, I’ll skip primping. Who do I know up here, anyway?”

Madeleine has always preferred an earlier night than her Manhattanite friend, but even more so now that she is pregnant and the first twinges of hunger quickly evolve to full-blown starvation in record time. They jump into Madeleine’s car, the windows rolled down, James Taylor providing the perfect soundtrack to their Cape Cod drive. They pull into the parking lot of a casual lobster shack by the time JT finishes “Shed A Little Light.”

The restaurant is filled with the study in contrasts a 5:30 dinner provides: older couples paired off and young families, children ignoring their parents’ pleas to stop running, sit down, don’t touch your sister again. An older, stout woman, accent thick as *chowda*, shows them to a table by the window, with an exceptional view of the gravel parking lot and the single lane highway. The restaurant’s lack of atmosphere, and a complete disinterest in even feigning an interest in one, is its charm. The linoleum floors are soft pink, baby blue and cracked; the faux wood table is topped with a silver canister of thin paper napkins and plastic salt and pepper shakers. Jules rests her forearms on the table as she plays with the plastic gray and white plastic shakers, spinning them around one another like some kind of boardwalk ride. When she leans back into the molded plastic bench and slides her arms back, they drag a little against the top of



the sticky table, the greasy film creating a touch of adhesive. Madeleine notices and immediately tries to reassure her germ-phobic friend.

“They have excellent food—the steamers and lobsters are their specialty—even if the place wouldn’t pass a health inspection.”

“I’m game for staying, but excuse me while I wash my hands. Up to my elbows,” she adds, sliding out of the booth.

She finds the bathroom, pink and black tiled and heavy potpourri-scented. She gets a good look at herself in the mirror as she washes her hands and chuckles at the sight. She has on not a stitch of make-up, save the residual mascara on her eyelashes and under both eyes. This is fine; she likes to go au natural on the weekends, especially at the beach. And, the bit of sun on the apple of her cheeks, tip of her nose and on the bony part of her eyebrows is far more flattering than Nars’s Orgasm Multiple Stick could ever be.

But, her hair looks like straw, the salt-water spray and ocean breeze encouraging sections of rogue hair. It doesn’t help that she didn’t dry her hair that morning, opting instead to pull it back into a ponytail. She winces from the pain of pulling out the elastic, then tries to run her fingers through, to tame her hair, to create some kind of sexy, intentionally messy look. She fails miserably. But, this is one of the benefits of visiting friends far from the madding crowd of the Manhattan-Hamptons scene. It just doesn’t matter. And she just doesn’t care.

She dries her hands and uses the paper towel to open the bathroom door. Places like this, with sticky tables, reinforce her compulsive cleanliness. As she walks towards the table, her eye catches the back of a tall, athletic-built man. Though he is dressed in the Cape Cod standard issue button-down shirt and khakis, there is something familiar about him, which she recognizes immediately upon hearing the voice.

“I’ll take a couple of those two-pounders. You know her. She won’t want anything bigger than that,” he says to the man behind the lobster tank.

*It’s the Yankee from earlier today!*

Instinctively, her hand goes to her hair and Jules realizes there is little hope in making last-minute improvements.

“Entertaining tonight, are you?” she asks, speaking to his shoulder.

He turns quickly and, with his back nearly against the tank, they are standing quite close to one another. Realizing this, Jules takes a step back, a small one.

“Well, if it isn’t the New York runner with the great sense of direction. How are you?”

“Great, thanks. My friend drove us here,” she turns and waves to Madeleine, who waves back, puzzled. “I should be able to find my way back—at least to our table—just fine, thank you.”

“No ride from a strange man needed?”

The man behind the counter lacks patience or interest in small talk and interrupts with,

“Evans, here are your lobsters. That’ll be \$40.”

“Thanks, Jack,” he responds, taking the brown paper bag that shows signs of life with a few muffled kicks. Jules looks at the bag and then back to Peter.

“That’s why I can only have lobster out. I just can’t bring myself to put them in the pot of boiling water and hear them struggling to save themselves until they finally die.”

“Yes, but you don’t mind if someone else does it, do you?”

“Nope. Call me a hypocrite, but I try not to think about it.”

“Well, hypocrite, I’d be happy to kill a lobster for you sometime,” he says as he hands the cash to the man behind the counter and one of his business cards to Jules. “Just let me know when. Enjoy your dinner, City Mouse,” he smiles as he walks out.

Jules realizes she is standing in front of the lobster tanks and Jack, behind the counter, is waiting for her to order something.

“Oh, sorry, I don’t need anything. I’m having dinner over there,” again pointing to a rather confused Madeleine. Jules stumbles on her words as she returns to the table.

“You leave to wash your hands and wind up chatting up some Cape Coddie?” Madeleine asks as Jules rejoins her in the booth.

“The Cape Coddie *hottie*,” Jules corrects her, “happens to be Peter Evans, the man who delivered me to your place this morning and an architect, apparently,” she says, looking at his card.

“If only you had gotten lost last summer, when I was looking to hire an architect for the house renovations.”

“Sorry, Madeleine, I’ll work on meeting a landscape guy next.”

“Or a pool guy, please.”

The bucket of steamers arrives and the girls pick through them quickly. They joke about the Cape Cod facials that enhance the locals’ natural beauty. Which brings Jules to realize that Peter has seen her twice in one day, both times looking worse than she likes even her best friends to see her. And, yet, he offered to kill a lobster for her. She is impressed. After a delicious and messy lobster bake—plastic bibs and all—Jules pays the check and tucks Peter Evans’s card into her wallet. Realizing he has no idea of her name or how to reach him, she will have to call him if she would like to see him again. And, she knows already, she would.

Saturday is another quiet evening, upholding their tradition of watching a movie together. Despite their graduate degrees and love/hate relationship with *The New Yorker*, the two enjoy watching chick flicks with boy-gets-girl happy endings. This time, they watch at home given the

distance to the local theater and Madeleine's energy level. She barely makes it through the movie, which wraps up at 9:30.

"Sadly, I can call more friends before 9 am than after 9 pm, Madeleine. What has become of us?" Jules asks her sleepy friend as she heads off to bed.

Jules turns off the lights and locks the doors, because Madeleine never does. Jules is not sure if it is her horror film habit as a teen or the comfort of having neighbors and a doorman, but she feels vulnerable in the country, where any deranged axe murderer could walk right through the door and nobody would hear their screams. Spooking herself, Jules runs past the sliding glass doors to the guest room, turns on the lights and jumps under the comforter, pulling the heavy patchwork quilt up to her chin. She laughs at how she still can scare herself out of her wits before lighting the Diptyque candle. She is happy to see one of her hostess gifts to Madeleine has found its way into her room.

While she waits for her heart to calm down, she reflects on the weekend. Jules is content to miss the drama of New York's scene and enjoy some quiet time on the Cape, even if she misses a Saturday at the new "it" restaurant with celebrity sightings and a private house party in the Hamptons. She opens her tome—tackling *Anna Karenina* at last, borrowed from Madeleine's shelf—but her eyes grow heavy quickly. She doesn't fight sleep and turns off the light to tuck in for the night.

Sunday morning starts with *The New York Times* crossword puzzle. Jules runs a new path with fewer turns while Madeleine heads to the general store, sans sighting of Peter Evans. They talk of baby names over iced coffees and homemade baked goods. NPR finally gives way to more James Taylor.

Before long and entirely too soon, Jules is tossing her clothes into her duffle and

throwing her bag along with a few of Madeleine's into the trunk of the car. They head off to Hyannis Airport, already planning Jules's next visit. Madeleine drops Jules before facing the traffic on the ride back to Boston. They will both arrive home at approximately the same time. They agree to a race and the stakes: the winner pays for their next lobster dinner. Jules feels truly rested and relaxed as she settles into the seat of the little prop plane, with the same young pilots who delivered her to the Cape only 48 hours ago.

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The following morning, Jules makes every effort to maintain the sense of balance and calm the weekend provided. Roy drops by her office, coffee in hand, story-ready. When he gives her the play by play of the Mets game Saturday, Jules nods at the right moments to indicate she follows his sports jargon and shares his enthusiasm. He also provides the highlights of his golf outing on Sunday. He recounts how outraged he was by his poor swing on the first hole and demonstrates how he threw his driver, which ended up in a tree. He is in the midst of a dramatic reenactment of the various methods of trying to knock his driver free when, Jules, doubled over, laughing, looks up to see Wendi standing before her.

“Well, good morning,” Wendi whispers, her presence killing the light-hearted atmosphere. She sips her iced coffee and looks at her watch, oblivious that she is the one who just arrived.

“Good morning, Wendi,” they both say, nearly in unison.

“Anyway, I’d like to talk to you about the relaunch and your designers, Jules. I mean, really, you have to ensure they all have coverage, Jules. I will not tolerate it, nor should your advertisers,” she warns as she leaves.

Immediately after, Roy takes a deep breath and gives Jules the raised eyebrow that indicates he will call her as soon as he returns to his office. And, he does, within seconds of exiting her office.

“Is she serious?” he asks excitedly.

“What are you talking about?” Jules asks, not noticing anything extraordinary.

“‘Got Milk?’ How am I supposed to look at her with a straight face when she wears a shirt like that?”

“What?” Jules asks.

“She’s wearing a ‘Got Milk’ tank, ripping at the seams across her swollen jugs!”

“I didn’t see it! Are you sure?”

“Yes, under her jacket. You really didn’t see it?”

Jules and Roy have spoken about how distracting it is to work around a woman who puts it—or them—out there, all the time, braless, nipples permanently erect, likely a result of her implants. Despite her usual best efforts to steer clear of Wendi, today’s clothing choice is something Jules cannot miss. She pulls herself together, checks her gloss in her mirror and walks to Wendi’s office. Wendi sits behind her desk, in a too small tank that does, in fact, pose the ironic question, ‘Got Milk?’ across her swollen, lactating breasts. The stretched, white, ribbed cotton makes a valiant effort to provide modesty, but the breasts are too big and spill from both the top and sides of the tank. Wendi is on the phone, which apparently renders Jules invisible, though she stands in the doorway. Jules waits and finally mouths, “Starbucks?”

Wendi looks at her and nods.

“Milk?” Jules asks, biting her lip.

“Soy. Thanks,” Wendi responds.

“Sure,” is all she can muster, and off Jules goes, enjoying the unintentional humor Wendi provides that morning.

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## **Jewish Jackie O.**

After returning from her morning client visits, Jules takes the opportunity to run out for lunch. As usual, Channing is busy preparing Wendi for the publisher's meeting that afternoon. Wendi, on the other hand, is on the phone with one of her friends, bemoaning her husband's insistence that they use birth control even though she is breast-feeding. She ignores Channing and Jules, standing in her doorway, thereby having them listen in on her most personal conversations.

"He's so afraid I'll get pregnant again. I sneeze and I get pregnant! And that we'll have to move if we have another baby. He's already working crazy hours at that bank but I told him he should get the hell out of there and make some real money at Goldman Sachs."

A few seconds of silent nodding follow, Wendi looking at her nails, inspecting the wraps, apparently oblivious to her staff still standing in the doorway.

"Ugh! Hold on, Francine," she says, without looking up. Then, "Yes?"

Channing asks if she could have ten minutes to review the update she has just finished for Wendi's meeting later that afternoon. She omits that the edits required her to stay until 10 last night and come in at 7 this morning.

"Are you confident it's perfect? Or do I need to review it? You tell me, Channing."

"I, uh, I know you are very specific in how you like the reports and I followed it exactly, but I still would like to review it with you to make sure you are comfortable with the information prior to presenting it at the manager's meeting this afternoon."

"Fine," she says, obviously exasperated. "Francine, let me call you later." Click.

No waiting for a response, no platitudes and certainly no goodbyes.



Jules exits, electing to pick up everyone’s usual lunch orders, as Channing and Wendi begin to review the forecasts for the year ahead. Channing is nervously calling Wendi’s attention to the important areas of growth, attrition accounts, general industry trends, the top twenty accounts by category and how these numbers compare year over year with the site’s performance as well as all competitors’. The forecast reports are a tedious, torturous exercise, but necessary for the site to direct edit on how much to write and, more importantly, what the publisher will report to senior management in regard to annual forecasts. They are also used to set goals—and commissions for the sales team—so the reps use finesse in providing ostensibly realistic and challenging estimates while actually providing conservative numbers to ensure they will hit their numbers and earn their bonuses.

Jules walks in and sets the large salad, no dressing, on Wendi’s desk, as they finish. Wendi instructs Channing to reformat the documents—yet more hours of work, even though she followed the very format Wendi directed her to use—and then looks up at Jules.

“It wasn’t that nice in the Hamptons this weekend. Where were you?”

“I went up to Cape Cod to visit a friend. The weather was beautiful.”

“*Ugh! I love the Cape!*” she says, slapping the desk for extra emphasis. “I used to go there all the time when I was in school in Boston. I should be a Jewish Jackie O!” she adds, without a hint of irony.

“Yes, you should, Wendi,” Jules fights back the smirk dying to appear on her lips.

“*I just love those preppy boys up there. I wish Scott had some sense of style.*”

“Yes, they are preppy,” Jules feels herself blush, ever so slightly, on recalling Peter’s Cape Cod uniform, despite the Yankees cap. Wendi does not miss this, at all.

“Oohhhh? What happened? I know! You met a guy up there!” she beams, proud of her

intuition and also for unearthing a little dirt on one of her staff.

“Not really. Just some guy who was nice enough to give me a ride when I got lost during a run.”

“Jules! New Englanders are *not* friendly people! If he offered you a ride, it’s because he was interested in you!”

“Trust me, Wendi, if you saw what I looked like, I doubt it. I was in my running clothes, all sweaty, wet hair. There is no way....”

“That’s exactly why I don’t run. Who wants to be seen like that?” Wendi asks. “But, if he gave you a ride, when you looked so icky, then that’s a great sign! So, does he have a beach house there? Live in Boston? When are you going to see him again?”

“He lives there year-round. And, I’m not sure,” she starts to say, “When I will see him again but....”

Wendi cuts in, “You *cannot* date someone who lives there year-round. It will *never* work. What will you do for work? What will you do off-season? And, don’t tell me you’d start wearing LL Bean clothes and boat shoes!”

“Wendi, honestly, I don’t know if I’ll see him again, so really, it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Mark my words: bad idea.” When Wendi is so emphatic—which is often—Jules knows it’s best to not argue. Jules is not sure how, once again, Wendi managed to get her to talk about her personal life. This happens entirely too often and Jules regrets it every time. She also resents that, despite her severe delivery, Wendi’s predictions are usually spot on.

“Anyway, I have a client call to prepare for,” Jules lies, “so I better get going.”

She quickly exits Wendi’s office.

### **Peter Evans, Architect**

Sunday morning recovery runs, especially after long Saturday runs, are Jules's favorite. She always runs the four-mile loop alone, to lose herself in her music and her thoughts. Even at 7 am, Central Park is filled with runners, cyclists, dog walkers and martial art devotees. Her favorite group is the hula dancers, gyrating in their grass skirts. Jules walks a little, then gradually break into a slow, comfortable jog. She holds off turning on her music, enjoying the quiet and focusing on her breathing. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* She imagines Maria's busy home cluttered with toys, the beautiful girls with strawberry jam sticky fingers they run through their thick, tangled hair and the husband with a questionable travel schedule and mystery callers. Whatever suspicions Maria may have had, she now—based on their most recent conversation—appears content in her faith in her spouse. Perhaps the cliché about the wife being the last to know is a result of a willing and deliberate denial that nature provides for long-term survival. There was no hint of concern when they talked. In fact, Maria told Jules that she has everything she wants, in between consoling one of the girls after a fall and breaking up a fight over whose turn it was on the swing. Is Jules being cynical in questioning if Maria is genuinely happy? Or, is Jules projecting her different ideals on Maria, a silly and useless comparison? After afternoon visits to the chaos of family life in suburban New Jersey, Jules is always relieved to return to the peace and quiet of Manhattan and a much-needed two-hour nap.

Looking ahead, she sees Cat Hill. She picks up her pace to attack one of the more challenging inclines along the east side and turns her thoughts to Madeleine, preparing for life as a single mother. Jules has such admiration and respect for Madeleine making her own happiness, rather than waiting for someone to come along and help her achieve it. She imagines how

daunting the process must be, going it alone. Even the pregnancy itself has been fraught with challenges. She knows Madeleine has had plenty of bouts of morning sickness and nobody there to comfort her during those exhausting nights spent running from bed to bathroom, no one to pour her a glass of lemonade—the only thing that soothes her urge to constantly retch—and launder the sheets after the episode that came on so suddenly she did not make it to the bathroom in time.

Madeleine manages to find humor in it, of course. “Nobody to worry about seeing my swollen ankles that look like they need to be popped. Or to see this weird brown line that has appeared, running down from my belly button,” she jokes. There may be a touch of loneliness to her decision, which Jules tries to assuage. During her visit to the Cape, she offered to join Madeleine at the hospital for the delivery—even if she secretly fears she will faint seeing her friend delivering a baby—and at home immediately after the baby arrives, lending support in the first days. They’ve even discussed heading out to the Cape house, where Madeleine is most comfortable, the week following the birth.

Her lungs burning, hills always do this to her, Jules is relieved to have reached the flat portion of the path behind The Met. Maybe she should call Peter Evans, as Madeleine encouraged her over their lobster dinners. She knows a good run on a sunny morning brings out her sass. She will call this morning. Perhaps another visit to the Cape is in order, to help Madeleine prepare a bit before she gets too big and uncomfortable. Excited by her decision, she turns on her music and hits the straightaway, along the east side, buzzing by the crowds around 90<sup>th</sup> Street, where groups congregate, waiting for their fellow urban athletes.

Within the hour, she enters the lobby of her building. It’s a beautiful spring morning, she’s gotten her exercise in and she has an open calendar for a relaxing Sunday. Later, she will

call Sloane to sort the details for their mani/pedis. First, she has the call to make to Peter. Judging from the time they met, during her early morning run on the Cape, he's an early riser. Still, she will wait until 10 to call.

A shower and two iced teas later, Jules applies her make-up, a stalling tactic if ever there was one. Certainly, he couldn't know what she looks like over the phone. But she feels better with a little mascara on her lashes and gloss on her lips. And that comes across. She finds the Peter Evans, Architect card and dials. She smiles, knowing that the positive energy will come across. On the third ring, he answers, "Peter Evans."

"Hello, Peter Evans, please," she tries to sound light and pleasant though cringing at her mistake.

*He just said Peter Evans!*

"This is Peter," he responds and she smiles at hearing his slight raspy voice and his clipped way of speaking.

"Peter, this is Jules Kennedy, we met at the general store, when I was running and got a little turned around and, uh..." she is waiting for him to interrupt her but he does not. So, she allows herself to trail off.

"Yes, I remember." He gives her nothing in return, making her feel increasingly awkward.

"Oh, good. Well, I'm hoping you may be able to help out my friend. The one with the house in Chatham?"

"The house I saw?"

"Yes, that's the one. Well, I...she is interested in getting some work done and I'm not sure it's really your specialty, or that you are even available to take on new projects at this time,

but she'd like to renovate some areas of the house and doesn't know a soul out there and I suggested, well, since I have your card and everything, that I would see what kind of work you do." She knows she is rambling—too much caffeine or too much nervous energy—only exacerbated by his calm, reticent replies.

"Okay."

*Oh, God. Just let me die here.*

"So, I am calling, I guess, really to see if you do interiors, probably..." now she realizes the flaw in her plan. She is completely out of her element. She knows little about home renovations and wants to use the correct terminology so not to sound like a full-on fraud. She tries to remember some of the architectural details that Madeleine shared with her. "Renovate and update the kitchen, open up the ceiling and add some flying buttresses and put in some skylights and double sliders across the back."

*Nice! That sounds pretty good, no?*

"Interesting," he replies, again, so succinctly.

"Interesting, how so? As in interested in providing an estimate?"

She shakes her head, realizing she had not thought this scheme out very far.

*Shame on me! How could I have not foreseen this development? Now what do I possibly do if he shows an interest in this imaginary project?*

Madeleine's renovations were recently done. Jules could not possibly allow Peter into Madeleine's home to see that all of this work, in fact, was very much completed.

"No, interesting that I believe Tommy Weber is your friend's general contractor and just finished the same projects."

Jules feels the heat rise from her chest, up her neck and engulf her face and ears, covering

her in shades of red that only true embarrassment could elicit. When nervous, Jules laughs. As she does now.

“Well, that may be the case, but when I came by to inspect it, I insisted that she have the whole thing ripped out and redone.”

“Not up to your standards, I see. And, you thought I was just the guy for the job,” he adds, playing along.

“Exactly. Just the guy I needed. Needed to talk to.” She blushes again, this time less so, since the double entendre was deliberate. It opens the door.

From there, they flirt and discuss everything except renovations and architecture. He surprises Jules with references to Ernest Hemingway satires and stories of his own years living in Paris as well as in Manhattan. His cottage is located in a national historic park and, originally owned by his grandmother, was standing before the park was decreed. She is able to determine he shares the house with only his black lab and black cat. Because he’s not exactly a guy who would strike one as a cat lover, Jules suspects the pet is either an adopted stray or a memento from an ex. She shares a few details about herself, her background and vague references that would lead him to conclude she is single, though the transparent excuse for the phone call probably took care of that. Twenty-one minutes and thirty-four seconds later, according to her phone’s call timer, the conversation still lively and strong, Jules tells Peter she had better let him go. Unsure how to close the conversation, she states the obvious.

“You have my number on your phone.”

“Yes. It seems we both have each other’s numbers,” he teases, before adding. “I’ll call you. Don’t be a stranger.”

She smiles as she hangs up the phone. She is still smiling as she dials Madeleine and

hears of the latest humiliation at the ob/gyn's office.

“They circle your weight in RED if you are tracking over your ideal. Can you imagine? Body shaming pregnant women!”

Jules shares with Madeleine how she used her as an excuse to call the architect.

“Using your pregnant, overweight and single friend to meet men? Brilliant. Do tell.”

After providing the highlights of the phone call, Madeleine readily suggests another visit to the Chatham house, in the event Jules would like to conduct an “accidental” run-in with the Cape Coddie. Jules thanks her for the offer and they agree to call each other later, with calendars in hand.

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## **Mani/Pedis with Sloane**

“Square or round?” the woman asks, not waiting for a response before she begins rigorously filing. Even as they just begin, Jules looks around and wonders if this walk-in nail salon was the right choice.

Abruptly brought back to reality, Jules answers, “Square, please.” She finds pedicures meditative, achieving a state somewhere between tipsy and in the zone from a long run. She winces as she looks down at her feet, ragged from the miles she has been logging. While her body is getting toned and firmed, her feet are calloused and blistered. She feels so embarrassed by their condition that she is actively cheating on her local salon. She thinks it the right thing to do, temporarily. It has become noticeable that while the women at her regular shop are as warm and friendly as ever, they are obviously less eager than they had been to provide her weekly pedicure.

Sloane rushes into the salon, flush from her brisk walk. “Honey! You’re on time? When does that ever happen?” Sloane asks as she slips out of her Chanel ballet flats, drops her bags, kisses Jules hello and climbs into the raised chair beside her.

“The one time you are late,” replies Jules, who hands Sloane a few of the magazines she selected upon entering. “Don’t even look,” Jules says, nodding her head in the direction of her feet. “It’s not pretty and the training isn’t letting up anytime soon.”

“Pshaw! I’m the one who should be embarrassed. I look like some kind of savage.” Sloane folds her skinny jeans up over her knees, revealing thin calves with fair, freckled skin and impeccably pedicured feet. “Now, catch me up! Madeleine, Maria, men. I want full reports.”

Jules and Sloane have been grabbing bits of time here and there, as Sloane was on her

way to interviews and retail therapy sessions while Jules was on her way to client lunches or stealing precious minutes when Wendi was pumping. Jules shares with Sloane the highlights of the weekend she enjoyed at Madeleine's house on the Cape, including meeting Peter, the architect.

"Whatever you do, do not call him."

"I must admit... I already did."

"Oh, honey! Have you learned nothing from all those books my mother left for us, highlighted, when we paid her a visit? We must let them hunt us!"

"I know, I know. And, please don't tell your mother I called a man. But, he didn't have my number."

"Okay, it's totally acceptable then," Sloane says, very convincingly.

"Want to know my angle? I think I was rather clever."

"Of course, pray tell!"

"Since he's an architect, I pretended I needed to talk to him, on a professional level, of course."

"Of course, you need an architect from Cape Cod for your one-bedroom rental on the Upper East Side. He'll never see through that!" she teases.

"No, no! Far better! I said it was for Madeleine, that she is looking at having some renovations done on her place. I thought that sounded legitimate."

"Mmm ... okay! So, did you talk to him?"

"I did. Know what he said? 'I'd be happy to take a look at your friend's place. Tell me: is she unhappy with the work that my friend, her contractor, did?'"

"NO!" Sloane is genuinely shocked.

“Yes! I nearly died! He knew all along I was making it all up!”

“And actually called you out on it? No!” Sloane bursts out laughing and Jules joins her, realizing the absurdity of her rouse.

“I have always been the worst liar. But, we had a great, flirty chat and he even asked if he could call again before we said goodbye. Like, no games. A guy’s guy. He drives a pick-up truck with a black lab in the back and probably doesn’t know Christian Loboutin from Daniel Boulud. And there is something so refreshing, so...masculine, about that.”

“It’s so un-New York. God, I’m jealous. Can you please take it easy on the filing, please?” Sloane says, addressing the woman working on her feet. She mouths “ouch” to Jules, who nods in understanding.

The girls flip through the weekly celebrity rags, catching up on the mindless nonsense news, sharing with one another the most outrageous updates on Botox, detox and divorce. Jules confirms that yes, another featured bride is cursed and rumored to be splitting with her spouse due to allegations of infidelity, though the details are unclear.

“Speaking of marital bliss, did I tell you about my visit to Maria’s?” Jules asks.

“No! How is the new house? I have to get out there. Or at least send a gift. When we’re done here, want to run to Tiffany’s?” she catches herself, just a second too late, and hopes the mention doesn’t recall for Jules the Tiffany receipt drama. “Anyway...you were saying?”

“Anyway, it’s really nice, in a very upscale, planned suburbs kind of way. It’s one of those developments in which all the streets are named after trees and you have a choice of a half dozen models. Hers is a traditional colonial with the upgraded kitchen breakfast nook and the double pantry. Personally, I’m not sure I’d know what to do with all that space just for food.”

“Well, she does have the four girls, right? And in the suburbs, it’s not like you go out

every night and order in on the rare occasion you don't," Sloane adds.

"Yes, she's in suburbia heaven. I know she's really happy and loves her life and I'm so happy for her."

Sloane gives Jules a look that says, "Spill it."

"Okay, I don't mean to project here but the reality is I don't know if I could ever be happy living like that. Her life revolves around her husband and the kids: PTA meetings, Brownie meetings and neighborhood dinner parties."

"Sorry, do you have the razor?" Sloane asks the pedicurist, before returning to Jules.

"Okay, the age-old question for the city girl: could I survive in the wild?"

"I know, but it's more than that."

"What has you so spooked about suburbia? It's not like she's wearing pleated jeans and abandoning her highlights. And even if she were, it's still Maria." Sloane knows how to read Jules and is right on the mark.

"If I tell you this, you must *promise* not to say a word to her about it. Promise?" Jules is lifting her feet out of the water for her favorite part of the pedicure: the foot massage and reflexology treatment.

"Cross my heart."

"She confessed that during the two weeks of the month Ari is gone, she wonders what he does after hours. When I suggested she ask him, she said, 'Of course, he says he just stays in his hotel room when he's done at the office.' There are many cities in which I would believe this could be true but Los Angeles is not one of them. The incredible weather, the beautiful people ... not a city to stay indoors."

"Absolutely not," Sloane adds enthusiastically.

“Maria was having some wine with lunch, so maybe she was a bit more gabby. She said that ordinarily, she wouldn’t think anything of it, but, the other morning, the phone rang very early in the morning—as she was just starting her morning meditation before the kids woke—and it was a woman, asking for him. Maria told her he was not available and asked if she could she take a message. The woman sounded emotionally distraught and asked that she tell him that Tara called.

“Oh my!” Sloane is visibly shocked, not an easy feat. “What could that possibly be about?”

“That’s what I would want to know if I were her. The irony is, I asked her, ‘What was his response when you confronted him with this?’ and she told me, ‘There’s nothing to confront. I passed along the message, he said thanks and that was that.’”

“That’s it? Not another word?” Sloane asks in disbelief.

“As the friend, what are you supposed to do? Fact: you don’t know a woman, calling—very upset, mind you—for your husband at home even though you have been married more than ten years and you were college sweethearts. Fact: your husband is gone two weeks of every month in Los Angeles, land of the beautiful people, claiming to be in his hotel room, watching CNN every night.”

“This was on their house phone? Did she look at the caller ID? Was the area code from LA?” Sloane asks.

“That’s what I asked. ‘Did you check the number? Could you hear some kind of accent?’ She said, ‘Sometimes you just have to have faith in someone.’”

“My God.” Sloane’s tone and word choice are neutral.

“Yes, unfortunately, I don’t think she even wants to know if there is something to know.

She probably only told me because she had too much wine.”

“Or she was looking for you to dispel her worst fears? Was Jules, the eternal optimist, meant to look her in the eye and, with heartfelt conviction, assure her it was nothing?”

By now their nails are being painted, with paper towels fashioned as toe separators, forcing their toes to fan out unnaturally and uncomfortably. Jules looks at Sloane and confesses, “The eternal optimist would be on the first plane out to Los Angeles for a surprise visit to her beloved at said hotel room. And, if there was nothing of interest in the hotel room, at the very least, look him in the eye when I tell my betrothed Tara called and killed my karma.” She watches as the first coat of Sheer Bliss is applied to her toenails.

She asks, without changing her focus, “Is this when a woman’s life starts to fall apart, Sloane? She cannot even pay a surprise visit to her husband, without lining up all kinds of help to mind the girls. And, she would have to keep it a secret from them, because one of the older ones would tell him about Mommy’s visit.”

“I don’t know, Jules. But I don’t like it,” Sloane, too, is quieter, more philosophical.

“I wonder, as much as she loves us, if Maria sometimes feels a little sorry for us, that we don’t have the mini-mansion in the suburbs, the doting husband so dedicated to his work and making our lives comfortable, that he’s gone half the time and the beautiful brood which is the center of her world.”

With this, she jumps off the chair, shuffling in the paper flip-flops the salon provides, over to the massage chair. “I’ll do my massage first, okay?” As she carefully folds her legs into angled pleather leg supports, she adds, “Should that concern me, that I don’t think I want it after all?”

Sloane is still on the pedicure chair, the polish application—Sugar Daddy—of the

treatment just beginning. Since they are the only two customers in the place, she continues across the small room, “My mother tells me I’m too selfish for kids. Maybe I am. And, maybe you are. There’s nothing wrong with admitting that. At least we know ourselves.”

The woman pulls Jules’s hair back and secures it with a plastic clip. She tears a quilted paper towel nearly in half and uses it to line the face rest, patting it, indicating that Jules should lean forward. She reminds the woman, “20 minutes, please,” before sinking in and enjoying the borderline painful deep back massage. But, instead of drifting off, as she usually does, Jules is preoccupied with thoughts of the visit with her friend. She has a difficult time inserting herself into that picture of domestic, suburban bliss. After each visit to Maria’s sprawling and well-appointed home, she recalls being a little put off with all the activity—chaos, actually—of kids clinging, crying, needing milk, needing a shoe tied, demanding attention. And, is her attention so focused on her children that she’s lost sight of her own marriage? Maria’s life is full, but would it be fulfilling for Jules? Is she—like Sloane so readily acknowledges, unapologetically—too selfish to give so much of herself to so many others? Jules tries to clear these thoughts from her head and focus on enjoying the massage.

Twenty minutes later, a groggy Jules sits at one of the tables for her manicure. She stares off into space, hypnotized by the hand massage. The manicure is nearly through—just the polish application left—when the woman slides the bill in front of Jules. Without even looking at the slip of paper, Jules hands the woman her American Express card.

“Would you like me to include tip?” the woman asks in her heavily Korean-accented English.

“Yes,” Jules slides the receipt across the pink Formica table. “Wait. Can you explain the charges to me?”

“\$30 manicure and pedicure, \$5 extra for special pedicure and \$20 for 20-minute massage,” she reels off.

“Okay, but, I didn’t get the special pedicure. I got a regular pedicure,” Jules points out.

“Your feet big job, big job. You pay extra.” End of discussion. “How much tip?”

“Excuse me?” Jules thinks she may have misheard the woman.

“Your feet are very bad. You must pay.”

Sloane, sitting at the next station, is laughing out loud, not even trying to stifle it. This, of course, triggers Jules, who starts to giggle when she asks, “Do you normally charge extra if they are in...not the best condition?”

“No, but your feet are not normal. \$5 extra.” There was no arguing with the woman and, to be fair, the point. Her feet were bad. But in the 13 years in which she has lived in New York, having weekly manicures and pedicure—her therapy at a fraction of the cost of a 50-minute hour on the couch—she’s never heard of a supplement for the condition of the customer’s feet.

“Just add an additional \$12, please, for the tip.” Jules knows defeat when it’s staring her in the face.

Moments later, Sloane receives her bill and teases Jules by exclaiming, “\$50 for a manicure, pedicure and massage. What a bargain!”

The polish is applied on the fingernails, wallets and bags are collected and the girls leave the salon. As soon as they are on the sidewalk, still in front of the tiny shop’s windows, they burst into laughter again.

“I’ve never heard of that before!” Sloane manages to say, when she can catch her breath.

“Yes, and I’m now two inches shorter, thank you. That woman went to town with the razor!”



“I would have simply died if the woman flipped down a pair of goggles and took out power tools,” Sloane teases while reenacting the motion with her hands.

“Funny.”

“I’m sure your toes are dry by now.” Sloane tells her, turning to her friend, who is walking gingerly.

“God, my feet actually hurt. I think she got down to the bone! I have to go back to my old place, even if the sight of these things will keep those poor women up at night.”

“Come on, I’ll buy you a frozen yogurt. Think you can make it that far?”

“Mmm...that would be so good right now. With carob chips and strawberries, of course.”

“It would be rude not to,” Sloane adds, with a faux British accent, quoting one of their favorite lines from their London days.

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## **Lunch Dates**

The offices are quiet in the early summer, as the designers are busy contending with final fittings for their summer brides, including those who have starved themselves down another dress size and those whose bellies have swelled more quickly than their obstetricians had predicted. Once the designers and their staff survive the onslaught, most take time for an exotic holiday—anywhere from India to the Greek Isles—for “creative inspiration” as well as a little R&R before the madness of market preparation begins. Jules finds fulfilling her weekly obligation of ten client calls challenging this time of year. She speaks with Roy over their morning coffee, to see if he is finding the same.

“It’s so easy with my clients,” he tells her, referring to his client list of the city’s most prestigious jewelers. “I book a couple of days of golf every week and invite three clients to create a foursome. That’s six. Add in drinks, a dinner and a couple of lunches and I’ve got ten, no problem.”

“My clients are all about the spa treatments. I’ve been spending so much of my T&E at every upscale spa, you wouldn’t believe. The whole thing takes a little more than an hour but really, you spend time talking in the lounge before, plus getting showered, hair and make-up after if I’m returning to the office.”

“How much could it be?”

“Two facials—hers and mine —is easily \$250, plus tips.”

“*Phew,*” he whistles.

“Not that I am complaining: my skin has never looked better. But, it burns through my time and budget. One client actually added in eyebrow waxing and extra services, like an oxygen

boost.”

“An oxygen boost? I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means an additional \$100 on top of the \$125 facial. Everyone in the industry knows this client’s a spa junkie but if you want her business, you deal with it.”

“Whoa,” Roy is a man of remarkably few words this morning. His focus changes from Jules’s face to right behind her.

“Whoa what?” Wendi asks, her voice high, nearly shrill, and playful. Already, Jules collects her coffee cup and stands, knowing their chat is over.

“I was just telling Jules about the Mets game last night and this play.”

“Anyway,” she interrupts him. Jules admires Roy’s ability to think quickly to deflect Wendi’s interest and prying questions by ensuring the topic is uninteresting to her. “I was thinking, you take your clients golfing, right?”

*How long had she been standing there,* Jules wonders.

“I think you should take Scott. He’s not good at golfing. And, it’s kind of embarrassing. I mean, all of my friends’ husbands are good at something, but not mine. So, I need you to take him, okay, and teach him to golf.”

“Uh, sure. What’s his handicap? It could be frustrating for him since my clients are really good, like 10 handicaps max.”

“Whatever, Roy. I’ll buy him clubs for Father’s Day and you just teach him. And make him good, okay?” With that, she turns on her Christian Louboutins and is off.

Roy and Jules know better than to speak, as Wendi again demonstrated how she waits, undetected, just out of sight, and eavesdrops. They smile silently and shake their heads as Jules gets up to leave. If there’s anything to be said, it will wait until they can shoot each other texts.

Jules opens her calendar for the week, reviews her client list and begins dialing, anticipating that at least two of the ten appointments will cancel. She starts with her favorite clients, smile on her face—you can hear it over the phone—greetss Jessica with a good morning and asks about her weekend. Over the course of three hours, she is able to make at least 15 calls to schedule meetings as well as get updates on business, which she types into the clients' profiles. This information is compiled at the end of every week to provide Wendi with a detailed status report. With few exceptions, the designers complain that business is off compared to last season. With the growing popularity of destination weddings and fall nuptials, late spring and early summer is not as hectic as they had been, making them skittish about investing in advertising. Jules knows she will have a bit of a challenge meeting goal, though she still has weeks to do so. She is engrossed in calculating her solid projections, she jumps when Roy speaks, breaking her trance-like state.

“Want to get some lunch?” he asks.

“Sure. I’ve calculated my projections three times and keep getting a different number. It’s definitely time for a break.”

As she stands, her left leg buckles just the slightest bit. She comes around her desk with a slight hobble. Roy notices and points out that it looks like her Jimmy Chooses are crippling her. Impressed with his shoe knowledge, she explains she often gets stiff after sitting too long and she has been at her desk, ear glued to the phone, since their morning coffee. It’s getting worse now that she is doing more long runs on the weekends. They walk outside to get some sunshine and pick up overpriced lunches at the local Korean market, which serves as their corporate cafeteria alternative. Each picks their standard: Jules selects an order of prepared sushi and a large bottled water and Roy a roast beef sandwich with a flavored seltzer water.

They find a spot across the street from their office, concrete slabs serving as makeshift stools, pop open the plastic serving containers and unfold the plastic wrapper holding their lunch selections. As they eat, Jules develops a head toss prior to each bite so not to eat her hair along with her tuna sashimi dipped in spicy sauce. Fifty-first Street is a parade of bankers, happy to escape their offices for “fresh air,” even if it’s Manhattan’s most polluted midtown variety. They sit in silence for a few minutes, Jules thinking about how to bring in more clients for the relaunch. And Peter.

Jules steers the conversation to topics in which Roy can provide his Voice of Reason. She dives right in and shares the update on the calls with Peter she’s enjoyed in the past few weeks and that she is actually considering taking the Cape Codder up on his invitation to visit for a weekend.

“Must I remind you that the authorities never did solve the brutal murder on Cape Cod of the New York City transplant?” Roy asks before taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Thanks for pointing that out. Maybe I’ll wait a little while. But, I could visit him when I see my friend, Madeleine.”

“And didn’t the victim work in media, too?” Roy responds.

“Is this some kind of profiling thing? I’ll *definitely* wait until after he visits here. Maybe we should get to know each other better before I disappear in the woods with this guy for a weekend.”

“Google it. It was a brutal, bloody murder and they’ve been taking DNA from every guy on the Cape since. It’s still unsolved.”

“Okay, I’ve lost my appetite,” Jules says, as she closes the lid on her plastic container of sushi.

They finish their meal in less than 20 minutes so not to provoke Wendi on a Monday, for there would be a full week of hell to pay for such an ill-advised move. Jules picks up an iced tea before they return to the office.

Channing lets them know that Wendi is out to lunch with a client. Since Wendi has no client list of her own, Jules wonders who the mystery lunch date is and elects to do a little reconnaissance work. Channing pulls up Wendi's Outlook calendar and points to the screen.

“She had a blowout at noon and lunch with James Cote. She sees him every few weeks and insists upon scheduling it herself. Maybe he's a very high-maintenance client.”

Instantly, the name rings a bell. But Jules doesn't want to be a gossip and keeps her voice flat. “Must be. Maybe he's someone she keeps in touch with from when she was a rep,” Jules says aloud while wondering how Channing could miss the obvious signs: Wendi's unusually sunny demeanor on the days she sees this client, the primping scheduled just prior to, the fact that Wendi actually booked an appointment herself and the unusually long length of time blocked off for the lunch.

The phone rings. Channing jumps to answer, “Sorry, it's Scott's cell. She will kill me if I miss his call, especially when he's on the road,” she manages to say in one breath as she hits the connection button from her headset to her phone. “Wendi Wasserman's office!”

*Scott is on the road while Wendi is having lunchtime trysts. Wendi is having an affair...with her ex!*

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## **The Hamptons**

While Jules loves running in the city, the fresh air and fresh routes south of the highway are a welcome change from the Central Park loops she knows by heart. She is starting to understand the rumoured runner's high and recognizes she may be becoming addicted to double-digit miles. A morning run seems the perfect way to kick off this Amagansett share house weekend. Even stressful thoughts of work and anxious anticipation of running into Tom out east fade as she increases her distance and time to self-reflect. There is no denying it, the potential of Peter, Mr. Cape Cod, offers a little extra incentive for toning up her body and tuning out any negative thoughts.

Early Saturday morning, Jules and Sloane finish their six miles in exactly an hour. Sloane, the natural athlete, could easily run faster and longer but maintains a 10-minute mile pace for Jules's benefit. They walk the last half mile, Jules is breathing heavily, her face flushed and her hair, pulled tight in a ponytail, is wet to her head. Sloane is speaking in normal rhythms and looks like she could head off to brunch with just a quick dab of gloss to her lips.

As they approach the house, Jules and Sloane's white, generic American-made rental car is deepest in the driveway. They were the first to arrive for the weekend as well as the first to return home last night. They had a quiet dinner at one of Montauk's casual marina-side restaurants, Dave's Grill, taking advantage of the relatively slow Friday night at the no-reservations favorite. They dropped by Stephen Talkhouse to see which former arena headliner was playing the tired old bar that remains an East End institution. But, with Jules's friend Branch not working the door, they quickly agreed to pass on paying the \$70 cover to see Howard Jones perform his '80s repertoire and turned in early. They heard their housemates arrive, well after 2

am, most heading directly to bed. Someone opened their bedroom door, probably looking for an empty room to crash or entertain a friend for the night. When they left for a run this morning, Jules and Sloane were the only ones stirring in the house and likely would be for hours.

Walking down the natural gravel driveway, Jules admires the antique convertible turquoise Cadillac and is curious to meet the owner. And a new car jumped in line during their run: an expensive-looking BMW, its silver finish reflecting the morning sun. They walk past the line-up of cars, the pebbles of the driveway crunching underfoot. Jules pushes twice against the wooden door before it gives and opens. She is glad to find the living room empty and the house quiet. She heads to the outdated avocado guest bathroom, relieved to peel off her wet clothes, slip into the shower and make herself presentable before meeting any of her summer housemates for the first time.

Après shower, a billow of steam emerges with Jules when she opens the bathroom door. Sloane stands just outside the door, which startles Jules.

“What are you doing?” she gasps.

“Saving you from embarrassment, honey!” Sloane stage whispers, “Shh! Come with me,” and pulls Jules into their room. Sloane follows and peers around the corner before closing the door firmly.

“What? What happened?” Jules asks, as she drops onto the bed and begins to towel dry her hair.

Sloane pulls back her hair, which looks entirely too good after having just run for an hour, and tucks it behind her ears. This marks a possibly serious talk, which baffles Jules, since they just spent an hour catching up during their run.

“There is an anorexic Sandra Bullock-look alike outside. She must have arrived just



minutes before we got in from our run. I walked out to the patio and she was on the phone, giggling, ‘Yes, Marky. I miss you, Marky.’ When she saw me, she gave me one of those waves, with the pinky held high.”

“Okay....”

“Jules, Marky is Mark! Your Mark! She’s talking to Mark Whittaker, The Slimey Limey! The one who wanted to fly you out to Aspen for a visit last weekend!” Sloane still speaks in a loud whisper, her eyes wide with excitement.

“What makes you think that? It’s not such an uncommon name,” Jules mimics Sloane’s sotto voce, without realizing it. She grabs her toiletry kit off the dresser and returns to the bed, searching through it until she locates her hairbrush.

“For starters, her boyfriend lives in Aspen, at the base of Ajax, right near her place,” she starts.

“Wait. She’s anorexic thin, looks like Sandra Bullock and has a place in Aspen? I hate her already, Slimey or not,” Jules says, seemingly unaffected, as she pulls her Mason Pearson detangler through her dripping wet hair.

“Listen, Jules. She met him when she flew into Aspen and was seated next to his *mother*, flying in from *Europe*.”

“Oh, God. That is pretty convincing,” she rushes to the window and pulls back the curtain to sneak a peek.

“Don’t let her see you!” Sloane says, pulling the thin white cotton curtain closed. “And, besides, do you want to see her flirting with your beau?”

“Sloane, as much as I still adore Mark or Marky—let’s just stick with my pet name, Slimey—he’s not my beau. Anymore.” Jules takes her cosmetics bag and walks over to the

dresser. She is inspecting her skin in the mirror.

“Are you sure? Let’s be honest, you were actually considering going out west until you decided you could be setting yourself up for a heart-breaking rebound, which would only set you back further.”

“To say nothing of your comment that he was reconfirming his Slimey nickname and starting to treat me like a high-class call girl, flying me out for a weekend rendezvous.”

“Did I say that, sweetie? Are you sure?” Sloane asks, without looking up, as she sorts through her clothes in the closet to select something to wear.

Jules laughs, “Pretty sure! Because most women would find one of her dear friends comparing herself to a hooker pretty memorable!” She looks at Sloane, now digging in her bag, in the reflection of the mirror. “It was a little questionable, especially if there is a woman in the picture. I guess he still lives up to the Slimey Limey name I dubbed him in London. Even if I still adore the man.”

“I know! And I was very proud of you,” Sloane says, “for not acting like a call girl.”

“I will admit. I was very tempted, though.” They sort Jules’s approach to meeting her not-so-ex-boyfriend’s girlfriend.

As Jules walks out onto the patio, the redwood color paint peeling beneath her bare feet, she and her rival smile wide while eyeing each other, like boxers in the ring. Jules decides to kill her with kindness. It would put her on her heels, so to speak.

“Good morning, I’m Jules,” she says with a wave.

*Keep it easy, breezy. Not a care in the world.*

“Marianna, nice to meet you,” she says, and without skipping a beat. “Your friend—what’s her name again?—tells me we have a friend in common.”

*A-ha. She gets right to the point. I can respect that.*

“Sloane. And, if you would call him that.”

*Let her wonder.*

“You know Mark? I assume we’re speaking of Mark Whittaker?” She figures she should clarify.

“Yes, though I call him Marky or Whitty,” not only confirming they are speaking of the same man, but that they are already in the diminutive name phase. “Isn’t it just the smallest world? I was on the phone with Whitty just now.”

*There it is. Whitty, again. This is not going to be easy.*

“He always was an early riser, but never on Sundays,” Jules realizes she is establishing knowledge of his patterns and isn’t sure why she does.

“We have so much to talk about. I was just going to unpack my things and then run for a coffee before getting my day started. Why don’t you join me?”

*Already looking to forge a faux friendship. A bold, even if familiar, move.*

“I’d love to but Sloane and I are getting ready to head over to her friend’s place for a poolside lunch. I would suggest you join us, but I’m sure you want to get your coffee, unpack and head to the beach.” To be polite, Jules extends what she thinks is clearly a half-hearted attempt to reciprocate the invitation. Before she even realizes what she is saying—she always talks too much when nervous—she adds, “The place sounds incredible, on the ocean in Bridgehampton.”

“I’d love to! I can skip the coffee, I drink too much anyway, and unpacking can wait. Not when I can join my new friends for a poolside lunch on a beautiful, sunny day!”

*What have I just gotten myself into? Jules struggles to keep a smile on her lips.*

“I wouldn’t want to throw off your whole day, if you have plans.” Jules’s transparent attempts to uninvite Marianna only make her more determined to join.

“Not at all. My bestie is under the weather, so I am here solo this weekend!”

*Bestie?* Jules tries not to smirk at the use of the word.

“Let me go find my bikini. I have one I bought when Whitty and I were in Hawaii.”

*Vacation in Hawaii?* As Jules is lost in the vision of Marianna and Mark on a Hawaiian beach, this woman looking tan, thin and amazing, Marianna heads into the house and gives Jules a little pinky-up wave and flip of her hair. Immediately, Sloane joins Jules on the patio.

“Ding, ding! End of round one!”

“What the hell was that?” Jules asks her friend.

“I only caught a bit of it but from what I can tell, that was you being pummeled, honey. You started off strong, but by the end, you were on the ropes.”

“I’m not ready for this, Sloane. This was to be our little escape and....”

Sloane starts waving her hands to stop her, “You won’t have to deal with her. We’re going to Erica’s.” She stops upon seeing Marianna approaching the sliding glass door, in a string bikini and tiny wrap covering her apparently perfect body, oversized sunglasses pulling her hair back and this season’s Saint Laurent bag slung over her shoulder.

*This is going to be hell.*

“Ready when you are!” Marianna trills from the other side of the glass, “I’ll just grab a few things from my car,” before walking away.

“No!” Sloane mouths to Jules, who responds with a subtle nod and a forced smile.

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Standing at the home's oversized glass front door, Sloane is still quiet, either in disbelief or out of fear of treading on dangerous territory, about the late addition to their lunch party. Marianna texts, presumably with Whitty, and giggles quietly, which Jules tries to ignore. The housekeeper, Ceci, in full uniform, answers the door and shows them in. She greets Sloane warmly and introductions are made all around.

The Munro home, perched on the beach in Bridgehampton, is casual majestic. Done in classic Hamptons style, the house is one expansive room after the next in shades of white, dotted with subtle sand and gray pieces. The only vibrant color is provided by the dramatic artwork that hangs on the walls. The east end's sunlight, a favorite of artists for decades, bounces from the ocean outside and reflects into the home. As Ceci leads them to the impeccably landscaped back lawn, Erica's parents, Sophie and Peter Munro, a striking couple with an obvious air of success, greet the girls a bit hurriedly. They are heading to the country club and running late for their tee time. Mr. Munro, with curly salt and pepper hair, a deep tan and a big smile, wears a pink Loro Piana V-neck sweater over a cream golf shirt, pressed khakis and leather loafers. Mrs. Munro, blonde bob and subtle make-up perfectly understated, is stylish in a white cotton dress and Jack Rogers sandals. Quick introductions are made before the Munros excuse themselves for their afternoon at the Maidstone Arms.

"You'll find Erica by the pool. Enjoy, girls!" they say as they give them quick pecks on the cheeks.

Ceci reappears, carrying a tray of mint iced teas and fresh basil lemonades, and shares what she will be serving for lunch before they continue to the pool. Erica sees them as they step outside and bounces happily toward them, a quick flash of surprise as she spots the unexpected

addition to their team, which Sloane had texted about on the drive over. Ever the gracious host, she makes them all feel welcome and invites them to settle into chaise lounges lined up around the sparkling pool.

Erica and Sloane have been friends since their freshmen year at Duke. The former roommates share the latest news on mutual friends and family. This leaves Jules to make small talk with Marianna, continuing to smile uncomfortably through their shared experiences. When it comes to Marianna commenting, in a little girl voice, about how cute Whitty is when he wakes a little grumpy in the morning, and how he enjoys one piece of bittersweet chocolate each night for the health benefit, Jules is surprised to find that each little comment tightens the knot forming in her stomach. She cannot continue this conversation, but cannot find an excuse to escape it. She decides the pool will be “base” and not only provide her a respite, but also allow her to strategize surviving the weekend ahead of her.

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Jules tries to appear casual as she hurries to the pool, conscious that she is providing a perfect view of her less-than-perfect derriere to her eating-disorder-thin nemesis. She dives in, making little splash, and makes it across to the other side, completely underwater. She comes up at the far end and, enjoying the tepid water, rests her chin on her crossed arms. While doing some scissor kicks, she admires the view of the expansive and perfectly manicured lawn, the beach rose bushes and the ocean beyond. The afternoon sun and warm breeze dry her face and shoulders. *I should apply some sunscreen*, she thinks, before starting some slow, easy laps.

Jules ponders her mother's advice in dealing with impossible women, from gossipy girls in high school to difficult managers in the office: fight dirty and win. Though it is not becoming behavior, it certainly is not beneath her. It is downright necessary in some situations. And this is one of them.

After a few laps, she hopes that the self-imposed time out will help calm her. She leaves the pool and takes her place back on the chaise. Within minutes, she realizes she is still boiling, not from the heat, but from emotion. And on what should be a perfect summer day. She dons her Greek-chic oversized Gucci sunglasses and grabs her bag of Neutrogena sunscreen and begins to apply the orange-scented SPF 30. Abruptly, Marianna springs forward in her chaise lounge and lifts her glasses up enough to provide herself with a better view of her phone, which she checks.

“Oh, I thought it was Whitty,” she says with a satisfied smile. “Again,” she adds.

*That's it!*

Jules cannot help but let some of some steam.

“You know what I wonder about Mark?” Jules starts, turning to face her opponent, shading her eyes in an effort to make eye contact, even though they are both wearing black-

lensed sunglasses.

“Tell me!” Marianna responds, enthusiastically.

“He is quite a talker! And there is nobody he loves talking to more than this mother. That’s why I don’t understand why he moved farther west to Aspen, when all along he knew his aging mother would move from London to Paris. Now they have more hours between them for phone calls and less direct flights for visits. Though she’s not very capable of travel anymore. Is she,” Jules adds, more a statement than a question.

“But, she just had a stroke...” Marianna says, the words coming slowly, showing she recognizes that Jules has current news from Mark.

“I know! But that’s just my point. He knew she bought the apartment in Paris and she would move there. After all, it had been her dream to live there ever since Mark was at university, when he and I met. And, still he moved to Aspen. I just don’t understand.”

“Thank goodness he did, though. Because Aspen is where Whitty and I fell in love,” Marianna answers, a cheap shot to Jules’s ego, while seemingly ignoring the fact that maybe she doesn’t know this man as well as she had thought.

*And still she insists upon using that ridiculous pet name for him.*

Jules wonders what would top the obviously current conversations. A one-two combo of something that she and Mark had been through together *plus* how he still relies upon for her advice and support.

“Yes, sometimes I worry he makes life more difficult on himself. It’s self-sabotaging, really. I remember how he struggled with the idea of retiring so young. He was burned out from banking, the international travel, the office politics and big city life, even though the bank took such good care of him. I *still* miss that apartment overlooking the Hudson. Especially dawn on a



clear morning.”

“I’ve heard *all* about that place. He said it was quite nice, you know, in his typically understated way,” Marianna replies, in an attempt to sound like she knows all about him: past, present and future.

“Oh, it was fantastic. I really have fond memories of it . . .” she trails off, lost in a blissful memory of lazy mornings spent in bed, a hint of a smile on the lips. “Anyway, where was I? Right, yes, so he struggled to retire from banking and what is he doing now? Consulting for banks on their Asian business, traveling all over the globe again.”

“He only took that consulting project recently,” she points out. Jules hopes this will finally give Marianna pause. And it does.

“Exactly! And, so, he left his job, where they loved him, only to return to a consulting role a short time later and do the same exact work! We talked about a leave of absence, but he was just so burned out. Of course, I supported him and his decisions, even though it meant this long-distance thing we have—*had!*—to contend with.” Jules didn’t even intend the Freudian slip but it was powerful without the overt aggression. She almost feels bad for her opponent, who, if this were in the ring, would be standing with her arms down, nearly unable to defend herself from the blows. Until she delivers one back to Jules, below the belt.

“It’s really so nice to meet you and talk with you, Jules. I feel like we have such a connection and I feel so comfortable with you. I guess it’s our shared experience with such a dear, sweet man. I called Whitty and told him that we met and were going to spend the day together.”

“You did? What did he say?” Jules asks before realizing how desperate she sounds.

“He said at least I met one of the nice ones.”

*At least you met one of the nice ones? I was just another girlfriend?*

Jules is livid about Mark trivializing her to his current love interest, especially as he had been trying to resume the relationship with Jules. Unable to respond, she smiles and gives a quick “Mmmhmm” to end the discussion.

On the brink of tears, Jules is grateful for her oversized sunglasses. She mulls over their conversation and wonders if she has been displacing her anger towards Slimey Limey on his latest victim. Perhaps. And out of pride, Jules will not play the part of injured little bird, broken-hearted over any man. No, she will act like a sought-after woman with a summer full of options for fun.

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After much lazing poolside, Ceci and another member of the staff invite the girls to the garden, where they sit at a glass table, beautifully set beneath a canopy of hydrangeas. The bright blue, magenta and lavender snowball shaped flowers climb the pergola and provide some cool shade after the heat of the direct sun on the patio. They are served a lunch of poached salmon, chopped salad and fresh fruit. After only a few forkfuls of lettuce, no dressing, Marianna excuses herself to the bathroom. *Would she bring that back up*, Jules wonders. *It was probably 35 calories*. Jules uses the opportunity to place a discrete phone call. She reaches David, a friend from summers past, who is out at his house for the weekend. Catching him in the midst of his BRIC workout, training for yet another Ironman triathlon, Jules gives him the highlights of the day's events. He readily agrees to meet her that night, happy to help her out in a trying situation and even more to satisfy his curiosity; would the growing tension between the women result in a full-blown catfight? Joking, he said he hopes to see one of his male fantasies played out right before his eyes.

Mark and David share English heritage, success in business, full heads of hair and very competitive natures. But, while Mark is strikingly good looking, he is also small-framed, standing at 5'9". His height is his only Achilles heel. David, an ultra-competitive athlete with a body that shows it, is on par with Mark as far as looks are concerned. And, at 6'4", has a commanding presence. Marianna would definitely mention him, and his height, in conversation with Whitty. In fact, Jules is certain that Marianna wants nothing more than to share with Whitty just how happy Jules is with her new British beau. And, while David is just a friend—despite random kisses in summers past and Jules's continued crush—their flirtatious ways could easily be misread.

After a dessert of fruit salad and another round of fresh basil lemonades, followed by cocktails, the women are again on side-by-side chaise lounges. Jules and Marianna keep to their respective corners the remainder of the afternoon. Instead of engaging in any further sparring, Jules allows herself to be lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the surf. Maybe the gin and tonic she is sipping, her morning run and the energy she put into the bobbing and weaving all afternoon have added to her need for a little beauty rest. She wants to appear fresh faced and glowing, despite feeling quite the contrary, for her “date” with David.

As the afternoon sun’s position and the massive pool house create long shadows across the yard, everyone pulls on their flowing and feminine cover-ups, most courtesy of East Hampton’s Caribbean-chic Calypso, and start to gather their belongings. They exchange quick kisses goodbye and promises to visit again soon, to which Marianna very readily agrees. The return ride to the house is a bit longer, as the traffic is already building from the beach-goers heading home or into town for precious provisions at the gourmet market, Citarella.

Once back to their share house and in their shared bedroom, Sloane looks around the corner before closing the door and turning to Jules, her hair whipping her in the face.

“I don’t know if you are brave or insane, Jules. Really, I’m not even sure!”

“Sloane, please.”

“You spent the whole afternoon with her, Jules! Why subject yourself to that? It’s self-destructive behavior. Trust me, I know it when I see it.”

“What was I supposed to do? I never thought she would take me up on the invitation!”

“Okay, that’s one thing. But, to sit next to her like that? And, to make it perfectly clear that you and Mark are still very much in touch?”

“Mark and I broke up a long time ago. I am over him,” Jules says with conviction. Or so

she hopes it sounds like with conviction.

“Sweetie, you actually believe that? And that’s why you still burn up the phone lines with calls in the middle of the night? And nearly went out to visit him just recently?” Sloane sits on her bed and the little exhale of air is either from the change in posture or a bit of frustration with her friend.

“Okay, maybe the calls and the rendezvous were not my best ideas. But, I was lonely and my ego needed a little massaging,” Jules reasons.

“We’ve all been there, Jules. It’s totally understandable. And maybe something else needed a little massaging, too.” The sexual innuendo, a rarity for rather proper Sloane, signals she is done with the lecture.

“Sloane! We’ve always had amazing chemistry. And, it was the best revenge in my mind. Tom always hated Mark, who is so confident, with that sly smile, great hair, perfect tan and killer accent. It was painfully obviously when we bumped into Mark when we were in Aspen.”

“Mmmhmmm...,” Sloane says, stretching out on her bed, bending the pillow in half and tucking it under her head.

“So maybe I liked the idea of a long-distance seduction and a weekend fling that would not only make me feel good, very good, as a short fix, but would also feel good, very good, to get back—if only in my mind—at that lying, strip-club-going ex of mine. Maybe that’s why it hurts that *Whitty* is totally involved with someone despite his calls to tell me how much he misses me. To think I actually starting to wonder if we should give it another go.”

“He probably does miss you. And the sex.”

“Thanks, Sloane!”

“I am teasing, honey. Honestly, you shouldn’t worry about her. If she means so much to

him, would he be calling you?”

“Apparently, he would,” Jules continues. “I’m tired of being the sweet, sensitive, broken-hearted one. I wish I could just let it roll off my back. But I fall in love with these bastards.”

“I know, we’re too sweet for these games,” she says, her lips pouting. Jules wonders if Sloane is now having her lips done and makes a mental note to ask her at a more appropriate time.

“Maybe not entirely. And that’s where David enters the picture. To make it appear that I’ve got plenty of options.”

“David? The tall, British Adonis? From our beach house years ago?”

“Yes, he’s meeting us out tonight. Not only do I always have fun flirting with him, but I’m sure Marianna will be happy to report back to Whitty about it. It’s time for me to shine a little.”

“Good for you, honey!”

“And he’s bringing a friend,” Jules adds with a smile.

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As expected, Marianna eagerly jumps at the invitation to join Sloane and Jules for drinks that night, but not before being sure to mention that she and Whitty had just spoken and that he sends his regards. Sloane shoots a quick look to Jules, who does her best to pretend the comment doesn't sting. Any doubts about her little scheme for the night are completely dismissed with that one, decisive dig.

The drive to Southampton is relatively easy since it is still early in the season and early in the night for the traffic to build on Route 27. The women walk into The Driver's Seat and notice the small crowd gathered at the bar. This is not Jules's scene; she prefers the casual t-shirt, jeans and sandals dress code of her Amagansett and East Hampton haunts, even if the tee is couture, the jeans are available only at Bergdorf's and the sandals are French. The Southampton set prefers more formal attire.

"There must be a charity event tonight at the Parish Center. Normally this place is jammed, even this early. And it's too early for the clubs," Jules comments.

"A charity event? Maybe we should see if we can get in," Marianna suggests.

"I'm sure they would let us in if we started throwing my editors' or Sloane's music industry friends' names around. I'd rather just have a drink or two here. But, feel free if you would like to go. It's just around the corner." Jules realizes she would love to rid herself of this woman, even if it means Marianna would miss David.

The girls stand at the bar, drinks in hand. Jules has a vodka, up, with a twist. She needs to numb herself to this nightmare. Sloane, still on Suboxone, enjoys a cocktail of only mixed fruit juices. Marianna opts for a beer, in the bottle. They are making awkward attempts at small talk. Marianna appears to steer topics toward her second home in Aspen, which naturally brings them

around to Whitty. When Sloane says, “Don’t you just love the smell of the salt air at the beach?” Marianna replies “Yes, but the crisp mountain air is just the best for you. Like when I’m in Aspen....”

Just as the strain is becoming obvious, Jules sees David enter through the restaurant’s front door, with a friend following behind. With his striking good looks, thick blond hair and golden tan, not to mention his killer body beneath the button-down shirt and jeans, he catches more than just a few women’s eyes, Marianna’s among them. Jules pretends not to have seen him.

“Ladies,” Marianna says quietly, with a little nod of her head, towards the door. *Self-appointed wingwoman*, Jules smiles and takes a sip of her cocktail before looking. She makes eye contact with David, who gives a quick smile and with his long legs, joins them in just a few easy strides. Jules raises her cheek up and smiles, as he lifts her chin with a finger, an intimate gesture, and leans down to kiss her hello. During the quick, but not *too* quick, peck on the cheek, Jules catches a split-second look at Marianna’s face and notes a literally dropped jaw. Jules and David make introductions before he moves to the bar alongside Jules, intimating a close relationship, and orders the women another round along with the first for his friend and himself.

He leans down and in a quiet voice asks, “Who is the lucky man who has had the pleasure to know both you and the skinny brunette, in the biblical sense?”

“Mark, the Brit I met in London during my study abroad days. The one who moved to Aspen while we were dating a while back. He has been trying to rekindle for months now, while taking this one to Hawaii. Of course, never a word to me.”

“Of course not, Jules, why would he? He’s got this perfectly timed. Keep one who flies in and out once a month and another who comes in once a season, and see both during occasional



visits to New York? You have to respect his moves. And taste.” David lifts the imported beer and clinks glasses with Jules.

“Thanks for that,” Jules says before drinking down the rest of her martini.

“Easy there, Jules. Unless you’ve really built up your tolerance lately, do I need to remind you that you are not a big drinker?”

“I’ve been drinking like a fish all day! Do you know what it’s like to have a woman glued by your side, constantly talking about your ex who you nearly had phone sex with just a few nights ago? I could hang him on the cross, if I wanted to, but I’m not like that.”

“Maybe you should be like that. She would probably thank you one day for letting her on to what he’s about.”

“It’s not my style. Grace wins. Take the high road. And all that. But, believe me, when I do hear from him, I will give him hell for this. And to think, I was stressed about running into Tom out here.” She takes another sip, a big one, from the fresh martini. Too quick to a second round, she’s already said his name, the very name she finds most upsetting.

David gives a little chuckle. “I’m not going to even ask who Tom is.” Taking her hand into his, he looks at Jules, serious now. “Is your hand shaking? You’re really upset, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m upset!” she answers, in a hushed whisper. “Sorry, I’m just looking to get through this weekend and then I will definitely make sure that she and I will *not* be out together again for the rest of the season.” She pulls her hand from his and places it on the bar, noticing that there is a touch of tremor.

“You need to take better care of yourself,” David says. “Or allow someone else to.”

Confused by his meaning and her emotions, Jules changes the subject. “Now, on to more interesting topics. Which event are you training for and when is it?”

David and Jules catch up in a private conversation that probably appears more intimate than it really is. Sloane and Marianna—mostly Sloane—talk with his fellow British, single and charming friend. After one more round, they all agree to an early night with commitments to morning bike rides and runs.

The group heads to the gravel parking lot, which is hell on the heels and makes walking gracefully impossible. As they are about to split to head to their cars, David asks Jules to accompany him to his, a new Porsche. He hands her the card for the realtor he is using to find a house to buy and has asked Jules to schedule an appointment for them, based on her calendar. They kiss quickly, too quickly for Jules's taste, and she heads back to join the women.

“Did he give you his business card?” Marianna asks, not missing a thing nor afraid to ask.

“Of course not. He's asked me to contact his realtor and schedule a day to join him for house shopping.” Jules knows David is simply looking for a woman's perspective but enjoys the implication of a house-hunting appointment with an attractive, single man, especially when it's a beach house in the Hamptons.

Sloane pulls the car out of the parking lot and they merge onto the eastbound two-lane highway and WEHM announces “Crazy Love.” As Van Morrison plays the first notes and sings “I can hear her heartbeat...” Jules is back in Tom's house, washing the lettuce for salad and feeling him come up behind and turn her so they can slow-dance. She sings along now with the other women, as tears roll down her cheeks, remembering when it was Tom's voice whispering these lyrics into her ear.

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## **The Morning Run**

The morning sun streams bright and hot through the open, sea-salt-streaked window, warming the left side of Jules's face. She has slept in later than she'd like, especially with a run before her. She looks over to the other single bed, where Sloane is still sound asleep, her long, auburn hair managing to look deliberately tousled. Even as she sleeps, she looks ready to seduce, Jules observes with a touch of envy.

Jules's hand feels a little numb. Her watch, which she forgot to remove the night before, has left deep impressions. As she shakes her hand to bring the blood and sensation back, she notices it is a quarter to 9, early for a Sunday by most people's standards. But Jules, raised by parents who she jokes wake the roosters, still maintains that "up and at 'em!" approach to mornings.

She dares not rouse Sloane from her beauty sleep, in which she is a firm believer, for a morning jog. Though she longs for Sloane's company during the run and considers waiting for her to wake, she doesn't want to postpone her start and risk the day getting any hotter. She has eight miles ahead of her—regretting her decision to run long on Sunday this weekend—and the air already has a heaviness that promises heat and humidity will follow. Running with Sloane makes the time go by so much more quickly. She hopes Sloane will wake and tries staring at her, to see if that will help. She sits perfectly still on her bed and squints her eyes, focusing them on Sloane's face. Within a few minutes, Sloane, without opening her eyes, says. "Stop it."

"What?" Jules asks, amazed this is still so effective.

"Stop willing me awake. You've done this since we were flatmates."

"Would like to join me for a run?"

“Not today. I need some sleep,” she says, still not opening her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly. Plus, you have some thinking to do. Now go.”

Jules gives up the sale and finds her running clothes. She dons her Lulu Lemon running shorts, allowing her too white legs a little hope of getting some color, and sports tank top. She pulls on her iPhone, splashes water on her face and performs a quick brush of her teeth before she heads for the door.

As Jules leaves the quiet house, she walks lightly, careful not to wake her housemates. She pulls the front door open, which sticks, swollen from the summer heat and humid salt air, and winces at the loud creak it makes as it finally gives to her efforts. As she steps over the scuffed wood saddle onto the concrete landing, she hears a woman giggling. At first, she smiles imagining that she may be inadvertently eavesdropping on a housemate’s early-morning encounter with an overnight guest. Then, as she leans in to pull the door closed behind her, the giggling woman speaks.

“I miss you too, Whitty. You have no idea how much,” the voice purrs suggestively, though still managing to project loud enough to be heard from the other side of the bedroom door.

Anxious to hear no more, Jules pulls the wooden front door closed, maybe a little too hard. On the driveway, she quickly plugs her ear buds into her now reddened ears and cuts across the dewy crabgrass and sand of what is meant to be the front lawn. She opens her music library, finds her playlist dubbed “Run!” and turns up the volume as the fast and bass-heavy club music begins. Before she even exits the private street, she climbs the hill, her trainer’s command in her head: “Attack that hill! Attack! Attack!”

Jules feels under attack. Marianna is so obvious! Must she rub it in that *Whitty* cannot survive even sleeping in on a Sunday without speaking with her? And, what the hell time is it in Aspen, anyway? She looks at her watch, elects not to give another thought to the fact that late-sleeper-on-Sunday Mark is up before dawn and decides to start her stop watch instead.

She runs to Hand Lane, her favorite running path, which not only offers sneak peeks of the “cottages” through the hedges but also provides patches of shade from the summer sun as well as a sidewalk that offers safety from those racing to the Farmers Market for their hang-over breakfasts, cups of strong coffee and Sunday *Times*. Without realizing it, she heads east, not her preferred path. In less than three miles, this route will take her along the uninteresting and unshaded stretch of Route 27, with fast-moving traffic kicking up gravel that will sting when ricocheting off her well-oiled legs and sandy dust that will burn her eyes. Once she is cognizant of the route she is following, she elects to stick with it, determined to run exactly eight miles and unable to recalculate the distance. She knows this loop quite well, since she had run it a number of times, though with Tom’s house as the starting point. *Better to see that dreaded house and get it over with*, she convinces herself. *And, better still to see it while alone, just in case I get emotional*. She skips around the songs on her phone, looking for songs that will help her move a little faster and elevate her mood. She could use a little emotional pep rally.

Twenty minutes later, she makes the right turn off of the Napeague Stretch of Route 27, into the little four-by-four block cloister of houses. Her heart races from the adrenaline as much as it does from the exercise. She runs until she hits the dead end of the weathered shingled houses dotting the ocean and is forced to turn left. His house is just three blocks away, along this street. Even from this distance, she can see his Range Rover parked on the street, in front of the house. He was already up and out, Jules knows because overnight street parking is not permitted

and strictly enforced.

*Why is he up so early? Bringing someone home?*

*Calm down, Jules. He is a creature of habit. He went for his morning coffee and the newspaper.*

*Does this make it more or less likely that I will run into him? And, will he be alone? Oh God, what if he's not alone? What if I am running by, with my hair wet from sweat, sticking to my face, my cheeks flush from the four miles I've put in and my white legs freckled with gravel and I see him? And what if he's with someone else? The horror of running into him! Or running into him with an overnight guest. Or worse still, with a girlfriend.*

The thoughts, fears, regrets, everything strikes her hard and nearly paralyze her with dread.

*Chin up!* she reminds herself of David's chiding last night. She picks up her pace and runs past the modern wood house behind the dunes of wild beach rose bushes, sprinting as she goes. If she's spotted, she hopes not to be recognized. But, if she's recognized, she wants to look strong and fast. She makes it past the house without incident but breathing hard. And, feeling bold, she runs to the end of the block and retraces her route in reverse, running past his house, again, without incident. Or so she thinks.

By the time Jules makes the turn back onto 27 and begins the second half of her run, which typically brings a sense of relief and renewed energy, she is crying. At first, she is not even aware of it. She thinks it's just the salty sweat burning down her slightly sunburned cheeks. And, with her running, her breathing doesn't allow her the gasps and sobs a full-on throw yourself on your bed crying binge would release. But, when the tears keep coming, she knows better. She wonders if she should slow down and walk the rest of the way back to the house.

Instead, she uses the emotion to push through, stronger.

Unwittingly, she starts a slide show of memories of Tom in her head, each frame capturing key moments of their time together. Meeting last Memorial Day weekend at his beach house and the immediate attraction between them. Keeping their relationship under wraps until they no longer could continue to sleep in separate bedrooms or have her sneak back to her room in the early morning “for appearance’s sake.” One of his friends telling her that fall, over dinner, how impressed he was that their summer romance was growing stronger, rather than fading, with the change of season. Nights in, cooking dinners together, using his grandmother’s recipes. Weekends out at the house, walking on the cold and windy beach, racing home to hot a shower together followed by lovemaking in front of the fire to the soundtrack of classic rock hits, courtesy of the local radio station. Lazy mornings in bed, listening to NPR and planning their week. Treating each little victory and milestone like a grand occasion: a great bottle of Italian red when she signed a new client, a long weekend in Aspen to mark his forty-fifth.

Her pace picks up and her tears subside as it dawns on her. Tom’s forty-fifth. Mark. It should have been little surprise that they would run into Mark while celebrating Tom’s birthday in Aspen. The social scene there is incestuously small. Yet, she voiced little objection to the destination and remained silent even as Tom made the arrangements. And, even as she and Tom continued to speak of their future on that trip—from ring preferences to religious differences, from their families to starting their own—Jules felt an unmistakable thrill when she ran into Mark. The surprise was not seeing Mark. The real surprise was the feelings seeing him stirred in her.

Jules feels that her shoelace has come undone. She stops to fix it, bending at the waist, to the delight of a truckful of landscapers, who honk in appreciation. The loud horn startles her.

Bolting upright, she switches off her music, adjusts her shorts and tank and takes a few fast-walk steps before resuming her 10-minute pace. She looks around for some indication as to where she is; the seemingly endless pine trees, train tracks and power lines along 27 make each mile nearly indistinguishable from the next.

But, this run is bringing a new perspective. With a touch of healthy cynicism, she recalls telling friends that she finally understood that “you’ll-know-it-when-it-happens” feeling but secretly knew, even as she said it, she had tinges of doubt about Tom, and that Mark remained capable of turning it all upside down. Mark’s petty comments aside, he had been respectful of her new relationship, which she boasted of to him, perhaps to prove she had moved on? To pretend she didn’t feel abandoned when he left New York? And he let the communication après-Ajax trail off so naturally that she hardly noticed.

Perhaps she was too caught up in falling for Tom to pay any attention to Mark’s good intentions. Until, only months later, Tom’s behavior changed, and she found herself confronting him as to his whereabouts during his late nights with Richard. His confession to ogling other women at tawdry strip clubs was hurtful but paled in comparison to admitting that he hadn’t been true about himself to her. She knew then that it was beyond repair. And, she knew now, it was irreconcilable.

As the road builds to a steady but gradual hill, signaling a little more than a mile to go, she again hears her trainer’s “Attack! Attack!” in her head. But she no longer feels under attack. She feels strong. She is done with the heartbreak. She has mourned the loss of Tom long enough. And, she decides to give Mark the best wishes he gave her, sans snarky asides, even if she finds his new girlfriend less than impressive. She focuses on attacking the hill and letting go of the attack on others and herself. With the eight miles done, she adds another mile of meandering



around the dunes to cool down, physically and emotionally, before returning to the house.

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“Honey! Where have you been? I’m lazing around here and you’ve been out there running for well over an hour!” Sloane greets her in the kitchen, in turquoise terry shorts she wears with her little white tank. “I am an absolute slug. How did it go?”

“Great! I feel great!” Jules answers, while wiping her sweaty and slightly burned face with the cardboard-hard towel she had taken from the bathroom.

“Are you sure?” she asks, while handing Jules a bottle of water from the gold, 1970s-style refrigerator. She is already preparing an iced tea for Jules.

“I ran past his house, Sloane.”

“Oh, that explains it. Was it just painful?” Sloane sits down at the faux butcher-block kitchen table. Jules sets down her phone and sits down next to her, picking up the cold drink Sloane put before her.

“I was upset. And then I was upset that I was upset. I cried from his house for at least a mile, probably two,” she confesses. “Thank you,” she lifts her glass and takes a long swig.

“I bet it felt good to get it out. You needed that,” Sloane refills the glass. “You were not yourself yesterday but maybe it was more than just petty, ridiculous comments that contributed to that,” she says, with a lowered voice and a nod of the head, in case anyone, or a certain someone, is listening.

“Was I awful?” Jules knows that having to pose the question is generally an indication that you know you are guilty of what you ask. But she also knows Sloane will be honest as well as kind in her delivery. She searches Sloane’s face for her response, as she finally lowers her already empty glass.

“Don’t misunderstand me. It was justified. She rubbed your face in her happiness with

your ex and you defended yourself. But, when you gave it back, maybe you gave a little more than necessary. She'll just have to get over it. Why don't we just leave it at that, before I start reminding you that we cannot control other people or their actions, only our reactions to them and all that rehab psychology?"

"Okay, okay" Jules laughs. "I'm done mourning Tom. I gave him everything I had, including my true self, while I was with him and he just couldn't deliver on his end. And, I need and deserve better than that."

"Good for you, honey!" Sloane says with a little upward nod of her chin.

"And, I made a mistake with Mark."

"What?" Sloane asks. "Do not go there, Jules."

"It's true, Sloane. I wasn't ready for what he was ready for, when he was ready for it."

"I actually follow that, which scares me to bits."

"Mark was my first love. But, we met so young and I had no idea how rare a connection like that is. And, though I was thrilled he moved to New York for me, I felt like he gave it all away when he moved to Aspen."

"But he wanted you to go with him! And, he stayed stateside, which says something."

"I see that now. It was always 'we' and never 'I,' but 'I' panicked and later blamed him for feeling abandoned."

"And so now you are going to...", Sloane asks, leading.

"Call him."

"Jules!" Her voice gives away what her face cannot. "I'm scrunching my eyebrows right now, you know."

"She does such excellent work! Of course, I couldn't even tell. But I did notice the

narrowing of the eyes. Sloane, don't worry. I'm not going to try to win him back. I'm going to give him the blessing he gave me with Tom and wish him well with what's-her-name."

"There you go, honey!" Jules is unclear if she means on wishing Mark well or referring to his new girlfriend in such a manner.

"Even if she is just awful," Jules whispers into Sloane's ear as she gets up from the table and places their glasses in the sink.

"I'm going to hop into the shower and will be ready in two shakes. Let's get to the beach and have a full day before we head back to the city."

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## **Invitation to the Cape**

“Hi Madeleine,” she says into the phone early Monday morning, once she hears the low humming, a sure sign Wendi is pumping breast milk in her office, a several times daily event. The 10-minute routine gives Jules some much-needed respite from Wendi’s onslaught on topics that can only be described as stream of consciousness—she once tallied 20 in an hour—and the equally impressive barrage of emails.

“Hi, Jules! How was your weekend in the Hamptons?”

“Miserable is the first word that comes to mind. Then cathartic, actually.”

“Sounds more like a Catholic retreat than a weekend of debauchery. And you pay for this?”

Jules laughs, “Yes, pay dearly, actually.” She stops to check that the humming noise hasn’t stopped.

Madeleine doesn’t hesitate before asking. “Did you run into him?”

“No, but I had the lucky coincidence of being in the same share house as Whitty’s new girlfriend.”

“Who?”

“A certain someone’s new pet name for Mark.”

“No! Your Mark?”

“The very one!”

“What a small world!”

“You can say that again! They were on the phone or texting all weekend long.”

“So, she says. Did you speak with him? What does he say about it?”

“He tried calling a few times last night, but I missed him. Probably I was in a dead zone on the drive back. He said he had just landed in Asia.”

“Wait...if he was flying, then....”

“Then she faked the snide ‘At least you met one of the nice ones’ Saturday afternoon and yesterday’s early morning call with him!”

“This just makes my head spin. Bottom line?”

“Yours and mine! Even though we broke up a while ago and it ended amicably, still, it stings. You should have heard her going on and on about Whitty this, Whitty that.”

“The women in New York are still abuzz about Mr. Whittaker, even though he’s living in Aspen. What are you going to do about it?”

“About him? No idea. Maybe he was just flirting with me and I hoped it meant something more, given our history. Especially since Tom and I broke up, he’s been suggesting we visit. Have I misread this?”

“I don’t know that you can say that.”

“Madeleine, he has a serious girlfriend.”

“According to whom, my dear? A woman you just met?”

“Either way, I’m checking the calendar to make sure she and I are not on any of the same weekends again,” she says while searching through her emails for the one that includes the summer schedule. “Oh no! In two weeks, we’re both on.”

“Can you switch or something? I don’t even know how these share houses work. How is it that your life is always so complicated and dramatic?”

“That’s what I would like to know. I could probably switch, I just need to make a few calls.”

“Listen, why don’t you come up here? You and I could have an exciting weekend of just making dinner, preparing the nursery, all the crazy stuff. I promise you lobsters and no drama of running into your ex...or your ex’s alleged new flame.”

“Perfect. And I would love to see you before the baby is born, because that will mark the end of my visits in the short term. I’m telling you this now, so you won’t be surprised.”

“And I appreciate your support. It’s all the more reason for a visit then.”

“Let me buy a new pair of khakis and dig up everything navy. We’re headed to the Cape, darling!” she adds with an exaggerated locked-jaw, New England accent.

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## **Dr. Easy on the Eyes**

Just weeks before the big race, on one of her longest runs, Jules experiences crippling pain at mile 20. She figures this is what “breaking the wall” means. While proud of her accomplishment, she grows more anxious about marathon day. If 22 miles leaves her barely able to get out of the taxi and into her apartment, what will 26.2 miles do to her?

*No need to worry, the adrenaline on race day will get me through...that's what they all promise.*

After three days of hobbling, she can no longer ignore the issue and calls her doctor. This is definitely more than your average post-run aches and pains. Her reliable and understanding doctor suggests she get an appointment with a sports medicine doctor at The Hospital for Special Surgery. She tries Dr. Masters, the curmudgeonly chief of surgery who, unfortunately, is traveling with the New York Giants. His office refers her to Dr. Ryan Kneisser, “Dr. Masters’s knee guy,” his nurse explained.

By the end of the week, Jules is lying on an examination table, in very flattering hospital-issue shorts, waiting for Dr. Kneisser’s arrival. It had been an exhausting week, both at work and as a prescription pain medicine addict. She willingly dozes off only to be awoken by an absolute dreamy orthopedic surgeon.

*Oh, yes, this cloud may have a silver lining!*

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Just a little cat nap,” she responds, sweetly.

Jules can’t help but give a sly smile, flip her blond hair and, just a little too slowly, sit up to greet the doctor. She realizes he is probably blushing as much as she is. Knee and hip doctors



usually have geriatric patients; they rarely get 30-something blondes with toned legs sleeping on their exam tables.

*Ahh...this visit is going to be more interesting than either of us anticipated.*

After a run-down of her health history, Jules confides, “Really, it comes down to one thing. Completing the marathon.”

He agrees and arranges for an x-ray. But, Jules isn’t leaving without getting what she needs: a little relief from Dr. Kneisser. While he plays serious doctor and warns “Cortisone is a serious drug,” Jules chides him, “I may not be an NFL fan, but I’ve watched enough games to know you shoot more cortisone into the joints of those athletes than goes into the faces of Upper East Side women.” He smiles and consents.

“Just this one marathon, promise me. I’ve run one and it’s tough on the body,” he shares as he prepares the biggest needle Jules has ever seen.

“You have? What’s the time to beat?”

Ryan, he insists she use his first name, calls Jules a few days later to share the good news: the MRI showed no stress fracture. She will have to cross-train until the marathon, but she should be fine for race day. Ever the subtle flirt, he suggests she call him on his mobile, which he provided during her appointment, in case she “needs him.”

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## **Jitney Rides**

Wendi had denied Jules's vacation request for Thursday and Friday off to create a long-weekend in late October, making attendance at the Hamptons Film Festival a bit complicated. So, on Friday morning, while Sloane sleeps in after a late night that included too many margaritas and embarrassing karaoke renditions of "Build Me Up Buttercup" and Beatles classics at East Hampton's Blue Parrot, Jules hobbles across the deserted, not-a-street-light-in-sight Napeague Stretch of Route 27 in Amagansett, just as the Hampton Jitney comes within view. The time: 6:28 am.

She hops up the three steep steps and hands her ticket to the clearly agitated driver.

"What are you, crazy? I could have killed you!" he offers as both a greeting and an apology. "I couldn't even see you in all that black you're wearing," he continues to grouse even as Jules walks down the aisle.

"Sorry, I'm nursing a running injury. And I wasn't planning on having to flag you down before dawn" she responds, her early morning voice still scratchy. She heads to seat 34, her lucky number and the port side of the bus. Did "Port Over, Starboard Home" apply just to ships? She sits on this side for the westbound ride for better views of the fields, farm stands and windows of the shops in East Hampton.

Aside from the chipper middle-aged women who board in East Hampton, likely heading into the city for a day of shopping, the ride is uneventful. Jules is lulled to sleep by the luxury coach's rocking motion. She wakes, a bit groggy, but feeling well rested. Looking out the window, she sees the familiar billboards and old brick buildings that indicate they are approaching the Midtown Tunnel. The bus, stuck in traffic, crawls along.

*Ahh...a few more minutes of sleep*, she thinks as she closes her eyes, but not before sneaking a quick glimpse of her watch. Instantly, a wave of panic overcomes her, making her queasy: it is already after 9 and they are just approaching the tunnel! Even if all goes well, it will easily be another thirty minutes before she can get into the office. Jules worries that Wendi will suspect she is deliberately late because the vacation days were denied. Jules remembers Wendi's response when she asked for the two days off: "Do *you* think it's a good time for you to take off? Please tell me you're too busy trying to prepare for relaunch to even *think* about anything but getting in those final contracts."

*Christ, this is going to be painful.*

In a seemingly futile attempt to ease the anticipated suffering, Jules sends a message to Channing: Stuck in traffic, will get in ASAP. Please turn on my laptop. Thanks!

Within the minute, Channing responds: Wendi in Paris until Monday. Don't worry.

*Paris! After all the pressure she put on me to be in? And she's on vacation?*

Jules slips into the office at 10:15, electing to stop for coffee at Bouchon Bakery along the way. She calls the Hampton Jitney and books herself on an earlier evening bus. She is miffed about having to be in the office, especially since her paperwork is in and given Wendi's well-kept secret European holiday. She feels nearly justified in a bit of time phoning and emailing friends, encouraging them to come east that night to join in the prime celebrity spotting and film-festival-festivities. At 5 pm, Jules heads out the door, calling out quiet goodbyes to Channing and Roy over her shoulder. With not an available taxi in sight, she makes her way southeast by hopping on the M50 to Third Avenue, where she connects to the M101. With the Friday rush hour traffic, she arrives at the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Jitney stop just as the 5:50 Montauk-bound Jitney pulls up to the curb.

Limping as fast as she's able, ice pack taped to the outside of her black pants, Jules notes that not a soul in the crowd—politely elbowing their way to the doors of the bus—shows any sense of compassion for her. It is every man for himself when it comes to seating on the Jitney; injuries do not provide an exemption. But, with the promise of golden sunsets over the ocean and pumpkin patches in mind, Jules is thrilled to score the last empty window seat. Alas, her triumph is short-lived when a white-haired woman, doused in a classic yet overpowering scent, drops into the aisle seat next to her with a huff. The woman is already annoyed with Jules, the crowd or perhaps life in general. It is clear that this will be a long ride, no matter how little traffic. Jules knows she must think fast, before the bus starts rolling and her fate is sealed. The woman is already fidgety and huffed again—a third time?—as she tries unsuccessfully to turn on the reading light.

*Aha! Perfect!*

“I couldn't help but notice you're reading Mary Higgins Clark. I love her writing,” says Jules, lying and nodding to the paperback. “Once I get started, I just cannot put her books down. She just draws me in.”

“Yes, well, the same with me. But, this overhead light won't work,” she says, clicking the obviously broken switch back and forth a few more times to illustrate.

“What a shame! You know, I think that man over there,” she looks towards the handsome man she knows is European by the cut of his suit, “was looking for an aisle seat. And, you'll notice his reading light is working just fine. I am sure he would be happy to switch seats with you.”

“Really?” She takes the bait. “That would be lovely.”

Eventually, with some hand gestures and simple “You sit there” phrases, which the

woman nearly yells at him, the switch is made. Jules smiles at her quick thinking and fine sales skills. This ride is already looking up, despite the throbbing in her leg from hobbling to the bus.

Her new seat companion is a major improvement. The adorable young man turns out not only to be European but also Italian, with elementary English skills. In his pidgin English, he sweetly explains that his name is Daniele and he just arrived at JFK that very afternoon. Originally from Puglia, he is working in midtown, on assignment, and visiting family in the Hamptons. His accent and apparent genuine enthusiasm for being in New York make him all the more endearing.

Despite the language barrier, Jules and Daniele are chatting, flirting really, when the Jitney ambassador interrupts. Daniele is clearly confused as the woman, with quite a remarkable accent herself, from the shores of Long Island, asks Daniele if he has a reservation and his form of payment. Jules digs her wallet out of her bag, so that he produces his. She goes through his cards with him, produces his Visa, and learns his family name is Pascucci. Daniele is obviously thrilled to practice his English and make a new friend.

Her seatmate is so entertaining that Jules nearly forgets to call Sloane to tell her she caught the 5:50 Jitney. Pulling her bag up from the floor, she accidentally dislodges the well-rigged ice pack on her leg. Immediately, the bag of melting ice that had been dripping, water-torture style all day, spills in one loud gush.

“What the hell was that?” barks a grumpy man, seated in front of them, not quietly.

“Shh!” his wife tries to coax him.

“Someone spilled water all over my new Ferragamo loafers!”

Jules and Daniele snicker silently, the telltale shoulder shaking giving them away to anyone who can see them. Once she collects herself, Jules dials Sloane’s mobile to let her know

she is an hour into the ride and to save her a seat at Rowdy Hall for their pre-film cocktail. But, she has waited too long and the Jitney is already in the dead cell zone on the Long Island Expressway. Daniele, ever the gallant gentleman, offers his phone. His phone's signal is better but not quite fully there. Jules whispers, so not to further disturb her neighbors, making it even more difficult for Sloane to hear. In fact, Jules is not sure Sloane hears her at all; the international cell number showing up on her display probably further confusing her friend. Sloane tries calling back on the international number but seems not to hear a word Jules says. Trying to catch the phone before the ringer sounded—how do you explain to silence the ringer to someone just off Alitalia's afternoon arrival?—is a challenge. Plus, she can tell by the stop and go snoring/snorting from her neighbor that she is close to waking him. Jules explains to Daniele that they should try again later and they resume their flirting despite their limited understanding of each other's words.

Their sweet though unintelligible dialogue, as well as most passengers' dozing, is interrupted by the less-than-charming Jitney ambassador's use of the public address system, on full volume, complete with the high-feedback screech.

“Sorry to disturb you but I have an urgent message for a passenger from our main dispatcher.” Jules feels it coming, but crosses her fingers just the same. “Is there a passenger Kennedy on board? I have an urgent message for a passenger Kennedy.” Jules meekly raises her hand. The man in front of her says loudly, “it figures” before his wife hushes him again. Daniele looks at her with total surprise.

“Your friend? How did she do that?”

“That's your new English word for the day: resourceful. My friend is very resourceful.”

The Jitney ambassador bumps down the aisle, hitting most people's heads, arms or

shoulders with her full hips, and announces, “You are to meet your friends at the cinema rather than at Rowdy Hall. She said it was urgent. Good luck with your film premiere, Ms. Kennedy!”

*That Sloane! She is good!*

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## **Puffy Coat in Aspen**

“Hello?” Jules answers, her voice soft and raspy from being woken in the middle of the night.

“Hello.” Her eyes flash open upon hearing just one word. And his voice.

“Mark,” she tries to sound nonchalant though her heart is racing. “What time is it?” she asks, completely at a loss of what to say.

“Too late to be calling, especially your time, but I couldn’t resist.”

She smiles and asks, “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I was just thinking about you.” Her heart, which was just starting to calm down from being startled awake, flutters again. She hates to admit it, even to herself.

“Oh, really?” she asks, a little too playfully.

“Yes, I came across your big, puffy coat when digging through my closet.”

“Oh, that very sexy cream Michelin man number I left behind during my last visit?”

“The very one. *That* was hot, Jules.”

“Hot it was, Mark,” she giggles.

*He can still make me giggle.*

Jules remembers the evening very well. Before Tom’s forty-fifth birthday celebration, before all the Marianna beach house drama, when Jules and Mark tried to work on their relationship long-distance, she surprised him with an extended weekend visit. Though he may have caught on from her line of questions of the details of his weekend plans, he played naïve to her scheme.

Jules was pleased with her alibi of a girls’ spa day that would deem her unreachable,



meanwhile flying into Aspen/Pitkin County Airport, arriving at 8:30 that night. Once she collected her bags, stopped in the bathroom and was safely in a quiet taxi, she called him.

“Hi honey, how was your day of skiing?” she asked, trying to sound mellow from her “spa day” while very excited to surprise him with her visit.

“I love spring skiing. And I would love it more if you were here with me. Where are you, anyway? Must you stay overnight at this spa? I want to talk later.”

“No, I musn’t. I’m in a taxi,” she answered honestly, omitting the very important detail that the taxi was in Aspen, not in Manhattan.

“And where are you?”

“One of your favorites. Campo de Fiori. At the bar, having a glass of Chianti, surrounded by Americans” his inflection telling her they’re loud, moneyed and the worst New York and Los Angeles can offer, combined. “And missing one in particular.”

“The Brit who tolerates Americans so well,” she teases. “Funny, since I’ve been missing one particular Brit very much, I think it’s high time to pay him a visit.” She is ready to burst with the excitement, even as she sorts out where to meet him, now that she’s learned he’s still out.

“Do tell, dear.”

“I will tell you all about it. When you get home.” She smiles, intimating the steamy phone sex that will surely follow. “When will that be?”

“Oh, I’ve just had the wine put before me. It won’t be too long. I’ll call you the minute I leave so you can keep me warm on my walk home.”

“Perfect. Speak then, honey.”

“Until then, love.”

She double-checks her phone to ensure the call has ended before speaking to the taxi

driver. “Sir, a little change in plans. Can we drop by South Galena, where I’ll leave my bags, and then would you please drop me at Campo?”

“Sure thing,” he replies. Jules primps one final time: a spritz of Hermes Pamplemousse Rose, a quick brush of color on her cheeks and a dab of gloss on her lips. She had just completed a more thorough freshening up in the airport bathroom after changing out of her jeans and into her bustier, garters, black stockings and four-inch Christian Louboutins, decidedly not Aspen attire but very appropriate for her outfit. And what Mark would enjoy most. The big, puffy cream coat—which had been bought for this very event—covered just enough to get her into and out of the taxi, through Mark’s front door and into his bed.

The taxi driver is kind enough to unload her bags out of the trunk and onto the covered porch outside Mark’s door, where they will be safe while she surprises him at the bar and joins him for a glass of red.

One block on East Cooper and two on South Mill, the taxi pulls up to the restaurant. Jules quickly pays and thanks the driver while trying to see if Mark is in view. Her heart racing, she hopes he won’t notice her out the front window as she approaches the restaurant. She takes a deep breath, chinchies her coat belt, tugs at the hem and walks through the door and stands right beside Mark, who is talking with another patron at the bar.

“Excuse me, would you mind ordering me a Chianti?” she whispers in his ear.

“Oh. My. God.” he says, his favorite expression which makes him sound either very English or very LA. He stands, grabs her around the hips, and kisses her hard, quick and several times before releasing her and taking a good look at her face. He pushes back her hair. “This is such a surprise, you little schemer, you.”

She smiles, pleased as punch that she so successfully pulled off the secret visit. “I missed

you,” she tells him, looking into his eyes.

“You have no idea....” He looks like he’s about to tear up. “Now, let’s get you a proper glass of wine and a bite. God only knows what they served you on those flights.”

“Well, we could just go back to your place,” she suggests, remembering what she is wearing. And not wearing.

“Nonsense,” he says. “You know I have no food in the fridge and I’d like you to have a little something to eat. You’ll need some energy, love,” he says, while pulling out the stool and getting the bartender’s attention. “Calamari, grilled veggies and a risotto. Oh, and some flat breads as soon as you can, with another Chianti, thanks.”

“Mark?” she says, quietly, while taking the stool. The other patron takes another stool at the end of the bar, so Mark can join Jules in sitting. He’s so caught up in the transition and ordering with the bartender the thoughtful patron’s next round, she can’t argue. She tries to get comfortable on the stool and tugs at her coat to ensure she’s not showing too much.

“Oh, honey, let me take your coat for you,” he stands to help her off with it. The bartender places her glass in front of her and tops off Mark’s.

“No, no, I’m fine,” she lies, eyeing the heater running the entire length of the windows, just a few feet from her. “Still have a chill from the night air.” She takes her glass and they toast, “To surprises.” They take a sip and kiss.

More than thirty minutes later, while Jules and Mark enjoy intimate conversation, the bartender places their plates of Aspen’s best Italian in front of them, apologizing for the delay in their order. She takes another tug at her coat.

Mark’s more insistent, “Jules, let me take that coat. How can you possibly eat in that big, puffy thing?”

“Truly, I’m fine,” but the little drops of perspiration above her lip tell him otherwise.

“You look a little warm,” he says, being kind. Her hair is starting to stick to the back of her neck.

“It’s just the altitude. You know how it throws my body off until I adjust.”

“If you insist,” he says and places her napkin on her lap before one on his own.

Thirty more minutes go by. Jules is happy to see Mark but she feels silly in the down coat. And, faint. The delicious deep red wine, the hiss of the heater that just won’t quit and a touch of altitude illness combine to make her incredibly woozy.

“Can we leave now?” she asks, pushing her very damp hair away from her cheek so she can blot her face with her napkin.

“You really are suffering, aren’t you, poor thing? Let’s get the check and get you home,” he says with a wink.

He signals to the bartender and they are out the door within minutes.

“No bags?” he notices, while Jules tears open the snaps down the entire front of the jacket.

“They’re already at your place. I dropped them before,” she says, unconcerned about who can see her and what they can see.

“You wore *that*?” he says, eyes wide.

“Now you know why I couldn’t take my coat off until now,” she says, with a smile. “But this little surprise seduction I planned didn’t count on a stop and a full dinner at a restaurant. I feel a little silly,” she confesses.

“Silly? You’re the sexiest woman I know,” and he grabs her for a kiss, long and deep. Then he throws her scarf around her neck for a little modesty, takes her arm and walks her home.

“I miss you, Jules,” Mark says, bringing her back to the present time.

“Mmmm...I know, Mark.”

“That’s not exactly ‘I miss you, too,’” he chides.

“I do. But I’m not sure I should say it, given...” she trails off.

“I understand. I know you do. But I’d prefer to hear it. I’m holding the jacket ransom until you do.”

“Deal, Mark.”

“Sweet dreams, love.”

“Sweet dreams, Slimey.” She drifts back to sleep with a smile on her face.

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## **Too Good to Be True**

Back in New York, later that week, feeling a bit sassy, Jules decides to follow her often-given and always-unsolicited own advice and head out for a drink on her own, at the bar of Daniel Boulud's newest bistro, a place she's been only a handful of times, with clients. It's a bit late for happy hour and a little early for the dinner crowd, the perfect balance for a woman on her own. She sits at the end of a communal table, catching up on updating her daily planner. Soon, at the other end of the table, two men join her, in suits and French cuffed-shirts. It's obvious: one is French, the other is American, both are bankers. Here and there, she catches the Frenchman, whose name she learns is Gabriel, pronounced Gabrielle, stealing looks at her. She is caught up in her task but notices the attention when she occasionally looks up to enjoy her glass of wine.

Jules pays her tab, gets up and walks outside, a little tipsy, even after just one drink. Standing beneath the awning, she hesitates, trying to find her umbrella. Suddenly, the door of the bistro swings open and Gabriel rushes out.

"I am so glad I caught you," he gushes, in his charming French accent. "I am in the middle of a business discussion, but I want so much to meet you. Will you join me for dinner?"

Jules laughs with surprise and asks, "What's your name?" They introduce themselves and he again asks for her number.

"Why not give me your card, Gabriel?"

He produces his card and again asks for hers, admitting, "I do not trust you will call me. I would like to be able to reach you." The card reads: Gabriel Bousbib, CEO, Plus Funds. She relents and hands her card in return.

*Hmm...one glass of wine and one dinner invitation, she muses to herself, proud of the*

results.

Late that night, Jules receives a call on her mobile from a number she doesn't recognize and opts not to answer, wondering if it's connected to the night's earlier encounter. Fearing having her mobile number pop up on his screen if she returned the call, Jules enlists Madeleine's help the next morning to identify the mystery caller.

"Good morning! Can I have your help, please?"

"Naturally," Madeleine answers before even knowing the favor.

"Dial a number for me?"

"Late night caller?"

"Surprisingly early to bed."

"Well, I had a big night! My first sip of wine in months, but I didn't even enjoy it. I have some tests today and the doctor suggested it to help me relax. Have you seen the size of those ultrasound wands?"

"No, I haven't. And, I'm guessing it's one of those 'ignorance is bliss' scenarios that you learn on a need-to-know basis."

"True. I won't scare you with the gory details. What's the number?"

"You have to tell me the results, Mad," Jules says.

"Of course, I will! I'll put you on hold and just call from the other line!"

"Thanks, but I mean about the tests. That's far more important."

"Okay. Number, please."

Madeleine returns within seconds to say a French-sounding "Allo?" greeted her on the phone and she quickly hung up.

"Well, that's decided. I'll call you later with the update."

“Thanks, Madeleine!”

Gabriel must have engaged in a little drunk dialing last night. Not that she minds, who hasn't? She's actually flattered.

Later that afternoon, Gabriel calls from a 212 Manhattan landline. He asks Jules if she will take him up on his offer for dinner. They engage in some light banter, during which he guesses correctly that she lives on the Upper East Side, “Your clothes and your posture gave it away,” he said. He tell her he has a place on the Upper West Side. They joke about the long-standing rivalry between their parts of the city, despite being just a park away. She agrees to dinner the following night at La Grenouille.

*This man is not wasting any time! So romantic for a first date!*

Now, Jules's real detective work begins. There's nothing of interest on Google, whitepages.com or anywho.com. Good, old-fashioned 411 turns up only one listing for the surname, in the tony suburb of Greenwich, nearly guaranteeing he is a married man looking for some extracurricular fun. Friends must be consulted and their help enlisted. First, Maria. She places a call to the 203 Greenwich suburban number. Her take?

“It's an American woman's voice on the machine and the house is enormous, definitely with cathedral ceilings, based upon the echo on the recording. I imagine impressive art hanging on the walls.”

“You can hear that there's impressive art on the walls?” Jules laughs, before asking, “Should I still meet him for dinner?”

“Yes! You don't know his situation. If nothing else, I could use the entertainment,” she encourages. “You have intrigue, I have car pools. Please go! But I do have a date night tonight, and should be available after 9, if you want to chat.”



Jules replies, “I should be done by 9 as well. Gabriel will want to be home in time to tuck in the kids.”

She can hear Maria choke on her afternoon tea before breaking into a full giggle. “Let’s hope not, Jules. You’re not the evil step-monster type.”

Next, Sloane. Her take? “A CEO of a hedge fund? Jackpot! This could be a very interesting development.” After she places a call to the 203 home number—how many mystery hang-ups will this woman have on her machine when she returns home today?—she shares her conclusions.

“Definitely.”

Jules hesitates, “Definitely married?”

“No, definitely cathedral ceilings. And I think Maria has a point about the artwork, too.”

“Why would a married man be so careless about having his home information listed?”

Sloane offers, “He wasn’t expecting four hours’ worth of effort by three near-professional cyber-sleuths in the course of one afternoon.”

“Very true. Okay, what’s the verdict? Do I go?”

“Allow me to remind you that while our work is impressive indeed, it is not infallible. Plus, it’s La Grenouille! Give him the benefit of the doubt and go but ask if he’s married...during dessert.”

“Perfect plan!”

“If nothing else, this will make for a fun story for Steakhouse Night with the girls. This will knock their mascara off,” she enthuses.

Jules meets Gabriel at La Grenouille. He confesses that because she is late, he feared being stood up. He smiles as she nervously brushes the hair out of her eyes and the strays stuck

to her lips.

*This Nars lipgloss is too sticky!*

After ordering, he gazes into her eyes and begins to share his family history, starting in 1492, when his ancestors were forced out of Spain and their immigration around Europe and North Africa began. She's charmed when he chats with the waiter in French and impressed when he orders the perfect wine to accompany each course of their meal.

The oysters Jules ordered arrive and she offers him one.

*A suggestive choice, perhaps, but I don't care.*

"No, I don't eat shellfish," Gabriel replies, "I'm an Orthodox Jew."

Jules, with her fair skin, blue eyes and blonde hair, states the obvious, "Well, I'm not."

He chuckles and says, "I know. But you are delightful." Taking her hand, thus interrupting her appreciation of the starter, he grazes it every so softly with his lips. "You are also delicious," he whispers, immediately putting her on guard, reversing the little warm and fuzzy effect his last compliment provided.

But, ever the optimist and giving the benefit of the doubt, Jules explains, "You know, 'delicious' has very different connotations in English than you may understand."

Smart enough to know that he has crossed the line and needs to lighten up on the charm, he takes the out she provides and pretends not to realize he has just had his hand slapped. Jules wastes little time getting to her point.

"Gabriel, do you have children?"

"Yes," he replies, without missing a beat.

"And they live with their mother, your wife or ex-wife?"

Unfazed, he says, dead even, "My ex-wife, otherwise, why would I be here?"

Satisfied, Jules smiles, dips another oyster into the mignonette sauce and dinner continues like a charm.

After a flawless French dinner, surrounded by exquisite flowers and being wooed by a sophisticated man with the sexiest French accent, Jules accepts Gabriel's invitation for a drink nearby. Despite the foggy night, they opt for the rooftop of The Peninsula, which typically has unbeatable views of the park. Unfortunately, the elevator ride provides Gabriel with inspiration. Taking her by surprise and grabbing her by both arms, Gabriel doesn't give Jules a chance. His aggressive kiss is nearly impossible to break, but when she manages, he moves his kissing, or rather licking, down her neck, shoulders and bare arms. Within minutes, he's managed to get obviously excited and is not shy about letting Jules in on it, rubbing himself against her.

Jules pushes him away and says, "Gabriel, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to devour you," Gabriel pants.

*From delightful to delicious to devour!* Jules's only response: defense. They exit the elevator, she excuses herself to the ladies room and ends the evening by inventing an early morning meeting.

Interestingly, though it would far easier for the taxi to drop Gabriel at his perhaps fictitious West 60s apartment before Jules heads to the East 60s, Gabriel insists upon dropping her at her building first. She wonders if he will continue on to the Merritt Parkway to Greenwich, to tuck in the little ones before they go to bed.

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## Missing Phone

The next day, as Jules rounds the corner, she sees Wendi coming down the hall, fangs in full view. Wendi detests tardiness of any kind in her staff. Jules is late and Wendi apparently on time—or at least, not as late as Jules—and therefore Jules will have hell to pay. As Jules braces for the pounce, suddenly, some form of divine intervention causes Wendi to stop dead in her tracks. She looks right, smiles and walks towards Roy’s cube. A three-syllable long, “Hiiii...!” can be heard down the hall.

*Roy to the rescue! I owe him.*

As Jules continues down the hall, speed walking, but careful not to draw more attention by running, she notices two well-dressed women with Roy. Wendi is caught up in introductions, her back to Jules. Jules now remembers that Roy was expecting the new contributing editors that morning. Wendi certainly should meet them not only as the sales director, but also as a woman who will take full advantage of the friends and family discounts such relationships provide.

Thankfully, Channing has already started Jules’s laptop, so Jules is able to slip into her chair while throwing down her bag and, most importantly, dialing her phone. She wants to be engaged in a call before Wendi is done with the impromptu meeting. She dials Mark Ingram who immediately answers. He is easier to reach before his salon opens its doors to the bold-faced-named socialites and celebrity clientele with the most-envied wardrobes. They adore Mark not only because of his impeccable taste but also his discretion; he never talks to the press or reveals pending nuptials.

His pleasant tone immediately puts Jules at ease. They gossip about industry news, the recent collections and he hints, but does not reveal, some of the recognizable names in his

appointment book that week. He clearly hopes that Jules will mention his unnamed clients to her editors, who hold the power to make the bride-to-be the feature story, providing one of Mark's designers with the highly coveted landing-page dress credit. They also discuss what he should buy and pack for his upcoming weekend at the polo matches in Argentina. Jules listens to Mark's long list of his classic and sporty purchases from Ralph Lauren.

“How could I not go with Ralph? The man practically invented the sport!”

She teases him, “And the friends and family discount sure comes in handy!” a nod to Mark's past life, working for the American fashion icon.

Jules is startled when she looks up to see Wendi standing directly opposite her. She covers the receiver and whispers, “Mark Ingram.” Not one to interfere with potential business, especially from a prospect who has yet to run on the site but features his creative consistently with the competitors, Wendi replies, “I'll call you from the car.” Mark accepts Jules's offer for lunch and suggests that his PR manager call to sort out the date, as he would like her to be there as well. This is a promising sign as he usually brings the PR woman along when he is ready to talk business. Jules is happy that the call she placed to save herself may actually help her break a long-targeted prospect.

Just as she hangs up, Jules's phone rings. It's Roy.

“Off your call?” he says in greeting.

“Yes, thanks. I owe you. Is the coast clear?”

“Yup, coast is clear. Not a problem. She was on a tear this morning. Something about having to ‘pump and dump,’ whatever the hell that means, for the next few days, messing everything up. Plus, she had to meet the new contributing editors anyway. She didn't even hesitate to ask about buying at cost, which they said they could ‘happily’ arrange. That cheered

her up immediately.”

“You know, Wendi probably thinks I was late since she wasn’t expected in this morning. Now she’ll be on watch more than ever.”

“Are you kidding? That would require her to actually get here on time herself, and we know how often that happens. She was only here this morning because she had the car swing by on the way to the airport, since the presentation was a mess or something.”

“Oh, hey Channing,” he says, the phone pulled away from his mouth. “Jules, come over. Channing is back with our coffees.”

Jules walks in to see Channing already looking frazzled.

She catches Channing say, “Sorry I took a little while. I had to meet Wendi at her car with her coffee for the ride to the airport.”

“Seriously? Christ!” Roy says, in between sips of his steaming black coffee.

“Please don’t tell me she came by the office on her way to the airport because she likes the way you pick up her coffee,” Jules throws in.

“No, actually, she made more changes to the presentation last night and I had to revise and drop them off with her doorman. I got it to her by 11 and she called me at 6 this morning and told me to come in early to make final edits and print up new copies.”

“You got home near midnight and she woke you at 6? You poor thing! At least she’s out of town for the next few days. You should plan to leave early today,” Jules suggests.

“I’d be nervous that she’ll call me and will know I’m not in the office.”

As if on cue, Channing’s cell phone rings. She looks at the screen and her puzzled expression indicates that she does not recognize the number.

“Hello, this is Channing”

A woman's excited voice can be heard on the other end, her words unintelligible.

"I'm sorry, Wendi, I was just delivering coffees to Roy and Jules. I will look in your office right away and call you right back. Should I call this number?" Channing pauses. "This is the driver's number? Oh, I see. Okay, I will see you at the airport then," she says before hanging up. Already, her cheeks are flush with nerves.

"Wendi forgot her cell phone and I have to meet her at the airport with it. The thing is, she doesn't know if she left it at home or here. She's already so late for this flight, I don't know if I can get there in time. And, if I don't, she'll have my head."

Channing's eyes are already brimming with tears, likely recognizing the impossibility of the situation. Jules and Roy spring into action. Channing will call Wendi's nanny and ask her to search the apartment. Jules will order an Uber for Channing to take to the airport. Roy will look in Wendi's office for the missing phone.

Within minutes, only Jules has had success in lining up a car to the airport. Neither Roy nor Channing, with the help of the nanny, have been able to locate the phone. Channing is in a state of near panic.

"What do I do? She is going to kill me!" her voice is noticeably strained.

"Because *she* lost *her* phone? Channing, just call her and tell her it's not in the office and her nanny can't find it in the apartment. She has to retrace her steps and sort out where she last saw it."

Channing returns to her desk, the picture of weariness and anxiety. It's obvious to Jules how nervous Channing is about making this call. She can hear Channing speaking, a pause and then "Okay, I will. Sorry, Wendi."

Jules walks over to check on her. The phone is still cradled between her ear and shoulder.

“Well?” Jules asks.

“She said it’s too late now, if I haven’t already left for the airport. Can you please cancel the Uber?”

“Did she find it? I bet it was in one of her bags all along,” Jules says.

“No, but if I can’t find hers, she wants me to overnight my phone to her to arrive at the hotel tomorrow. She just told me she may have left it at the restaurant or in the car last night.”

Jules shakes her head as she walks away. Channing’s desk is located along a much-traveled route of senior executives. She knows better than to say anything that could be overheard by anyone rushing down the hallway. The shame of it is, even when Wendi leaves the office, there is often a trail of frazzled nerves in her wake.

Jules goes about her work, overhearing bits of Channing’s conversations with restaurants—“Wendi couldn’t recall the name, only that it was ‘some Greek place on the Upper East Side’”—trying to locate the missing phone. Eventually, Jules goes outside and sees Channing programming her phone, entering in some of Wendi’s most commonly dialed numbers.

“Oh, Channing, you are too nice,” she says when she walks by to get Roy for lunch. “Not all work places are like this, Channing. Just know that.”

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## Paper or Plastic

After a long day at the office, Jules treats herself to a drink and dinner by at L'Absinthe, closer to home and with a crowd she knows. She enjoys a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and the grilled vegetable plate, which though not listed on the menu, Jean-Michel makes especially for her. She sits at the bar and Kareem catches her up on the recent celebrity visits, which do not include Mick. After declining a second glass of wine, on the house, she briskly walks one block east to her apartment.

Isias, the nighttime doorman, greets her. He checks the register and tells her she has a package. She follows him to the vestibule, expecting the dry cleaning that she dropped off that morning. Instead, he hands her a Whole Foods paper bag. She looks at the bag, then at him, quizzically.

“Are you sure this is for me?”

“Yes, it was dropped off just about an hour ago. By a man.”

Her stomach flips.

*Could it be? Has he finally done it?*

She spots her golf glove on top of the bag and feels a wave of nausea come over her. She thanks Isias and heads to her apartment, already aware that never has a paper bag from a grocery store taken such an emotional toll. The sadness sweeps over her by the time she reaches her door. She enters her apartment and drops the bag just inside the door.

*Thank God I had a drink tonight*, she thinks as she plops down on the couch, staring at the bag. *He's done it. He's severed all ties.*

It had taken her months to work up the courage to send Tom an email, asking that he

return her things left at his house and apartment. As weeks, then months, went by and there was no reply and nothing was returned, she had convinced herself that this was proof-positive that he was filled with regret about the break-up. He was holding onto her things because he could not let them, nor her, go. He was holding onto something as an excuse to contact her. When she thought about her non-returned belongings—which she did more often than she ought or would ever admit to—she hoped he was still remembering their connection to her: looking at her Crème de la Mer, which she applied every morning, in the bathroom cabinet, smelling her Phyto shampoo and conditioner in the shower, fondling her Claire Pettibone lingerie in the drawer and recalling the fun they had when looking at the framed photos of them sailing in Newport, laughing on the beach and dressed for the MS Society gala. She hoped he had not returned these things because he realized he had made a terrible mistake but did not know how to approach her with the idea of reconciling.

The paper bag, staring at her from across the room, mocks these hopes. And her. There it is: confirmation that Tom is over her. Probably these things had been stuffed into a bag months ago, to make room for the personal belongings of new lovers—or worse?—one lover. She cannot bring herself to even approach the bag, never mind go through it and its contents. She drags herself into the bedroom and lies down on the bed.

She is surprised to find she cannot cry. She stares at the ceiling, willing herself to put this out of her mind, to fall asleep, even with her makeup and clothes still on. She would rather sleep without washing up and changing because she would have to pass the bag on her way to and from the bathroom.

*Who am I kidding? I will not be able to sleep with it sitting there.*

She needs a friend to walk her through this. Who can she call at this hour? She decides on

Sloane, who picks up on the second ring.

“Sloane? He did it. He dropped off my things. In a Whole Foods bag. It’s over,” Jules tells her, her voice monotone, belying the hurt.

“Ohhhhh, honey. Paper or plastic?”

“Paper. I hate him.”

“I am so sorry, Jules. Really.”

“Sloane! A paper Whole Foods bag!” Her voice begins to crack.

“Why, why, why a Whole Foods bag? What a fool,” she says, genuinely sympathetic.

They agree he is a black-hearted man for such an act of complete insensitivity.

“I cannot bring myself to even touch the bag, never mind go through it. I’m not ready for this.”

“Honey, do you have anything to drink there?” Sloane asks.

“Yes, a few bottles of wine and a bottle of Grey Goose in the freezer, in case of emergency.”

“Jules, I’m here for you and will get you through this. Listen to me. Go get the vodka and pour a double shot. Either it will help you fall asleep or work up your courage. Don’t be brave, be smart, honey.”

As instructed, Jules heads to the freezer, takes a deep swig right out of the bottle, her lips stick for a second to the mouth of the frozen glass, and waits for the viscous liquid that burns as it goes down to take effect. She starts to cry and the crying gives way to sobbing. Sloane listens, encouraging her to let it out, offering to jump into an Uber to come over and remove the bag until Jules is better able to face it.

“No, I want to just deal with it now. I won’t be able to think of anything else until I do,”

Jules tells her, demonstrating self-awareness, despite the buzz that seems to be taking effect.

Putting down the vodka bottle, Jules picks up the bag and brings it to the couch. Piece by piece, she empties the bag of her items that Tom has returned to her, crushing her heart and her hope in one grand gesture.

On top is her golf glove, reminding her of their visits to the driving range, where he would playfully “help her with her form,” pressing right up behind her, evoking jealous glances from the other golfers. Both jars of Crème de la Mer, which she had purchased because she was spending so many nights with him: one for his apartment and one for his house. The photos of them together, wrapped in tissue paper to keep the silver frames from getting scratched. Seeing how happy they looked in the photos and the fact that he hadn’t even tried to keep one, sets her off again.

Sloane asks, “Are you sure you want to continue? I can come get the bag tonight and you can deal with it another time.”

“There are only a few more things. Let’s just get this over with.”

Then, Jules begins laughing through her tears, “Stupid, stupid man!” There, at the bottom of the bag, is a little jar of Origins eye cream. Jules is a La Mer devotee. This is likely a left-over from the blonde aesthetician Tom had dated before her. He used to complain about her incessant chatter about everything, demonstrating, he claimed, she knew very little about anything in particular. Maybe he should have paid a little more attention to idle chatter, like when Jules teased him upon finding the cream in the bathroom drawer when she was moving her things in.

“The bastard can’t even keep us straight. There is some cheap eye cream in here, from his previous ex.” She and Sloane laugh together. Jules is on an emotional rollercoaster and is so

relieved to have Sloane along with her.

“Thank you, Sloane. I just couldn’t have faced it alone.”

Sloane instructs her, “Right now, put everything back in the bag and bury it in your closet. Put everything away that will remind you of this moment. Throw away the bottle, but finish it first. Then, wash up and get to bed. You need to rest, sweetie.”

“I will. Thank you, Sloane.”

Not until they hang up does Jules remove her coat. This, along with the vodka shot and emotional night, has contributed to her very flushed cheeks. She splashes cold water on her face, peels off her clothes and climbs beneath her duvet, snuggling beneath it.

*It’s over now. Time for you to accept it. Be thankful for friends who care enough to ask if the bag was paper or plastic.*

The following morning, Jules wakes with a remarkable sense of acceptance and calm, like she has just finished a great run. She surprises herself when she realizes she is singing in the shower. It’s painfully bad singing, but she is singing to her heart’s content. She wants to put this all behind her, but first she will share the news with her friends who have endured the painful, emotionally distraught months of mood swings and the hyper-analysis of even his silence. As she towel dries her hair, she quickly emails Maria: My things returned in a Whole Foods bag. Sloane coached me through it. It’s over. Talk later. xo

By the time she finishes drying her hair and putting on a touch of make-up, she has a response in her in box. Ever the one to find the positive in any situation, Maria responds: Look at the bright side. It could have been a Victoria’s Secret bag—their largest bag, with the plastic handles—with the receipt for a dozen 34 DD bras and extra small lace thongs. Since he was so gracious to return your things, you must do the same. Run downtown to Condomania and get

their largest bag. Fill it with his things—a razor, toothbrush and boxers, preferably not his. Or better, go to CVS, buy home pregnancy kit, throw in a jumbo box of extra-large Trojans and a couple of tubes of KY Jelly. Leave the receipt in the bottom of the bag, drop with his doorman over the weekend and enjoy.

Jules chuckles at Maria's unfailing ability to provide the funniest case scenarios and how to respond using subtle and not-so-subtle tactics. Noticing the time, Jules pulls together the rest of her outfit, her black-on-black uniform and heads for the crosstown bus.

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## **Waxing and Waning**

Jules and Sloane occasionally schedule their monthly wax appointments back to back since they both visit Alma, the Russian woman at Bliss, who is the quickest and most efficient waxer in town. This is one procedure a woman does not want to drag out.

“Sweetie, I think that poor Russian woman is the only one I take my panties off for these days,” Sloane says, as she pays her bill. “Which reminds me, I have something to tell you later.”

“Me, too. It almost makes me wonder why I bother.”

“Because you know if you let a forest grow down there, then you can’t take advantage of any impromptu offers.”

“Where there’s hope, there’s wax.” Jules slips on her coat. “You know my theory. Put some tape over my eyebrows, pull my hair up in a ponytail and let me sit in a vat of wax. I want no hair, anywhere.”

“You are practically hairless, anyway, Jules!”

“Come on, let’s go.” They pick through the bins and shelves, select a few favorite creams and pay for their services and products.

“Do you have time for breakfast?” Standing on the corner of Lexington, heading north, they wait for the light at 50<sup>th</sup> Street to change so they can cross.

“I wish I could, but I really have to bond with my father’s soon-to-be wife.”

“That’s nice of you, Sloane. Extend that olive branch.”

“Not my idea, trust me. I’m nearly over the edge with this one. She sent me a wedding invitation and spelled my name wrong.”

“She did not!”

“Would I lie? No ‘e.’ What does it really take to remember the spelling of the name of your intended’s one child?”

“Really, it’s so bad it’s almost funny.”

“Jules, did you get my message about heading down to Palm Beach? A little sun and fun now that it’s cooling down up here? My step-father’s place is available.”

“Wish I could but I have the marathon that weekend.”

“Of course! How could I forget?”

“After that, I’m free.”

“I’ve got to get out of town to mix and mingle with some new men. Did I tell you about the blind date which ended up back at his apartment and all was going swimmingly until he whispered into my ear, ‘How well can you tolerate pain?’”

“No! He didn’t! Did you tell him that you endure hot wax and hair being torn out of the most intimate places monthly?”

“Yes, he did and no I didn’t. So, it’s a small wonder I can’t stop obsessing over Pierce getting serious with that awful Southern Belle.”

“Dear Sloane, must I remind you that you are, in fact, from the South?”

“Yes, but I did *not* have a cotillion!”

“True! But the whole Barbour-jacket-wearing, duck-hunting, bourbon-drinking, fly-fishing?”

“Guilty. But I’m a northerner at heart.”

“Anyway, can you please tell these mutual ‘friends’ of Pierce’s and yours to stop sharing updates? You’re doing so well...and, well, I’d hate to see that change.”

“It’s not Monique or Leslie.”



“Then who?”

“I thought you knew.” She looks around before whispering, “Annalette.”

“Annalette, your cleaning woman?”

“Shh! Quiet!” Sloane leans in, “Annalette is Pierce’s housekeeper most of the week. She comes to clean my place once a week.”

“And gives you dirt.”

“Well....”

“Sloane, it’s brilliant. Unhealthy but brilliant.”

“My mother’s idea. But it is, isn’t it? Now, where to for a quick coffee?”

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## Wendi Gone

A crisp, sunny fall morning, Wendi storms into the office and everyone scatters. Apparently, someone has woken up on the wrong side of the bed and is ready to raise hell this morning. Are the rumors true? There were whispers that one of the men in creative, who has been asked to wait too many times while Wendi used the men's room, registered a formal complaint with human resources. Rumor has it, he claimed, "Even as a gay man, the very first time I stepped into the women's room, you would have escorted me out of this building."

Human Resources has been on "Wendi Alert," salivating for something exactly like this. Because, despite all the tantrums—and shoes—she has thrown, stomachs she has upset and days she has ruined, they need a bonafide infraction to pin on her. The men's room visits have her within their grasp and they were not going to let this opportunity go by.

Wendi throws her *Women's Wear Daily* on Channing's desk, knocking over her assistant's cup of coffee. Through gritted teeth, she commands, "In my office. Five minutes."

Wendi crosses the threshold of her office and slams the door. Jules tries to decipher the cause of today's fit. She can't make out the words, just the hostility, behind the screaming going on next door. Just as suddenly as it started, it stops. Is this the quiet before the next storm? The eye of the hurricane? Jules doesn't dare peek her head out. The risk is too great. She dials Roy, who doesn't answer. She sends a quick email to Channing: What's going on? Channing responds: She's been called to the founder's office.

Impromptu meetings with the founder are usually short and not so sweet. Not a chance Jules will go anywhere near an enraged Wendi. Better to lay low and let her blow off some steam first. Jules continues to review her client list and the outstanding contracts.

There's a knock at her desk and Wendi clears her throat. Jules instinctly stands at the edge of her desk, unsure what to say.

"Here. Take this and finish it," Wendi says, handing her the many-times updated presentation that Jules has not been able complete to Wendi's satisfaction.

"You'd like me to manage this...again?" Jules asks, careful with words.

"Yes, I'm leaving. For good. Like, done, fired."

*Is this really happening?*

Jules nearly pinches herself. Proof positive there is a God. A benevolent God who has heard and answered her prayers. Tears begin to collect in Jules's eyes and one starts to roll down her cheek. Tears of joy that, thankfully, Wendi mistakes for tears of sympathy.

"Don't worry, Jules. I'll be fine."

"There's not a doubt in my mind, Wendi."

"Don't cry. This is for the best. I was ready for more. There's just no place for them to promote me here. I'm too big for this place."

"Of course, Wendi, you've done so much, they just don't know what to do anymore."

"Just one question. Do you think I'm a good manager?"

Jules responds by repeating the words she had shared with Wendi time and again and meant quite sincerely. "Wendi, I always said if you didn't kill me, you'd make me the best sales person out there. Looks like I survived, so that must mean only one thing."

This strikes a cord with Wendi, who seems pleased. After taking a few seconds to collect herself, a quick hug that feels genuine and a glance at her reflection in the window behind Jules—the gel-tipped nails through the black mane, freshening of Chanel lipstick, and lifting the cleavage to full potential in her Roberto Cavalli silk blouse—Wendi walks down the hall, head held high,

the security guard a few paces behind. And then she is gone.

Jules stands in the eerily quiet hallway. *Where is everyone?* She will be the one to share the news with the team. Nobody will believe it. She steps inside her office and sits at her desk, wondering if her over-active imagination is playing a trick on her. But, when she sees the general presentation on her desk, her fingers lightly caressing the linen cover, she knows it must be real. She looks up, to see Channing standing in front of her.

“Are you okay?”

Before Jules can answer, Channing adds, “Here comes Catherine.”

The founder arrives, followed by Channing and, as if on cue, Roy.

“We have made some changes today to demonstrate our dedication to this team’s success and happiness. I hope you understand we are committed to keeping you here, keeping this team functional and keeping it professional.” She asks if there are any questions and then smiles as she exits.

And, like that, it is over. The house has finally fallen on the WWE. Her ruby red Christian Louboutins will haunt these halls no longer.

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## **Marathon Eve**

“Wow! This must be a special occasion! We’re on time!” Jules laughs as she greets Sloane with a kiss and a hug at the restaurant door.

“Actually, we’re all 15 minutes or more late, sorry!” Maria says, looking at her watch. She, too, greets Sloane with a peck on the cheek and a big embrace.

“Fifteen minutes is good for us! An apology and text are required only when you are 20 minutes late. An apology and a call if you are closer to 30 minutes,” Sloane explains, while pulling off her coat and unraveling her scarf.

“Please, with the two of us, you know we’re only actually on time if we are trying to beat each other to the bar of a steak house, playing the single, approachable woman. Right, Sloane?” Jules smiles at the hostess, who recognizes Jules as a regular.

“True, true. I confess,” Sloane agrees, pulling her hair out of her low ponytail. It falls around her face and down her back, sleek and straight. “Jules, I haven’t been here in ages. Great idea!”

“I thought it would be close and easy for my pasta dinner. You know every Italian place is probably packed tonight with all of the marathoners carb-loading. But our little Mediterraneo is probably off the beaten path for the tourists, at least.”

“I offered to make her one of my specialty pasta dishes, from my Italian cooking classes, but she wouldn’t hear of it,” Maria says, as she hands over her coat to the hostess and takes the seat along the window. “You have that spotless kitchen and that beautiful collection of All Clad pots and pans.”

“And the kitchen and those All Clad pots and pans are going to stay spotless and

beautiful because they will remain in pristine condition, from lack of use.”

“It’s a city thing, honey. There are specialists for everything and we leave the hard work to the professionals,” Sloane offers as an explanation, setting her bag on the floor, against her leg.

The girls settle into the table and within minutes, the young and swarthy Italian waiter, accent indicating he only recently arrived from Italy, greets them, hands them menus and takes their drink orders. Maria and Sloane order glasses of Pinto Grigio, Jules a large glass of water with extra lemon. He returns quickly, setting the glasses before them.

“I’m so looking forward to being able to order wine without thinking about my morning run,” she says, eyeing her oversized water glass.

“Cheers to that!” Maria offers, while clinking her glass with her friends’.

“Look me in the eyes when you do that or risk seven years of bad sex!” Sloane blurts out the reminder.

“Here’s to seven years of fabulous sex!” Jules suggests.

“Yes, seven years of fabulous sex for us all! And, a fabulous run for you, tomorrow!”

Maria toasts again, looking first at Sloane and then Jules, squarely in the eyes as she clinks their glasses.

“A fast and painless run for me and a fast and painless delivery for Madeleine tonight!”

“Sorry?” Sloane asks, clearly surprised.

“Right before I left my apartment, I heard from Madeleine. The baby is coming. She’s on her way to the hospital. She even remembered to wish me a good run tomorrow...even with all that is going on in her life right now!”

“She’s having it already? Isn’t she due later this month? Like around Thanksgiving,”

Maria chimes in, clearly the most knowledgeable at the table, about how a baby is considered full term if it goes until some certain week and how the lungs are fully developed by now and the auto-immune systems is mature. At worst, a slightly premature baby may spend a little time in the NICU. Sloane and Jules stop her when her experience as a mother and her expertise in all things medical and scientific starts going too far over their heads.

“Please, please, no more! There is no way we are following this, sweetie!” Sloane laughs.

“Bottom line: Madeleine and the baby will be just fine,” Maria says in summary. “When did the hard labor start?”

“I think it was really just within the last couple of hours. I only got her text that she was on her way to the hospital.”

“Then she’ll probably deliver by the morning. The doctors will give her a Caesarean if the labor goes too long. But, you know doctors abuse the C-section for deliveries in this country. That’s why we have such an astoundingly high infant mortality rate in this, one of the most medically advanced countries in the world.”

Sloane and Jules look at each other and Sloane gives her friend wide eyes. Sloane, like Jules, has recently visited Dr. Levine, so raising an eyebrow is not currently part of her non-verbal communication repertoire.

While Maria continues to wax poetic about best practices in delivering babies among OB/GYNs in the US, Jules interrupts, “Maria, honey. No disrespect, but please! The topic of childbirth is making me lose my appetite just as I’m about to order my first pasta meal in more than six months.”

“Sweetie,” Sloane adds as she drops her menu onto the table. “There is nothing scarier to a woman who wants a brood of little babies than hearing these battle stories. I already have my

legs crossed just thinking about it!” and does so to illustrate her point.

Maria smiles. “You two always were a little quick to get queasy. Sorry. It’s just so nice to talk with adults about adult topics.”

“We understand. Talk away but just no more gore about the true labor experience.” Jules opens her menu. “Now, what is everyone ordering? I think I may try the homemade tagliatelle with shrimp and artichokes in the marina sauce.”

“You’re not *really* going to eat pasta, are you, Jules?” Sloane asks, with sincere concern.

“Yes, Sloane. A full order, too. And I will enjoy every bite without an ounce of regret. I am running 26 miles tomorrow. I’m meant to eat carbs!”

“Okay, if you must,” Sloane says under her breath, picking up her glass of Pinot Grigio and taking a sip.

As Maria begins to open her mouth, Jules interrupts, “I sense a lecture about how carbohydrates turn into fuel, delivered by our own Maria Giannopoulos.” She and Maria exchange smiles across the tops of their menus.

Jules indulges in a full order of pasta, Maria tries the wood-oven grilled pizza with vegetables and Sloane maintains her healthy and low-fat diet with grilled chicken, roasted vegetables and salad, dressed only in lemon juice. The conversation turns to Jules’s final preparation for the marathon.

“Have you downloaded the app and started tracking me? You’ll be able to track me throughout the course.”

“That’s amazing! I need to get these chips on my girls’ shoes!”

“Isn’t it fantastic? That way, you can enjoy your morning, then come cheer me as I run up First Avenue. That stretch is supposed to be especially tough. I’ll probably be really feeling the



fatigue and it's a long, steady and painful incline the whole length of Manhattan. The only thing worse than hills are long, steady inclines. I will be so happy to have you there!"

"And we agreed to meet on the west side of the street, yes?" Sloane confirms.

"Yes, because the last thing you want to do is run through the onslaught of people. If, for whatever reason, you need to cross First Avenue, which I don't suggest, then you ought to run diagonal, like when swimming out of a rip tide." Jules looks at her friends and sees blank though enthusiastic looks on them both. She adds, "Don't worry, you won't be running across anyway."

"No, we won't, so we'll just look for you on the west side of First Avenue at 66<sup>th</sup> Street, just a block down from the playground. Maria, I know where we are going, so don't worry."

"Oh, and Maria, you may want to act as the spotter. Sloane, you may get vertigo, watching all the people coming at you. It really can make you dizzy."

"Maria, you are the official spotter then. I definitely don't want to get sick and miss seeing our marathon girl!"

Maria finishes her pizza, Sloane is playing with the food, half of her entree remains on her plate, and Jules sets her fork down.

"Mmm, that was delicious," she says as the waiter moves in to clear the table.

"Nothing like a leisurely paced dinner," Sloane mentions. "Would anyone like to join me for a cappuccino?"

"I'll have one. As long as it's decaffeinated," Jules replies.

"Not me! Though I will have an herbal tea. Even the littlest bit of caffeine will keep me up all night," Maria says, then picks up her bag and starts riffling through it.

"What are you wearing for the big day?" Sloane asks, speaking to Jules but distracted by Maria.

“Running shoes that I have broken in during the last few months and my favorite running clothes. You never want to wear anything new so no surprises on the course.”

“Well, we hope you’ll wear this!” Sloane says, as she pulls a wrapped package out of her bag and hands it across the table to Jules.

“It’s from all three of us,” Sloane says, with a verbal nod to the absent Madeleine.

“Jules, I hope you enjoy it, even if you can’t wear it tomorrow.”

Jules unwraps the ribbon and she pulls off the wrapping paper to find a Mizuno black running shirt.

“Oh! This is perfect! I’ll wear it with pride,” she says while reaching across the table to place thank-you kisses on her friends’ cheeks. She sits back down and tells them, “The fabric is supposed to be the best for keeping you dry. Mizuno is one of the best companies for sports gear.”

“And, the black is the best way to hide the sweat,” Maria adds.

“And you can never go wrong with an Italian designer,” Sloane says before turning her attention to the waiter. “Two decaf skim cappuccinos and a hot water, please.”

Maria, who has happily unearthed an herbal peppermint tea bags from her voluminous purse, adds, “I have my own tea bag.” The waiter smiles politely in response.

“This will be my new lucky shirt! Like the one we shared in London, do you remember that?”

“You know, I think I may still have that shirt. Somewhere in my basement,” Maria admits.

“Of course you do! You keep everything! And have it catalogued,” Sloane teases her.

“God, I so loved that shirt! We would fight over it. What was it? White cotton button

down?”

“It was eyelet. That’s what made it so sweetly sexy. A white cotton shirt with just the tiniest bit of skin showing through,” Maria remembers.

“I remember meeting Mark in that shirt. Once I told him about how we considered it the lucky shirt, I couldn’t wear it in front of him anymore.”

“Speaking of the Slimey Limey, have you spoken with him lately?” Sloane asks.

“Actually, I have,” she says with a smile.

“Do tell, you little hold out!” Sloane encourages.

“How did I not know about this?” Maria wonders aloud.

“I don’t want to jinx it, but we’ve been talking regularly lately. And it feels... good.

Really good. He was trying to come through New York this past week, but he couldn’t arrange it. But soon we are going to have a ‘proper date,’” she adds before taking a sip from her water glass.

“That’s great!” Maria enthuses.

“Bravo, honey!” Sloane chimes.

“This is one date I’m really excited about, especially after all the frogs I’ve kissed.”

The group of people waiting for tables is growing at the bar, causing the waiters to try to rush the patrons at the tables a bit. The girls finish their drinks and bites of biscotti quickly. Jules reaches for the check when it is set on the table, planning to treat her friends to thank them for their support, but Sloane grabs it first.

“Please, my pleasure. It’s the least I can do for two of my oldest and dearest,” as she pulls her credit card out of her wallet, slips it into the check presenter and hands it to the lurking waiter.

“I only wish Madeleine could be here for a full, flat-mate reunion. Speaking of, have we

heard any updates?”

They all pull out their phones and check their texts.

“Nothing here,” Maria says.

“Nothing of interest here, other than I’m late for my date and a reminder of my yoga session in the morning,” Sloane adds.

“Then we all really should get going. But we’ll call you as soon as we hear from her,” Jules says to Sloane.

“Definitely! I’ll meet this guy for a quick little intro and still have a few chapters to read in *Light on Yoga* before I see my yogi in the morning so I’ll be up.”

The three are out the door and on the corner of a very busy Second Avenue, where Sloane is able to get a taxi within one change of the light.

“Please call me with news, no matter the time! I will keep my phone handy in case you hear.” She gives big hugs and hard kisses on the cheeks of both friends before sliding into the back of the taxi. “Maria call me when you get up. I scheduled an extra early morning session.” Looking at Jules, “Go get ’em, honey! I am so proud of you!”

The taxi driver, growing impatient, starts to accelerate and pulls away. Sloane waves out the window and turns to give a final wave out the back window.

“Now, let’s get you some rest!” Maria says, maternally.

“I would love to turn in. I’m sure I won’t get much sleep, but I’m already feeling incredibly anxious and at least I’ll feel relaxed and rested.”

“You know, I have something in my bag,” Maria offers. “Well, probably not a good idea...”

“You and those herbal tea bags!” Jules laughs.

“Uh, no, I’ve got something a bit more calming than chamomile. My doctor prescribed some mother’s little helper when the last was born, to help with the anxiety.”

“Really...you? Of all people?” Jules asks, genuinely surprised.

“Yes, the scandalous life of sex and drugs coming to a bedroom community near you!”

“And we thought the city is where the action is.”

They turn the corner and are at Jules’s building within a few minutes. Upstairs, Jules drops her bag and takes Maria’s coat. While Maria washes up in the bathroom, Jules puts on the teakettle and turns on Pandora. Since sharing the London flat, it’s not even asked, they always serve each other tea first thing in the morning and just before bed at night. Maria walks into the room, hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, stripped of her minimalist makeup, gently massaging gel—pure vitamin E squeezed out of the capsules—around her eyes. Jules heads to the bathroom to perform her twice daily dental ritual (brush, floss, rinse) and looks at the soaking tub, remembering the words of the Slimey Limey when she last visited, “You Americans rush everything. You don’t even know how to take a proper bath.” With his words in mind, she decides that a hot bath is very much in order.

“Maria!” she calls out through the door. “I would love a bath. Do you mind?”

“Please do! I am having some tea and going to read a few pages of my book...uninterrupted!” sounding genuinely pleased.

Jules turns on the water and pours Jo Malone’s Orange Blossom bath oil under the running water. The big bubbles immediately start to foam as she slips out of her clothes, leaving them in a pile on the black and white tile floor. She takes a couple of big fluffy towels and stacks them on the shelf around the tub before easing into the warm, bubbly water.

She reviews all that the last few months of training have meant to her: the commitment,

the discipline and the sacrifices. But more importantly, she recognizes how proud she is of herself, how strong she feels and how lucky she is to have friends cheering for her all along. And who will literally cheer her during the run. Even Madeleine, in the midst of giving birth to her baby, remembered Jules. How ironic, then, that it was Tom's disbelief in her abilities that prompted her to run in the first place. She remembers distinctly the conversation over dinner with his friends, when she first met Tom's best friend's new girlfriend. Richard had been gushing on and on about what a dedicated athlete Vickie was and how she'd run a number of marathons.

"I'd love to hear about it. I've always wanted to run a marathon," Jules confided.

"You?" Tom asked, with entirely too much surprise in his voice.

Jules looked at him. "Yes," she said flatly.

"I just don't see it."

She recalls being speechless. She just looked at him, probably the pain was apparent in her eyes. She hopes the anger was more obvious.

"I just don't see it." Those five little words hurt her. She feels her response even now, physically. She remembers remaining calm, even more quiet during the remainder of the dinner and the taxi ride home. She recalls turning her back to him that night when he got into bed with her, making it clear she was not in the mood to as much as sleep with her head on his chest, as she usually did. Probably he hadn't realized what he had done. And, at that point, perhaps she hadn't, either.

Now, in the tub, as she looks at her legs—still a tad too big and shades too white but so powerful and strong they'd take her on a 26.2 mile tour of her city—she knows it. Tom showed her that he didn't believe in her, in her ability to realize her dreams. And, if he couldn't really

believe, how could he genuinely support her when she tried? She leans back suddenly, allowing the water to splash a bit over the side and stares at the ceiling. God, how could I have spent so much time mourning the loss of a man who didn't know me at all? Who would doubt me rather than encourage me? Everyone loves a cheerleader, because a cheerleader tells you, no matter what, "You can do it!" And if you fail, they still cheer, "You tried! Better luck next time!" But they never say, "I just don't see it."

And just like that, she realizes she already has three of the most amazing cheerleaders screaming their lungs out for her, every step of the way. Not just during her run, but all the time. Her cheerleaders. She jumps out of the tub, more bubbly water splashes over the side, and pulls on her robe. She finds Maria, reading her book on the fainting couch and squeezes onto the foot of it.

"Thank you, Maria. You have so much going on with your family and I cannot imagine what it took for you to be here. But, it means so much to me. If there's anything I can do that would mean as much to you as this does to me...."

"Is that an offer to babysit my girls?" She jokes because she sees Jules on the brink of getting highly emotional. "Jules, you listen, burning who knows how many cell batteries, when I lock myself in the bathroom and confess that sometimes the little darlings drive me crazy. You talked me off the ledge when I was convinced my husband was having an affair because some woman misdialed and called my house by mistake. And suggested I stop being a martyr and get some help with keeping the house and raising the girls. You were the only one to tell me my feather earrings were a bad idea when hitting the London clubs. And, you helped me pull on my tightest jeans with a wire hanger when I didn't have the strength to do it myself. I know you will be amazing tomorrow and I wouldn't miss it. Plus, this is so good for me, too. I need to start

taking care of myself again and that means being someone other than Mommy, if even for 36 hours.”

“Thanks, Maria. Now, speaking of Mommy, how do we check on the new Mommy in our group?”

“What about *her* mother?”

“We could try. But, I believe she’s en route from the west coast. There must be someone closer to the action...you know, Peter from Cape Cod? His father is a prominent doctor who works out of the same hospital Madeleine is going to deliver. I wonder...”

“Do it! Don’t even give it a second thought, just call him!”

“You’re right! I will!”

She finds her cell phone and dials Peter’s number. He picks up after the second ring.

“Howdy,” he says, his tone revealing nothing. No sense of surprise, pleasant, unwelcome or otherwise.

“Peter, it’s Jules. How are you?”

“I know. Good, thanks. Finally found my number?” She forgot how his minimal word answers throw her. Maybe that’s partly why she felt nervous about calling him after so much time has passed since he last called her and she didn’t return his call. “Ouch! But, I deserve that. Sorry, I just got caught up in things...”

“It’s alright. How are you?”

“I’m great, thanks,” she says, sounding happy and upbeat. “I’m calling because I need to ask a bit of a favor, actually. You see, it’s really more about asking if I could ask your father’s help on something, professionally.”

“You want my father to deliver a baby?”



“Well, no. I mean no! I’m not having a baby,” she corrects him immediately. “But you may remember my friend is, the one with the house on the Cape?”

“The one you wanted me to give an estimate to, after the work had already been done?”

“Right, that’s the one. She’s having a baby at your father’s hospital. She went into labor early and we’d love to get an update. I was planning to be there, but she went so early that the scheduled plans are, well, clearly no longer possible. And I haven’t heard from her in hours and I’d really love to know how she’s doing.”

“You know these things can sometimes take a little while.”

“Yes, I know but I don’t know who is with her and I would love to know everything is going well. It’s her first and she’s early and I’m supposed to be there, and her mother is supposed to be there and....”

“Jules, listen. It’s okay. She’s at Beth Israel?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Okay, I’ll give him a call and see what he can find out. This time, I know you’ll return my call,” he adds, a little dig at how she had let the ball drop, months back.

“I’d really, really appreciate it. Call no matter the time.”

“I always do.”

Jules was about to hang up when she hears him speaking again.

“Oh and Jules?”

“Yes, Peter?”

“Maybe you were right, not to call. It’s just I liked—like—being with you but don’t know how to compete with New York and your lifestyle. I just didn’t see you leaving Manhattan and your fashionable friends and cool clubs and new restaurants and your Prada behind.”

“Maybe you have me all wrong. Maybe I’m just as low key as the next girl, Peter.”

“Who wears Prada shoes to dive bars?”

“Okay, appropriate footwear that was not, I admit. Ralph Lauren would have been so much better,” she jokes. “But, I don’t know if the Cape is a place I could call home. Still, I should have called to discuss your invitation to visit. I’m sorry.”

“Let me get back to you about your friend. And, maybe when you come visit her, you’ll let me make you dinner?”

“That would be nice, Peter. I’d like that.”

“Stay tuned,” and this time, he hangs up.

Maria overhears most of the conversation and looks at Jules as she enters the living room.

“Okay, that was a little more than getting the update on the baby.”

“I’m glad we sorted that out. If I didn’t know any better, I would swear that guy is spending some time on the couch.”

“Shouldn’t we all? I love going to a therapist now. One hour every week to talk about myself without interruption. It is heaven!”

Maria puts on her pajamas and Jules, her yoga-style pants and top, to prepare for bed. The marathoner-to-be reviews all of the items she has laid out for tomorrow: her number, her safety pins, clothes, including the new lucky shirt from her friends, perfectly broken in sneakers, Body Glide for those quick-to-chafe areas, and all the drinks and energy bars, already prepared, including the flat Coca Cola and the Gatorade, watered down 50 percent. She then checks the two alarm clocks and her iPhone to make sure the morning alarms are all set, not that she expects to sleep a wink that night. As she turns down the lights in the living room, her phone rings.

“Is it your alarm?” Maria asks.

“It’s Peter!” Jules shares excitedly, after looking at the screen.

“Hi! Any news?” Jules listens briefly and then breaks into a full grin.

“A boy, delivered at 8:34! They ended up doing a Caesarean and both mother and baby are fine!”

Maria and Jules beam, proud new aunts.

“Julian Mario Sloan?” She laughs. “Yes, got them all. Thanks, Peter. I really do appreciate it. And, yes, I’ll let you know when I will be heading north.”

Jules ends the call and puts the phone on the bedside table. “Maria! Madeleine’s a mother now!”

“And, she named him after us!” Maria says, obviously welling up.

“Isn’t it just such an honor?” She hesitates before realizing, “And you had four girls and not one was named after any of us!” before clobbering her friend with one of the pillows piled on her bed. The two climb between the sheets, together deliver the happy news to a very excited Sloane and wish each other sweet dreams before turning out the light.

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## **Marathon Sunday**

The first Sunday of November, the very day Jules has been preparing for, literally for months, has arrived. At 5 am sharp, she has been awake and watching the arm of her clock circle for nearly an hour, willing herself back to sleep. She has finally given up on any more rest and turns off all alarms.

With Maria soundly asleep next to her and enjoying a rare good night's rest, Jules crawls out of bed so not to disturb her and tugs gently on the duvet to cover her friend's bare shoulders. With her countless obligations at home and all the coordination it took to join for the marathon festivities, Maria managed to spend the eve of and full marathon day with Jules, so as not to miss any of it. Jules smiles at her friend's dedication.

She leans on the windowsill, feeling the cold air tickle her wrists through the one-inch gap she leaves the window cracked this time of year. The sky looks promising, clear and blue. The forecast had called for ideal conditions and Jules is relieved it appears that every forecast she'd checked obsessively, every hour, was right on target.

Her stomach is already aflutter with butterflies and she tries to calm herself by pretending this morning is like any other. She heads to the kitchen and pours a large glass of water, room temperature, to get a head start on the day's hydration. She drinks it down in one swig and pulls out the makings of her high-energy, low-stomach-upset breakfast: oatmeal, bananas, cinnamon, peanut butter and a dash of almond milk. She heads to the bathroom and showers to wake herself.

*Just another Sunday run. Do not make yourself anxious,* she repeats her morning mantra.

Post-shower, she goes through her typical morning product routine. Crème de la Mer

gently massaged into her face, Neutrogena Sesame Oil slathered all over her legs. It's ritual as a calming technique. The specialty products like Body Glide, strategically placed Moleskin and the like are to be donned closer to race time. She pulls on the clothes she laid out the previous night: black sports bra, wicking shirt in white, black Capri-length running pants and her favorite running shoes and socks along with her trusted watch and heart monitor. She vowed not to try anything new but made an exception for the shirt her friends gave her, for good luck. Otherwise, she won't experiment and learn of chaffing or blister-inducing gear on the big day. She packs her water belt, Goo and bottles of Coke, now sans gas, as well as her number, safety pins, ferry pass and phone, filled to capacity with her favorite running tunes.

"How are you feeling, marathon girl?" Maria asks, surprising Jules who, so focused on running through her mental check list, did not hear her friend enter the room.

"Great! And nervous as hell, Maria." She drops her last things in and pulls on the nylon cord to the navy blue TCS backpack.

"I bet you are! But you are going to be a superstar, Jules," taking her by the hands and looking into her eyes. "You know that, right? You are going to absolutely shine and I will be there to cheer you along the way!"

*Maria's genuine enthusiasm and support make her so perfect as a mother, Jules thinks.*

"Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to be here for me."

"Not at all! Plus, I haven't felt this rested since before the little darlings were born. I bet you didn't sleep a wink, though. Should I make us our morning tea? A cup of English Breakfast? Or should you pass on our morning ritual today?"

"Afraid none for me this morning. But I am happy to share some oatmeal medley with you. This is quickly becoming one of my favorites." Jules starts ladling the oatmeal into the bowls

before Maria takes over.

“Run, I cannot. Oatmeal, I can. In my sleep. Let me make this for you and you go do what it is you do before this event.”

“You are so good to me, Maria. I have about 20 minutes before I need to leave to get downtown to the Staten Island ferry and face this monster. Head on,” Jules says as she fills the teapot with water, sets a ceramic Italian mug on the counter and drops an English Breakfast tea bag into it. “The milk is already set out. Do you still drink it with sugar?”

“Sadly, I don’t drink a proper cup of tea anymore. My girls are a bunch of sugar junkies so I try to cut it out whenever possible. Even in my tea. The sacrifices.”

Jules runs to the bathroom, goes through her bag one last time and eats about half the bowl of delicious oatmeal that Maria has expertly prepared for her.

“It’s about time for me to go. Actually, it’s a bit early, but I’m so nervous, I feel like I need to just get going.”

Maria smiles and gives a quick hug. “Good luck, Jules! I’ve got my phone ready to track you! Sloane and I will see you at the corner here. One last big breath!”

Jules exhales and leans out of the hug, looks at Maria and says, “Thank you, Queen of Scheme.”

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As the taxi makes its way down the FDR Drive, the traffic particularly light and agreeable, Jules reviews the months of training, the morning runs, the early nights in to prepare for the early morning runs, the training sessions with Ramon throughout the process, the cold plunge she promised to sit in daily—even on the days she did not run—all the sacrifices and the rewards. Her body has never looked or felt better; thinner and leaner, yes, but more importantly, stronger. She feels strong. And she focuses on this strength, as much mental as physical, which will be crucial in the coming hours.

She pays the taxi driver, slides out of the back seat and stands in front of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, her blue card in hand. The other runners, people who are, surprisingly, of all ages, shapes and sizes, surround her. There is a mass of people, all dedicated runners, all marathoners. Jules is proud to be a part of this group. A quick flash of her pass is all that is needed to enter the ferry. She takes a seat near a window and is soon joined by a woman, Dani, a fellow New Yorker and first-time marathoner. As they chat, they discover they have run a number of the same New York Roadrunner events, which would explain why each looked familiar to the other. They also learn that they run at a similar pace and Jules is thankful to connect with a woman whose confidence is contagious. Before long, they are disembarking on Staten Island, heading for the corral starting point for blue runners.

Runners are everywhere, in various forms of pre-marathon preparation. Some enter into a pre-run zen by listening to music, others stretch or even jog in place. Judging by the queues, the most popular pre-race activity is one last trip to the bathroom. Jules and Dani pick a line and, while waiting, each drinks another bottled water.

“It’s more nerves than anything else,” Jules tells Dani.

“It’s like beyond important to hydrate, so keep drinking,” Dani agrees.

Finally, the announcer calls for blue runners. Jules has just dropped off her plastic bag of gear to be picked up after the finish. She wishes Dani good luck as they merge into the pool of people. With 50,000 runners, the New York City marathon is the largest in the world, and therefore starts in waves. The dramatic gun firing is replaced with a high-pitched beep indicating your chip has been introduced to the starting line sensor. They will meet and chirp again, hours later, in Central Park. When this reunion takes place is entirely up to the runner. Jules sets her watch as her feet cross the mats and she passes under the start line, decorated with an archway of balloons. She takes a deep breath.

*Yes!*

Crossing over the Verrazano Bridge, Jules reminds herself to take it easy. She remembers Ramon’s dark eyes staring into hers and hears his words from their talk last week.

“Jules, people will sprint down the bridge. Let them. They are fools. Watch your pace. You will run past them, walking, in a few miles.”

She focuses on keeping consistent as she feels the downward slope trying to seduce her into a faster pace. Her adrenaline still high, Jules enters Brooklyn and sees mile marker 2, along with cheering fans. She is sticking to the right side of the course, as she had promised her friends and colleagues. It provides comfort, too, knowing her place and not getting caught up in the temptation to jockey for position by switching lanes. She hears her name being called and smiles at being recognized. She scans the crowd and finds Samantha, a friend from her neighborhood, jumping up and down, cheering, “Yeahh, Jules! Go get ’em!” Jules hopes to see more friends with incredible energy and enthusiastic smiles to share along the course, especially 20-something miles later.



By mile 3, Jules is in her groove and getting lost in her music. She is listening to a mix that Jeremy, an intern from the office, had made specifically for her marathon run and she has been listening to during her taper runs. The dance version of “Let the Sunshine In” is helping her mood and her pace. When she passes the mile marker and checks her watch, she is surprised to see she has somehow managed to lose seven minutes off her time. Her targeted 10-minute per mile pace was realistic, even conservative, and would result in a very respectable four-and-a-half-hour, first-time marathon. And, the math for only three miles was easy enough to compute at 30 minutes. Still, she double-checks her wristband with the times listed, by mile, a cheat sheet to check her progress. How is it that her watch was reading 37 minutes? She guesses that she has been overly cautious so as not to get caught up with the faster runners and burn out too soon. She focuses on trying to make up the time, gradually, and not to over-exert too early in the run. For the next seven miles, she will try to make up some of the time: 30 seconds a mile is reasonable enough.

Brooklyn’s neighborhoods are a mix of young families recently relocated from Manhattan with those who had been in the borough long before the hipsters. Just before entering the Park Slope section, Jules sees mile marker 7 and checks her time. Still seven minutes behind. She focuses on the positive: her pace is consistent. But, still she wants to shave off those extra minutes. The various routes will merge ahead, just as they enter downtown Brooklyn. She knows this from having studied the course map. With more runners entering into the mix and more populated areas ahead, meaning more people cheering on, she is confident she will get back on track. Other than those seven minutes, the running is great.

*Doing great, looking strong, feeling good,* she encourages herself.

She grabs for one of her Coke-filled bottles on her belt, squeezing too hard as she pulls to

release it from the elastic strap. The cold soda squirts up and sprays onto her shirt and foams over onto her hand. Jules makes a mental note: stop at next water station to rinse off sticky Coca-Cola.

The stretch through downtown Brooklyn is a relief. The tree-lined streets are dotted with charming and trendy shops in quaint buildings alongside the townhouses and walk-ups. They provide enjoyable, almost movie-set like pretty scenery as she runs past. Most importantly, the path is flat.

She passes a little café, the tables set outside on the sidewalk. She can picture Maria and Sloane enjoying brunch in Manhattan. The two would be excitedly talking, almost over one another, catching up even more after last night's dinner and too long an absence. She imagines them enjoying their conversation after the plates are cleared, over fresh cups of English Breakfast tea, a habit developed in the Holland Park flat they all still shared. She loses herself in the image of them sitting at their London townhouse's kitchen table, surrounded by old, drafty windows, in clear view of their well-heeled neighbors on their way to work or delivering their uniformed children to private school. The flatmates usually spoke about the previous night's mischief: Sloane hitting the clubs with the international jet set, Madeleine seeing the newest play in the West End, Maria pining away for her college beau at home and Jules running around town with Mark and his crew, grateful her grades didn't transfer back to her home school. She enjoys losing herself in these memories of their program and has a deep sense of satisfaction that she still enjoys such strong ties to her flatmates, even after all these years and their wildly different life choices, as well as with the man with whom she felt an instant and deep connection.

So, when she runs along the right side of the course and spots someone in a white and soft pink hoodie trying desperately to dodge runners as she crosses the course, it takes a moment

to register. The woman, who probably doesn't realize she is taking her life into her hands by breaking the strides of a few dozen determined marathoners, looks like Maria. Jules squints her eyes to get a better look. Yes, *that is* Maria! The non-black, pastel-colored clothes worn on a crisp November morning and the schlep bag trailing behind give her away. And, there's Sloane, running along with her, dressed in her weekend favorite: black trench, AG jeans and expensive work boots, her auburn hair pulled back by her aviators, the rest bouncing daintily behind her. Jules pulls her earbuds out and starts waving her hands, running towards them and calling their names.

“Maria! Sloane! Over here!”

They turn towards the sound of her voice, their big smiles indicate when they spot her. They are still on the edge of the course and don't seem to recognize how they are creating a bit of a traffic jam for the runners along the right side of the course.

“Jules! Hi! Oh my God! We found you!” they scream, hugging Jules, who is completely thrilled by the surprise of them meeting her at this part of the course.

“I can't believe it! How did you two manage to get here?”

“We took the subway,” Sloane says, smug with the accomplishment.

“I'm impressed! Thank you! Thank you for being here!” she hugs them, oblivious to how her hair, wet with sweat around her face, must feel against their cool, clean and freshly made-up cheeks. She continues to pump her legs while standing in place to ward off cramping.

“You look great! How do you feel? How is it going?” they ask in a rush of questions.

“I feel great!” she says for herself as much as for them. “I'm a little behind on my time and my left leg is starting to ache, but nothing to worry about. Thank you, both. You have no idea,” the tiniest crack in her voice indicates she is feeling overwhelmed by a sudden rush of

emotion.

“Don’t stand around here talking to us! And don’t you dare start tearing up! Get going!”

Sloane encourages.

“Wait! You need to take these!” Maria digs through her oversized bag, stuffed with baby wipes, a bag of pretzels and a sticky pacifier. “We thought you might need them,” Maria adds, stalling, as she continues to look.

“You and that schlep bag, Maria!” Jules jokes.

“Yes, but finally I can justify it as a Mommy bag...wait! Here they are!” she announces as she holds up the two found items in victory. She stuffs the energy bar into Jules’s running belt and hands her the bottle of still cool Gatorade. “We’ll see you in Manhattan!”

“66<sup>th</sup> and First! West side of the street!” Jules reminds them as she turns toward the course. She can hear them yelling her name and cheers of encouragement as she starts a slow jog then picks up the pace. She feels an increase in the dull ache in her left leg, almost in protest of resuming the run, but she ignores it and merges into the runners away from the thickening crowd with homemade posters and banners in support of their friends and family members. She plugs her earbuds in, turns her music on and reminds herself that it’s just another Sunday run, just 18 miles left to do.

*Just another Sunday run. Just another Sunday run.*

She repeats her mantra silently. Just like that article in the *Times* said, a positive outlook gets you through the taxing times more easily. As Jules’s excitement grew as the marathon neared, she decided she would test this idea and treat this, the big run, like any other of the many long Sunday runs she had made over the last several months. She focuses, trance-like, on her breathing and is comfortably in her groove again.

*Those little schemers! How did they find me in Brooklyn? How did they even find Brooklyn? Sloane gets lost downtown. And, Maria is certainly no city girl. And, the subway!*

She tries to picture them on the subway, the two a bit wide-eyed in wonder while making sense of the maps, but she can't even imagine it. But, she had warned them over dinner to avoid driving on Marathon Sunday. The traffic in all the city's boroughs are a tangled mess and no taxi or Uber would dare to cross the bridge.

She remembers how well they played it off last night, Sloane telling Maria she would pick her up for a brunch in the neighborhood and then the triple-threat: manicure, pedicure and massage at her favorite little salon that is open on Sundays.

"Ah...a relaxed manicure! Do you know I am lucky if I can apply a coat of clear while waiting to pick up one of my girls from one of my dozen car-pooling obligations?" She hopes they would still go.

She is relaxed in her run, feeling strong and losing herself in her thoughts and her music. She knows that "true" marathoners turn their noses up at it. In their opinions, these are performance enhancers. They argue that the sound of the runner's own breathing and the cheering of the crowd are the only sounds a person needs to get through 26.2 miles. Jules happily takes the handicap, sans any shame whatsoever, and turns up the volume.

With the big, sweating bottle of Gatorade in hand, and her drink belt fully loaded with alternating bottles of flat Coca Cola and watered-down Gatorade, Jules decides to take a few swigs of the cherry sports drink before she'll ditch it. Drinking while running, even with the sports drink top, nearly always results in spillage. This time is no different. She wipes her chin with the back of her hand and instinctively looks down to see if the front of her shirt is still clean. The shirt's color and wicking material keep it a secret from her fellow runners and the thousands

of spectators she will pass along the marathon path that she is drenched in sweat. She loves that her friends were thoughtful enough to carefully select a shirt that appeals to her sense of vanity. Jules looks an absolute mess while running: flushed checks, wet hair sticking to her face and nape of her neck and quite sweaty. She doesn't perspire, but full-on sweats. A shirt that helps to conceal her active sweat glands is a blessing. With her teeth, she tears at the wrapper of the Luna Bar that Maria was so thoughtful to bring and bites off a small piece. The bar is chewy, sticky in almost a saltwater taffy way, the taste neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The bars are an acquired taste and though she doesn't mind them, she certainly only uses them for their energy-boosting benefit. She takes yet another bite of the bar and washes it down with the Gatorade before deciding to toss the two on the side of the road. While in refueling mode, she pulls out one of her vanilla Goos, which tastes like white frosting from the tube, and gulps down about half of the package. Within minutes, she feels the effect of the combination of energy bar, gel and sports drink. For the next four miles, her stomach is horribly upset.

Is it the Luna Bar? The full-strength Gatorade? The Goo? Probably a bit of the three. Plus, Jules recalls, she had gone through some of her flat Coca Cola as well as a bottle of the watered-down Gatorade. Not to mention the hydration stops en route, in which she took big gulps of cold water and full-strength Gatorade. Her belly feels uncomfortably full and even looks bloated.

*More runners suffer from hyper-hydration than dehydration. Why am I eating and drinking like this? I never eat this early in a run. What the hell am I doing? At mile 6 and I've already had probably 2 ounces from the Gatorade...or is it more like 4 ounces? And then the two bottles off my belt. No, that's okay. At the water stations, I probably had another 8 ounces. Wait, so it was 4, no 6 ounces, of Gatorade and 2 bottles at probably 4 ounces each which makes*

*it...makes it what?*

“Jules! Looking strong! How are you feeling?” She looks over to see Dani.

“Hey, Dani! How are you feeling?”

“Never better!” she says, with a full smile on her face. She looks like she genuinely means it, too. “How about you?”

“Bit of a stomach ache. Which I usually don’t get when I run.”

“Could be nerves,” Dani offers.

“I was nervous at the start. But, I was fine until the last mile or so.”

“At mile 7? Did you do anything different?”

“I think too much Goo, energy bars and drinks.”

“You have to pace yourself. You may not be able to handle all the sugar.” They run together for a few minutes, without saying anything.

“Do you mind if we just run together for a little bit and not talk? I’d like to think for a little while.”

“You got it!” Dani flashes another big smile, revealing a distinct gap between her two front teeth, before donning her own earphones, to indicate that the conversation is over. For now, anyway.

Jules starts to speak but catches herself before saying, “I feel like I may get ill. How will I get to the end feeling like this?” She doesn’t want to bother Dani, after just suggesting some quiet time. And, she knows that vocalizing it will almost certainly make it so. Instead, she reassures herself.

*You may be a little queasy right now, but you will finish this run! This may just be another Sunday run but it’s the most important Sunday run to finish, ever.*

*All of those early morning runs in the park, running as the sun came up. All the dinners, parties, beach bonfires, work events, leaving everything early to skip the last round and be able to get up early. Of being the only one waking early at the share house and returning from a 10-mile run while the rest of the house was still asleep. All the dedication, the discipline and determination to get this far...I have no time for stomach cramps!*

*Sprinters are born, marathoners are made. Where did I read that? And, now, I am a marathoner. What “made” me a marathoner? Once I started training, I just followed the program. But, why did I start? Sure, I’ve been to plenty of marathon Sunday parties and swore over a Bloody Mary or a few Rose Kennedys that “That’ll be me one day.” And, yes, I’ve been a casual runner for years. But, running the marathon, why now? This one is for me. Just for me.*

*It made me feel strong physically when I felt weak. Or when my day felt like nothing more than another round of revenue reviews. Eggshell walking. Bullet dodging. It helped me mend my broken heart...just when my friends’ eyes were glazing over if I spoke of heartbreak one more time. I feel strong again. I am in control of my body, my emotions, my life. I am strong and I will push forward. To the finish line. And the future. And it may get scary and painful and include some stomach pains. But no way some silly sugar overdose is going to stop me!*

And before she can stop herself, Jules vomits.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand before looking up to see, with great relief, that nobody seemed to notice. Other than Dani, who, thankfully, is running along Jules’s other side and missed the actual vomiting, though she probably notices that Jules is no longer running and is instead wiping her mouth. She hands Jules a bottle of water.

“Here, rinse your mouth out. Are you okay?”

“I guess,” Jules says wiping the tears from her eyes. “Getting sick always makes me cry.



Maybe I feel sorry for myself.” Jules cups her hand, pours the water into it and then splashes her mouth and chin with it.

“You probably needed to rid yourself of all of the extra sugar. Try drinking some of the water.”

“I don’t know. I’m going to give it a little while and see if I feel better. Don’t let me hold you up, I’ll catch up with you!” Jules adds, trying to sound cheerful and confident.

“Are you sure?” Dani looks at Jules and sees her weak smile. “I have a better idea. Let’s walk for one minute—I’ll time it—then we’ll start to run.”

“Okay, one minute.”

Dani distracts Jules from her stomach issues by telling her about her friends who have flown in from Los Angeles, her hometown, to cheer her on. Jules shares how her two flatmates, from her study abroad program, are here and the third would be, if she hadn’t just given birth to her first baby.

“Wow! How nice!”

“Yeah, all by herself, too. And I thought I was having a rough few hours!” Jules looks over at Dani. “Shall we go?”

“Are you ready? Let’s do it!”

And, like that, the two slowly pick up the pace to a casual jog, light on their toes and then into a full stride run. Jules is feeling tentative but increasingly more confident as she and her running companion pass mile marker 8.

*Nearly a third there, Jules thinks. The tough bit’s ahead but one mile at a time.*

With a full 13 miles of the 26.2 course, Brooklyn is a bear. Jules runs through the artist-cool Williamsburg sections and Greenpoint, with its old Polish butcher shops and bakeries and

chic new apartments, and realizes that the road starts a steady incline, leading to the Pulaski Bridge. And, even though hills typically crush her—all the flat roadways of the Hamptons had spoiled her—seeing the halfway point gives Jules the extra adrenaline to attack the foot of the bridge. She bids a fond farewell to Brooklyn, the second of the five boroughs she will run today, and looks forward to greeting Queens.

Queens is a mix of factory buildings, power lines and blue-color, two-family homes, a fascinating slice of New York City for Jules, who isn't too familiar with the area. A large, organized cheering section greets her and her fellow 10-minute milers as they approach mile marker 14. She is feeling strong and encourages Dani to go at her own pace, though she can still see her bright red top ahead, when the course's slight changes in elevation allow. The few miles in Queens pass quickly. Running over the Queensboro Bridge is one mile long and covered. In the darkness, the air feels a little cooler, perhaps also from the rushing East River below. The group as a whole picks up the pace. They are on the other side of the halfway mark and ecstatic to arrive in Manhattan.

The energy is immediate. First Avenue is alive. The streets are lined with hordes of fans, cheering, holding banners, waving flags, calling out names of those who printed or pinned their names on their shirts. Live musicians are performing Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" and Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run." The bars are open, their drink specials and good wishes to the runners printed on large banners, sponsored by every beer and vodka brand imaginable. They are packed with customers, watching for their friends on the TV screens broadcasting the race and running out, drinks in hand, when they anticipate them approaching. The city cheers for each and every runner.

Jules turns off her music and pulls the earbuds out. She doesn't want to miss a thing. She

moves to the west side of the street, in anticipation of meeting Sloane and Maria. She smiles as the faces in the crowd offer her their big smiles and loud encouragement.

Looking good! Stay strong! Whoo-hooo!!

She runs north on First Avenue, past her former grocery store, Food Emporium, tucked under the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge on her right and the gourmet cheese and coffee house a few blocks farther. On her left, the loud Mexican place where she dropped a full margarita, and a bit farther, the Korean nail salon she tried once but never again after the terrible razor incident that left her hobbling for days and forced her to take a running hiatus. The East Side sidewalks, usually quiet this time on a Sunday morning, are teeming with people. Today, Jules sees the scene as a runner, not a spectator. Everything is familiar and the familiarity is comforting. She speeds up as she approaches the 66<sup>th</sup> Street intersection, where O’Flanagan’s bar is and her friends wait. She scans the crowd, probably a dozen people deep at this point in the course.

“JULES! JULES!”

She hears Maria’s voice above the crowd’s cheering. Sloane is next to her, glass in one hand, waving furiously with the other.

“Jules, you look great! But, so wet and thirsty! Care for just a sip of my Bloody Mary?” Maria asks as she offers the glass of thick, spiced tomato juice, garnished with a celery stick. She has obviously enjoyed a few of the non-virgin variety already.

“I’d love one, maybe after the finish.”

“You know, there have been runners coming into the bar, ordering a round of beer then going back to the run? It’s just fantastic!” Sloane shares.

“Jules, you are doing great! How are you feeling?” Maria asks, always the nurturing mother, even after a few cocktails.

“A little achy, but it’s nothing. I got sick a little ways back there, though.”

“Eww...,” Sloane says with a laugh. “Like sick to your stomach sick?”

“I know. But, I’ve been fine for about 10 miles now. A really great woman helped me out and...” Jules realizes it’s been miles since she last saw Dani. “Anyway, I am so glad you are here, but I better keep moving so I don’t cramp. See you at the finish?”

“At the finish!” Maria and Sloane chime in, clinking their glasses with the water bottle Jules picked up at the hydration zone.

“On the left, okay? I’ll see you there!”

*The finish! It feels so real now. This is what it feels like to run a marathon!*

The remainder of Manhattan goes by in a blur of cheering fans, loud music and pure, good energy. Jules knows she can and will make it. As she searches the backs of those in front of her for Dani’s red sports top, she starts looking at the runners alongside her. A woman with a “Susan’s 70 today” t-shirt, her gait more a shuffle, garnering lots of happy birthday wishes. A pair of British friends, trailing union jack flags behind them. A young couple running together; his pinny announcing, “She said YES!” And, a Dutchman, his head to toe bright orange declaring his national pride. She is proud to be a part of this group. These marathoners.

As she continues north on First Avenue, Jules enters Harlem, a neighborhood she loves to visit. She’s been to Mark Ingram’s impeccably decorated brownstone for his famous, fabulous New Years Day party. Too often, she passes through, on the way to the airport or the Hamptons. It is a different experience entirely to see it on foot. The crowds start to thin, and she knows the tough patch is ahead: hitting mile marker 20 in the very desolate Bronx. This is where most runners hit the infamous wall.

Crossing Willis Avenue Bridge into the Bronx is like running in a completely different

event. She is crashing from the high of First Avenue's rush. She alternates between walking and running on the bridge, the inclines more challenging than ever. A sprinkling of spectators lines the boulevards and offers claps and cheers. But, it's too quiet, lonely even. It gives her too much time to think and she starts to feel the effects in her feet, knees and up to her hips from the constant pounding on the pavement of all those miles behind her. Only one mile in the Bronx and, as she had been warned, this was the hardest mile of the race yet.

*Just past mile 20. I've been running at least 200 minutes. Two hours and wait...look at your watch. Don't try to do the math. Okay, 3 hours and 43 minutes. Which is 180 plus 43 which is...what? I don't know.*

She remembers that she has her split times on her wrist, ready for when she grows tired and confused. She reads her little chart. She is meant to be at mile 20 at 3 hours and 20 minutes. She is running 24 minutes behind, more than a minute per mile. She realizes she is walking. And, even though she makes the realization, she doesn't care. She cannot get herself going again. Three minutes. Just walk for three minutes then start to run again.

She walks along, watching as some runners push through, their faces twisted in pain. Others start to walk like she does. One man stands off to the side, urinating. A woman next to her is crying. She wishes she had taken some Advil before the run. Her joints are aching. She looks at Yankee Stadium, on her right, realizing she never noted the time at which the three-minute hiatus began. She decides, instead, on a landmark. That building up ahead, that will be her starting point.

"Five miles, people! Five miles to go! Move it!" someone yells as they approach the Madison Avenue Bridge.

*Five miles left! Just another Sunday run. Just another Sunday run.*

Though limping, she starts to run. Manhattan, and the finish line, are just on the other side of this bridge.

*Attack! Attack! Attack this hill!*

She hears Ramon's words in her ears. She tries to pick up speed, but is content with any forward motion, anything more than a walk, regardless of pace.

*Ramon's probably already done eating his banana and bagel. He'll be home, showered and dressed to go out by the time I hit the finish line. But, I will get to that finish line, no matter the time!*

Before long, Jules reaches Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile. The spectators are out in droves, cheering. Some of the runners are still able to run and look strong. Many are making best efforts to continue to run, but it's more of a shuffle, their bodies unable to match their will. Though this avenue seems flat enough in a taxi or during an afternoon stroll, Jules feels the incline and curses it. As she passes the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and its perfectly manicured lawns, she hears someone calling her name. She turns off her music, scans the crowd but doesn't see a familiar face. She thinks maybe she imagined it.

*No! There it is again! A man's voice, calling my name.*

*God? Is that you?*

"Jules! Over here!"

Jules breaks into a big smile, the first since mile 17, when she sees Roy, looking very dapper with his Ray Ban aviators, his white t-shirt and navy running pants. He is scanning the avenue, looking for race officials and police officers, as he jumps the barricade to enter the race.

"Keep moving," he says, as he starts to jog along side her. "I had nothing better to do today, so I thought I would go for a little run." He joins her, his keys and cell phone jangling

against each other in his pocket.

“Oh, God, Roy! You have no idea how happy I am to see you!”

“Jules, don’t take this the wrong way but you look like shit. I figured I better bail you out, like I always do.”

“Thanks, Roy. Only you could get away with saying that.”

“Nah...you look a little beat up, but you are still going strong.”

“I am really shattered right now. But, it’s weird, I feel okay at the same time.”

“Yeah, well you’ve got my company for two miles. Once we hit the bottom of the park, I am ducking out and you are on your own for your moment of glory. I hear they pull out renegade runners and beat the hell out of them.”

“Two miles is perfect. Thank you!”

“Want me to sing some of my best karaoke songs for you? A little Elton ‘Tiny Dancer’?”

“Nothing would be better, Roy, than your off-key singing.”

They enter Central Park and it genuinely starts to feel like just another Sunday run, but with thousands of cheerleaders. She has run Central Park’s loops and paths for years and even more so since she began her formal training. And, she has Roy to keep her company and sing his best renditions of his favorite songs between catching his breath. He hasn’t run in years, making his gesture that much more thoughtful. The only odd bit is running down this path, in the opposite direction of how it is typically run. But, she is thankful, especially for Cat Hill, which is often the scene of killer sprint drills with Ramon. As they make their way around the bend and are about to exit at Central Park South, Roy turns to her—now, very sweaty himself—and says,

“You’re there, JK. I knew you could get there on your own but thanks for letting me be a part of it.”

“Thanks, Roy,” she is taken either by his kind words or the overwhelming emotion of being about to complete her first marathon. Her eyes sting from the tears that are welling up.

“Careful now, Kennedy. You have to see the road ahead, at least for just another mile. I’ll see you at the finish.”

She nods her head, knowing she is unable to talk without choking on her words, which would make her lose her breath. After a quick hug, he drops off and heads for a break in the stanchions, the crowd absorbing him immediately. A little more than a mile left. Everyone is cheering louder than ever.

*I know this park, I know this route and I know that around the corner is...yes, there it is, the finish line!*

Jules runs towards and across the finish line, with Sloane and Maria cheering her on. Though she doesn’t actually see them, she knows they are there. She looks at her watch: 4 hours and 54 minutes, 17 seconds.

Suddenly, every emotion in her body for the past 26.2 miles, every tear, every smile, come rushing out. She is crying so hard, she can barely breathe.

*I’ve done it! Every early morning run, every cramp, my sore knees, my black toenails, my sore hips...all worth it for that single moment when I crossed this line.*

In a dream-like state, Jules follows directions from race officials and volunteers. She collects her medal, feels a foil sheet being wrapped around her shoulders and continues up the park, where runners’ families and friends await. She sees faces in front of her, though recognizes none of them. Like the high-pitch shrill on an alarm clock that startles you awake in the middle of the night, an ear-piercing scream brings Jules back to reality.

“Oh My God! Jules?!”



Jules turns, expecting to see Sloane and Maria. Instead, Wendi, clad in a Roberto Cavalli leopard print silk blouse and sweater, oversized sunglasses in hand, stands before her. In her other hand, she carries a full bouquet of perfectly bloomed roses, dew appearing on their petals, like they had just been clipped from an outdoor garden. The juxtaposition of who she expected and who she discovered has been calling her name is startling. Jules wipes her tears and smiles.

“Wendi! What are you doing here?”

“I can’t believe it! Did you actually run the marathon?” Her freshly-glossed lips seem to move too slowly for the speed of the words.

“Yes. Yes, I ran the marathon.” It is the first time Jules says these words out loud. “But, what are you doing here?”

“Ugh, Scott. Scott decided he wanted to try to run it. But, look at how slow he is. Even you beat him.”

“That’s great! I mean, great that he is running it.”

“I guess. But, here,” she says, as she hands Jules the oversized bouquet of fragrant white roses. “You deserve them. He doesn’t even really like white roses. I bought them because they are my favorite.”

“I remember. And, thank you, Wendi. It’s very kind of you.”

Wendi suddenly reaches down into the pockets of her very tight and very dark jeans, reaching for her phone.

“Oh, shit! There’s his text. Scott just crossed the finish line and I missed it. I’ll have to have him run through it again so I can take photos.”

Jules laughs. “Congratulate Scott for me.”

And, Wendi is off, doing her best to run in her favorite Jimmy Choos, her black hair

shining in the November sunlight.

As Jules watches her run off, she catches out of the corner of her eye Maria and Sloane coming towards her, arms outstretched, smiles big, shrills high. The three embrace and Jules lets the emotions run out of her again. As they hug—deep, long embraces—Sloane looks to Maria for a sign and then tells Jules, “Someone else is here to surprise you.”

“Wendi? I already saw her.”

“Wendi? She’s here? No, this is far better!” Sloane and Maria turn, all smiles, to someone unseen by Jules.

Under a tree, full with flaming red leaves, is a man, walking toward them. Jules spots him and recognizes his silhouette, even as she must spy around the crowds of celebrating runners. He walks toward her, a bouquet of flowers in hand.

“Jules,” he says, as he approaches her. He gives her a full smile as looks at her, completely, before giving her a long-overdue hug.

“Slimey!” she says, into his ear.

He pulls back to look at her face, gives her a sweet kiss on the lips then hands her the bouquet.

“Well, these certainly don’t look up to snuff compared to your other suitor, but it was the best I could do, given the trip in from JFK took nearly two hours.”

“Oh! The traffic must be at a standstill with all the road closures for the marathon.”

“That it is.”

“And you didn’t offer me a ride from the Bronx, you thoughtless bastard?”

“I’m such a rude Limey, Jules!” he chuckles. “But it appears our timing is quite good, actually. Other than missing you cross the finish line.”

“Our timing is perfect.” She leans in and hugs him, oblivious to how she must look. And feel to his touch.

“I must be dashing off to your namesake airport now, Jules.”

“You aren’t staying? Not even for dinner?”

“Afraid not. I’ve got to get to London for some morning meetings. I imagine the traffic will be just as awful on the way out to JFK. But, I would love you to join me for dinner...,” he reaches into his blazer pocket, “in Blimey,” and hands her a British Air ticket jacket. Before she can respond, he gives her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Bye, Love. I’ll look forward to celebrating where it all began!” He heads in the direction of Central Park West, where his car and driver wait.

As Jules watches as he jogs off, Maria and Sloane step back in.

“Can you believe it, honey? We ran into him near the finish line. Is that fantastic timing?”

“Oh, that clever man. He asked me about the app for tracking me, pretending he would from home. He must have followed me along the course since he landed!”

“This is so romantic! And, you two are obviously still perfect together. It brings me back to our Portland Road days,” Sloane adds.

“Speaking of our London days, let’s go home and make a pot of tea. I’m sure you should bath in some Epsom salt, too.” Maria suggests.

“Ice bath! Brrrr!” she shudders dramatically. “But first, a toast! I have some chilling at home. Ready?”

Jules starts leading them north through the park’s winding paths and past celebrating exhausted runners. The three walk together, Jules in the middle, her limping growing more pronounced, with her friends on either side, arms around each shoulder to keep her post-race

wrap in place.

“Amazing what they do with foil these days,” Sloane teases.

“Yeah, I think metallic silver is my new color!” Maria stops, mid-step. “Do you hear that?”

“No, hear what?” Jules asks.

“I thought I heard someone calling.” They all stop and turn around.

“It must be those bionic mommy ears,” Sloane teases.

“No, she’s right.” Jules smiles as Mark approaches. He is running toward them with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot in hand.

“Hey, Jules, I nearly forgot!”

“Mark! Thank you!” He is about to hand her the bottle and then asks, “Mind if we open it right now?”

“Let’s!” Jules says. “I’d love it!”

He shakes the bottle for extra fizz before popping the cork. The girls laugh and squeal as he sprays the cold champagne all over them. Mark hands Jules the still-erupting bottle and she takes a big swig. He looks down a moment then, up at her eyes and moves quickly towards her. He kisses her so hard and fast, Jules doesn’t have a chance to respond, nor swallow the bubbly in her mouth, which she inadvertently spits out, some into his mouth. She swallows hard.

“Sorry, I wasn’t expecting that!” she says, wiping the champagne that has spilled down the front of her.

“Don’t apologize. I’ve wanted to do that for a very long time. And I wasn’t leaving without it.”

The bottle gets passed to Maria, then Sloane, who are looking at each other with raised

eyebrows. They hand the heavy, dripping bottle over to Jules, who takes one last swig, finishing its contents.

“To Jules!” they toast.

“To friends!”

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## **JFK**

New York is enjoying a White Christmas. Jules has just returned to her apartment from her parents' Christmas bunch. She is sorting through a few sweaters and putting the last of some prettily wrapped gifts in her carry-on. Her phone rings.

“Merry Christmas, honey! Or are we saying Happy Christmas now?”

“Merry Christmas, Sloane!”

“Are you ready? I'm almost at your building.” Sloane asks, the excitement in her voice obvious.

“Look at you! So prompt, Sloane! I'm pulling on my trench now. I'll be right down!” she says before tossing her phone into her bag, checking once more to ensure she's packed her passport and taking a look around her apartment before walking out the door.

As Jules steps off the elevator, Isias greets her with a big smile while swiftly and gently taking hold of her bags.

“How was your Christmas, Jules? And, thank you for the gift.”

“You're very welcome! Thank you! My Christmas was very nice. I was down in Sea Girt with my family. Did you enjoy your holidays?”

“I did, thank you. Off again? Where to?”

“Back to London,” she says with smile.

“How long will you be gone this time?” he asks as he exits the building and heads for the town car, idling at the curb. He drops her bags into the trunk while Jules waves to Sloane, in the back seat.

“Ten days. A little holiday visit. And a bit of flat shopping.”

“I hope you’re not leaving us, Jules?” he asks with sincere concern in his voice.

“Not just yet, Isias! But until I do, I will be visiting my beau monthly.”

Isias opens the car door and Jules slips into the back, next to Sloane. She takes her carry-on bag before thanking Isias for his help. He smiles at Jules and her friend.

“No trouble at all. Safe travels! Happy New Year!” They wave as the driver pulls away from the curb.

“Hi sweetie! Merry, merry! Pack all the Burberry you own?” Sloane asks as she leans in to give Jules a peck on the cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Sloane! And then some. You? How much sunscreen have you brought to keep that milky white skin luminescent?”

“Plenty! Though the gracious people at Coqui Coqui tell me they have some on hand. But, you know my skin’s so particular.”

“You can never be too careful in Mexico. Now, winter in London... I’ll be lucky to see any sun whatsoever.”

“You’ll have to tell me how Holland Park looks. And how the interview goes. And please visit the Prince of Wales. It’s been ages!”

“I will! And, as soon as the flat is set up, I’ll be hosting a little reunion.”

“I’m RSVPing now. Yes!”

The driver takes them to the FDR Drive on their way to JFK. The traffic is cooperative as they speed along the East River. Jules speaks, while looking at the water.

“Sloane, you’ll soon be overlooking the most beautiful, crystal-clear turquoise waters in the morning.”

“And, you’ll be spending New Years in the city we both love with the man you love.”

Jules turns to her friend and smiles.

“I cannot wait! New York is a bit drab once Christmas is over. I must confess, I’m a tad bit nervous about practicing yoga twice a day but my yogi assures me I’m ready. I may have to take part in the ceremonial drumming and the shaman-led Aztec energy dance. And then there are the spa visits, including the *Mayan influenced spa treatments!*” Sloane’s adds with a bit of dramatic effect on the final words.

“It all sounds fantastically hippy chic!”

“Nothing but Faherty and yoga wear in my bag!”

Jules’s phone rings and she shows her phone to Sloane before she answers.

“Hello, Madeleine! Perfect timing! I’m in the car with Sloane!”

Sloane waves and whispers a “Say hello for me!”

“How is Julian? Does he miss his favorite aunt?” She pauses. “Of course!” Jules whispers to Sloane, “I think I hear the baby crying in the background.”

“Yes, I’m here! The little one doesn’t want anything but your complete attention. Just like his namesake. No worries, I will have a couple of hours in the lounge before boarding. Call me if you’re able. Until then!”

Jules shares with Sloane a little of her weeklong visit to Madeleine’s house on the Cape, helping her friend so she could have a morning shower, an afternoon nap and a proper dinner daily. The baby is beautiful and loves to sleep, for which Madeleine is very lucky. And grateful. But, even with the help of a night nurse, she was so thankful for Jules’s visit and company.

“She’s madly in love with him, of course, but it’s an adjustment. Her mother is here now and will stay through the holidays so Madeleine will be just fine.”

The car crosses the Triborough Bridge quickly and Jules feels her excitement build as



they make their way to JFK.

“Did I tell you? Maria’s in Paris for the holidays. Ari surprised her with a family Christmas on the Left Bank.”

“How romantic! I love that they still surprise each other after 10 years and four children together.”

“They are working hard on their marriage and Maria’s taking such good care of herself. It may be the therapist or it could be the nanny, but no matter, she’s never been better! And they’ve never been better.”

“Bless her for managing this long without the extra help...and getting it now.”

“So are you, Sloane, taking better care of yourself. It’s made a remarkable change in you.”

They’ve experienced their individual peaks and valleys as flatmates and in their years as friends since but this year was a challenging one for them all. And, as the year comes to a close and they reflect on how they’ve survived—and thrived—they look forward to the new year and rush toward the future.

Jules smiles and nods, “Haven’t we all? Look at us now!”

**Finis**