Swimming Backwards

A Novel

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June 25, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

JOANNA TURNUS

I could have confessed to Alexander in the North End, Faneuil Hall, the Seaport District, or even Carson Beach, despite the cool, chilly night; but I chose the Old Post Inn, my grandfather's favorite, where he and I went once a week; our dinners lasting three or four hours, always talking, usually about me, about my struggles, my gender confusion, the latest boys of interest.

Of course my meeting ran late. I texted Alexander several times, but he wasn't answering. Perhaps he was stuck in traffic or forgot about our dinner or had a premonition about my confession and decided to skip out altogether? (And who would blame him if he did?)

I asked the maître d' to look for someone 6'3"; strong, adorable, with sparkling green eyes; a deep tan that would linger well into the winter, and soft, playful brown hair that most women would consider a tad too long, combed straight back, pillowed against his ears, loose strands sometimes taking a life of their own. She immediately replied that Alexander was indeed at the bar, nursing a beer. She complimented my choice in men, which would have thrilled any woman, but knowing how things were and how things might pan out, only increased my despair.

The Inn was just outside Boston, on the Old Post Road, which in colonial times connected Boston and New York. Inside, its cozy, oak-paneled walls were interspersed with tall, stained-glass windows, beautifully etched with colonial travelers: some tired and weary, some smiling, boastful of their travels; most too poor to stop, too embarrassed to glance inside; some sad, as if traveling to a funeral; others exuberant, anxious to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary, the birth of a child.

Alexander was stunning in a black, faintly pinstriped suit that showed off his broad, muscular shoulders. His beautiful green eyes sparkled as he handed me a dozen roses, hinting a smile at my lacy black dress, my shiny red nails, my diamond stud earrings. He wrapped his arm around

me; my head softly on his shoulder—kissing my forehead, whispering that I looked absolutely beautiful.

I wanted this moment to last forever.

As the maître d' escorted us to our booth (the same booth that my grandfather and I sat in for our weekly dinners), complimenting how nice we looked together, I remembered my psychiatrist warning that people like me (his words) should never expect to get married or even have a long-term relationship with someone from the opposite sex, that we should look for happiness elsewhere.

I brushed away a tear, fearful that he was right.

I ordered champagne, wondering if any of the colonial travelers etched in glass were pretending to be someone else to please others, unsure and confused about their gender. But despite a little sadness and apprehension, I saw no doubt, despair, or ambiguity.

The waitress uncorked the champagne bottle, presenting it to Alexander. I watched her meticulously fill each glass, jealous of her confident femininity, jealous that every morning she'd choose something to wear, do her makeup, her hair, never thinking twice about being a woman; no questions asked.

For an appetizer, I ordered clams and linguine (my favorite dish as a little girl), even though it wasn't on the menu; while Alexander ordered the grilled beef medallions peppered with Gonzaga cheese. I also suggested the mushroom soup, the best around.

Alexander agreed, asking our waitress to bring it with the appetizers. He smiled at me, raising his glass. "To a nice dinner!"

We clinked glasses, small-talking about a predicted early frost, the Red Sox missing the playoffs, the upcoming Patriots game against the Jets. As Alexander talked about his work, and I mine, I sipped my champagne, imagining us walking in the rain, on the beach, my head softly on his shoulder.

The waitress delivered our appetizers.

Alexander sliced his bite-size medallions into even smaller bite-size medallions, praising the soup as the best he's ever had. I straightened my silverware, wondering his reaction to what I was about to say, wondering how quickly he would leave, wondering if I'd ever meet someone like him again.

I brushed away a tear, innocently feigning something in my eye.

"You OK?" Alexander asked.

I said I had to pee. Yes, I was nervous and yes, the champagne had made me lightheaded, but I really had to pee. Feeling nauseous, like I was pregnant—how could I be?— I excused myself. I rushed to the restroom, opened the stall and sat down. Alexander and I seemed to be getting back on track and if I confessed, I'd never see him again. But then again, why should I define myself by someone else, and who I'm with?

At the sink I let the water run cold, dabbing my forehead with a cool paper towel, surprised at how pretty and feminine I looked, surprised at how confident I appeared.

"This is the men's room," interrupted a stern masculine voice.

I lightly screamed, turning to find a young man, kind of cute, his baritone voice not

matching his youthful appearance, silently inspecting every inch of my body, silently inquiring why I was in the men's room.

"This is the men's room? Oh my God! How embarrassing." I turned off the water, snatched a paper towel and dried my hands. "I'm so sorry. I felt nauseous and rushed in, not even looking."

The young man smiled at my feminine voice, relieved that I was a woman (at least superficially). But despite my breasts, my body curves, my lacy black dress, my pretty legs; despite my lip gloss, mascara, and shiny red nails, I'm sure he knew that something was dreadfully wrong.

"No problem," he said. "Can I get you something? An aspirin?"

Admiring his self-possession, I apologized and shuffled back to Alexander, back to the same booth where my grandfather and I ate dinner once a week; feeling like an escaped convict after years on the run, finally caught and forced to confess. For those of us, who as Ovid said, 'Hover between the sexes,' we live our lives fearing that we'll be found out—before we're ready to confess—no matter how hard we cover up —not that we deceive or lie, but it's just too visceral—too overwhelming to confess all at once.

"You OK?" Alexander asked as I nestled into the booth.

"I guess I'm not used to the champagne." I dabbed my eyes with a napkin, imagining us walking in the rain, holding hands, my head softly on his shoulder. But a jarring inner voice warned that I must confess; a threatening, ominous, persistent voice warning that I couldn't keep

putting this off. Indeed, I couldn't live this lie any longer. "Alexander, there's something I have to say."

The waitress asked for our order.

"We'll have the roasted spit for two," I blurted, without realizing that I could never eat all that boar, steak, venison, and sausage. "I'm sorry, Alexander, I should have asked you."

"That sounds perfect. I was just looking at that."

I pushed my barely eaten clams and linguini aside, wishing someone else would say what I had to say, wishing I could fast-forward to the end of my confession already said without hearing a word. I took a sip of champagne, imagining us walking in the rain, my head softly on his shoulder. "Alexander...I have a female and a male identity." I carefully avoided his contorted look of unsure superiority that something was wrong, that something was amiss." Perhaps in an ideal world I could be both, affirming each, accepted by my husband for who I am. But that's not the world I live in." I was relieved to have finally mentioned 'it,' relieved that I had finally broached the subject with a 'normal' person; surprised at how easy the words formed. "It took me a long time to realize...and an even longer time to accept it...I didn't choose this—nobody in their right mind would."

"I don't understand. Separate identities? Female and male? What are you saying?"

"I'm glad you don't understand, Alexander. I'm glad that you never awoke in the middle of the night unsure and confused, never witnessed your friends commit suicide because they couldn't pretend to be someone else, never struggled to stay alive while your own family disparaged you and your so-called friends disowned you."

For a split second I thought I saw a modicum of understanding.

"Why didn't you say something when we first met?"

"I'm telling you now."

"So does this mean you dress as a man?"

"Sometimes."

"In public?"

"Yes."

"What exactly do you wear?"

Couples around us were smiling, talking, eating, celebrating. I felt like I was going to throw up. I slouched forward, fidgeting my knife; my

voice subdued. "Everything. . . jackets, jeans... underwear. . . even a Fu Manchu."

"A Fu Manchu? Why?"

I shrugged.

"And underwear you said? Men's underwear?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I just do."

The waitress rearranged our glasses and utensils, making room for the roasted spit of boar, steak, venison, and sausage. I wanted to finish my confession and leave, for I realized that confessing was tiring and debilitating. "I've spent a lifetime trying to understand who I am and why I was born like this. I've spent a lifetime blaming others. I've spent a lifetime trying to survive. I'm transgender, Alexander. There—I said it. Now you can leave and find someone else, someone halfway normal." I dabbed at my plate, not sure if I was eating sausage, venison, steak, or boar.

"My world's black and white," Alexander said. "Male and female. I'm hard-wired to like a certain type of woman."

"I'm also hardwired, Alexander. Something I can't help, something I've no choice, something I have to accept and live with." I rose to leave, my eyes watering, avoiding his look of complacent contempt. "I hope you find someone normal, someone safe and secure, someone you can listen to, someone you can share your life with—you deserve that.

I bid Alexander good-bye, softly kissing his forehead, and hurriedly left.

I remembered my grandfather comforting me during our first dinner at the Old Post Inn, that someday I'd meet someone who will love me for who I am. Yeah right. I'm sure that stuff happens. Somewhere. Perhaps in the movies. I stopped at the register informing the maître d' that it wasn't the food, the service or the ambience, but that I had been feeling nauseous all day (anticipating my confession) and perhaps shouldn't have come for dinner. The maître d' offered to call a cab. I paid the bill, leaving a generous tip for the waitress, promising to return soon, thanking him, saying my car was in the parking lot. As I bid the maître d' goodnight, I noticed Alexander rising, straightening his jacket, brushing his hair back; the waitress talking, as if reprimanding, handing

him the dozen roses, the stems wrapped in foil.

Outside in the chilly evening air, I hurriedly passed a young couple entering the Old Post Inn, exuberant, anxious to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary, the birth of a child; her head softly on his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her, whispering how beautiful she was.

BOOK ONE

Chapter 2

JOANNA TURNUS

My parents were happiest when my mother was pregnant with me, at least that's what my grandfather had said—except for one minor and short-lived argument early during her pregnancy; the major ones would come later: My mother wanted to name me Joseph Michael Turnus after my two deceased brothers, but my father adamantly objected—thank God. And I'm not giving anything away to say that they were never so happy again.

In anticipation of my birth (twenty-nine years ago this month) my parents had painted my bedroom blue and gold with a white trim, and stenciled Red Sox and Patriots' logos on the walls. They stocked my room with soldiers, footballs, baseballs, a horse rocker. On the walls, an autographed portrait of Carlton Fisk, photos of Knute Rockne, Ara Parseghian, and Joe Montana; an aerial view of Fenway Park.

It was a fun time for my parents, sharing their dreams for me. My father saw me in the family construction business, after college of course; while my mother insisted that her young husky (her nickname for me during her pregnancy) would play football, eventually getting a scholarship to Notre Dame, following her father's footsteps. While my father saw me as a tight end, maybe a defensive end, my mother saw me as a quarterback, just like her father. In their dreams there was plenty of room for compromise.

Sounds ideal, right? Off to a great start while still in my mother's womb?

Except that I was born a girl.

At the hospital, my parents had either forgotten, didn't want to, or were too upset to give me a middle name, but my grandfather insisted. He said that not having one would complicate my life (as if my complicated life could've been any more complicated). Adamant, he expected an argument with my father—after all, they had argued about everything

else—but surprisingly my father quietly deferred, no doubt distracted by my mother's grief.

I was named Joanna Meredith Turnus.

Sometimes I wonder if I initially was a boy in my mother's womb, then somehow became a girl. Sometimes I wonder what it would've been like to be happy in my gender, never imagining anything but. Sometimes I wonder if my parents had done everything right—even if they had treated me like a girl from the beginning and were happy for me—if I still would have been screwed up. I mean, look at my best friend Rachel: from a happy and 'normal' family, but she always knew that something was wrong: that she was a woman trapped in a man's body.

If my mother had known that she was pregnant with a girl, she would have aborted me. I know that. I overheard her tell my aunt when I was eight years old, before I even knew what the word meant.

Chapter 3

ALEXANDER MORGAN

"Morgan!" Phil yelled. "Help the welder watch the sparks so the roof don't go up in flames, you goddamned son-of-a-bitch."

"After I finish," I said, centering a wickedly large concrete shard into my wheelbarrow; careful so it wouldn't tip.

"Now!"

Sure as hell, Phil had forgotten that Zella Asphalt was about to pave the bank's newly expanded parking lot, and that we—make that I—had to pick up all the accumulated bricks, bottles, cans, nails, spikes, sawed-off planks, concrete shards, pieces of strapping, and other crap; assuming, of course, that pick-up duty was ever on his schedule.

"Send Paul," I said, nudging my wheelbarrow forward to the left, compensating its slight tilt to the right. "Zella will be pissed as hell—"

"If you ain't on the roof in two minutes, you can start working for Zella."

I threw my hands up in disgust and headed toward the backside of the bank.

"Are you deaf?" Phil yelled, waving his arms up and down. "I just asked you to grab a goddamned extinguisher."

If I insisted that he had said no such thing, he would've ranted and raved even more, but I had better things to do than to bear witness, so I slipped away and did as asked.

To be honest I don't know where they got this bastard. Zachary should have started him on an easy one-story addition rather than this bank which was challenging even for a semi-competent supervisor: Originally two stories, the bank was expanding 200 hundred feet in back and five floors up in the middle of a busy city block, while remaining open for business,

The extinguisher wasn't where it was supposed to be—but when is shit ever rightfully returned? I snatched a yellowed invoice from the

desktop and wrote in bold, black letters:

Please return the extinguisher to where it friggin' belongs!

I double-underlined the sentence, highlighted it, then hooked the yellowed invoice on the wall above the desk, exactly where the extinguisher should have been.

At the back of the trailer, I plowed through square shovels, round shovels, picks, bars, rakes, water hoses, boots, water pumps, stepladders, sledgehammers, chipping hammers, buckets, paint cans, cement bags, asphalt shingles, compressor hoses—everything was heaped in an organized mess. Finally, I found an extinguisher wedged between a compactor and a flat-tired, one-armed wheelbarrow.

With a half-broken shingle, I scraped off the dirt and grime caked on the extinguisher from years of non-use. Then I monkeyed up the long aluminum ladder leaning against the bank's backside, shouldering the extinguisher like a Christmas tree. On the roof, I tapped the welder's shoulder, letting him know that his all-important spark-watcher was ready for duty.

He tipped up his Darth Vader mask just above his nose, bracing it with his index finger, barking instructions like I was an idiot, like I didn't know that the sun-baked insulation was dry as a bastard.

The welder slipped off his mask, rubbing its Plexiglas eye cover. "Give me a minute."

I meandered to the roof's front edge. A delicious aroma of baking bread knitted the stale smells of gasoline, lumber, fresh dirt, diesel, and sawdust.

"Don't disappear, I'll be—"

The welder was snuffed by the whining and screeching of screw guns—metal against metal—whirring from the newly-built partitions below. A constant, day-long, seductively irritating rhythm: One gun. A second. A third. A brief silence. Then the first, second, third.

Directly below the roof's edge, Nick, Abe, and Walter were framing a wooden form for the new sidewalk on what used to be a broad expanse of grass studded with tall oak trees: a peaceful buffer between the bank and the busy street traffic. But the bank president had ordered the trees cut down, claiming that they obstructed the view. Really? A traffic-clogged rotary fed by three, traffic-clogged streets, and that's a friggin' view?

The welder signaled that he was ready; ready to strengthen the steel beams across the old roof that would soon support the new floors. The steel skeleton of the upper addition was already in place.

I kicked a few pebbles over the roof's edge, then scooted back.

"Cut the shit!" I heard Nick yell above the whining and screeching.

At the roof's far end a crane operator was unloading steel beams. A huge American flag draped motionless from his cab. As fast as he unloaded, guys aligned and welded, showering sparks in every direction. I gave the crane operator the finger, like I did every morning, and he ignored me, like he did every morning. Sure, he makes triple my salary, but does that entitle him to be a prick?

Watching sparks ain't as easy as it seems. Yeah, you wait for nothing to happen, but no matter how hard you try, you can't help glance at the welding arc. It won't blind like you an friggin' eclipse, but even a casual glance hurts your eyes, and then you suffer like a bastard that night.

Below us was an old computer billing room. Everything flammable had long been removed; polyethylene covered the still-remaining metal filing cabinets. Guess who was chomping on an unlit cigar, looking up at me, armed with a water hose? Gary. I'm sure he had reserved this job days ago before anyone else even knew about it. Everyone says that he used to be a good laborer but that must have been years before his triple chin and large, protruding stomach.

Why have two guys standing around waiting for nothing to happen? I clicked on my cell phone to call Phil and was surprised as hell to find three text messages from Lisa, and it wasn't even eight o'clock.

I stepped back from the welder, away from view, reading the first message, "Derek's working overtime tonight. I'm making a nice dinner, why don't you stop by?" Then the second: "He won't be home until nine!!!" And the third: "Call Me!"

Maybe, just maybe, if she wasn't married to my brother. "Call you later," I texted. "I'm working." My message didn't send. I tried resending. Finally, after three tries.

Suddenly the insulation began crackling and sizzling. Shit! The welder whipped off his mask, stomping and swearing like a bastard. I sprayed the extinguisher, but nothing came out. Gary threw us the hose and the welder extinguished the flames, and not a second too soon.

"What the hell were you doing?" demanded the welder. "Why'd you

bring an empty extinguisher? Get another one that works! And no more fuckin' screwups."

Chapter 4

JOANNA TURNUS

It was an unusually warm day during an unusually warm spring. Trees had budded early, the grass was green, and everyone was mowing their lawns. It was Thursday, March 30, 1997—my grandfather's birthday—that's how I remember. I was in the sixth grade.

At school I had made my grandfather a nice birthday card out of yellow construction paper, and with a red marker had sprawled in my neatest script,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO THE BEST GRANDFATHER IN THE WHOLE [redacted] WORLD!!

I had crossed out 'WORLD' and replaced it with 'UNIVERSE.' But instead of gluing a photograph, I drew a picture of us; I knew that he'd appreciate that more.

My parents said that I was his clone, never nicely of course, but I didn't realize how true it was until I began drawing. We both have small ears, which I never minded (as if I had a choice). We both have large foreheads, which looked good on my grandfather, especially with his receding hairline, but not on me, although he always said so just to assuage me. We both have wide, brown eyes. Mine are soft—that's what everyone says—but soft is just a nicer word for too big. My grandfather's eyes were definitely not soft, and if they were any bigger, you'd swear he was a frog.

Thank God I didn't have his beak nose. A large forehead is bad enough, but I couldn't imagine having a beak nose and a large forehead—I'd never go out in public. My nose is small, too small (if there's such a thing) but at least it matches my small ears (as if that matters). But I worry that my kids will have super big noses (things like that usually skip a generation), although my father has my grandfather's nose.

My grandfather always wore a full moustache to distract attention from his nose (at least that's what he said) but it didn't work: You saw

the moustache you saw the nose.

I drew my mouth a little smaller. Everyone says I have my mother's wide-open mouth. My grandfather said it was from her constant laughing, at least before her two miscarriages. He also said that my mother was the prettiest girl in the senior class at Walpole High, when she met my father, who was, by the way, no slouch himself.

I didn't have the heart to draw all those deep lines across my grandfather's temple making him look older. However, I did draw him a little taller and me a little shorter, so that we were almost the same height. He always boasted being average height, although he was actually shorter than average; and I was taller than average—I still am—in fact, I was the tallest girl in sixth grade.

When school ended my grandfather was waiting for me. I was wearing olive-green shorts with an over-sized white shirt. (Just before school ended that afternoon, I had changed from long pants to shorts.) I wore shorts a lot, even in winter. I liked feeling the hair on my legs and how it made my legs look stronger, as if I had muscles.

He opened the passenger door of his new Silverado truck and extended his helping hand—a big step even for me. He smiled and I smiled back.

"Bubbling Brook just opened for the season," my grandfather said. "How does that sound?"

I nodded enthusiastically—he didn't even have to ask.

For a split second my grandfather had that perplexed stare, that contorted look of unsure superiority that something was wrong, that something was amiss; a conscripted stare that I would become so inured to from so many people that even now when I'm introduced to someone I look to the ground, the sky, anywhere but their eyes.

I carefully removed my grandfather's birthday card from my backpack. Noticing an edge was bent just a little, I smoothed it before handing it to him. "I made you something," I said, with a hint of apprehension.

He smiled. "It's absolutely beautiful." He blew his nose with a Kleenex.

I never knew anyone so emotional. Too bad none of that rubbed off on my father.

Bubbling Brook had already opened its seasonal shed behind the main restaurant; a pleasant area with lots of picnic tables and shady

pine trees. We decided to eat there on such a warm, sunny afternoon.

The line to the shed was long, but it moved quickly; lots of mothers with their kids, talking and laughing. Two boys stood behind us with their mother. One, short with red hair, the other, my height with black hair. They didn't look related—the mother had blond hair—but she talked as if she was their mother. The tall boy was really cute, a little older than me, like in junior high school. I kept glancing at the back of the line pretending to look for someone just to sneak a peak.

A brook meandered between the tables, and sometimes if quiet enough—although it never was—you could hear it swooshing over deep sinkholes, like someone gargling mouthwash. I never heard it, but my grandfather swore he had, once when he took me here in my stroller.

On the other side of the brook, beyond the tables, were blueberry bushes. During the summer, Bubbling Brook makes the best blueberry ice cream, but you really have to like blueberries because it's like eating a blueberry pie. They also grow their own strawberries, raspberries, peaches, watermelons, and apples, making them into ice cream, but blueberry is their best. My grandfather agreed.

The ground was wet and mucky, suggesting that the brook had recently overflowed. The wonderful smell of grilled hamburgers made me hungry. My grandfather read my mind, as always. I nodded enthusiastically when he asked if I wanted a hamburger (if I had said no, he would've ordered one anyway).

When it was our turn to order my grandfather stepped to the window. "Do you have any blueberry ice cream?"

I heard the boys laughing.

"No," replied the waitress. "We sold the last of the summer lot just yesterday with the warm weather, but we still have peach ice cream?"

"No. Give me two vanilla cones and two hamburgers: one with everything and one with just extra ketchup." My grandfather winked at me.

The boys continued laughing.

Curious, I was about to turn to see why, when I realized that they were laughing about me.

"That's disgusting," said one, loud enough for me to hear. "I'd never go out with someone like that."

I'm sure my grandfather heard, although out of the corner of my eye, he was still talking to the waitress.

"I bet she doesn't shave her armpits," said the other.

"Why would someone that pretty not shave her legs?" asked the mother. "Why would her mother allow it?

"Disgusting," the boys said.

I knew my grandfather heard, although he pretended not. His smile disappeared, that's

how I knew. I wished the brook was deeper and carried to the ocean. I imagined swimming backwards, my ears submerged, listening to the water, arms slicing, legs kicking, immersed in my hidden world.

My grandfather asked for extra napkins. He said something to the mother. I snuck behind him, hidden from view. He wrapped his arm around me, guiding me away. He was talking. I wasn't listening.

The engine was running. We were sitting in his truck. My grandfather had finished his ice cream and his hamburger. I must have finished mine because my hands were gooey, although I didn't remember eating.

"Sometimes boys say things they don't really mean," my grandfather said, handing me a napkin. "Sometimes they say things without thinking, especially when together. Sometimes they say things that they'd never say alone, just to please their friends. It's natural for boys to. . ."

I saw my mother peeking from behind our living room curtain, smiling, watching me play touch football with the neighborhood boys. I was the only girl ever asked to play, although everyone considered me a boy because I dressed like one and was better at every sport. My mother smiled when I scored a touchdown, smiled when I ran faster than anyone else, smiled when I made a nice block; so I ran faster, blocked harder, and scored more touchdowns. More touchdowns than anyone.

Chapter 5

ALEXANDER MORGAN

I tapped the welder's shoulder, asking if he wanted anything for coffee break.

He propped up his mask just above his nose, bracing it with his forefinger. "Just a small coffee." He handed me a ten-dollar bill. "Black. And an English muffin. Buttered."

"Both sides?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you join us?"

"By the time I climb down, shut the machine off, coffee break will be over. Just bring it up you with you. And the change."

"Who's going to watch for sparks while I'm gone?"

The welder shook his head, lowering his mask.

I descended the ladder and headed to the front of the bank sidestepping two-by-fours, pipes, planks, bricks, spikes, and unannounced holes.

"Leaving for the day?" Nick dropped his hammer in his holster. "I wish I had your goddamn hours." Admiring his almost-finished wooden form for the concrete sidewalk, he fished deep in his overall pockets pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

"What you want for coffee?" I asked.

Nick lit a cigarette, then handed me a five-dollar bill. "Take a wild guess. And make sure there's four goddamn sugars. Yesterday—"

"I put them four in myself."

Nick removed his hard hat, brushing back his blond hair—what was left of it—then hurriedly put it back on, as if shying away from baldness. But there ain't nothing you can do about it. And I'm sorry, but blonde dudes shouldn't try to grow a beard. A moustache perhaps, even a friggin' Fu Manchu, but definitely not a beard.

Nick exhaled smoke in my face, "Make sure there's four goddamned sugars."

"One large coffee with four goddamned sugars." I typed his order into my cell phone—you have to with these bastards. "Hey, if they're out of goddamned sugars—they sell out pretty quickly—"

"Four goddamned sugars. And don't disappear after coffee. You have to put the wire down for the sidewalk."

Yeah, no shit.

This was damn fine weather. Just like an August day but without the humidity. If I didn't have my truck payment hanging over me, I'd call in sick and head to the beach, but with my luck some reporter would do a story on construction guys playing hooky and then everyone in the city of Boston would know that I wasn't sick.

"Well, well, well," Abe said. "Look who's coming to work." He stood at the other end of the wooden sidewalk form, steadying a plank lengthwise, while Walter braced it with a piece of strapping. Abe removed his thick black glasses, wiping them with a handkerchief before putting them back on. "Give us a hand."

"We're good," said Walter. A short man with a perfectly round face and an always-red left eye, like he was suffering a perpetual hangover. "The kid's goin' for coffee."

"First work he's done all day," said Abe.

Despite Walter being white and Abe black, at first glance you'd swear these two bastards were related: Same height, same stout build, same upturned, pudgy nose, but Abe's stomach is flat and his eye ain't always red, although sometimes it's hard to tell with them heavy glasses. Everyone says Abe is a youthful 59, but if you ask me, he looks exactly 59; whereas Walter's leathery, weather-beaten skin makes him look even older. So much for first glances.

Walter handed me a twenty-dollar bill, then said to Abe: "I'm buyin'."

"You win the lottery or something?" asked Abe.

"Haven't bought in a while."

"The friggin' understatement of the year." Abe picked up another plank, eyeballing it for straightness. "Make sure them both sides of my English muffin are buttered."

"You should be double-checkin' everyone's order," Walter said to me. "And take Gary's coffee out of my twenty."

"I'll need a lot more that," I said, extending my hand.

"Just get him one coffee. And one goddammed muffin."

"English?"

"Bran," said Walter. "He's on a new diet."

"Every week he says he's on a new diet," snickered Abe.

"If he exercised every now and then," I said. "He wouldn't need no diet. So, he don't want his muffin slabbed with butter as usual?"

Walter frowned. "Didn't say, but yesterday he was full of piss and vinegar that his muffins were marmaladed."

"Marmaladed?" asked Abe.

"His words."

"Then he should've said something if he was so pissed"

"He did," Abe said. "He raised quite a stink during coffee. Don't you remember?"

"Dozin' off again?" Walter said. "You should be payin' attention during coffee break."

"Hey, the kid put in a good fifteen minutes of work and needed to rest."

Walter fondled a piece of strapping, then, at a forty-five-degree angle, nailed it to the plank. "Gary wants a small black coffee, no cream and no sugar. And one friggin' bran muffin. Get goin' kid, it's almost time for lunch."

"Where's Paul?" I asked, typing in Gary's order. Of course, everyone knew that he was still snapping off them rods sticking out from the newly poured foundation, and probably will for the rest of his life.

"He's found a new home," Walter said.

"If he'd listened to me, he'd be done by now," I said.

"Why would anyone listen to you?" asked Abe.

"He better not get too comfortable," added Walter. "When they start gradin' he might be backfilled along with the dirt."

"Not the worst thing to happen," I muttered.

"Get goin' kid, it's almost time for lunch."

At the rear of the bank, I straddled a six-foot mound of fresh black dirt, paralleling the newly poured foundation, carefully side-stepping the aluminum ladder. Not that I'm superstitious about shit, but I have enough bad luck without inviting more. Sure enough, Paul was leaning against the foundation clasping an open-ended pipe around a two-inch, exposed reinforcing rod, pushing it to the right, left, right, left, right, left.

"Hey Paul. Time for coffee."

"Time for coffee!" I repeated. "I ain't got all friggin' day."

The rod snapped, throwing Paul to the ground. He pushed himself up with his long, bony hands, wiping his forehead with his sweaty tee-shirt.

"Look at you: Sweating like a bastard and it ain't even nine o'clock. If you had torched them rods like I suggested, you'd be done by now."

"You know I get the same thing every day," Paul said, searching for his open-ended pipe.

"Because the one day I don't ask, you'd want something different and then I'd never hear the friggin' end of it—and besides I need money."

"Use the change you still owe me from yesterday."

"Change? You owe me twenty cents, you cheap bastard."

Paul handed me a sweaty five-dollar bill. "Twenty cents? And I'm the cheap bastard?"

"Twenty cents one day, forty cents another; it adds up."

Just then a large flatbed truck hauling a bulldozer and a grader rumbled into the bank's newly expanded parking lot.

"I thought they weren't grading until Friday?" Paul said.

"Friday? Who said that?"

"Phil."

"And you believed him?" I pointed to the far end of the foundation. "What about them two rods still sticking out?"

"Two rods? Big deal."

"Big deal? Why not leave them all in?"

"Don't tell me how to do my job." Paul shuffled down the dirt mound, giving me an over-the-shoulder the finger. Like I really gave a shit.

Chapter 6

JOANNA TURNUS

I wasn't going to mention underwear—after all it's no one's business—but since you'll soon find out, I'll tell you now so that at least you'll understand. I wear male boxers, except, of course, when I have to wear a dress or a skirt for work, then I wear male briefs, which aren't nearly as comfortable. When I get married next spring (yes, I will wear a wedding dress—a friend of mine is designing it) I will wear boxers. I've already informed my fiancé and he's fine with that—he's such a wonderful man.

I'm not blaming anyone, and I don't have an axe to grind. I'm also old enough to make my own decisions, but like every aspect of my life this decision was made for me, by others; more specifically, by my mother.

It was a cold December afternoon. I was nine years old. After snowing all morning, it abruptly stopped, giving way to a clear blue sky. It was the first snowfall of the season, and quite unexpected since the forecast had called for rain and then freezing rain. I wanted to play in the backyard but needed my winter clothes that were stored in the basement, which I hated, partly because of the ubiquitous smell of heating oil—so bitter you could taste it. (We still used an old-fashioned oil furnace, only because my father was supporting his friend's oil business.) And partly because of our furnace, and for good reason: Just one month earlier, I was in the basement getting something—I don't remember what—when I heard the furnace clicking. Curious, I noticed that the small, circular glass window on the furnace front was broken. I could see the dull orange flame in the center. Suddenly, the furnace made a low hammering noise, spitting out sparks; one brushed my leg, and another landed on the rug. I ran upstairs, screaming, scared that it was about to explode. Of course, my father didn't believe me, laughing that I had made the whole thing up. But I didn't lie (I've never lied to anyone; well actually only once—I had to, which I'll tell you in due time) and I know what I saw.

My winter clothes were thankfully shelved underneath the wooden staircase, easily retrievable without nearing the furnace. Nevertheless, I patiently waited until it shut off, then quietly descended, fearful that any noise might trigger it. I was putting my snowsuit on, leaning against a glass cabinet filled with never-used wedding dishes. I had one leg in when I noticed my mother methodically descending the stairs clutching a small package. Reaching the bottom, she tersely handed it to me. It was underwear. Boys' underwear. Her cold, empty eyes were far away in a distant past, a past which I knew nothing; a past which I'll never know.

I shoved the underwear back into my mother's chest. I'm not sure why; I had never before disobeyed her. Maybe because of how callously she presented it, like presenting the head of John the Baptist to Salome; maybe because she didn't even ask, presuming that I'd do whatever she wanted; maybe because even for me—only nine years old—I knew something was dreadfully wrong: Girls aren't supposed to wear boys' underwear and their mothers aren't supposed to make them.

She stumbled backwards, steadying herself on the railing. She brushed her short hair back, revealing streaks of grey. She glanced at me, then opening the door to the glass cabinet, placed the underwear on a shelf next to a stack of dusty dishes. Relieved, I assumed she had changed her mind. Then she took a dish, blew off the dust, methodically examining it. She raised it high as if offering a sacrifice, then let it crash to the floor. A small piece nicked my bare leg. I winced. She removed another dish; examined it, blowing off the dust. She held it high, then let it crash to the ground, shattering it. Another dish. Another. And another.

I screamed, fearing what she might do next. I took the underwear from the shelf and slowly removed my snow pants. I tried balancing myself but couldn't see through my watered eyes and fell. My mother closed the cabinet door, then snatched my panty just as I had slipped it off. I inched the underwear up my leg, shivering, crying, ashamed; wondering if any other mother in the world made her daughter wear boys' underwear.

Chapter 7

ALEXANDER MORGAN

"Where've you been?" demanded Walter.

Snapping turtles—all of them—crouched in a circle waiting to snap. You'd think they'd be relaxed, basking in the shade, waiting for their hand-delivered morning coffee.

"We thought you took the rest of the day off," Walter said. He was sitting on an overturned plastic bucket, underneath a lone, yellow-leaved oak tree.

"How can he take the rest of the day off when he ain't even worked the first part?" said Abe, squeezed next to Walter on a stack of old newspapers; his back against the water barrel.

"He's got a point, kid," Nick said to me, lighting a cigarette. He sat on a stack of two-by-fours, opposite Walter.

"Where's my coffee, kid?" Walter asked. "It's almost time for lunch."

"Did you get my hot water?" asked Gary, squished next to Abe.

"Hot water?" I said. "You didn't ask for no hot water."

"I most certainly did. I told Walter to—"

"You didn't mention nothing about no hot water," I said to Walter, who seemed to be busying himself with his coffee.

"I did kid, you wasn't listenin'."

I handed Gary his coffee, then showed everyone Gary's order from my cell phone, while reading Walter's words: "Gary wants a small black coffee, no cream and no sugar. And one friggin' bran muffin. Get goin' kid, it's almost time for lunch."

"Sounds like something you'd say," said Nick.

"Hot water?" Abe asked Gary.

"With my new diet I'm drinking nothing but tea."

"New diet?" asked Walter.

"It's a new week," I noted.

"All the tea in goddamned China won't help you lose a goddamned ounce," said Abe.

Gary, unwrapping his muffin, turned toward me: "I supposed you had both sides buttered?"

"I figured that with starting a new diet you'd only want one."

"See, the kid's always thinkin'," said Walter.

"It's called anticipation." I was sitting on the bare ground on Nick's left, against a stack of two-by-fours still wet with morning dew. Closing my eyes, I inhaled its sweet, apple cider perfume. The fifteen minutes for coffee break seemed like an eternity.

Nick tugged my shoulder. "You'll get worms sitting on the goddamned ground."

"Paul out sick again?" asked Gary.

"Jealous?" Abe asked.

"Well, well, well; speaking of the goddamned devil," Nick said, as Paul slumbered in, his tall skinny frame hunched like a camel.

"You're the slowest fuckin' rod-snapper I've ever seen," Abe said.

"My change?" Paul demanded, sitting on Nick's right.

"I'll get it after coffee."

"You should see him dab cement on them holes," Gary said. "Like he was Picasso or someone."

"You're jealous because you didn't get that job," Walter said.

"Christ, if he did," added Nick, "he'd ask Phil for a goddamned addition just to keep workin' on them goddamned holes."

Gary wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I thought about it, but with my back there ain't no way I could work like that for eight friggin' hours."

"Since when you ever worked eight friggin' hours?" Walter said. "Maybe if you did some work now and then you wouldn't have no back problems. I'm your age but you don't hear me complainin' about my friggin' back every wakin' hour."

"Hey Walter," Nick suggested. "Give Alex some newspapers to sit on."

"He can get his own."

Nick tugged my shoulder. "With Zella here, you'll have to move our trailers so they can start grading."

Walter cleared his throat, smiling; a smile that boasted of advanced, privileged knowledge. "Just this mornin' Zachary said this tree's stayin'."

"Talking to Zachary again?" Gary asked.

"In fact, this little section right here ain't bein' hot-topped at all. They're keepin' the tree and makin' a little oasis so the bank employees can eat their friggin' lunch outside."

"What about the rest of the parking lot?" I asked.

"From here to the bank, asphalt," Walter replied, beaming as if it was his own idea. "And from here to the back alley, grass."

"I was thinking—" said Paul.

"A fuckin' first," Nick said, a cigarette dangling from his lower lip, as if held tight by a groove. I tried that once, but sucked the cigarette into my mouth, practically singeing my tongue.

"I was thinking why no one's invented nothing for snapping them rods off. It wouldn't take much: take a six-inch, open-ended pipe, smooth it, paint it; then attach a compressor to the sucker, just like a chipping hammer."

"No one would buy it," Gary snorted. "Them open-ended pipes are a dime-a-dozen."

Walter balanced his half-eaten bran muffin on the rim of his coffee cup. Either his muscular hands were too big for his small body, or his body too small for his fast-moving hands as if they had a life of their own, as if they were pushing and pulling and coaxing the slow-forming words out of his mouth—and sometimes they would intimate a completely different line of thought before words could follow. "Ever since foundations have been poured, them rods have been taken out the same friggin' way. I did it, you're doin' it, and—"

"He's right," added Nick. "You can't sell nothin' no one wants to buy."

"It takes me two days to snap off them rods," Paul said.

"Only two hours with a friggin' torch," I noted.

"And my invention can do it in one hour," said Paul with newfound confidence. "Think of the savings."

I could tell Paul was itching to say something like, 'I'll be rich someday and then I'll show all you bastards.' Every week he dreams up a new invention, but to be honest, they all suck. Like last week's retractable, pocket-sized cat's paw, especially made for women. Can you imagine! I've dated lots of women and I've yet to meet one who knew—or even wanted to know—how to use a cat's paw.

Walter blew his nose on a napkin. "So, what you call this friggin' invention of yours?"

He inspected the napkin as if searching for lost change, crumpled it, and tossed it in the water barrel.

Paul frowned.

"How can you invent something without first naming it?" I asked. "Anyone can think of shit to invent. No wonder all your ideas suck."

"How about the all-purpose snapper?" offered Gary.

Everyone laughed, except Paul, of course.

"How about a video?" I suggested. "Paul busting his skinny ass, manually snapping off

each rod, taking all day just for one, then Gary snapping, not even breaking a sweat."

"We don't want it too realistic," said Abe.

"I'll call it The Cabrini."

"You don't name something after yourself, you dipshit," I said. "Call it what it does, so everyone knows what the hell it is."

Lisa texted me, "Hello???"

"It's that time," Walter said, rising from his bucket.

That's how he ends every break, like we're about to march off a cliff or something.

"Time for what?" I asked.

"What'd you think?" Nick flicked his cigarette butt at me.

"You can't sit on your ass all mornin'."

"Why don't you ask Zella to join us for afternoon coffee," Nick suggested.

Walter nodded. "Not a bad idea kid."

"They can get their own."

Walter took my arm. "Listen kid, you want people rememberin' you as the prick who never bought coffee? Asphalt guys remember shit like this: here just for a few days, then onto the next job, spreadin' news like friggin' wildfire." He tightened his grip. "If you want to get elected AFL-CIO president, you have to make people remember you."

"I'll vote for you just to get your ass out of here," Nick said, lighting a cigarette.

Walter removed a wad of bills from his wallet, handing me a twenty. "Every bastard you meet is a friggin' vote."

“Christ Almighty!” exclaimed Nick. “How’d you get so loaded?”

“So, doing shit jobs and scrounging everyone’s coffee will get me elected?”

Walter waved me away. “Get goin’ kid, it’s almost time for lunch.”

Chapter 8

JOANNA TURNUS

Our first vacation—if you want to call it that—was the summer before sixth grade. Even deciding where to go was a major ordeal. My mother insisted on North Falmouth—she had vacationed there as a teenager and craved the salt air, the morning fog, the seafood. My father adamantly objected, insisting on camping in the Green Mountains. I had no idea why, other than Vermont was the one place my mother didn't want to go. (My father hated the ocean, hated being near it, and hated being in it—at least that's what he had told me.)

I was surprised when they asked for my vote, surprised that for the first time they had asked my opinion about anything. Perhaps in a normal family I would have abstained rather than automatically offend one person, but ours was not a normal family. I sided with my mother.

We rented a cottage one block from the beach. It rained the first two days, relentless and torrential, with fierce winds blowing the rain sideways against the house, against the windows. A record-breaking tropical depression had stalled right over the Cape. Seventeen inches of rain in two days. Nothing worse than vacationing at the beach in the rain with your parents. Nothing to do but watch movies, sleep, read, play solitaire. Of course, it was sunny and warm in Vermont, as my father constantly reminded us; I don't know why he even stayed.

On the afternoon of the third day the rain had stopped, the sky brightened with broken patches of blue. Everyone went to the beach. Water had pooled on the road, on the rain-drenched lawns, but no one cared—the rain had finally stopped.

The salt air mixed with sweet-smelling seaweed intoxicated me. Two distant fog horns alternated pitches: one low, one high. Dark thundery clouds lingered on the horizon. Boiling waves spat up broken lobster traps, logs, soda bottles, plastic bags, and oily-brown seaweed that glistened in the misty sunlight. I never knew the sea contained so much

waste yet was so eager to give it up.

My father took off his shirt and handed it to my mother. As he dove into one wave then another, I wondered how a normal daughter in a normal family would feel watching her father battle the waves. Would she be scared? Would she scream? If a wave knocked him unconscious, submerging him, how would she react? What would she do?

My father treaded water, catching his breath. Beyond, about fifty feet or so, was an anchored raft tossed about by the heavy surf. He glanced at it, then at me. Through the mist-brightened sunlight, he had that same hateful look as he had that recent warm spring morning.

I was in our bathroom, the window open, readying myself for school; happy, giddy even, breathing deep the sweet perfume of the outside lilacs. I was in a girly mood. Such moods were becoming more frequent and more unpredictable (I didn't understand it then, but my "natural" hormones were slowly changing me into a woman, surreptitiously usurping my body) and would often, like a riptide, channel me far away. I never fought them—how could I when I didn't understand (then) what was happening?

I liked best weaving my hair slightly up and to the right, but of course I didn't have any barrettes, so I asked my mother, nicely, of course, to borrow some—the first time I had ever asked for any girly things. I mean, it wasn't like I was asking for mascara or lip gloss, just two stupid barrettes. Silly me thinking it was an OK question to ask, silly me for thinking it was a normal daughter-mother question.

I heard commotion on the stairs. I expected my mother, excited, rushing to help me. Did she finally realize that I was a girl, and was pleased that I finally wanted to dress like one? I hurried to the landing, my hair falling over my eyes; then tossing it back I was surprised to see my father charging the steps, alone. Did my mother faint or have a heart attack and he was rushing us to the hospital?

I swear he flew off the last two steps. Maybe he did. In that eternity-long, split-second before his hand hit my forehead with such ferocity that I stumbled backwards, I covered my face so I couldn't see his elongated disgust, his crazed, twisted revulsion. I don't remember what happened next, not that I blacked out (I don't think I did) but I was numb, so numb that even if he had lacerated my arms, I wouldn't have felt anything.

My father selected a large wave and body-surfed, perfectly extending

his arms and legs. As the wave ebbed, he pushed himself up, peeling strips of oily-brown seaweed from his shoulders, basking in the attention. Just behind, a huge brown wave was rolling, churning, surging. My mother faintly smiled as the wave engulfed him, thrashing him in the brown surf before spitting him up on the beach like a wayward lobster trap. He laid face down, motionless. My mother watched as one man rolled him over and another gave him mouth-to-mouth forcing him to cough water.

We approached tepidly, trying to feign emotion—we had to: everyone was watching.

My father sat upright, gripping his chest. My mother tossed him his shirt, muttering something about his stupidity. He stood up; wiping his face, he tilted his head, shaking water from his ears. He threw his shirt over his shoulder, glared at me, then staggered toward the cottage.

That night I couldn't sleep, harassed by my father's snoring. I don't remember leaving the cottage, or walking to the beach, or why I was wearing only one shoe, or if the water was calm, or warmer than the air, or if the wind had subsided, or if the surf was still rough. At the beach, I dove deep, skimming the sandy bottom; then surfacing, I flipped over, swimming backwards toward the raft, imagining being far away. The water caressed and soothed me, not caring if I was male or female, not noticing that my breasts were growing—changing me into someone I didn't want to become, that my body was curving, that I never wore makeup, that my hair was short, that I was the only girl in sixth grade without pierced ears; that deep down inside I wanted to be a boy.

I treaded water for a bit, catching my breath; then alligator-like, skimmed the surface towards the raft. I pulled myself up, washed away the seagull turds and sat down on the gristly surface. An enveloping peace infused me. I curled up and drifted asleep, seduced by the distant foghorns: one loud, one soft . . .one loud, one soft.

Chapter 9

ALEXANDER MORGAN

The next morning the drywall guys joined us for coffee, looking like vampires with their pasty-white skin. Paul was unusually talkative, chatting as if they were long-lost friends: "I was half-way up the ladder, when this big bastard demands that I come down immediately."

"You? On the ladder?" I asked. "Actually working?"

"A much-needed break." said Abe.

"He probably had no idea who you were, that you even worked here," added Nick, lighting a cigarette.

"Who'd you piss off now?" asked Gary. "The Carpenters' BA?"

"Our guys use more sophisticated tactics," Nick said, exhaling smoke in my face. "Like

cutting your ladder in half with a Skil-Saw."

"He was from the mafia," Paul replied, "asking me to work for him."

"You?" I asked, joining the laughter. "In the mafia?"

"They must be really scraping the bottom of the barrel," said Abe.

"In a year I'd triple my salary," said Paul. "Although I'd have to start at the

bottom."

"And end up at the bottom of the harbor," added Abe.

"At least you won't have to worry about no goddamned pension or health benefits," Nick

said.

"It's the only goddamned job in the world where you can say no to your boss and get away with it," Abe said, pretending to talk into a phone: " 'Hey Vinny, I need you to take care of someone Tuesday.' 'Tuesday? No, sorry boss; I got plans.' 'Oh, OK. How about Wednesday?' 'My nephew's visiting and we're going to the ballgame.' 'Hmm. Thursday?' 'Sorry boss: in the morning I got a dentist appointment, then I'm playing golf if the weather's good.' 'Friday?' 'Yeah, Friday works.' "

"I should try that with Phil," I said, mimicking Abe. "Hey Alex, I need you to dig a trench this morning. Sorry boss, I got plans."

"So, how'd you say no and friggin' live to tell it?" Walter asked.

"I told him about my inventions, and that I'll be striking it rich."

I spat out my coffee, joining the laughter. "You actually said that?"

"That's almost as funny as Morgan wanting to be AFL-CIO president," Abe said, trying to contain his laughter. "Christ, I'll bet my last paycheck that five years from now you two clowns will still be here, slaving away like the rest us."

I rose, slurped what was left of my coffee and tossed the empty cup at Abe. "Five years from now I will be District president and five years later I will be ALF-CIO president. Then I'll make your sorry asses miserable."

"Five years from now we'll all be retired," said Abe, pointing to Walter and Gary.

"Then, I'll just have to make it in four." I headed toward the aluminum ladder, giving everyone a polite over-the-shoulder finger.

Chapter 10

JOANNA TURNUS

Sometimes I tried reading with my mother, wondering if her morning readings could ever calm me, perhaps even bring us closer. But she always read coldly, methodically, fogged in by an elusive serenity, fumbling her cross necklace, staring past me as if veiled, her face obscured—and in a way I wished it were, for at least she would have appeared more consoling and more humane.

One morning I asked my mother for readings for a confused and depressed eighth-grade girl—not confused over which lip gloss to wear, what skirt to wear with what blouse, what not to say to a boy she liked—but confused over her own identity, not knowing if she was a boy or a girl, not knowing who she was or who she was supposed to be, or even who she wanted to be. My mother exploded. I was used to my father hitting me but not my mother, although her cold, callous looks were far worse.

That was the last time I sat with her.

Chapter 11

ALEXANDER MORGAN

I jabbed the welder's shoulder, reminding him that it was almost lunchtime [redacted]

"It's only ten to," he said, waving me away.

He was done, clear as day, just pissing around the edges. I waited five more minutes, then tapped his shoulder goodbye. If he wanted to be a prick and work until precisely noon, then he'll have to find another spark watcher or slip off his mask and watch for sparks himself.

"I need you to get a compactor from the shop, you lazy son-of-a-bitch," Phil demanded as I was scampering down the ladder.

"In the middle of the afternoon?"

I stood face-to-face, or more accurately, face-to-chest with him. Another reason why that bastard hates me, like it's my fault that I'm six-foot-three, like there's anything anyone can do about it. Some things in life you can't change, so just accept your God-given body and live with it. But even if Phil was my height, he'd still be a prick.

"Let me get this straight," I said, my anger escalating. "You want me to go to the shop, get a compactor, then drive all the way back? Why didn't you say something at the shop this morning? There's three of them there; I could've brought them all with me. It don't make sense to waste the whole afternoon stuck in traffic—what about the compactor in the trailer?"

"It's on another job." Phil's neck veins pulsated; the left side of his face was sunburned, like he had fallen asleep at the beach. "Ain't the word 'yes' even in your fuckin' vocabulary?" A tidal wave of hatred roiled his flat nose into his black pindrop eyes.

"Because you're asking me to do something totally ridiculous!" I almost added 'as usual' but held back. "So what do I say if I run into Zachary at the shop?"

"He knows."

"You talked to him?"

"I left a message. You'll be back by 2.30. Compact for an hour. That's more work than you've done all day."

"Why not rent one instead of paying me to run all over town? Fifteen minutes to the

rental center and fifteen minutes back. I'll be back by 1.00."

Phil tilted his head to the left and his neck veins stopped pulsing, so at least I knew the bastard was thinking. He can't simultaneously think and talk. "They're all out."

"You called?"

"I just said they're all out."

"Fine." I waved my hands in disgust and headed to the front of the bank. "You want me to drive all over town, I'll drive all over town."

"Where you going?" demanded Phil, as I headed toward the front of the bank, hoping to grab lunch. "Your truck's in the opposite direction!"

"My contract allows thirty minutes for lunch."

"Your contract also allows you to be fired. Get going! You need to be back in less than two hours to make up for the time you'll be stuck in traffic—and don't forget to tie it down."

"Tie it down? It's a fuckin' compactor, not a leaf blower."

Just as I thought, that prick: Rental Resources had three available compactors. Either he's too stupid to assume I'd check, or he assumes that I'm too stupid to question his own stupidity. But I didn't care how much he ranted: if I ran into Zachary at the shop or anyone else for that matter, I'd be immediately fired, no questions asked, and deservedly so.

I reserved a compactor for 1:06, then drove west out of the city along the river, surprised at the low water level, revealing huge boulders where before there was nothing but water. But with no rain since August, we're lucky that there's still a friggin' river.

"Can't wait to see you!" Lisa texted me.

If I answered immediately, she would've assumed that I was thinking of her all morning, but if I didn't answer, she'd keep bugging the shit out of me.

Exactly fifteen minutes later I passed Rental Resources. Perfect. I continued west following the narrowing, twisting, turning river. Maple trees with reddened leaves dotted the riverbank. As the river took a sharp bend to the south, I came across a windowless, red-stuccoed restaurant right on the river's edge.

I snagged the last spot in the gravel parking lot, half-parking on the grass, surprised that a windowless restaurant on the river's edge would be so busy.

Above the restaurant's front door hung a huge wooden sign: The Edge. Really? They get a friggin' A for originality.

Another text from Lisa: "Can't wait to see you!"

I knew what she wanted, and she knew that I knew what she wanted but then again, I never said yes; I only didn't say no, which ain't the same thing as saying yes.

I opened the door to The Edge, texting Lisa, "Working, talk later."

"Do you have a reservation?" inquired the hostess. She wore a dark blue shirt with a black tie.

"No. I don't."

"Then you'll have to sit at the bar."

"Fine." I took the last spot at the long mahogany bar, next to a young woman and man, both around my age—about thirty or so, sharing a heaping dish of pulled pork and sweet potato fries.

Two more texts from Lisa. I shut my phone off.

"Can I get you something?" the bartender asked, pointing behind him to an impressive array of tap beers. Nineteen, I counted: not bad for a windowless restaurant on the river's edge. Tempting, but Zachary has zero tolerance for drinking on the job and just my luck he'd find out. It's amazing how some people think they're irreplaceable. Like Brett, who used to work with us, that is, until this one Saturday when he had already made fishing plans, and then was told to work the weekend along with the rest of us bastards. But instead of morning coffee, he and another laborer opted for a local bar's two beers and a shot special. Guess who was walking by just as they were walking out? Nothing they could've done or said to save their asses.

"We just tapped the Oktoberfest yesterday," the bartender said, like there was any friggin' way of changing my mind.

I asked for a Diet Pepsi, no ice.

"House special," said the woman next to me, pointing to her plate. "Pulled pork and sweet potato fries."

Yeah, no shit.

Her long blond hair was streaked black. Either she originally had blond hair, then dyed it black, or had black hair then dyed it blond.

But her eyebrows were black, so I assumed that was her original color. But if she took all that trouble, why not dye her eyebrows? Maybe she was blonde and dyed her hair black to convince everyone that it was originally blond? Or maybe her original hair was brown, and she just wanted to confuse the hell out of everyone?

"They give you way too much," she said, pushing the plate to the dude. She had a nose ring and her left eyebrow was pierced. She wore a loose-fitting tank-top, white with blue horizontal stripes. The dude's head was shaved, his muscular arms tattooed with fighting serpents, and his black T-shirt shirt was a half-size too small.

The bartender delivered my Diet Pepsi. I drained it; glancing at the tap beers, before ordering another Diet Pepsi and the house special.

"Ask for corn bread," the woman suggested; "it's delicious. They add maple syrup and jalapenos making it really sweet and really hot."

"It's addicting," agreed the dude.

I ordered the cornbread.

"You work for the DFG?" the dude asked. He had three small hoops in his left ear.

"No," I snickered. "Why do you ask?"

"Upriver they're setting brush fires and you smell of smoke, so I assumed you're DFG."

I had forgotten the fire, and the dude was right: I smelled of smoke.

"Good wages and benefits," said the woman. "We can't get near them."

I looked at her, not sure what the hell she was talking about.

"The DFG," she explained.

The dude looked at her and she at him, then both at me. They whispered to each other extending their hands: "I'm Lily. . .And I'm Brian. We're organizers from the Teamsters."

We shook hands.

"Here for a month," Lily said. "Organizing cops."

"Cops? Really?"

"Why so surprised?" Brain asked.

"Cops are pretty conservative, at least the ones I know, and you don't—"

"Look conservative?"

"Organizing is about relationships," Lily said, "building trust and commitment."

"And trust is about honesty," added Brian. "Wearing a suit and tie wouldn't be honest, and people appreciate honesty more than anything else."

"Our message really resonates with cops," Lily said. "So, what do you do, Alexander?"

"Let me guess," Brian immediately answered. "President of the Young Republicans. Lives in Wellesley. Went to a private high school. Dating your high school girlfriend, also a Republican. Some friction between you two: she feels better qualified to be President and you know she's right, so you compensate by going to the gym."

"I live in Roslindale," I snorted. "I went to Roslindale High and I'm not dating anyone right now."

"So, I guess first impressions matter," Brian said with a smirk.

The bartender delivered my corn bread. I buttered all sides, crumbling the bread.

"You like a lot of butter?" Lily asked.

I grunted.

"So what do you do, Alexander?" Lily asked.

"I'm a laborer at General Construction."

"General?" They both said, glancing at each other.

"You've heard of it?"

"Ahh, yes." Lily answered in a sing-song voice.

Maybe they're Zachary's spies? But how could he have possibly known that I was here? Or maybe they're spying for Phil? But that moron wouldn't know a spy if he tripped over one.

The bartender delivered my lunch. I took a bite of pulled pork, explaining with my mouth half-full that we're headquartered in the Seaport district, with our shop in Milton.

"Seaport district?" Brian said, more of a statement than a question, glancing at Lily. "Must be doing well."

Lily dabbed away a smudge of ketchup on Brian's upper lip, then turning to me, said, "General's family held, right?"

"Yes. Zachary, the son, took over after his father unexpectedly passed away."

"I heard he's a prick," Brian said.

I had taken a bigger bite of pulled pork than expected, apologetically pointing to my full mouth. "Haven't met the bastard," I finally said.

"Really? The guy signs your paycheck, and you haven't met him?" Brian asked.

I swirled a sweet potato fry in ketchup.

"One reason I'm running for local union president. . .I think I have a good shot." I'm not sure why I said that; it just came out.

"So, no one's running against you?" Brian started to laugh but stopped when he noticed Lily wasn't.

"How do you know so much about General?" I asked.

Lily turned to me, leaning on her elbow. "It's no state secret: General's at the top of our list."

"General? We're non-union. We've always been."

"Why you think it's at the top of our list?" Brian asked. "The largest construction company in New England and still non-union?"

"We've received some complaints about management," added Lily.

"From us?" I finished my cornbread, swishing my knife in the still-warm butter.

"You're running for local president and you didn't know that?" Brian asked.

I shoved my plate away.

"Hey, ease up," Lily reprimanded Brian, apologetically rolling her eyes at me.

"Looks like we will be paying General a visit," Brian said. "Soon."

"Don't mention my name," I said.

"Just what like I," Brian mocked; "A man of conviction."

If Lily wasn't sitting between us, I would've smacked that arrogant cocksucker. I'm sure that's why the Teamsters sent her along: to prevent his ass from being kicked whenever he opened his mouth.

Brain looked at his watch, rising with Lily. "We don't want to be late."

Lily handed me her business card. "You have a number we can reach you?"

I scribbled my number on a napkin and handed it to her. Not sure why, I just did.

"You'll need a business card if you're running for office," Lily said.

"Yeah right."

"We'll be in touch." Lily smiled; a smile that lingered long after she left.

Chapter 12

JOANNA TURNUS

One day in sixth grade science class we learned about sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic rocks. Due to the Earth's inner heat and pressure, my teacher explained, sedimentary or igneous rocks could, under the right conditions, metamorphize into something else. While my friends dutifully took notes, feigning interest, I realized that the same thing was happening to me, that I was metamorphosing into something else, that my body was changing against my will. But was I a girl changing into a boy, or a boy changing into a girl? Or into both at once? Or into something completely different?

Later that afternoon at the school library, I looked up everything about metamorphosis, eventually stumbling upon Ovid's Metamorphoses. The librarian recommended something else, claiming that a sixth-grade girl would never understand it. But I insisted, asking why the book was even at the library if a sixth-grade girl could not understand it.

It was one of many books that I would read, not to escape (as my father callously insisted) but because I was terribly alone when I wasn't reading, terribly alone at school, in my house, in my room, terribly confused about who I was, about who I was becoming, about who I was supposed to be, terribly confused about why this was happening to me and no one else.

In Ovid's day, the gods monitored your every move and if you stepped out of line—whammo, you were changed into a bird or a tree, but they also listened and answered your prayers. Of course I took Ovid literally: that gods actually cared, that they heard your anguish, your cries, your pleas, and intervened; but as I got older, I realized that we make our own gods, that they are within us, that only we have the power to change. But this understanding came later, after several suicide attempts, and well—I'm getting ahead of my story.

I especially identified with Ovid's Iphis, a thirteen-year-old girl living as a boy; in fact, I had read this story so many times that I thought I was

Iphis.

When Ligdus (the soon-to-be father of Iphis) had learned that his wife was pregnant, he prayed for a male child, warning his wife that if the child was born a girl, she must be put to death—as if the mother could control her child's gender (although I'm sure he assumed his wife would somehow heed his warning). The infant, still in the womb, hearing this crap, became screwed up before she was born. I know. The same had happened to me.

A goddess instructed Telethusa (the mother) that if the child was born a girl, she must deceive her husband and raise her as a boy. Of course, Iphis was born a girl and of course to appease the father, she was raised a boy. Then at thirteen, the father arranged a marriage for Iphis to the most beautiful girl. Of course.

Iphis lamented, "How I wish I had never been born."

How many times have I cried the same words?

Of course, the deceit couldn't continue and of course mother and daughter wouldn't challenge the father's wishes and of course the beautiful girl had no knowledge that the boy she was marrying was actually a girl. After interminable postponements, mother and daughter begged the goddess to intervene. She finally obliged, changing Iphis into a boy, making everyone happy. Of course.

But didn't Ovid send the wrong message? That a child is only instrumental to her parents' wishes? Wouldn't it have been better for Iphis, if the father, learning that the child was actually a girl, immediately put her to death as promised? Isn't physical death preferable to mental and psychological anguish? If quality of life is measured by one's cumulative happiness or misery, perhaps the child should have been put to death? And if the gods really were gods, why didn't they castrate the father, before he could do any damage?

Like Iphis, I begged to be changed into a boy. So many nights I cried myself to sleep, hoping that when I awoke, I would be a boy, but the gods didn't listen, even though my cries were just as real and just as visceral as those of Iphis.

Perhaps one book that I shouldn't have read, especially in the seventh grade when I first began having suicidal thoughts, was The Sorrows of Young Werther, a story about this guy who becomes distraught over not winning the beautiful girl (Lott), and methodically plans his suicide—a

conscious and deliberate act no different than planning a wedding.

I hated Lott's arrogant self-confidence, clamoring for an author who "shows me my own world, conditions such as I live in myself with a story that can engage my interest and heart as much as my own domestic life does, which is certainly no paradise but is still on the whole a source of inexpressible happiness."

Inexpressible happiness? With guys fighting over her? Are you kidding?

But I also envied Lott wanting "to sit in some corner on a Sunday and share with my whole heart in Miss Jenny's happiness and sorrows." And then to be entertained by another fictional character informing her life's banality so that she can smile and feel satisfied, smugly congratulating herself and her boyfriend that she understands the world.

How would have Lott treated me if we had met? I pictured her in her kitchen with her boyfriend cursing me for challenging God's will, for disturbing her peacefully banal Sunday afternoon, for not accepting my God-given gender like everyone else. I felt her wrath, her ruthlessness, all in the name of God.

Chapter 13

ALEXANDER MORGAN

I started the main course, Peking Duck, the day before (it needs 24 hours). Then Sunday morning I made the rest of the dinner: pot-stickers (with my own dough); egg rolls; shrimp fried rice (I didn't catch the shrimp nor grow the rice); and my grandmother's shark fin soup (I substituted swordfish for shark, which she wouldn't have approved, but times have changed). The soup was one of my favorite dishes growing up (my Scottish grandmother could best any native Chinese chef); and today, I'll often eat it as a meal itself, made with green chiles, cilantro, jalapenos, a spicy fish oil, bean sprouts, lemongrass, shitake mushrooms (although I absolutely love portabellas, only shitakes work) and of course, freshly caught swordfish.

I made my sweet and sour sauce slightly sweeter to compensate for the extra spicy shark fin soup (i.e., swordfish soup minus the fin). Every now and then I like a little symmetry in my life. Ha!

I didn't intend for all this food, but I like to cook, and Alexander likes to eat, and so does Rachel, although lately she's been eating like a bird.

Speaking of Rachel, she had eagerly helped me set the table, smiling and singing as she brought the dishes poolside. She looked pretty in her khaki shorts and pink tank top, barely concealing her purple two-piece; giddy with excitement, her first time wearing a bikini (I gave it to her Memorial Day, hoping that she'd wear it during the summer, but here it was mid-October).

I decided to have our dinner poolside underneath my A-frame canopy. (After remodeling the house shortly after I had moved in, I had enough leftover Tuscany stone—actually, a lot—to build a five-foot base on the long sides, keeping the other sides two open for the A-frame, which I then extended three feet with oak and topped with a retractable canopy. The oak matches the front exterior of my house and the stone matches my kitchen. I also built a small, but well-stocked bar.) And, needless to

say, given the warm night with no rain in sight, I retracted the canopy.

Stan barked at Alexander's truck pulling into the driveway.

"He's not used to him," I said to Rachel.

"Neither am I," Rachel smiled. "Ha! I'm glad I'm not barking."

Alexander galloped toward us in dirty, sweaty work clothes. He hugged Rachel, then kissed me.

"You came straight from work?" Rachel giggled, plugging her nose.

"Why don't you take a quick dip before dinner?" I suggested. "But shower first. It's behind the A-frame."

Alexander sheepishly confessed that he forgot his swimsuit. "OK if I jump in with my underwear?"

"As opposed to?" I asked, hearing Rachel's heart skip a beat or two.

Alexander showered and then perched at the pool's edge. "How deep's the deep end?"

If I wasn't so hungry, I would've joined him, dinner or no dinner. "It's twelve feet everywhere," I said as he hit the water; "there's no deep end."

"The water's really warm?" he said when he surfaced, more as a statement than a question.

"Eighty-two degrees. I keep it open year-round."

"Even in winter?"

"That's what year-round means."

"Your third date with Alexander on the water," said Rachel, watching him alternate between dogpaddling and swimming on his back. "How's this going to end?" she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"Don't worry sweetie, I'm not going anywhere."

Rachel's pleasant countenance suddenly disappeared. So typical. Her volatile moods were becoming more unpredictable and tougher to tolerate. Was it something I said? Did I trigger a long-harbored memory? Or perhaps she was jealous of Alexander and I?

But before I could ask what was bothering her, she began. "Last night I stopped for dinner at this nice restaurant," Rachel brushed away a tear. "Behind me sat this family celebrating a young woman introducing her new boyfriend. Everyone was happy, asking him all sorts of questions. I saw my wife someday doing the same, fully confident in his masculinity, nodding as he rubbed his stubbled chin at just the right moment, mulling each question, perfectly orchestrating hand move-

ments, carefully enunciating the right syllable; everyone admiring his self-assuredness."

I waved Alexander in. I was hungry and the food was getting cold. "Sweetie, you have to get over her. She's moved on. And so must you."

Alexander flipped over, gulped water and squirted a long arc of salt-water. He helped himself up the ladder. On the deck, I handed him an oversized towel and an over-sized men's bathrobe (I'm sure he was relieved) and walked him to the A-Frame table. Rachel was sitting with her legs crossed, smiling.

"You should get a video camera like Walter's," Alexander said, kissing me. "Especially being out here alone at night."

"I can take of myself. But I do have a high-resolution camera on the house."

"So we have to behave?"

"Not necessarily!" I invited Alexander to sit next to me and Rachel across, while dishing everyone a plate.

"Joanna made everything," Rachel boasted. "Except the soy sauce and the sweet and sour sauce."

"I made the sweet and sour sauce, sweetie; like I always do."

Alexander wolfed down an egg roll and helped himself to a pot sticker, then another. "This is delicious. As good as any Chinese restaurant. How'd you learn to cook Chinese? From your mother? Is your mother Chinese?"

"My mother?" I asked, surprised at the question, surprised that anyone would insinuate that I had learned anything from my mother, especially about cooking.

"No, certainly not, although she wasn't exactly a bad cook—I've certainly had worse." I tried recalling a good meal that stood out, that was fondly ensconced in my memory, but there was nothing except foggy snippets of store-bought chicken pot pies, shake and bake, overdone steak, hamburger helper, soggy tuna casserole, and canned vegetables. "For my mother cooking was a chore—no different from vacuuming or dusting. She never had fun cooking or eating. And she never sang while she cooked."

"Like you always do," added Rachel, cheerfully.

"My mother always sings while she cooks," Alexander said matter-of-factly, dipping what was left of his egg roll in the sweet and sour

sauce.

"I like her already." I smiled at Alexander. "That says a lot about her."

"Then there's me," laughed Alexander. "Who can barely flip on a stove."

"You'll be easy to teach," I said, dishing the main course for Alexander and Rachel; pleasantly surprised that she was eating so much. "Cooking should be fun and enjoyable." I then told Alexander about my good friend Maria, a cooking aficionado if there ever was one. An inspiration, who taught me (at an early age) that cooking can be fun, a creative art, something to be enjoyed.

The word 'aficionado' perplexed Alexander, so I explained: "An aficionado teaches and inspires by example, mastering each dish's subtle nuances, infusing it with her own imprimatur. In another life she might have been a great novelist—a Márquez, Tolstoy, Hemingway, a Fitzgerald; a master chef with words. . . I met Maria freshman year in college during Christmas break, when I was hospitalized."

When Alexander asked why, I brushed him off, not exactly eager to tell him that I was in the psychological floor (after a suicide attempt), but Rachel abruptly informed him, not maliciously of course, but matter-of-factly, like everyone should have known, as I'm sure everyone does; and I guess that's OK for I just remembered that I had told Alexander about my talisman in my grandfather's boat. On the Lake. When we were alone. Although it's not something that I'm proud of.

"Maria was a second-generation Cuban immigrant," I continued, enjoying watching Alexander gobble seconds; "completing her nursing internship at Brigham and Women's. She really took a liking to me, at first not understanding why such a pretty girl (her words, not mine) would want to take her own life. After I explained, she opened up about her brother: a TG who was murdered in Havana. We became very close and every day she would share her homemade lunch with me, always bringing extra portions, relating in wonderful detail the intricate steps of Cuban cooking, weaving enthralling snippets of her grandmother, her mother, and especially her aunt 'the improviser', who would never follow a recipe exactly, tweaking and twisting, but only to a certain degree and always making it better, improving the dish and inspiring others to improvise. But only an aficionado can improvise to create something just as good or even better than the original.

"Maria's oxtail soup, always made with the freshest ingredients, can solve the meanest tempest. She also introduced me to Russian cooking. Her borscht is delicious, .and you'd never know it was made with beets."

"Can't stand the suckers," said Alexander.

"Russian?" asked Rachel.

"Maria's grandfather was an engineer from Moscow, came to Havana for work, met a woman and settled in the capital. They passed their recipes down to Maria. One of her favorites, so simple but immensely satisfying, which I often make for dinner: fried eggs topped with salmon, caviar, fresh dill; served with a side dish of parsnips and sliced oranges.

"Maria inspired me to cook. She was my muse. My first year in law school. I started cooking for friends. At first just a few, but as word quickly spread, more people came, so I always cooked for more, never knowing exactly how many people would show up. Every Sunday afternoon at two o'clock—a tradition, by the way, still going strong. I soon became one of the most popular women on campus. The school paper interviewed me. My weekly menu (along with the recipes) becoming a regular feature; and the University Press published my recipes as a book. The dinners were fabulous—often ethnic, lasting well into the evening; everyone eating, talking, laughing, and drinking, as if my kitchen was the only place in the world.

"I always experimented but I also had my requested standbys: Carbonaro, borscht, beef stroganoff, Peking Duck; always using fresh herbs and spices—basil, parsley, lemongrass, mint, tarragon—whatever the dish called for, making it visually and aromatically appealing. And on a cold snowy afternoon nothing was (and is) more comforting than my roasted lemon and garlic chicken, with mashed potatoes and tarragon butter, cornbread blueberry stuffing, and Brussels sprouts stuffed with nutmeg and halibut, which amazed everyone because no one knew that Brussel sprouts could be so good.

"Once a month I made Cuban, always adding a twist, a slight deviation, just like Maria's aunt, but always ending with Tres Leches, perfectly made with no deviations. It's one of my favorite desserts on the planet, and the main reason I jog every morning. There's nothing worse than a bad Tres Leches—it's not even edible—but nothing beats a really good one. And mine was the best—everyone said so, and as good as Maria's—she said so herself.

"Maria helped me to survive. She taught me that it's OK to be in the middle, that life doesn't always have to be black and white, that binary opposites suffocate and constrict, forcing people into predetermined delusions. And I inspired her to follow her real passion: cooking. After she finished her internship and got her nursing degree, she enrolled in Johnson & Wales and never looked back. (So because of me there's one less nurse in the world.) She was a great nurse, but a much better cook.

"Maria worked her way up in kitchens in Saugus and Medford, quickly becoming sous chef. Last year she opened her own restaurant in the Seaport District to great reviews. Every Wednesday I make it a point to work late in the city and stop at her restaurant, right at closing. She whips up something—usually seafood, usually sea bass, one of her restaurant's specialties, selecting the fish herself—first thing every morning right from local fishermen—that's what makes her food so good: fresh ingredients locally bought, and locally grown vegetables. Everything made in-house, even the sauces and breads."

"You ain't no slouch yourself," noted Alexander.

I sighed. "She's one step above me. And she keeps getting better. I love watching her transform even an ordinary dish like meatloaf into a work of art."

"Your pot roast can give her a run for her money," added Rachel.

Alexander shook his head. "Never been one of my favorites."

"You've never had Joanna's," Rachel said. "It's absolutely out of this world."

"My mother was a pretty decent cook," Alexander said. "But her pot roast was always dry and bland—she said so herself."

"People lower their expectations because it's so ordinary. Since not much is expected, cooking and eating becomes a letdown instead of an invitation to be creative without losing sight of the dish's simplicity. I add several Cuban ingredients that give it a verve which it might not otherwise have (and some might even say, doesn't deserve). And a blueberry mango sauce that makes the meat melt in your mouth."

"You haven't made it in a while?" Rachel noted. "I've been craving it."

"You're right sweetie. And tomorrow's one of those rare Sundays without any guests. It'll be just Rachel and I."

"Just Rachel?" she teased.

"How about tomorrow afternoon then? A Sunday dinner: Cuban pot roast—oh I forgot, Alexander, you have to work?"

"Actually, we got a lot done today. Phil gave us tomorrow off."

"Wonderful! Dinner, tomorrow afternoon, two o'clock?"

Alexander dipped his half-eaten eggroll into the sauce gulping it in one bite. "So why didn't you become a chef like Maria and follow your friggin' passion? Perhaps open a restaurant together? I could see you two doing that."

"Someday I will. Someday when my foundation work is no longer needed."

"Don't stand on one leg waiting for that to happen," Rachel muttered.

"We've actually talked about it. We cook well together; our styles complement each other very well. We even decided on a name: Dangling in the Moment."

"I like that," Rachel nodded; "I like that a lot."

"What about a part-time catering business right now? Just make a little more during Sunday dinners. It'd be great for tailgating and shit."

"I can't take time away from my foundation. Not now." I got up, slipped off my black dress revealing my red bikini; the same one I had worn at the Lake.

"You know what happened the last time you wore that," said Alexander, a little worried.

I pulled him close and kissed him. "The farthest I'll swim is the edge of the pool. And only with you."

Rachel slipped off her blouse, folding it several times before placing it on the table. Then slowly and methodically removed her shorts. (If I didn't know any better, I would've suspected her of strip-teasing Alexander.) "No need to feel embarrassed, sweetie." I said, silently urging Alexander to shoot her a compliment.

Alexander kissed her forehead. "You're fuckin' beautiful." Then he skipped to the pool's edge. "Where's the friggin' diving board?"

"Too much of a friggin' liability."

"So how do you practice your jumping?"

I pretended a laugh, then followed Alexander into the water. When I surfaced Rachel was gradually easing into the water off the ladder steps. Then she dogpaddled toward me, keeping her head well above water.

"Rachel, if you want to be a woman you have to learn to live with wet hair."

"I am a woman."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't want to wash it tonight."

"My grandfather always said that water isn't refreshing until you completely dunk and swim along the bottom."

"I'm not a fish," she said, as Alexander surfaced between us, catching his breath.

"Is this a dream come true?" I asked. "Two women, at night, in bikinis, alone in a swimming pool?"

"Where were you two when I was in high school?" asked Alexander.

"Studying," I said.

"Chasing girls," Rachel replied.

We watched Alexander swim to the far end of the pool bobbing up and down like a loon on steroids.

"Joanna, I quit my job."

"What! Why? I thought we were going to fight this?"

"The writing's on the wall. Resigning on my own terms will make it easier to get another job, but if I'm fired, who would hire me, especially now? Maybe the Captain's right? Maybe I should do something else?"

"Sweetie, being a cop is what you've always wanted! You said so yourself so many times. Why are you giving up like this?"

"I'm not giving up. I'm just being realistic. . .This morning I asked the Captain if we could talk, away from the station, at a local coffeeshop. She wanted to wait until Tuesday, but I said no, that it was urgent. When she saw me, or, more accurately, when she saw who I really was, that I wasn't Bobby McNair—that I was Rachel—she gave me that same horrified look that my wife did. Maybe I should've warned her? At first, she wouldn't sit down, but I insisted on talking. She still wouldn't sit, so I stood up. I asked for a six-month unpaid leave of absence so I could fully transition and return to the force as Rachel McNair. I was surprised at my bluntness, at how calm I was. She scoffed, calling me a freak, working herself into a frenzy, saying that none of my colleagues would want to work with me, that they'd be too afraid that I wouldn't have their back, that my presence would sully our ongoing community involvement

program. 'Find another precinct,' she said."And your Review will make that happen.' "

"She actually said that? Really? In public? Perhaps we can get some of the customers to corroborate?"

"I did one step better. I taped the whole conversation on my phone." "You did what? What possessed you to do that?"

"I knew that no matter what I said, the meeting on Tuesday wouldn't go my way. I just knew. I wanted some evidence."

"That was wonderful sweetie to think of that!"

Rachel yawned. "I have to go to bed."

"Can we talk about this? Now? It's important."

"I can barely keep my eyes open."

"Then, first thing in the morning?"

Rachel nodded.

"Why don't you sleep out here on a chaise lounge? That's why I bought them."

Rachel yawned again. "I need my bed tonight."

I kissed her on the cheek.

Rachel pulled herself up on the ladder and dried herself with an oversized towel; wrapped it around her and headed inside.

"What happened?" Alexander asked, swimming toward me. "You two have an argument?"

Alexander wasn't surprised at all when I told him what happened. "Maybe she should take a stab at something else? Perhaps HR?"

"General doesn't have an HR department."

"Yeah, no shit. And that's why we have Phil. What about your foundation?"

"It's just me and I don't earn a paycheck, so how could I pay someone else?"

"How about CCB?"

"No experience."

"She has lots of people experience. That's what really matters."

"I'll see what I can do."

Stan started barking.

"I thought I heard a car door." Alexander asked. "You expecting someone?"

I smiled at Alexander. "Just you."

Stan continued barking.

"There's lots of animals out here at night: deer, raccoons, skunks, foxes," I said. "They drive Stan nuts."

"Anything bigger than us that we should worry about?"

I laughed. "They're all harmless."

Alexander kissed me, loosening my bikini string. Rachel's bedroom light flipped on. I waited for it to flicker off, hoping that she'll sleep peacefully, hoping that tomorrow will be a new beginning. But it never did.

Chapter 14

JOANNA TURNUS

Were my friends really happy or was their happiness, like mine, a façade? I would often search their faces for frustration, questioning, annoyance, aggravation, a wrinkled forehead, an upturned mouth, an angry eye—anything suggesting that something wasn't right, anything suggesting that they were confused just like me. But nothing. Never. Not even a trace.

Once I had asked a friend if she ever wanted to wear boys' clothes, to cut her hair short—to be a boy. I might as well had asked if she wanted to go to Mars for lunch. I thought I had noticed a confused look, a gestating anger, but she looked at me like I was a confessed axe murderer. It was then that I realized I was different.

Why did God select me to participate in his evil experiment? Wouldn't it had been more equitable to designate every family's first-born, or perhaps one person from every neighborhood, or every city, or every state, as gender-confused, rather than randomly select me? (Maybe in a former life I had sinned against God and he was now exacting his revenge?) I mean God made both genders but if he really wanted us to be both he would have made it palatable and more tolerable so that others—and especially ourselves—could accept it.

Why did God make me an aberration, a weirdo; my prison-body trapping and suffocating me, announcing to the world that I'm a girl, that I'm expected to wear girl clothes and do girly things? It would've been easier if I was also attracted to girls but as my body was changing all I could think about was boys, but what boy would ever be attracted to a girl who also wanted to be a boy?

My friends at school relished their changing bodies with excited apprehension, envying those who had progressed the most, and chastising those who had progressed least. That's all we talked about, when, of course, we weren't talking about boys. My friends (and everyone I knew,

for that matter) accepted their gender, although looking back, I don't think 'accept' was the right word, since that implied a choice and, at least as far as I knew, no one ever gave it any thought.

Outwardly I shared their excitement but inside I was becoming more depressed and more alone. My prison-body announced to the world that I was a girl changing into a woman, but the inner me wanted something completely different and actively rejected all the girly things I was obligated to do. I felt like a convicted felon receiving a life sentence with no possibility of escape or parole. The only interest shared by my prison-body and the inner me was liking boys—that's all I could think about.

My mother had planted a faulty compass inside me that I couldn't extirpate or even deny. It was there, every day, so that no matter what girly things I was forced to do to my body, no matter how much I liked boys, I was on course to be one myself.

Chapter 15

ALEXANDER MORGAN

At two minutes past four, my phone rang. I assumed it was Walter reaming me out for forgetting to put something away or for putting something away in the wrong spot. But it was Phil. Fuck him. This was my time. I shifted into reverse and backing up I heard a loud bang, like I hit a wall or something, but there was nothing there.

Suddenly Phil thrust his head into my window, scaring the shit out of me, with only my seatbelt preventing my head from going through the roof of my cab. "Why didn't you answer the phone, you goddamned son-of-bitch?" His foul breath reeked of stale coffee.

Would you, knowing who it was? "It's recharging."

"I need you to stop at Hudson Brothers for a half pallet of brick, you goddamned son-of-a-bitch."

"I'll get it first thing in the morning."

Phil thrust his even face closer, his neck veins pulsating, displaying coffee-stained teeth and a capped front tooth. "We need it first thing in the morning."

I was tempted to raise the window lever right then and there and chop his head off and be done with him. A quite convincing accident: I could say that his finger got wrapped up in my shoulder strap, and everything happened so quickly that neither of us could react in time. Who wouldn't believe me?

Phil scribbled something on an index card, then tossed it to me, "Half a pallet of blood-red brick, you goddamned, lazy son-of-a-bitch. Do you think you can handle that?"

I was about to say no—and would've otherwise—that I would get it first thing in the morning, that I had a basketball game or something, but thinking for a minute, I realized that Hudson Brothers was only ten minutes out of my way and a ready-made excuse for not arriving too early at Lisa's. I slowly released my fingers from the window lever but

was not about to let him off so easy. "This is my time, you know."

"If you don't get going, you'll have plenty of time on your hands."

"I have a dentist appointment. Right after work. That's when I schedule such things."

"Reschedule it."

"I just did." I squealed onto the road, like a high school kid roaring out of the school parking lot. Cars honked. I gave them the finger, crumpled Phil's index card and tossed it out the window.

Lisa was texting me, "Can't wait to see you! Everything's ready!"

Stuck in the usual stop-and-go mess on Route 128, my mind drifted to first meeting Lisa, or perhaps more accurately, when Derek and I had first met Lisa. We were returning from a Canadian fishing trip—my first and last trip with that bastard—when an hour or so into New Hampshire, I suggested stopping for lunch, but Derek wanted to keep driving until at least Manchester, and maybe even Nashua. But since it was my truck, and I was starving I pulled into the first decent-looking restaurant: A turkey farm restaurant just south of Center Harbor on a large lake. The restaurant was literally right on the water with a shitload of expensive-looking boats all tied up to a shitload of docks.

Lisa waited on us. I thought she was absolutely beautiful, but then again, after spending four days with Derek in the Canadian woods, I would've said that about anyone. But she was beautiful and still is: Pesky, with lively blond hair that bounced to her shoulders and musical blue eyes that seemed to widen as she talked.

If I live to be 100—highly unlikely at the rate I'm going—I'll never understand why Lisa was so infatuated with Derek. No looks, no money, and he's an asshole. And I'm not just saying that because he's my brother, ask anyone. Perhaps if Lisa was using Derek to get to me, I would have understood. Perhaps if she was any taller—she's barely 5'2" on a good day—I would've been more aggressive, but I'm hard-wired to like really tall women, I guess like some guys are hard-wired to like blonds or brunettes or women with freckles or dimples or long hair or short hair or big boobs—none of that really matters—well, maybe just the last. Maybe she thought I was just another good-looking guy looking for sex, which I was, but that's beside the point.

Then the next day she calls Derek inviting herself to visit. They were married exactly one year later. I still don't get it. Go figure.

At Hudson Brothers the line stretched a quarter mile or so out to the friggin' service road. I waited fifteen minutes without budging an inch. Although I didn't want to arrive too early at Lisa's, I also didn't want to spend the entire night waiting in line at Hudson Brothers. Then, just ahead, I spotted what looked like a side-entrance with no line. Perfect. As I pulled ahead, truck drivers honked, giving me the finger, assuming I was cutting the line. Fuck them.

Pallets of bricks—every type and color—were stacked twelve-foot high on either side, but there was no traditional red? Perhaps they were sold out? Or perhaps they had reserved a special place for the most popular brick?

Yikes! What I thought was a road quickly became a narrowing forklift path, wedging my truck between pallets. I backed up, knocked one pallet over; then pulling forward, knocked over another, scattering bricks everywhere.

A forklift approached from behind, the driver laughing like a bastard. "Can't even keep your pecker in your pocket!"

A tall, thin man, balding, with a heavy grey moustache, ran from the office. "What the hell's going on?" he asked, loosening his tie and rolling up the sleeves of his white button-down shirt.

The forklift driver, trying to compose himself: "Mr. Hudson. . .Mr. Hudson. . .this peckerhead. . .this peckerhead—"

"I thought this was the entrance," I confessed, immediately realizing that I sounded like an idiot.

"You thought this was the entrance!" Mr. Hudson tried to approach but loose bricks were everywhere. "How can anyone be so stupid? Who do you work for?"

"General," answered the driver. "I've seen this clown before."

"Your name?" Mr. Hudson asked, holding pen and paper.

"Cabrini. Paul Cabrini."

"Clean up this mess," Mr. Hudson ordered the forklift driver. "Charge your time and the bricks to General. Then get this idiot out of here. If he ever comes in again, run him over!"

Chapter 16

JOANNA TURNUS

During our North Falmouth vacation—five dreary days that seemed like an eternity—I plucked The Godfather from a small, built-in bookcase; the book was sandwiched between A History of Shipwrecks off Nova Scotia, and A Guidebook to Southern New England Birds—it was either that or play solitaire with my parents. I was intrigued by the author name's—Mario Puzo, thinking that Joanna Meredith Puzo would be wickedly cool. I noticed that one of the book's characters was named Michael, just like my older brother. (Even though he had died at birth, my mother always referred to Michael as her eldest son and insisted that I call him my older brother.)

I couldn't put the book down, finishing in three days (I read slow). I was captivated by Sonny's temper, almost as explosive and unpredictable and uncontrollable as mine (my father's only trait that I inherited). I had tried everything to ameliorate it: counting to fifty, holding my breath, staring at the sky, tying my hands behind my back. Nothing worked except immediately walking away.

Whereas Sonny would fly off the handle in a rage, muscles tightening, face reddening, my anger would lie dormant for days, weeks—months even—never dissipating, always gestating; my calm veneer never betraying the inner turmoil, until one day I would unexpectedly explode like an overdue pressure cooker.

When I first realized that something was wrong, that I was different, I blamed myself (like there was anything I could have done) and God (as if God really cared), my parents, and even my friends (more envy than blame); and like Madame Defarge I kept a lot inside, silently knitting my anger, until this one day in junior high I exploded after reading in The Globe about this twelve-year-old girl (Savannah), born a boy, who always knew that she was a girl. (I've always admired people—especially young kids—who unambiguously know who they are, despite being born

in the wrong body, despite countless people admonishing them to wait until they're older so that they can understand God's plan, whatever it was, as if they knew best, as if they and they alone were somehow privy to God's plan; despite countless people saying that they're too young to know better—even though they listen to their bodies when no one else does. But many of us are cursed with ambiguity and uncertainty and guilt, and some of us, like my best friend and soul sister Rachel, could never accept it, never mind live with it.)

Savannah wanted to try out as a cheerleader—everyone said that she was just as good and just as pretty as everyone else, except, of course, her parents who refused to accept her as a girl. They got a town ordinance passed that only born-females could be cheerleaders. Can you imagine? Her own parents? She pleaded with them but to no avail. Savannah hated being forced to be someone else. Of course her parents were shocked when she took her own life, but if you ask me, they were just as guilty as if they themselves twisted the knife deep into her heart.

I went to her wake and her funeral—yes, I know what you're thinking: that I shouldn't have gone (like Madame Defarge attending a royal costume ball), that I should have sent flowers, or a sympathy card (to whom?) or start my own foundation to help young people like Savannah (which I eventually did). But I had to attend, for even though I had never met Savannah, I felt like I had known her my entire life.

I hate to claim anyone's misfortune as a turning point, but Savannah's funeral was just that for me, an epiphany if you will (although more visible in the rearview mirror), setting me on a very different path with an interest in the law and how it can affect people, enabling (or sometimes not enabling) each of us to reach our full potential. For I began to realize (slowly) that only law can temper raw emotion, only law can attenuate the ubiquitous harassment and violence against people like us, and only law can help nudge values in the right direction. But at the same time, the wrong law or the lack of any law can have devastating effects. No one chooses gender confusion—who in their right mind would? But law can change society's values so that we can accept, tolerate, and even live with it. And, just as important, and more personal, by becoming a lawyer I could transmute my anger into something socially useful, for I refused to be like my father and to end up like Sonny Corleone and to sit idle while other Savannahs took their own life.

Chapter 17

ALEXANDER MORGAN

East Bay Drive.

I'd like to meet the bastard who named this street. Don't look for no water, except the nearby Neponset River, which ain't exactly swimmable, never mind drinkable, although just the other day I thought I saw a school of fish swimming upstream.

East Bay Drive overlooks a sprawling roofing mill, a linoleum plant, and a paper mill, draping the neighborhood in a milky white, ammonia and asphalt-stinking semi-fog that stings your friggin' eyes, forcing you to wear sunglasses even on a cloudy day.

The light had turned red. Lisa was standing curbside in front of her apartment, wearing brown shorts and a white tank top. She tossed her blonde hair back over her shoulders. I took a swig of my just-bought mouthwash. The light turned green. Someone honked. I gave the bastard the finger. I lowered my window. Assaulted by the stinging stench, I slowly pulled alongside her.

Lisa ran over to my window, resting her hands on my windowsill. "It's nice to see you Alexander!" Her chewed fingernails made her small fingers seem even smaller.

She hugged me immediately when I stepped down from my truck. "I'm so glad you could come."

I nudged her away, shaking dust from my jeans.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Everyone knows I'm your brother-in-law. They might get suspicious."

She led me toward her apartment: the top floor of a dull-grey triple-decker in a neighborhood of dull-grey triple-deckers. "You know how many rumors there are about who I'm dating, who I was dating, when I'm getting divorced?"

"You're getting divorced?"

"That's still a rumor."

I opened her front door, following her up a long flight of creaky, wooden stairs. "Does Derek still keep track of his steps?"

"Why do you think we live on the top floor?"

I had actually invited Derek to room with me for six months—the six months from hell—about a year before he met Lisa, so he wouldn't have to worry about rent after he got laid off. But his obsessive list-making—and that was the least of his nagging habits—drove me absolutely nuts. Yeah, lots of people make lists—even I tried it for a while, thinking it might give us something to talk about, but I kept losing them, and then forgetting to write down half the shit I needed to do—but Derek took it one step further, detailing every friggin' detail of every hour of the day. Like taking a friggin' nap, say Sunday at 3.30 for thirty-five minutes. Who schedules a nap? They're totally unplanned and unexpected. That's what makes a nap a nap. Maybe that was his problem: forcing his life—the epitome of dullness—into a logical, sequential orchestra, when it was anything but.

And then, most people when finished checking and crossing everything off will toss the list away? Right? Or perhaps use any unchecked items to start a new list? But Derek filed all his lists in a cabinet in the basement. I found this out one Sunday afternoon, seeing him in a chair next to the furnace, reading what looked like a set of instructions. Assuming he was fixing it—a quite logical assumption, even though it didn't need fixing—I asked. Without glancing at me, in a voice as if it were the most natural thing in the world, said that he was studying his old lists in order to map the future by connecting the past to the present. Yeah, my fault for asking, but bizarre behavior merits an explanation.

That was the last time I asked.

If I'm sentenced to hell—which right now looks like a good possibility—no worse punishment than rooming with Derek for all eternity, reading his lists night and day in the basement of hell, with no friggin' windows. Lisa's lucky: she only has to live with that bastard 'til death does them part.'

On the second-floor landing Lisa abruptly turned, catching me staring at her pretty, slender legs. "I wish he was that obsessive about me," she said, brushing away a tear. "Hugs with Lisa, kisses with Lisa, sex with Lisa, but then there'd be a lot of zeroes."

"You OK?"

"Allergies. And this damn east wind. . .God I hate this place."

We resumed climbing.

At the top landing, Lisa opened the door and ushered me in. I had forgotten how depressingly small her apartment was. Centered in her tiny kitchen was an almost real-looking marble table, with four black, straight-back chairs. An asparagus fir in the corner added a nice touch. Since my last visit, she had painted the walls mustard yellow, and on the opposite wall a four-foot, red rooster.

"Derek was supposed to work overtime," she said in a voice tinged with anger. "But they cancelled it and he'll be home soon." Lisa took out a casserole from the refrigerator and slipped it into the oven. "Swedish meatballs. My mother's recipe. It's already made, I just have to heat it." She opened the refrigerator and from a not-so-small wine box filled a glass. Overfilling, she carefully sipped it, handed it to me, then poured a glass for herself. She led me to the table; we sat opposite.

"I'm sorry things aren't going well between you two," I said.

She took a long sip of wine. "We live in two separate worlds. Last Sunday we were

driving home—if that's what you call this dump—listening to this song on the radio. I was smiling, thinking of someone else—and so was Derek. We were in the same car, listening to the same song, but we might as well had been on different planets." She sighed, looking straight into my eyes. "I quit my job; did Derek tell you?"

"We don't exactly talk much. Why?"

"People loitering two hours over a cup of coffee don't exactly tip a lot. I got a new job at an espresso bar in a bookstore, tripling my old tips—in Cambridge, not too far from you, near the Coop."

"Really? I'm just a couple of blocks away, over the river."

"I know."

"So why haven't you stopped by?"

"I work nights, six to closing and you work days, 7.30 to four; so when could I stop by?"

I glanced at my watch. It was ten minutes to six. "Aren't you late?"

"Tonight's my night off—of all the nights for him not to work late; he's been working overtime every night the last two weeks." Lisa reached across the table and clasped my hand. "Alexander, I've a favor to ask: Next weekend I'll be at the Lake celebrating my birthday with my family.

I don't want to be alone with Derek. I just don't—so I was hoping that, perhaps, you could come along?"

"Me? Come along¿'

"Yes, take him fishing; he's been anxious to go with you again."

"Are you friggin' serious? That was the worst week of my life."

"Please, Alexander." A buzzing oven timer prompted Lisa to rise. "The casserole's done!"

I wanted to say no, excusing myself that I had to work overtime or something, but instead found myself saying yes, probably because I was so relieved that's all she asked, that she didn't want to make love right then in her stifling, suffocating apartment.

"Thanks, Alexander, I'll make it up to you!"

Lisa opened the oven door. "What?" She looked at me, confused. "I did turn it on? What the hell happened?"

"Maybe the pilot's out?"

"It's electric."

"I can't stay," I said, standing up. "I don't want to see Derek. Not tonight."

"What? What about the casserole? I made it for you!"

"Freeze it and bring it to the Lake."

"So you will come?" She kissed me.

"Yes."

We kissed again, this time a little longer.

Chapter 18

JOANNA TURNUS

If my two brothers had lived, would my mother have played with them on the beach, building sandcastles, happily answering questions, playing with their trucks, wearing a baseball hat backwards, oblivious to anything else? Would she have respected who they were? Would she have created a world for them with no uncertainty, no ambiguity, a black and white world with no grey; mother and sons happy and content with each other? Or, would she have over-masculinized them, forcing each to become someone else, reduced to an elusive stereotype? Or perhaps, satiated with boys, she would have craved a girl, dressing the youngest (or perhaps the oldest, or both) in girls' clothes and girls' underwear? I shuddered at the thought. Maybe it was better that both my brothers had died?

Chapter 19

ALEXANDER MORGAN

The next morning, I was relaxing in my truck, savoring my coffee, enjoying the last peaceful moments before work. The sun had just risen. It was a delightfully cool, crisp, wind-breaker morning. Suddenly Phil raced into the parking lot shattering the last peaceful remnants of the delightfully cool, crisp morning. He pulled alongside me, beeping his horn like a bastard, "Where's that other prick?"

"Which other prick? You have to be more specific around here."

"Where's that goddamned son-of-a-bitch?"

Just then Paul, carrying his backpack, lost in his Beats, slumbered toward us like a wayward camel.

"Get over here you goddamned son-of-a-bitch."

"He can't hear you with them Beats," I said, stepping down from my truck, removing my windbreaker.

"Have I got a job for you two." Phil smiled, pulling Paul closer. "You're going to wish you'd called in sick."

I put my windbreaker back on. "Actually, I ain't feeling that well. I could use the day off. Thanks for the suggestion."

"Park the compressor next to the rear door and take enough hose to reach the vault," Phil barked. "Hook up one hose for the chipping hammer and another for the jackhammer."

"What about the graders?" I asked.

"They'll have to wait. This is urgent."

"Everything's friggin' urgent," I muttered. OK, so what the hell's going on? Did Phil find out about Hudson Brothers and The Edge, and now he's dishing out this shit punishment? Bracing for the inevitable accusations, Phil instead explained that the architect forgot the air conditioning duct in the vault and now the sheet metal guys are pissed because they can't finish.

"You are serious?" I asked.

"No, I'm just here for a fire-side chat."

"What about the dust?" asked Paul.

"And the noise?" I asked, relieved and confused. Did the architect really screw up or was this a shit punishment in disguise? Either way, it sucks.

"Wear masks and ear plugs. And water down the dust with a thermos."

"A thermos? Are you friggin' serious?"

"I already outlined and aligned each hole," Phil continued impatiently, like he had someone to go and was already late—which I'm sure he was. "Build one level of staging, run a couple of planks through the top rungs. Hold the jackhammer horizontally. One prick holds the front just above the point, while the other holds the back."

"We know how to jackhammer; we ain't dimwits," I said. "What about the dust? How we supposed to fuckin' breathe?"

A flatbed truck lugging a grader and a bulldozer thundered into the parking lot.

"You'll think of something. Now get going. I want this done so the sheet metal guys can finish," Phil said before scurrying off.

The vault was bigger—much bigger— than I had expected, not that I've ever been in one before. It was about 100 x 75, giving the impression that it was originally something else, like a windowless office or a janitor's room and Phil had just realized that he'd forgotten the bank's heart and soul—how can you build a bank without a friggin' vault? And if it wasn't on the plans—which I'm sure it was—then Phil should've spotted it and made amends—that's what supervisors are supposed to do: solve problems before they become problems.

After Paul and I built one level of staging with six planks running across the top, and before we started hammering, I suggested that we double-check that both holes were centered.

"Phil said that he aligned them," said Paul matter-of-factly.

"Ain't that good enough reason to check? And whose asses will be in a sling if they ain't?"

Paul eyeballed the holes. "They look good to me."

"Either you're too blind to see or too stupid to know what you're looking for." I handed Paul the end of my tape measure while I climbed to the top level of staging. "Take it to the base of the wall," I said, writing down the measurements as Paul read them; then doing the same for

the opposite hole. "Just as I thought: Off by three inches." But which hole was off? With that bastard, they both could be? The only way to make sure was to check the holes in the adjoining room.

Next door the drywall guys were slabbing the first layer of plaster onto the screw holes. I tapped the closest guy's shoulder, asking to borrow his step ladder. He looked at me confused; I'm sure deaf from being around screw guns day after day.

"He don't speak no fuckin' English," someone said.

Then why's he working in America?

I asked anyone within ear range if I could borrow the guy's step ladder to take a quick measure.

"Why don't you bring your own, like everyone else?" someone asked.

"I don't want to waste time trampsing to the trailer just to take one friggin' measurement, and hold you guys up even longer; then you'd really be pissed off."

The bastard nodded his approval. Christ almighty, you'd think I was asking for his first born.

Just as I thought: Each hole was perfectly centered, meaning both holes in the vault were off. There's a surprise.

Back in the vault I properly re-aligned the holes—it would've been easier had we aligned the holes ourselves, saving half an hour. Before we started jackhammering, I called Phil so he wouldn't be pissed that we hadn't yet started and to casually mention that he screwed up again.

"Double-checked? Didn't I say they were aligned?—And?"

"They were three inches off," I said smugly.

Silence.

"Hello?"

"Thanks for checking," he answered calmly, without his usual friggin' adjectives and adverbs. Just a three-word, unadorned, almost unrecognizable sentence, which I, nor anyone else, ever thought possible.

I scribbled on a piece of scrap paper, for myself and all of posterity:

'On this day, Wednesday October 7, in the Year of Our Lord 2018, Phil O'Sullivan complimented Alex Morgan.'

Chapter 20

JOANNA TURNUS

Before you meet Terry, I guess I should tell you why I tried out for the eighth-grade boys' football team; although no matter what I say or how I say it, you'll think that I'm just a simpleton brandishing hackneyed gender stereotypes. (Indeed, sometimes I wish I were.)

Even today some people criticize my playing football as superficial, that it had nothing to do with being or wanting to be a male. And some of my TG friends, whom you think would have understood, asked (half-facetiously) why I didn't play hockey, drive a truck, or some other supposedly macho thing.

So why did I play football? Three and a half reasons. None sufficient on their own, and taken together might not convince you at all, but football was, and is, an important part of who I am. And besides, I never would've met Terry, and probably wouldn't be here today if I didn't play football.

One, I liked it (and still do—although now I'd rather watch than play). Two, back then, I was good at it (better than most boys—everyone said so). Now don't get me wrong, I wasn't on a mission to prove that girls were just as good as boys. If there was a girls' team, I would have been quite content.

Three, and perhaps most importantly, football provided my war-zone body with a rudder, without which I was captive to the slightest breeze from any direction. Admittedly, playing football was a puerile grasp at self-affirmation, without exactly knowing what I was self-affirming (just like my friends getting their ears pierced didn't make them a girl, but merely expressed who they were). Looking back, I played football to survive, which was hard for an eighth-grade girl to fathom—or anyone else for that matter—reconciling who I was with the body I was given. My body was a war zone, and I wasn't sure who was going to win; something none of my so-called 'normal' (God, I hate that word) friends

could possibly have known or understood, or even related to.

Oh, the half reason: I knew what pleased my mother, although it wasn't until much later that I understood why.

To lessen the shock of a pretty girl (everyone said I was) trying out for the eighth-grade boys' football team I decided to meet Coach in mid-June, just after classes were done, to feel him out, to explain my rationale so that at least he'd understand, and to hopefully show how good I was.

The morning of my appointment with Coach I was nervous, not over what to say, for there really wasn't much to say except asking for a try-out; rather, it was deciding what to wear and how to wear it. Obviously, everyone knew I was a girl, so if I dressed as a boy, Coach would think I was pretending to be a boy, so I had to dress like a girl.

Thankfully, I hadn't cut my hair in a while, so I decided to tie it in a high pony. With my mother's mascara, I laced my upper lashes, and her lip gloss prettied my thick, pouty lips; bare, they looked like inflated earthworms.

I was ready, finally, or so I thought, until I glanced at my legs. I didn't know any girl who didn't shave her legs. (I'm sure their mothers made them, even if they didn't want to.) I thought about wearing sweatpants, but it was too hot—I would have died. So I had no choice: a girl asking to try out for the boys' football team had to shave her legs.

As I walked the mile or so to school, I pulled my shorts low over my thighs. I was glad that I wore a somewhat loose-fitting T-shirt, for I swore my breasts grew a little that morning.

Inside the cavernous gym I asked the janitor for directions—I'm sure curious why an eighth-grade girl wanted to see Coach in mid-June. I dabbed on my mother's lip gloss, which I had stashed in my pocket and quickly rapped on Coach's door before I became too nervous, before I could change my mind.

"Yes?" inquired a male voice. "The door's unlocked."

Expecting someone much older, a curmudgeon; a conservative gate-keeper of the status quo, I was pleasantly surprised to see a young guy, kind of cute, with black hair cropped short and spiky. His full moustache complimented a strong jaw, and his perfectly fitting South High T-shirt showcased strong, muscular arms.

Coach was sitting behind an oversized metal desk cluttered with

papers, newspaper clippings, and clipboards. Behind him, dozens of trophies lined a cinder block bookcase. A small electric fan buzzed on the windowsill, sucking out the stuffy, sweaty air.

"I'm looking for the football coach?" Of course, I knew he was but didn't know what else to say.

Noticing that I was a girl, Coach smiled. "I am the coach, how can I help you?"

"I'm Joanna Turnus. I'd called earlier about—"

"Oh yes, yes," he rose enthusiastically to shake my hand. "Please sit down. So, you want to try out for the football team, is that right? You do know that tryouts aren't until August?"

"Of course...but I'm a girl and I would like your permission."

"Are you related to Zachary Turnus?"

I squirmed. "He's my father."

"You don't look anything like him?"

"Everyone says I look like my mother."

Suddenly I couldn't remember if I had left mascara on or removed it. I felt my eyelashes: yes, but more than I thought?

"What does your father say about this?"

"About mascara?" I shrugged, fidgeting my eyelashes.

Coach laughed. "I mean playing football."

"He doesn't know."

"You're trying out for the boys' football team and your father doesn't know?"

"Neither does my mother. There's a lot they don't know about me."

I expected him to say something, but he leaned back in his chair staring at me.

"If I make the team, I will tell them," I obligingly said.

"You sound pretty sure of yourself. What position do you play?"

"Receiver."

"Let me see your hands."

I showed him my hands, extending my long, strong fingers.

"I've never seen such hands on a girl?"

I flinched, unconsciously extending my chest.

"I mean," Coach straightened himself in his chair. "What I mean is that you have really strong hands for a receiver—in college I was a receiver;

hands are so important—what about defense? What position do you play on defense?"

"I don't play defense."

"All our guys go both ways, except the quarterback."

Was there any hidden meaning in what Coach just said, or was he just talking as coaches usually do? "If I have to play defense, then. . . defensive end."

"Too small."

"I'm taller than most boys."

"I mean weight, strength; there's some big linemen out there, not to mention fullbacks."

"I can beat boys in arm wrestling."

"Football isn't arm wrestling."

"How about throwing me some passes?" I asked, surprised by my bluntness.

Coach shuffled some papers on his desk. "I can't now. I'm drafting players for the League all-star game." He looked at his watch. "Tell you what: TC is stopping by and I'll ask him to throw you some balls, er. . .I mean, passes."

"TC?"

"Our quarterback. You're a receiver and you haven't heard of him?"

I shrugged. "I'm just starting eighth grade."

"He should be here soon. You can wait here while I finish and—." The door suddenly opened. Coach smiled, "Morning TC."

"That's the quarterback?" I exclaimed a little louder than intended. Oh my God: Cut-off T-shirt, tall, strong arms, blond, washboard stomach.

Coach pulled him closer, "TC, this is Joanna Turnus; she wants to try out for the team."

I stood up, blushing, feeling my breasts rustle underneath my T-shirt.

TC smiled. "Yeah, I heard there's a girl wanting to try out, who says she's pretty good."

I smiled back. "TC?"

"Terrance Connor," Coach answered immediately. "Everyone calls him TC."

"Except my mother and sisters who call me Terry," he said, winking at me.

Oh my God! Catching passes from this guy is going to be more difficult than I had thought.

"What position do you play?" Terry asked.

"Joanna, show him your hands."

I did, quickly pulling them away, embarrassed at my unpolished, chewed-off nails.

"Placekicker." Terry laughed. "We could use a good one."

"Why don't you toss her some passes, TC? See how good she is?"

"Sure, Coach, but only for a few minutes; I want to watch a few films before I cut the grass." Terry held open Coach's door. I stepped out, quietly dashing on my mother's lip gloss.

"TC, Joanna should wear a helmet and so should you; just grab one from the bin."

Without waiting, I fished a helmet from an empty water barrel overstuffed with helmets. I grabbed a new one and tried it on. Perfect!

"First time wearing a helmet?" Terry asked.

My face flushed. "How'd you know?"

"You didn't look at the inside pads, just tried it on."

"I knew it'd fit."

Outside, Terry said he needed to warm up a bit. On the ground, he stretched his left leg, then his right. Oh my God, I couldn't look. Facing opposite, I did the same, then jumping jacks. After five minutes or so I glanced at Terry still stretching. Oh my God. I turned away, jogging in place until he was ready.

We began with soft, short passes; then longer passes with more zip.

"I like how you catch the ball with your fingertips," Terry said, stepping back about twenty yards.

I caught everything he threw at me. Everything. I really had to concentrate, forcing myself to focus on his hands—looking at the rest of his body, even for an instant, I would have fluttered.

He unleashed a high bullet. I jumped, catching it with both hands, briefly accelerated toward the end zone, then jogged back.

"Impressive," Terry said. "How about some down-and-outs?"

This guy was good. Timed the ball perfectly, throwing some passes directly into my hands, others high/low, obviously testing me. I noticed Coach had slipped outside with his clipboard, standing next to Terry, talking, jotting notes.

Then I ran posts. My favorite because I could use my speed to catch off-target balls; in fact, the more off-target, the quicker my acceleration. Terry threw one pass, low and to my right; I dove, caught the ball, juggling it as I rolled over, never letting it touch the ground. Terry lobbed the next pass high. I jumped, batted it with one hand and caught it.

Coach waved me in. "Impressive." He tossed me a water bottle. I caught it with my fingertips, tucked it into my chest and ran a few yards toward the end zone. They shared a laugh.

"Coach, can we consider her officially on the team? She's quicker and stronger than any receiver we've got, and I could break the school record."

"You already have the school record. No one gets special treatment. She can't officially join the team until tryouts—you know that—but I am impressed." Turning to me, Coach said, "If you catch like that during tryouts, you'll easily make the team."

"Easily make the team? She's going to be my star receiver."

"Terry, did you know that you slightly telegraph your throwing shoulder when you pass?"

Coach glanced at Terry, writing in his notepad. "Very observant."

"Hey Coach? Can Jo and I—"

"Joanna," I said tersely.

"Sorry Joanna," Terry said, appearing genuine. "Can Joanna and I work out during the summer? Practice routes and work on our timing?"

"Sure. You can do whatever you want, as long as it isn't official and as long as I'm not involved or even around."

"Got it. How about it Joanna? A couple of times a week? Here? Working on routes?"

"Sure," my voice blushed. "That would be nice."

Chapter 21

JOANNA TURNUS

We practiced every Tuesday and Thursday night for two hours outside, or if it rained, in the gym. But that summer it hardly rained, at least from what I could remember.

This guy was good. And I'm not just saying so because I was falling in love with him. Here's just one example: In one of our favorite drills, Terry, blindfolded at the line of scrimmage, would call a route, count to four and throw it to where he thought I should be. By the end of July, he was on target eight times out of ten—better than most quarterbacks without a blindfold. Then he would blindfold me, forcing me to sense my route by touch. These two drills—perhaps more than anything else—helped us understand each other by synchronizing our speed and timing. By the end of the summer, catching a pass blindfolded from Terry was almost second nature.

Before every Thursday practice we watched films of opposing teams, together, alone, in Coach's office. Sometimes it was too much: Terry, practically naked, sitting next to me; forcing me to take refuge behind Coach's clipboard, scribbling notes about every defensive back, defensive lineman—even other receivers—forcing my thoughts elsewhere. Sometimes I wouldn't shave my legs for days, then one day I would. Terry always noticed. Immediately. A faint glimmer, a half-smile; a turned upper lip.

That summer was exhilarating. Each practice flew by, while each off day laboriously dragged into the next. But as July melted into August and tryouts loomed, I became more restless. I wanted a lot more from this guy than just catching his passes all season. And I knew he did as well. I just knew.

As I showered the morning of football tryouts, I let the water run on my face. I closed my eyes, imagining Terry embracing me in the warm, soothing rain. Long, soft kisses. I felt him inside me; his warm body

pressed against my breasts.

When I opened my eyes, his sweetness was on my skin, in the soap, in the shampoo. With my mother's razor I shaved my left leg. Slowly. Methodically. Then my right leg. Methodically. Slowly. My bare legs exuded his salty sweetness. I tingled when my breasts touched my cool, bare thigh.

An hour before tryouts, I called Coach to say that I wasn't trying out, that I just couldn't. "Girl problems," I said. He was upset. Understandably. I apologized. He was yelling. I wasn't listening. I knew what he was saying. Staring at my chewed-off, unpolished nails, I carried my phone into the bathroom. In my mother's drawer, I found a purple nail polish with a hint of brown. Perfect. I sat on the hopper and painted each nail. Coach ranted. Too much polish on my middle finger, dribbling onto my thigh; surprised that it didn't stain. I hung up without saying goodbye—maybe I did, I don't remember.

I closed my eyes and could still smell Terry's sweetness. The phone rang. It was Terry. Angry. Of course. Girl problems? He wanted to see me. Immediately. I couldn't. He yelled. I didn't respond. I smiled, knowing how he really felt about me. I just knew. I painted each nail again. Then each toenail. The same color. Purple, with a hint of brown. Careful not to smudge, careful not to drip, careful not to apply too much. I spilled polish on my mother's small rug where she stood every morning applying her makeup after her readings, coffee on the sink. I noticed a small burn mark on the rug, a cigarette burn, but neither my mother nor my father smokes. Perhaps a late afternoon rendezvous?

Terry was yelling. I smiled, knowing how he really felt about me—I just knew. I dusted on my mother's mascara. Just the upper lashes. Perfect. And my mother's lip gloss prettied my thick, pouty lips. Bare, they looked like inflated earthworms.

Chapter 22

JOANNA TURNUS

Ok, so why didn't I try out? Why did I back out at the last minute? Sure, I would've helped Terry break his own school record and undoubtedly set a few of my own on our way to consecutive championships. But if so, we would have remained quarterback and receiver forever; nothing more, nothing less. I wanted more. A lot more. And besides, I couldn't picture myself hugging Terry after a touchdown pass (there'd be a lot). How could I trust myself to stop? Or riding home on the bus after a game, in the dark, sitting next to him? Or being alone with him practically naked in Coach's office watching game films?

I'm sure you're laughing right now: what does an 8th grade girl know about love? But in the 8th grade, like a war-orphaned child, I was wise and mature way beyond my years. I knew what I wanted. And I knew I would get it. I just knew.

But for us to become a couple, Terry would have to notice me as a girl, and what better spotlight than being an 8th grade cheerleader? Now I know what you're thinking: It was bad enough to embrace a stale, hackneyed caricature of maleness, but why do the same for femaleness (as if either word has any meaning)? Of course, being a cheerleader didn't make me a girl or enable me to become a girl (just like playing football didn't make me a male or enable me to become a male) but back in junior high, I was unsure and confused and volatile and depressed; not like my friends whose self-esteem and entire day depended on whether a certain boy smiled at them. My problem was deeper—a lot deeper. I needed something to focus on, to grasp, to occupy myself, anything to suppress the 'other' gender—although I never really knew which was the other. I thought that by extirpating one I could nurture the other. But it wasn't until I was much older that I realized that I was both, and that in order to survive I had to nurture and shepherd both—not exactly clear, digestible, or even palatable stuff for an eighth-grade girl.

So forgive me for playing football (I was good at it) and for becoming a cheerleader (I was pretty and athletic and still am, and I was in love with Terry) and for trying to understand who I was and who I was becoming. The only certainty in my screwed-up life was that I really liked boys and that I had a major crush on Terry (as did all of my friends, and for that matter, just about every girl in 8th grade) which made me feel somewhat good about myself. No one told me how to deal with gender ambiguity, no one had offered a recipe. And no one even suspected me—at least not yet.

I made the cheerleading squad. No surprise there: I was strong and athletic (a perfect bottom-post pyramid); I had a warm and engaging smile (the cheerleading coach said so); I had the nicest legs (everyone said that); and I was prettier than anyone else (my grandfather insisted).

I eventually became squad captain. Yes, Terry had noticed me as a girl and we began dating: the star quarterback (who reluctantly found other receivers, although none as good as me, breaking his own school records) and the pretty cheerleading captain became high school sweethearts. A story book romance, right?

It was cheerleading policy to wear a sports bra no matter how flat-chested you were. I'm sure the other girls didn't think anything about it: no big deal, I'll just grab one from my drawer. But I had never worn a bra and thankfully didn't really need one—I was completely flat-chested—until coincidentally practicing with Terry, or was it coincidental?

I almost asked my mother to accompany me to the mall, but she would have exploded; then again, it would've been nice to have gone with someone, anyone—even my mother, pretending to be normal, doing normal mother/daughter things. (All of my friends went with their mother to buy their first bra, turning it into a nice mother-daughter outing, even getting their ears pierced, if they hadn't already.)

I went to the store myself.

I had no idea my size, only that my breasts were growing and that they hurt. I asked the first clerk that I could find to help me, surprised that she wasn't that much older than me.

"This isn't—is this your first bra?" she asked with a touch of arrogance. "Is your mother with you?"

Obviously, I was alone. "She's sick."

"What's your size?"

I shrugged. “Do you have sports bras? I need a sports bra.”

“Of course we have sports bras.” She nodded to a small, semi-enclosed room filled with sweatshirts and sweatpants. “What sport do you play?”

“I’m a cheerleader.”

For an instant she stared at me confused, as if peering deep inside my soul and finding something terribly wrong. Then with a measuring tape, she asked me to raise my arms.

I scooted back. “I can do this myself.”

“For your first bra, it’s better for me to measure you, so you can see how it’s done.”

I insisted I could so myself.

“Fine.” She snatched a black bra and a pink one from an adjoining table, handing me both. “These should fit. . . A sport bra’s tighter than a regular one,” she explained in a somewhat nicer tone. “But it breathes—see the mesh? This one [the black bra] has a hook, which sometimes can be tricky.”

I left the pink bra with her and took the black one into the fitting room.

OK, this should be easy, right? The front’s obvious, as is the back, and the straps go over my shoulders. I slipped the bra on but couldn’t hook the back, so I removed it, hooked it, then slipped it on but couldn’t squeeze my breasts into the cups and the straps dug into my skin.

“Everything OK?” the clerk asked, snooped outside the door.

“Yes!”

She repeated in a few minutes.

“I think it’s too small?”

“Too small? Can I come in?” she asked, opening the door. “Yes, it is too small.”

I reluctantly let her tape-measure me.

“Are you sure you’ve never worn a bra before?”

I felt like I was going to throw up.

The clerk left, then quickly returned with a black sports bra, definitely bigger. “This should fit.”

In the fitting room, I hooked the bra, raised my arms, then lowered it onto my breasts. I put my blouse on. Looking at myself in the mirror, I was wowed, scared, amazed, and confused by how pretty I was; even the snotty clerk said so.

"We're running a special," she offered. "Buy one bra, half off the second. You'll need one when school starts; I'm sure you know how boys are. And tell your mother we're having a bra-fitting session later this week."

I forced a smile, nodding.

Chapter 23

ALEXANDER MORGAN

Using the jackhammer vertically—normal usage—is a lot easier than it looks. Its weight does the work, so you just guide it as needed. But horizontally, that's a different story—no wonder that bastard was smiling—no handles and nothing to grab, so you need two guys, although the hammer ain't long enough for two, and you need gloves because it gets hot as a bastard.

With 120 decibels reverberating against the walls, earplugs were useless, and our masks filled quickly with fine grey dust, making it more difficult to breath with them on. And 'dabbing' water from a friggin' thermos—who was he kidding?

After thirty minutes or so I suggested hosing down the dust so we could at least see what we're doing. "The floor's concrete," I said to Paul. "So water ain't going to damage it."

A faint grunt, which I took as a yes; not that I needed his approval. I headed to the trailer to fetch a water hose, hacking up all sorts of dust and shit; I also grabbed a couple of extension cords and a hanging torch light.

Returning to the vault, I ran into Lily—literally.

"Alexander?" she asked, peering closer. "Is that you? What have you been doing?"

"Don't ask." I shook the dust from my hair. "What brings you here so early in the morning?"

"We had an all-night organizing session a couple of blocks away. I needed coffee—it was good to get out and . . .I was hoping to run into you." She handed me her business card. "This has my personal number. I was wondering—"

"You live in Worcester?" I asked, noticing the central Massachusetts area code.

"Born and raised."

"I thought you and Brian were—"

"Together?" She laughed. "Are you kidding? We have absolutely nothing in common."

A short silence.

"Look, I find you very attractive, but if you're not interested." She removed her heels and hurried to the bank with a determination that said she was comfortable at a construction site, unfazed by pinching nails, shards of glass, scraps of wood. And she knew I was watching, staring at her long, slender legs glistening in the morning sunlight. At the bank entrance, she bent down, scraped the dirt from her feet and slipped on her shoes.

I called her number. No answer. I called again.

"Who's this?" she asked, recognizing my voice.

"Alexander Morgan. I work at General Construction. How about dinner Saturday night?"

"Hmmm. Brian and I are leaving for Albany Saturday morning, for a week.

A week? Together? And there's nothing between them?

"How about Friday night?" she suggested.

"Sure."

"Should we say seven? Oh, let's make it eight: I've an all-day session in Woonsocket. Call me this week, I've some good suggestions."

Back in the vault, Paul and I outlined the first hole with the chipping hammer, so that when we began jackhammering, the surrounding concrete wouldn't accidentally crack. We worked like bastards, finishing the first hole by 9:10, just in time for coffee. At this rate, we'd finish well before noon. But something wasn't right: it was too easy.

"Did you notice how weak this shit is?" I asked Paul, resting my arms on the upper

planks. The ash-like dust was already an eighth-inch deep. "What if the whole building's

like this?"

"It ain't."

"You've checked? And what about the steel rods?"

"What about them?"

"There ain't none; that's the problem: They're supposed to be in the concrete."

Paul lifted the chipping hammer. “I’ll finish outlining the second hole while you go for

coffee.”

I waved my hands in disgust, then grabbed three small pieces of concrete: one

for Walter, one for my truck, and the other for safe keeping in the trailer.

Outside, I coughed, hacking up more dust and shit.

A Zella guy approached in his friggin’ grader. I waved but no response. I waved again. No response. Fuck him—he can get his own coffee.

Paul and I entered the coffee circle simultaneously but from different directions

“Where’ve you two clowns been?” Walter asked. “And why so dusty?”

“You tell him,” said Paul. “You’re better at explaining stuff.”

Nick lit a cigarette. “The master bullshitter.”

“He was voted best bullshitter in high school,” added Paul.

“An award for best bullshitter?” asked Abe. “In school? No wonder our goddamn country’s so screwed up.”

“They just didn’t hand out them awards,” I said, taking my spot next to Nick. “I won it fair and square.”

“By lying,” Paul said. “Like senior year, you were voted the most tallest, lying to everyone that you were, when, in fact, five guys were taller. And that’s just one example.”

“Which everyone knew—it wasn’t exactly something I could hide—so I bullshitted. And that’s why I won best bullshitter.”

“How do we know you ain’t bullshittin’ now?” Walter asked.

“Everything’s in the yearbook,” I replied. “Check it out online.”

“Liars, bullshitters?” Nick asked. “What’s the goddamned difference?”

I sipped my coffee. “There’s nothing worse than lying—the ultimate deception. Lying deliberately deceives. No one suspects you’re lying because you’re serious, but everyone knows when you’re bullshitting. The opposite of bullshitting is not bullshitting and the opposite of lying is not lying, so if you’re bullshitting you ain’t lying. How does someone five-foot-five dunk a basketball? By bullshitting. How did only a handful of bastards defend the friggin’ Alamo? By bullshitting.”

“What kind of logic is that?” Abe asked, trying hard not to laugh.

"The honest bullshitter," added Nick.

"So why are you two clowns so dusty?" Walter asked.

"You really want to know?" I asked.

Walter sighed. "Let's hear it."

Abe glanced at his watch. "The condensed version, lunch is in three hours."

"You guys have no idea what we do every day getting coffee. Like this morning, just as we were leaving, this blinding sandstorm came out of nowhere. Paul and I were inching along, guided by my compass—thank God I remembered to bring it."

"The goddamned blind leading the goddamned blind," said Nick, lighting a cigarette.

"Then Paul suggested renting a camel."

"He's always thinking," said Abe.

"And charging it to General?" Walter said.

"They ain't cheap now-a-days," Paul added.

"Lucky for us there was a camel stand this side of the street; usually there ain't one when you need it. But our camel wouldn't budge—must've been deaf or something, so we exchanged it for another. Then we got attacked by this roving band of bandits."

"Them's the worst kind," added Nick.

"We whipped out our swords and drove the bandits back, back into the quicksand where they all disappeared."

"You always have a sword getting' coffee?" Walter asked.

"Absolutely," I said. "You never know when it might come in handy."

"That's it?" Abe asked. "No snakes or crocodiles snappin' at you?"

"That was yesterday—thank God we don't have to deal with them bastards every day."

Nick flung his cigarette butt at me.

Walter rose from his bucket, stretching his arms. "So, what's the real reason you're so dusty?"

"The real reason?" I laughed to Paul, "He thinks we made this up!"

"The real reason¡'

I finished my coffee and tossed the empty Styrofoam cup into the water barrel. "If one of us fucked up one-tenth as much as Phil, we'd be out of here on our ass so quickly. He made us cut two holes in the vault

for the air conditioning duct, saying that the architect screwed up."
"What?" Walter asked. "The duct's on the plans, clear as day."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Of course I'm sure—why wouldn't I be?"

"An expensive mistake if you ask me—and something ain't right with the concrete. It's cutting too easy. It's supposed to be zero slump, you know that, but it's a helluva lot weaker. How'd this get by the inspector?"

"Where'd you put it?" Walter asked.

"In the dumpster—where else would I put it? I also stashed a piece in my truck."

"Why?"

I shrugged.

Walter glanced at his watch. "Hey kid, you wanted to speak with Zachary; I set up a meetin' this afternoon. At his office. Be at my truck at exactly three-thirty. He even said we can leave early to leave beat the traffic—I told him it was urgent. And make sure you clean up; you can't go to his office lookin' like that." Walter grabbed my arm. "And who was you talkin' to this mornin'"?

"I was in the vault all morning."

"When you was returnin' from the trailer."

"Her? Oh, a bank customer. She was lost."

"So, she gives you her card?"

"Why so friggin' nosy?"

Walter frowned. "Listen kid, if I see you screwin' around and I ain't even lookin', then so can Phil, who's watchin' your every move. And why didn't you ask Zella to join us for coffee?"

"They're pricks." I reached in my front pocket and returned Walter his twenty.

Cutting the second hole was even easier. We finished at 11:00, three hours ahead of our self-imposed schedule. Our holes were laser-cut perfect. We wheelbarrowed the concrete into the dumpster, then vacuumed the vault floor with the industrial vacuum.

"Let's have a cigarette," I suggested to Paul when finished; "it'll clean out our lungs."

He didn't laugh. He never laughs at my jokes, although this time I was half-serious.

I texted Phil that we had finished, assuming he'd be pissed that we had finished so early. No answer. It was 11:35. I called again. Fuck it. I decided to take an early lunch. If that bastard wants to fire me, then let him explain his expensive screw-up to Zachary.

At the Scarlet Pumpernickel, I snagged the last river-adjacent table, surprised that it was still available. I stretched my legs on an adjoining chair, savoring the warm breeze. My forty minutes for lunch seemed an eternity. I closed my eyes, soothed by the river cascading off the rocks. Half asleep, someone jerked me awake. Assuming it was the waitress asking for my order, I was surprised to see Lisa.

"Alexander? Is that you? I almost didn't recognize you?" She wore an unflattering oversized brown maxi-dress, with her blonde hair tied back. She smiled as I straightened myself up, shaking dust from my hair. "I kind of like you in grey," she said. "Makes you look distinguished."

"How'd you know I was here? Even I didn't know I was coming until the last minute."

"Paul told me."

That bastard.

She sat opposite, handing me a large Styrofoam cup. "A Switchblade. Made it myself.

Five shots of Espresso mixed with house coffee. I thought you might need one."

I took a long sip, nodding my approval. "No naps for me this afternoon. Or the rest of the friggin' week. Do you guys deliver? What's the name of your shop?

"The Comet. We're on the other side of the river, only one stop away on the Red Line, although from here you can practically walk. Stop by when you're working overtime or something."

A waitress approached, asking for Lisa's order.

"How's the grilled avocado salad?" Lisa asked, scanning the menu.

"One of my favorites. You have to try it with alfalfa sprouts."

Lisa nodded.

The waitress turned to me.

"Can I have three cheeseburgers, extra fries, and onion rings? And a Diet Pepsi."

"Really Alexander?" Lisa asked. "Three cheeseburgers? Extra fries

and extra onion rings? No dessert? Won't you be starving by mid-afternoon?"

"I'll manage." I swatted a wasp darting at me.

"That just makes him angry. Sit still and he'll go away."

I unlaced my boots and stretched my legs on an adjoining chair. "I thought you worked nights?"

"I'm subbing today. It's good to get out of the house. Hmmmm, maybe I should sub more often?" she muttered. "So, why so dusty, Alexander?"

I took a sip of my Switchblade, then another. "Paul and I were jackhammering in the

vault."

"How much money did you abscond with, Alexander Ocean?" she asked, laughing.

"Yeah, right. I wouldn't know what to do with it all."

"Me? First, I'd get a manicure and a pedicure, then a trip around the world. In a sailboat."

"With Derek?"

"Are you serious?"

"That's on his list."

"Maybe so, but not with me. Of course, I'd ask you along—I think that'd be fun."

I laughed, "Phil won't even let me go to Allston, never mind a trip around the world."

The waitress delivered Lisa's salad.

Lisa spooned several grilled avocados onto my plate, urging me to try one, as if they were God's greatest invention.

"Can't stand the bastards."

"I bet you never had them grilled?"

"When I was seven my mother made me eat a whole plate of them."

"Lie bag. Just try one. There's nothing like a grilled avocado!"

"An avocado's an avocado no matter if you bake it, boil it, steam it, baste it, sauté it, dice it, eat it raw, or even grill it."

"Not necessarily. A good cook can take a basic avocado and transform it into something magical, something beyond recognition."

"Then why bother with it in the first place?"

"Where's your sense of adventure Alexander?"

"With avocados? Are you kidding?"

"Did you know that these onion rings are actually avocado rings, and your cheeseburgers are avocado burgers?"

I threw my napkin down and stood up.

"Alexander Morgan! Don't be so ridiculous."

"Ain't it reasonable to assume that if I order something, I know exactly what I'm getting?"

"Yes; and no—who cares! I didn't come here to talk about avocados."

I sat down. The waitress delivered my lunch. The onion rings were steeped high, practically burying everything else.

"You should've ordered more, Alexander, I don't think you have enough. But I'm glad that you ordered extra fries."

"What the hell's all this?" I asked, noticing tomatoes, relish, lettuce, pickles and who knows what else in my burgers. "I specifically asked just for extra ketchup and nothing else."

"You didn't. I was right here."

"I did."

"No you didn't."

I diligently scraped off everything, saving the ketchup.

"Are you sure got everything? I think I still see some lettuce."

Finally satisfied I took a bite, "So, how was your romantic dinner last night with Derek?"

"Romantic? With Derek? I wouldn't use those two words together." She took an onion ring, raised it her mouth, then put it down. "Did I ever tell what happened last Valentine's Day?"

I shook my head, not sure I wanted to know.

"I made him breakfast in bed. Yeah, I know: what I was thinking? Maybe I'm a hopeless romantic, that even when things hit rock bottom, they'll get better? I was wearing nothing underneath my bathrobe. Then you know what he said? That I didn't deserve a Valentine's day present this year but maybe next year if I worked at it. I dumped the whole tray on him." She brushed away a tear. "I packed my suitcase and went home to New Hampshire. My Dad initially thought I was pregnant and came home to surprise him. But how can you be pregnant if you don't have sex? And how can you have sex when you don't sleep together? And how can you sleep together when you're not intimate? And how can you be intimate when you don't like each other?" Lisa scattered

her avocadoes. “Last night, it was supposed to be just you and me. He was supposed to work overtime. And today, I was going to surprise you with leftovers—a nice picnic lunch, but he was so pissed that he threw everything in the trash. Now he’s accusing me of having an affair with you.” Lisa stood up, drying her eyes with a Kleenex. “I have to get back to work. I can’t be late, we’re short-staffed as it is.”

I hugged her. “You OK?”

She nodded. “You still coming next weekend?”

“Yes.”

She smiled and kissed me goodbye.

Chapter 24

JOANNA TURNUS

For homecoming, Coach bought us these purple ball earrings—a small token of appreciation for working so hard for the fans, for helping us stay unbeaten, and for 'making her look good.' Yeah, I know what you're thinking: purple; yuk, too gaudy. But they were pretty in a sophisticated way, stylish even; something my grandmother might wear if she was feeling funky on Mother's Day or her birthday or anniversary. Although Coach told us that the earrings were inexpensive, some of the Moms insisted otherwise, even suggesting they were Sapphires. But whether they were or not, they were pretty and quite noticeable from a distance; and purple was our team color.

I was the only girl on the squad without pierced ears. I'm sure Coach would have understood if I didn't want to get my ears pierced (I guess like a Quaker excused for military service); she would've bought me a nice pair of clip-ons, just as pretty, and no one would have been the wiser; that's just the type of person she is. But I didn't have a good reason, at least that I could afford to tell, other than that I was part of this stupid family (a word I hesitate to use) where such a simple thing as getting my ears pierced was so problematic.

Three weeks before homecoming I asked my mother (nicely) to let me get my ears pierced. It certainly wasn't the first time (I was really tired of asking) but now I was more determined. I asked my mother during her morning readings, when she was (usually) halfway nice, waiting until she had crossed herself finishing some worn-out prayer.

"No," she firmly said, fondling a tiny gold cross draped around her neck—a gift from her mother shortly after my mother's first miscarriage. "Absolutely not."

"But everyone on the squad has pierced ears!"

"I don't care! You are not getting your ears pierced."

"We have to. Coach wants us to wear these purple—"

"You'll just have to tell her no."

"You want me to be the only cheerleader without pierced ears?"

"Then you never should've joined the squad. You—" Suddenly, my mother looked at

me calmly and quizzically, even somewhat pathetically, as if seeing me for the first time. But just as quickly she pulled back, returning to her readings. "When you're sixteen," she solemnly said. "When you're sixteen."

"When I'm sixteen? That's three years from now!"

"Your father will explode if—"

"I'm a girl and girls are supposed to get their ears pierced!"

I wished that she had let me pierce my ears. I wished that she had taken me right then to the mall, or even did it herself, like some mothers. I wished that she, like Telethusa, protected her daughter. It would have changed everything.

That same night, a gripping sensation woke me, the same urge that had overtaken me before, but this time I was stronger, calmer, and more determined. I scooped some ice cubes from the freezer. Squeezing both sides of each earlobe until numb, I grabbed a pair of studs from my mother's small earring saucer in the bathroom and a needle from her sewing kit. I pushed the needle (I didn't even think of sterilizing it) through my left earlobe—it was surprisingly easy. Then I did the same for the right ear. I clasped the studs in my ears, feeling wonderfully calm.

Inspecting myself in the mirror, I noticed the left earring was perfectly positioned, but the right was too low. I thought I had pierced them both in the same position? I tried re-piercing my right ear slightly above the first piercing, but it was harder this time, as if pushing through bone. At first, I couldn't; then I re-tried just to the right of the initial hole. Finally, with all my strength (honestly, it was that hard), I pushed the needle through. Blood spurted. I inserted the earring into my still bleeding ear, removed it, squeezed a wet paper towel over my ear, then pressed an ice cube against it. When the bleeding stopped, I re-inserted the earring.

My right ear was red, but at least the earrings were even.

Chapter 25

ALEXANDER MORGAN

3:25.

No sign of Walter.

I sat on the hood of his truck; my feet perched on his radiator grille. 3:26; 3.27; 3:28; 3:29. At precisely 3:30, the horn honked right underneath my ass.

Walter craned out the driver's window. "You dizzy prick! How long were you gonna just sit there?"

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I said 3:30. And where do you think you're goin' like that? Clean yourself up! Stick your head in the water barrel or something."

"In that friggin' cesspool?"

"Christ, when I was your age, first thing every mornin' I'd dunk my head in the water barrel and be 'rarin' to go."

"I'll wash inside."

"If you're not back before you leave, I'm leavin' without you."

"Christ, you sound like Phil," I muttered.

No sooner inside, Walter was honking like a bastard. If the door was any bigger or his truck any smaller, he would've driven right inside. I cupped my hands and poured cold water over my face, scrubbing clean my dust-caked face.

Sure enough he had backed to the door, revving the engine. Picture the starting gate of the Indy 500, with everyone's foot on gas, counting down the seconds. A young woman, with big brown eyes, wearing a baseball cap backwards, was leaning into Walter's open passenger window yapping away on her cell phone.

"Who's she?" I asked, climbing into the passenger seat.

"Joanna. Zachary's daughter, General's legal counsel."

"Dressed like that?"

Walter shrugged. "She can write her own rules, kid."

She continued talking as if she was the only one on the planet. Then she hung up, abruptly bidding Walter good-bye without even acknowledging me.

"Someone so busy she can't even say hello?"

"She got her hands full, kid, believe me."

"That don't justify rudeness."

Walter leaned on the steering wheel, glaring at me. "I asked you to wear a clean shirt."

"I've one in my truck."

"Where is it?"

"Where it always is."

"It wasn't there yesterday."

"I moved it for Zella."

"So where's it now?"

"Where it always is."

Walter stepped on the gas, and like a high school kid done for the day, raced across the parking lot. "Your truck's blockin' the dumpster, kid. What if the dumpster guy comes?"

"He never empties it unless it's full. And it ain't close to being full. And besides, he just emptied it Friday." I jumped out, grabbed my T-shirt and was back in Walter's truck before he had shifted into neutral.

"A Patriots T-shirt? We're going to the Seaport District, not the Black Rose."

"Mr. Tux is running a special all week—everything but the shoes. We can stop on the way. And maybe you can rent one; I heard they're also offering a two-for-one special."

Walter reached over to the glove compartment and pulled out an electric razor. He tilted the rear-view mirror toward him and started shaving as we roared out of the parking lot.

"At least pull over so you don't get us killed."

"When did you last shave, kid?"

"Me?" I smiled, stroking my stubbled chin. "Two days ago. Women like it."

He handed me the razor. "Well, Zachary ain't no woman. When I was workin' with Anthony, he insisted we shave every mornin' before work. If not, he'd send us home. Only happened once, kid."

"That was then and this is now," I replied, stroking my chin. "Unless it interferes with how I do my job—which it don't—or if there's some friggin' regulation forcing me to shave every hour on the hour—which there ain't—I'll keep it."

"It's a matter of respect, kid."

"Respect for whom?"

"Most men would kill for a jaw like yours. Why don't you shave all that crap off so women can actually see it."

I returned the razor to its rightful habitat, slamming shut the glove compartment. Apologizing, I reopened it, then gently shut it.

"What's eatin' you kid? You've been like this all day."

"Nothing's eating me." I tried stretching the seat back. "Don't your goddammed seat go back any further?"

"That's as far as it goes, kid. Anything else?"

"Order a pizza. I'm sure they deliver."

"If you were ready on time like I had asked you, we would've missed all this."

"What? You made me sit on my ass for an hour."

"It wasn't even five—."

"My truck? I forgot to lock it."

"You did. I saw and heard you. And besides Phil locks the gate every evenin'. The one friggin' thing he gets right."

"Can you call and check if he did?"

"Why so worried kid? You stashin' away gold bars?"

"My truck's brand new."

"No shit. If you bought a used one like I suggested, you—"

"Don't start that shit again." I closed my eyes and stretched back as far as I could in a seat that didn't go back all the way.

Walter flipped on his stupid talk radio program.

"Can you turn that crap down?"

"If you saved some money now and then you could sleep better at night and wouldn't need no naps in the middle of the afternoon. That's the difference between you and me kid: When I was your age, I bought a '67 Chevy pickup. Used. Paid cash. No wonder you ain't got a pot to piss in."

"What the hell has that got to do with taking a nap? You ain't making no sense. You never make no sense." I was tired and needed a quick

nap and the only way to do so would be if I could get him to tell a story, something that I've heard at least a million times—that should be easy; then he'd lower the volume and his voice would monotone me to sleep. The perfect question came easy: "What was it like working for Zachary's old man?"

Walter immediately lowered the volume, and in a perfectly pitched monotone, began retelling the story that everyone has heard at least a million times. "No matter how early I arrived at the shop, Anthony was always there pourin' over plans. Wooden clipboards hangin' on the bare sheetrock. You couldn't see nothin' with all the goddamned cigarette smoke. No windows, so you never knew if it was day or light. Next to his desk was a globe. He knew every country and its friggin' capital. Not bad for a guy who never left New England—except once when he went to Albany for his niece's wedding. He was always braggin' that he lived just a mile from where he was born. When I arrived at the office—5.30 sharp—I filled my thermos—there was always a full pot of coffee waitin' for me. Peerin' above his plywood-angled desk, he would salute hello, wrap up quickly while chattin' about the day's job and we'd soon be on our way.

"If it weren't for the cigarettes, his drivin' would've killed us: tailgatin' and beepin', and passin'—even on a one-way street; he never understood no-passin' signs—while writin' in his notebook. He was always thinkin' and talkin' about the job, especially drivin', while smokin' a cigarette and drinkin' coffee. If cell phones had been invented back then, he'd be smokin', writin', and yappin' away, with no hands on the friggin' wheel."

"You ain't much better."

"He was the most recklessly careful driver I knew."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"You know, drivin' with the flow, doin' what everyone else expects with no surprises: speedin' up for a red light, not lettin' no one in, not yieldin' at a rotary—we never got into an accident."

"A friggin' miracle if there ever was one," I muttered, closing my eyes.

"He even died with a cigarette in his mouth. Right there next to me, on the stagin'. I thought he had slipped and lost his balance, but by the time I realized what happened, it was too late."

I sat up, opening me eyes. This was new? But how could I have missed

this? "That must've been something? Have him keel over right in front of you?"

"I called 911, givin' him mouth-to mouth but he died instantly. Massive heart attack. Nothin' no one could've done."

"Zachary must've been devastated, losing his old man, especially on the job like that?"

"Are you kiddin'? That was the happiest day of his life."

I looked at Walter, confused.

"They hated each other, always fightin,'—you knew that kid. The friction, the dislike was so intense. Sparks flew whenever they was together, fightin' about everythin' and especially General. Zachary wanted the largest construction company in New England, while Anthony preferred it small and family-run. The irony of friggin' ironies: they was family in name only—just a collection of individuals who happened to be related. That's what killed him, if you ask me: none of his goddamned offspring gettin' along.

"Maybe that's why father and soon never got along: two peas in a friggin' pod, with the same awful temper, although Zachary's was worse, like somethin' was always festerin' deep inside. His first day workin' with me, the day after Christmas his sophomore year in high school—are you listenin', kid?"

Unfortunately.

"He was pissed that his old man had him workin' while his buddies had the friggin' week off. Christ, when I was his age, I'd be happy as a clam workin'. I was teachin' him how to build stagin'. When this half-bent brace wouldn't fit, he whacked it against the wall and flung it as far as he could, almost decapitatin' two electricians. Then he took another brace, connected it and finished as if nothin' happened. I don't know what was scarier: his initial anger or not acknowledgin' nothin' about it. Anthony laughed it off, sayin' kids have to let off steam now and then."

"What about you and Zachary? You two get along?"

"I never could trust the bastard."

"Christ, you say that about everyone—even me."

"There's the buildin', kid." Walter pointed to a slender, grey-stone, medium-size building in the Seaport District, overlooking the harbor.

Chapter 26

JOANNA TURNUS

So much of who you are and who you become is determined by others. I became a good swimmer because of a gymnastics class that my father insisted I take—a class, however, that I never attended. It was supposed to make me more agile and athletic—at least that's what he had told everyone—but what better way to explain away increasingly random bruises?

Every Saturday morning my mother dropped me off at the Y, then picked me up at noon. But I never attended class, instead changing into an old bathing suit of my mother's and jumping into the pool.

Saturday mornings were family time, so I judiciously stuck close to everyone (although I'm sure the lifeguards suspected the obvious) watching and learning as parents taught their children how to breath, tread water, float on their stomachs and on their backs. I learned the freestyle, the backstroke, the sidestroke, and the butterfly; but my favorite was swimming backwards, which I taught myself. It wasn't exactly a stroke, perhaps more of a medley: swimming on my back, submerging my ears, caressed by the water, blocking the surface noise and the world above, staying afloat with my arms, slightly kicking my legs.

The first Saturday when my mother picked me up, she asked why I had smelled of chlorine. The pool water was just changed, I answered, and its strong smell was everywhere (not exactly a lie). So, every Saturday thereafter, finished with swimming, I made sure to thoroughly wash my body and especially my hair before my mother picked me up. She never asked again.

When my grandfather first invited me to swim with him, the summer before seventh grade, he had no idea how good I really was, so at first, I had to pretend that I knew nothing, (which was difficult since I always thought of myself as a natural swimmer) otherwise even he would have suspected something. He praised me as a fast learner. My grandfather

also taught me the frog stroke, which I didn't like because I was super conscious of my big eyes, and the Australian crawl, his favorite and soon to be mine.

He also taught me how to breathe. "You can't focus on breathing and technique. Since breathing is natural, forget about it and focus on your technique, which isn't natural, but will become so with practice. With proper breathing and good technique, you can swim all the way to England."

"What if I have to pee?"

He laughed so hard.

Chapter 27

JOANNA TURNUS

I should tell you something about my grandfather, something that I'm sure you've long suspected, but it's important. That afternoon back in sixth grade, driving home from his birthday celebration at Bubbling Brook, he asked why I didn't shave my legs, but in such a caring way that I could only answer honestly. (It was the first time anyone had asked.) Everything gushed out. Despite our closeness, or maybe because of it, I expected my grandfather to wave his hands in disgust, asking why such a pretty girl would want to become a boy, chastising me for daring to challenge God's plan (as if He had one for me) as so many others would later heartlessly say, as if they were privy to God's inner workings, as if one inelastic exhortation could change me and set me on their pre-conceived self-righteous path, as if they knew who I was. But my grandfather let me speak without interrupting; listening, leaning, handing me an occasional Kleenex, taking my hand (he was driving).

After driving around with no particular place to go, which was fine—it was nice to talk, no matter where, even in his truck, just the two of us, without any distractions—we found ourselves walking along Wollaston Beach in Quincy, comforted by the salt air, Boston's skyline, planes landing at nearby Logan airport, one after another.

My grandfather wrapped his arm around me protecting against a raw breeze snapping off the water, promising to always love me for who I was, and if I wasn't sure, that was OK, there was no rush to find out, he was not going anywhere; that life is rich and diverse and so is identity, so there's no need to pretend based on others' expectations. 'You must become the author of your life, rather than a pawn for others,' he said, 'despite what others have done and what others would like to do. And if so, you will find that special someone who will love you for you are and not for who you're supposed to be.' I was surprised by how much my grandfather knew and how much he cared.

He said that my gender uncertainty would give me a third eye, so to speak, a sixth sense, an acumen (I had to ask him what that meant) that no one else had, along with courage, humility, compassion (a special gift from God), a sense of humor, and an empathy that would enable me to go anywhere and do anything; a creative edge that I would use to make the world better.

Of course, back then his words didn't exactly make sense, but I never forgot them: they enabled me to survive the tragedy soon to come, and then graduate top in my high school class and have the courage to go to Columbia Law School, graduating second in my class; eventually finding an occupation that I love and one that I'm able to give back so much.

That evening my grandfather took me to the Old Post Inn, his favorite restaurant, just the two of us, our first of many dinners there. During dinner, my grandfather officially nicknamed me Molasses for being the world's slowest eater, which I was and still am. And if so, he was the world's second slowest eater, so I nicknamed him Molasses Two. My grandfather laughed, promising that my first-born (already nicknamed Molasses Three) would eat even slower and put us both to shame!

Chapter 28

ALEXANDER MORGAN

"Welcome to the friggin' penthouse!" Walter beamed, as if the thirty-ninth floor was his

and his alone. Stepping out of the elevator, he was immediately accosted by a security guard. "What the hell's this?" demanded Walter. "You know who I am."

"Someone tried to kill Mr. Turnus last week," replied the guard, frisking Walter. "Just after you left."

"He has more enemies than y ou could shake a stick at," Walter said to me. "And that's just his own friggin' family."

"Everyone has to be checked," the guard apologized to Walter. "Everyone."

"Any idea who it was?" asked Walter.

The security shrugged, frisking me. Satisfied, he led us through a metal detector. "His office is at the end of the foyer."

"I know where the hell it is."

If a prize were awarded for the most uselessly expensive foyer, this would win, hands down. The walls were lined with dozens of expensive, museum-looking portraits of people I didn't know, places I'd never seen. And no windows by the way—how can a foyer on the 39th floor overlooking the Harbor not have a friggin' window? About two dozen mustard, oversized royal thrones were spaced about three feet apart. Obviously not for sitting—so why bother with them, as if anyone on their way to see Zachary Turnus would have the luxury of sitting? In the middle of the foyer, hung the biggest chandelier I had ever seen.

"For the life of me I don't understand why he went to Spain for this friggin' thing," said Walter.

Directly below the chandelier was a granite water fountain emptying into a shallow pool, guarded by two, six-foot golden urns. Ahead, at the foyer's end, was a three-foot, gold-lettered sign.

GENERAL CONSTRUCTION, INC.
WORLD HEADQUARTERS

"World headquarters?" I asked.

"Anthony's turnin' over in his grave. And yes, it's real gold."

The door suddenly opened. "Right on time!" Zachary smiled as the two embraced. "I've always liked that about you."

He was taller than I had thought, almost my height, impeccably dressed in a tailored olive suit; his head shaved, his brown eyes stone cold, as if chiseled out of concrete, with a greyish goatee centering a large nose.

"This is Alex P. Morgan," Walter said. "One of our laborers."

Christ, why couldn't he just introduce me as Alex Morgan?

Zachary shook my hand. "P?"

"Peckerhead," offered Walter; the two sharing a laugh.

Expecting Zachary to follow up and ask, I readied with my tidied, oft-told, standardized explanation that my parents had debated for months on end but couldn't agree on a middle name. For there was no way in hell I was going to tell him or anyone else that my middle name was Pierpont.

Pierpont was my father's idea—and I guess I should be thankful that it's just my middle name and not my first, for then I would've have legally changed it when I turned 16, no matter how much my mother liked it. Yeah, she was actually fond of Pierpont, and still is, perhaps reminding her of happier times. Here's how it happened: My parents were watching TV one night; my mother eight months pregnant with me. That night was one of the few that my father hadn't been out drinking, even promising a new beginning. Channel surfing, he came across a biography of John Pierpont Morgan, which really intrigued him. After the program, he suggested naming me Pierpont. At first my mother thought he was joking, but unfortunately, he was not. She rightfully objected that Pierpont wasn't a first name, but my father persisted. So they struck a deal: my mother could choose my first name, as long as it wasn't too off the wall— as if Pierpont wasn't?—with Pierpont as my middle name.

'Alexander,' my mother immediately said. No particular reason: she was just fond of it.

Later, long after my father had left us, I promised my mother that when I become AFL-CIO president, I'll use my full name: Alexander Pierpont Morgan. Not only does it roll off the tongue reasonably well, but it tells the world that this dude named after one of the richest bastards who ever lived, actually cares about the common laborer.

But Zachary didn't ask, leading us through a small, windowless room, barely large enough for his secretary, who was sitting at her desk, on the phone, typing into her computer. Spotting us, she intensified, her smile disappearing. Zachary whispered something to her. She immediately clicked the phone, then redialed.

"No metal detector in your office?" Walter asked with a touch of sarcasm. "A lot can happen between here and the elevator."

"Some nutcase burst into my office with a handgun. Didn't I tell you? Luckily, I wasn't in. It turned out to be a case of mistaken identity."

"Mistaken identity? He enters the elevator in your friggin' buildin', comes to your friggin' penthouse which needs permission and a friggin' security code, walks a mile down your corridor, past your sign, past your secretary—that's a case of mistaken identity? And what about the video monitors?"

Zachary opened his office door, inviting us in. "They were being repaired."

Floor-to-ceiling glass windows afforded expansive views of Logan airport, the harbor islands, and the Atlantic Ocean straight ahead; to the left, Faneuil Hall and the Government center; and just beyond, the Pru and Hancock towers.

Zachary spotted a smudge on the harbor-facing panel. He tried wiping it off with his handkerchief, but it seemed to be outside. Frustrated, he immediately called the building manager, leaving a short angry message.

Centered in the room was a large oak desk, completely bare. No papers, no phone, not even a memo pad. Against the far wall was a large fireplace centered between a half-filled bookcase and a well-stocked, chestnut-paneled bar. Zachary, inviting us for a drink, pointed out that he had personally selected the wood from a six-hundred-year-old tree. Placing three medium-sized, empty glasses on the shelf, he dropped two ice cubes into one glass, filled it with Coke and handed it to Walter. He removed a half-filled bottle of Balvenie Scotch, poured himself a glass, plopped in two cubes, asking if I wanted the same.

I nodded yes, but to skip the ice, watching Zachary meticulously fill my glass, stopping exactly at quarter-point, examining it, as if looking for something. Smudges perhaps? Satisfied, he presented it to me.

"Balvenie?" noted Walter. "This must be a special occasion."

Above the fireplace hung a large portrait—or was it a photo? —of an older man.

"A portrait of my father," Zachary said, anticipating my question, which, by the way, I had no intention of asking. "It was my mother's idea."

"You defiantly have his nose," Walter said.

Did he just say what I thought he just said?

"I meant definitely," Walter blushed, immediately correcting himself.

"I bet my mother ten bucks that he couldn't sit still."

"That's all?" asked Walter.

Was he just being his usual stupid self, or was he deliberately trying to provoke? If the latter, he was doing a good job, although Zachary seemed oblivious.

Walter leaned into me, "That's him kid: always worryin', smokin', fidgedin.'"

"Fidgeting should have been his middle name," Zachary said, staring at the portrait. "You know the last thing he said to me? Just two days before he died, like somehow, he knew. That I'd bankrupt the company, run it into the ground."

"He didn't mean it like that," Walter said.

"Of course he did. He never minced words; you know that." Zachary gulped his Scotch, quickly refilling his glass. "Your father was a mason, is that right?"

"Yes," Walter replied. "And my grandfather and my great-grandfather. I come from a

long line of masons."

"What about your sons?"

"They're both in sheet metal. Someday they hope to start their own company."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Hell no! It's great work."

"I mean that you're the last of the masons?"

Walter laughed. "Of course not. Why would it?"

Zachary sat down at his desk, gesturing for us to sit opposite. "You said this meeting was urgent. You're not retiring?"

"Not for a while." Walter sipped his Coke. "You knew that."

"Then what's on your mind?"

"Phil," Walter answered immediately.

"What about him?"

"He's constantly screwin' up. Always makin' the wrong decisions, reversing the right ones, forgettin' things, not coordinatin' with subs, jeopardzin' our safety and pissin' people off."

"Pissing everyone off." I added.

"And morale sucks," said Walter.

"I don't care about morale, as long as the job gets done."

"That's the problem," noted Walter. "Half the time I'm doing his work. He can't—"

"He's completely disorganized," I said. "Interrupting jobs, sending me on wild goose chases, sending me back to the shop in the middle of the day."

"Last week he forgot to tell the sheet metal guys about the air conditionin' duct in the vault—it's right on the plans—so he sends the kid in with the friggin' compressor."

"Where'd he put the concrete?"

"In the dumpster? Where else would the kid put it?"

Zachary abruptly excused himself and ducked into his secretary's office. "A super needs to be flexible," he said, when he just as quickly returned. "Things come up; you have to be able to think on your feet."

"Thinkin' on your feet's one thing, not knowin' where your nose is, that's another."

"That's not what I'm hearing. Everyone's praising Phil that we're eight days ahead

of schedule."

"Only because of the unusually good weather," I noted.

"If it was just the weather, we'd be on time: we factor good and bad weather when

we do the bidding." Zachary glanced at his watch. "Anything else?"

Walter took out a small spiral notebook from his shirt pocket.

"Is that my father's?" asked Zachary, peering over the table.

"He started me with this goddamned habit." Walter slipped on his reading glasses,

flipping through the pages. "There's been some talk about unionizing. The Teamsters have been snoopin' around. I thought you should know."

How the hell did Walter find out, and why's he bringing this up now?

"Unions just don't snoop around," Zachary retorted.

"No one from General invited them," Walter clarified. "If that's what you're getting at."

"Obviously they see us growin' faster than no one else, so they want a piece of the action. If your father was alive, he'd—"

"Damn my father!" Zachary stood up, hurling his whiskey glass at Anthony's portrait, splattering ice and glass. Then he poured himself another drink and calmly sat down as if nothing happened. "If my father was still running the company," he said in a disarmingly subdued voice, "it would be bankrupt. Times change and you have to change with them. Anything else?" Zachary sipped his Scotch, glancing at his watch. "I have a conference call in just a few minutes."

Walter rose and I quickly rose with him.

"Why don't you check up on Phil now and then," offered Walter. "See how that moron really operates."

"I check up on everyone." Zachary glared at me with his stone-cold eyes. "And I don't have a problem with Phil."

We shook hands and said good-bye.

"What the hell was that all about?" I asked, once inside the elevator.

Walter grabbed my arm, pointing to a camera and microphone directly above us. I waited patiently for the elevator to empty us into the parking garage. "Why'd you say that shit about the Teamsters? And how'd you find out?"

"Relax kid. The woman you was talkin' to the other day when you was returnin' to the vault."

"So why'd you ask me who I was talking to if you already knew the reason? And now Zachary thinks I invited the Teamsters."

"Relax kid. By givin' you a little of the disease now, it prevents you from gettin' it later; you understand what I'm sayin'"?

"No, I don't understand what you're saying. I never understand what the hell you're saying."

"Listen kid, Zachary knows about the Teamsters, the Laborers, Steelworkers, the UAW, and every other friggin' union wantin' to organize us. So by tellin' him now clears your name. He'll never assume you're guilty if I mention it now. Trust me, kid."

"I don't trust you." I stepped up into his cab and slammed shut the door. I've never trusted you.

"Don't you think it odd that there weren't no papers on his desk?" I asked, as we merged onto the Expressway, surprised that the traffic was so blight. "And no filing cabinets or plans?"

"Did you happen to notice that door across the hallway from his secretary?"

"No, I didn't notice no door across from his secretary or anyone else."

"That's his office. This afternoon he met us in the Conference room. His office has three overflowing blueprint desks, and the walls plastered with before/after photos of every project General's ever done."

"Did Anthony have any family pictures in his office?"

"Anthony? Yeah, lots. Especially Joanna—two peas in a friggin' pod if you ask me."

"She married?"

Walter laughed.

"Just asking."

"She ain't like you and me, kid; she ain't like no one else: she's weird, unpredictable, and explosive—just like her old man. And she ain't in your league."

"Didn't know I was in no league?"

"You know what I mean: rich, smart, a lawyer, drives a Lexus."

I stretched back as far as I could in the passenger seat of Walter's truck, closing my eyes. "I'll have to remember that: not in my league."

Chapter 29

JOANNA TURNUS

Our first practice after our first game was terribly brutal, as if we had lost big-time, as if we didn't know what we were doing, as if the fans weren't on our side, as if we had bumbled through a lopsided, excruciating loss. Coach nitpicked every little fault that no one else would have noticed, that no one else would have even thought to look for, that probably kept her up all night. But, in retrospect, maybe it was good to get chewed out: bringing us down a notch before we got too arrogant; after all this was the beginning of a long season.

I couldn't imagine how such a long practice could've been any longer or any worse, or even what it would have been like had we lost, but just when we thought it was finally over (already ninety minutes later than usual) Coach said that she had videotaped everyone's game performance and wanted to meet with us individually, immediately; in her office.

Of course, my meeting was last (we went alphabetically), and of course it was the longest (although I had assumed that when she finally got to me, she would have exhausted herself)—and it would have been even longer, had not her husband called.

She handed me my video wrapped in manila paper as if it was a report card. Plastered on the front was my grade (so far, the highest grade was a C- with several Fs):

C + SEE ME

"See me?" I wondered out loud. "But I was a hit with the moms?" Indeed, they had raved about my 'infectious enthusiasm' making everyone want to dance, which I guess was easy when we scored on our first six possessions cruising to a lopsided shutout, in what was supposed to be our biggest test, our closest game all season. With our ebullient fans dancing in the stands, anticipating another undefeated season, it would have been tough to find fault with anything that afternoon.

Except for Coach.

"You have to correct this," Coach said, seeming like she was getting her second wind, or perhaps she never lost her first? She hurriedly unwrapped the paper and injected the tape into the machine. "Sometimes—but not always—you strut like a boy, not in your walk but in your dance—disjointed, discordant; deliberately exaggerating your arms and hips like you have something to prove."

'Strut like a boy?' 'deliberately?' 'like I have something to prove?'

Coach wasn't exactly angry (perhaps by now she too was tired?), admitting that I had received the most compliments from the moms, but that she was just fixing a 'noticeable problem.' Nevertheless, the meeting was surreal, as if Coach were tiptoeing around a well-guarded secret, knowing full well what it was. I felt like Montag 'hearing something in the silence.'

Coach said that while I was in-sync with the team—more so than anyone else—I was sometimes (thankfully not a lot, otherwise it would have been a major problem) out of sync with myself—more so than anyone else. Her solution was simple, practical, and effective: use my body curves to portray flowing, continuous, feminine motion to preempt any jerky 'masculine' moves. "No need to go overboard," Coach said. "You're a girl, so it should be natural to dance like one."

I practiced night and day, determined to fix my 'noticeable problem.' By the second game, dancing like a girl was almost second nature.

During the first quarter of that game (which, by the way, we also lopsidedly won, although we surrendered a last-minute field goal which angered the defense, even more so than a loss, since they were hoping for back-to-back shutouts), I had an embarrassing mishap. As part of our uniform, we had to wear a skimpy miniskirt and a black outer panty, which was fine, but underneath I wore boys' briefs—I had to: it was the only way I could be myself. It was the only way I could relax and smile in public. It was the only way I could walk (and dance) like a girl. During a jumping routine early in the second quarter, the elastic of my outer panty ripped, sliding down my leg exposing my male briefs. Two cheerleaders, surprised, immediately shielded me from the crowd. Obviously nothing was there that shouldn't have been (except the underwear). Obviously I was a girl.

"My boyfriend's," I said, forcing a laugh. "We got a little carried away."

"So, he's wearing your panties?" snickered one girl.

"If he did, he wouldn't be my boyfriend."

As soon as I said that I wanted to retract every word, preferably all at once, as if never said. Sometimes we're forced to say things we don't really mean, uttering a scripted line, unrehearsed; at the time convincing to everyone but ourselves. Sometimes we say things too quickly—later wishing we never had—to comport with the callous, inelastic expectations of others, as if that's the only barometer, as if that's all that matters.

I was sure Coach was in the stands secretly videotaping, knitting evidence against me. But she had left at the beginning of the game for an urgent family matter and didn't return until half-time. Perhaps she had someone else videotaping me? But I saw no one suspicious, no one pointing their cell phone at my skirt. Only two cheerleaders witnessed, and everything happened so quickly that even if someone in the stands had happened to see, it wouldn't had been exactly clear what they saw. My friends laughed it off as innocent fun. Nevertheless, I felt the Hound's presence, getting closer, 'like a wind that didn't stir the grass.'

My friends on the cheerleading squad accepted me. Yeah, I was a little weird, a little masculine now and then, but who was 100% feminine, whatever that meant? I also laughed a lot (more than anyone) and was (very) pretty—everyone said so—and I had a major crush on Terry, which made me really fit in. But I was jealous of the other girls, jealous that every morning they'd do their make-up, their hair, slip uncontested into clothes, never thinking twice about being a girl—no self-doubt, no questions asked, no need for discussion.

As I got older, an inner voice warned that this charade couldn't continue, that the longer it lasted, the worse it would become; a threatening, ominous voice, becoming more frequent and more persistent. My body had become a silent battleground; nothing secured, nothing battened down, and it wasn't clear who was going to win.

Chapter 30

ALEXANDER MORGAN

"Hey, Walter, is that the Comet?"

"Too bright in the city to see nothin', kid."

"No, the coffee shop? Can you back up?"

"In the middle of traffic?"

"Then drop me off."

"Getting a head start on mornin' coffee, kid?" Walter asked, pulling to the curb.

"My sister-in-law works here. Care to join me?" I only asked because I knew the answer.

"Just lookin' at caffeine at night keeps me up."

"Then have a decaf."

"I don't drink nothin' that don't do nothin' for me. And, besides, I have to get home."

"It ain't even six-thirty."

"It's seven-fifteen, almost my bedtime. Sister-in-law you said? Be careful, kid."

"I'm just having coffee."

Walter laughed. "That's how it starts: She makes you a coffee. Extra strong. You like it. She makes another. You're wide awake. You wait for her until she's done work. You both stop at a bar for a drink. Then another. She invites you home. You have a night cap. Then, in the mornin' you come to work with a goddamned twinkle in your eye."

"I'm having one coffee, then leaving." I opened the passenger door and stepped out. "And I certainly won't be coming to work with no goddamned twinkle in my eye."

"You have a gate key, kid?"

"What gate? No, I don't."

"How'd you expect to get in without a key?" He handed me his gate key, along with the key to the trailer. "Don't lose them, kid."

The L-shaped Comet's floor-to-ceiling windows afforded a great view of the traffic. Lisa, her hair tied back, was working the espresso machine. "I thought that was you." She smiled seeing me, wiping her hands on her black apron. "What a nice surprise!"

"I think I'm addicted to switchblades?"

She laughed. "I'll make you a just-as-good caramel whipped-creamed decaf that won't keep you up all night."

"Caffeine doesn't bother me at night."

"A switchblade will. Trust me."

I took a seat next to people sitting alone or sitting alone with someone else, typing into their laptops, writing on their note pads, texting who knows whom.

Lisa returned with my coffee and an over-sized brownie.

I took a long sip, nodding my approval.

"Glad you like it!" She sat opposite. Perspiration beaded on her forehead.

"Is this really a decaf?"

"I told you that you couldn't tell the difference! Are you working overtime tonight?"

I explained my visit with Zachary.

"I'm closing tonight," she said. "Someone called in sick, so I'm working a triple shift: opening this morning, a day shift, and closing."

"Maybe you need one of them switchblades."

Lisa's phone vibrated. "Now what does he want?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think? He's called three times in the last hour, accusing me of an affair—I have to get back to work. I've already taken my break, and I can't loiter with customers, no matter how cute." She rose and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks for stopping by! Are you still coming this weekend?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "We're leaving Friday night right after work. 5.15. And don't be late."

Chapter 31

JOANNA TURNUS

My grandfather nudged me awake. "We're here, Molasses!"

"Anthony!" my grandmother reprimanded. "She has such a pretty name."

I had been asleep in the warm front seat of my grandfather's truck—quite comfortably I might add—snuggled between my grandparents, on the way to the Lake. My grandfather's lake: the lake where he swam every Sunday, the lake where he met my grandmother, the lake that he promised to take me swimming (hopefully waiting until summer), the lake that gave me my middle name.

My grandmother helped me down from the truck. I stretched, rubbing my eyes, not quite awake, not sure if I was awake just yet, half-listening to my grandfather excitedly explain that we had parked on a scenic overlook along the eastern shore of the Lake, on Highway 11, just east of Sleeper's Point.

"I can see how Sleeper's Point got its name," I said, exaggerating a yawn.

My grandmother laughed.

The Lake sprawled before us: 22 miles end-to-end. I had never seen so many islands in one place; 252, my grandfather boasted. The air was crisp and the sky clear, unusual for New Hampshire in mid-November.

My grandfather wrapped his arm around me. "See the large expanse of open water just east of them two islands? That's where I swim. It's called the Broads because it's so open. Sometimes it's as rough as the ocean—the winds can be so unpredictable—and sometimes it can be smooth as glass—like today."

Too bad it's so cold.

"You should start her off in a cove, Anthony. She's just thirteen."

"She'll be fine; and besides, I'll be right with her."

Seeing the two of them now, you'd never guess that he was the swimmer. My grandfather didn't have much of a swimmer's build, and actually my grandmother was more athletic looking: slender, strong, stern, outwardly dour but inwardly warm. She never swam with him but would always accompany him in a dinghy to shield him from bigger boats—after all, no one expected a swimmer in the middle of the Lake—and in case he ever got a cramp (which he never did, my grandfather had boasted).

I nestled between my grandparents listening to grandfather: "That's Rattlesnake Island. Some people say that from the air it looks like a rattlesnake, while others say that years ago the island periodically would become so infested with snakes that the residents would have to burn everything—but they always returned."

"The people or the snakes?" I asked.

My grandmother laughed, clasping my hand.

"Any water snakes?" I asked.

"Not where we swim, Molasses; they don't like people. See the island just to the left of the Broads? That's Bear Island, where your grandmother and I picnic when we're done swimming. When I was younger, sometimes I'd see a bear swimming around the island, but not now, there's too many people."

"Anthony, you're scaring the poor thing with rattlesnakes and bears."

"As long as there isn't a piranha island," I said, half-serious.

Directly across from us was a non-functioning lighthouse perched on a narrow spit.

"If you look north/northeast, Joanna," my grandmother said, pointing. "That's Center Harbor. I grew up just west in a wonderful farmhouse overlooking the Lake."

Beyond Center Harbor, rose steep, cold-grey hills, and further yonder, a range of mountains. Looming majestically in the distance was snow-clad Mount Washington.

"It's unusual to see the Mount," my grandfather boasted, seeming surprised. "Especially in November. On a clear day, you can see it from the Atlantic. It used to have the world's highest wind speed, but someone beat us out in Australia, I think."

"Hard to imagine," I said. "It looks so calm and peaceful."

"That's where all the North American air masses converge. The summit is—"

"I'm sure Joanna's hungry." My grandmother scooted me into the truck. "And I'm getting cold."

We drove down the hill, away from Sleeper's Point, then west along the long wide bay; my grandfather rattling off the names of the towns and villages that dotted the Lake: Meredith, Weirs Beach, Laconia, Gilford, Alton Bay, Moultonborough, Tuftonboro, Center Harbor, Wolfeboro—"

"I'm glad you two didn't meet in Wolfeboro; I couldn't imagine being Joanna Wolfeboro Turnus."

My grandmother laughed.

"The lake's clear as glass today," said my grandfather. "Perfect for swimming, but too bad it's so cold."

Thank God.

We pulled into the parking lot of the Center Restaurant in Meredith at the base of Meredith Bay; the same restaurant where my grandparents had first met. We sat at the same Formica table (looking like it hadn't changed a bit, my grandmother said) that my shy grandfather sat in as a young man (while my future grandmother and her father sat just across the narrow aisle, so narrow in fact, that I couldn't believe it took them three just weeks to talk).

My grandfather and I ordered blueberry pancakes with extra (real) maple syrup; and my grandmother ordered homemade oatmeal with walnuts and locally grown cranberries.

"When I was 18," my grandfather began, eager to explain how he had met my grandmother. "I was training every day for the Olympics." [1968 in Mexico City, which I'll explain shortly]. "Every Sunday, mid-May through mid-December, I drove the 2½ hours one way to the Lake rain or shine to swim, often donning a wet suit. It was more of a relaxing psychological reward after a long, hard week of training. Surrounded by pine-scented hills with the White Mountains in the distance, the water was—and still is—crystal clear, and so clean that you could—and still can—drink from it.

"I would first breakfast here, loading up on carbohydrates—they make the best blueberry pancakes (with the best maple syrup). One morning I noticed this pretty young lady eating with an older gentleman. At first, I assumed they were a couple, but it soon became obvious they were

father and daughter. Finally, after the third Sunday, I was determined to break the ice."

"I never understood why it took you three weeks to say anything," chided my grandmother.

"Having your father sitting next to you glaring at me, didn't exactly help matters."

"Oh, he's harmless; you know that." My grandmother took my hand. "We couldn't believe how your grandfather would meticulously dissect each pancake into quarter-inch squares, then inspect them as if bestowing grace, taking deep breaths like a tightrope walker about to traverse Niagara Falls. And once he started eating, he was so focused he never looked up."

"How many pancakes did grandpa eat?"

"You'll never guess," challenged my grandmother. "And each was as big as a regular plate!"

"Two?"

My grandmother laughed.

"Three. Four? Five?"

"Six?"

My grandmother nodded.

"How could anyone eat six pancakes?"

"I could've eaten twenty," my grandfather boasted.

"And the only reason you didn't, was that it would've been dark by the time you finished and then time for supper."

"To think that I could've been named Joanna Pancakes Turnus?"

My grandmother laughed, such a light, endearing laugh, slightly tilting her head back, displaying a fun, elfish look.

"My plan," my grandfather winked at me, "was to accidentally bump into your grandmother in the register line."

"That was a plan?" laughed my grandmother. "Jacques Clouseau had better-made plans!"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"He was so nervous in line rehearsing what he wanted to say," said my grandmother, "that he hadn't notice me talking to him, taking his arm, laughing that I'd never met anyone who could eat so many pancakes."

"That morning we sat for more coffee while her father did a few errands," my grandfather continued. "And after swimming, her parents

invited me for Sunday dinner, which soon became our weekly tradition."

"How many dinners did grandpa eat?"

"Just one. But the portions were huge—my mother was forewarned."

"Then I had to stop for ice cream not even half-way home."

"I'm surprised that he waited that long," my grandmother said to me, laughing. "And this was after my mother made him a huge doggy bag."

When my grandmother had finished her breakfast—us slowpokes weren't even half-done—she handed me a small package wrapped in purple, my favorite color. "Joanna dear," she said with emotion, "we don't care if you have pierced ears or not, if you wear clip-ons or no earrings at all, or even if you let your holes close; but we thought that if I you choose to wear earrings, you might like these."

I had difficulty opening the package, never mind seeing it. Like my grandfather, I can get quite emotional. My grandmother gladly took over, while my grandfather handed me a Kleenex.

"Diamond earrings?" I exclaimed, wiping my eyes.

My grandmother scooted closer, gently pulling my hair back. "No matter what you wear or don't wear, we love you Joanna Meredith Turnus. We're proud of who you are; always remember that." She slipped one earring in, clasped the backing, then slipped in the other. "There!" She held out her compact for my inspection. I was wowed by how much they prettied my ears and were the perfect size.

The waitress refilled our coffee, complimenting my earrings and how pretty I looked.

While us slowpokes resumed eating, my grandmother asked for the Lake News, the bi-weekly paper. She always enjoyed reading Mrs. Mildred's gossip column, 'Roundabouts,' saying it was 'wonderfully entertaining,' although I couldn't tell if she was serious.

As my grandmother read, my grandfather hooted and howled at practically every word, the banality of Mrs. Mildred, although it was chilling how much she knew:

"Mrs. Collins' younger sister Eleanor just visited from New Jersey—I'm sure you all remember her visit last summer—who can forget? This year's trip was calmer, and thankfully no one caused a scene—exactly why I'm not sure—although last summer's trip had enough scenes to last a lifetime.

This year's trip started similarly, which worried yours truly and everyone else in the Lakes Region, with the two sisters breakfasting at the Center Restaurant, sans husbands. A good idea since they never would have got a word in edgewise. I'm sorry to say that I didn't get to see them. I arrived early (the same time as her last visit) thinking they would want to get a head start on such a beautiful day, but they had overslept (out late the night before at a neighborhood party, which somehow I had missed?) and almost canceled their 10.15 pedicure/manicure (also a tradition) but Eleanor insisted that a weekend visit wouldn't be the same without first breakfasting at the Center. (How about a little flexibility: Maybe Sunday brunch to wrap up the weekend?) So, they called Lucille and rescheduled for 11.00. Of course, Lucille was super busy (when is she not? especially on a Saturday?) but she happily obliged, only because their husbands graduated together from Inter-Lakes High School, Class of 1977 (along with yours truly).

Then it was on to a late lunch for the ladies, which was more of a social event, since neither could have been hungry after such a big breakfast. Lucille said that the two sisters debated for 'quite some time' where to lunch (as if we have a lot of choices in Meredith) finally deciding on the Turkey Farm (is there a better place for lunch, Saturday mid-afternoon?)

Delores ordered the turkey special with all white meat, but Eleanor couldn't decide between white or dark. The waiter suggested ordering both; a nice young man, one of the Wilkenson boys, rather tall for his age, but unfortunately looks just like his mother (poor boy) but, thankfully, doesn't stir the pot like her. When finished, they discussed desert, although if you ask me, neither needed any. They finally decided on the home-made mincemeat pie. . ."

Who monitors everyone's whereabouts, what they debated having for lunch, what they said and didn't say? I felt Mrs. Mildred's presence at the Center Restaurant, writing about me, this strange girl from Massachusetts who didn't fit in, who wants to be a boy, yet has a major crush on the team quarterback, whose grandparents just gave her diamond earrings; although I'm sure she would write that they were fake. I smiled, tugging on my ears, knowing that despite all the stuff she was writing about me, at least my diamond earrings were real.

Chapter 32

ALEXANDER MORGAN

The parking lot gate was locked—remind me to give Phil a medal for finally doing something right. But my truck was gone. Along with the dumpster. What the fuck? Was my mind playing tricks on me? Did I hitch a ride with Walter to work? But I distinctly remember parking my truck next to the dumpster this morning, and this afternoon getting a T-shirt—a Pat's T-shirt—the same one I'm wearing now.

I called Walter. If anyone knew anything about anything, it was him, although, to be honest, if he wasn't with me the whole time, he would have been my prime suspect.

Doris answered, surprised that I was calling at 8.45 PM knowing full well that Walter had long been asleep. I told her it was an emergency

"Maybe some kids hot-wired it; it ain't that difficult," Walter said, finally answering. "Same thing once happened to me."

"No shit. But why would they also take the dumpster? And the gate was locked, so whoever took it also took the dumpster and had a key."

"You're assumin' that this all happened after the gate was locked, but it could've been taken anytime durin' the day."

"Someone would've noticed."

"Maybe the dumpster guy emptied it and took your truck, pissed that you'd parked so close, like I'm always tellin' you."

"Then he would've gone straight to Phil. Like when Paul parked the bulldozer right in front of the dumpster. And besides, it was just emptied on Friday and he never empties a half-full dumpster."

"Maybe Phil noticed your truck when he locked the gate?"

"He couldn't notice his ass from his elbow."

I called the dumpster guy and of course he knew nothing about it. He was just as pissed as I was, and immediately called the police.

I called Phil. He answered on the first ring, that prick.

"Was my truck there when you locked the gate?"

"It was."
"And the dumpster?"
"Yes."
"My truck and the dumpster were both there?"
"I just said that."
"You noticed both?"
"Yes. Did you call the dumpster guy?"
"He didn't take it."
"Maybe he moved it?"
"He didn't."
"Maybe the graders moved it?"
"They wouldn't have taken it home with them."
"Call the police and report it stolen."
Son-of-a-bitch.

I called Paul. The phone rang six times. No answer. I called again. I knew that bastard was home, sitting on his Lazy-Boy, watching TV; that's all he ever does. I called again. Finally, on the fifth ring he answered. Of course he knew nothing, although he did mention that he saw my truck and the dumpster when he left that afternoon, wondering where the hell I was.

I called the police and reported a stolen truck.

Paul only lived fifteen minutes away but even if he were the last person on earth, I wouldn't have stayed with him. And if I stopped at the Comet or even called Lisa, who knows what would have happened? I thought about taking the T home, but the Orange Line was down, and in the morning the Orange and Red Lines would both be down, meaning that I'd have to take a bus to the Green Line to Government Center, then the Blue Line to Park Street, and then re-connect with the Red Line. Fuck it, it was almost 10.30 and I was tired, so I decided to sleep in the trailer and worry about my friggin' truck in the morning.

The trailer was stuffy and warm, smelling of everything ever used at a construction site: turpentine, diesel, gasoline, asphalt, paint, grease, wooden shingles, cement, weed-killer, fertilizer. I plopped the trailer door open with a couple of bricks, arranged several turpentine-tinged drop cloths into a makeshift bed, and with canvases for pillows, fell fast asleep. It was surprisingly comfortable—almost as comfortable as my own bed.

During morning coffee, Gary was going on and on about some bastard who had tried to rob a bank under construction on the other side of Harvard Square, as if that was the only news item of the day, as if everyone was interested. "He assumed it would've been a cinch breaking into the vault from the roof," Gary continued. "He's walking along, then steps on nothing but tar paper. Lucky for him, he landed on staging just below, only breaking a leg and some ribs. Now he's suing the contractor."

"Are you kidding me?" asked Abe. "What did he want? A sign? Please pardon the inconvenience; we are renovating to make your robbing experience more pleasurable."

"That's like getting someone pregnant," Paul said. "Then suing the condom maker because it had a hole."

"Speakin' from experience?" asked Walter.

"If there's a hole," I said. "Return the sucker."

"Who inspects a condom before using it?" asked Gary.

"You have to have sex in order to use one," Walter said, laughing.

"Sex without protection?" I said to Gary. "You might as well take a gun and shoot yourself."

"If you were marooned on a desert island," Gary asked, "with a beautiful woman and no condoms, what would you do?"

"First of all, I don't live on no deserted island," I replied, standing up, stretching my arms. "And second, if I was planning on getting marooned—especially with a beautiful woman—I'd make sure to bring along a year's supply of condoms."

"Why just a year?" asked Abe

"Where you goin' kid?" Walter asked. "Coffee break's just gettin' started."

I crouched next to Walter. "Can you meet me at the Scarlet Pumpernickel for lunch? I need to talk about some shit."

Walter reached in his front pocket, "How much do you need kid?"

"I'm good. I just need to talk."

"You know I bring my lunch every day. Why don't you meet me in my truck and save some money for once?"

Just then a white limo pulled into the parking lot, parking at the bank's rear entrance.

"Must be nice," said Abe. "Chauffeured to the bank to count your millions."

Zachary stepped out, impeccably dressed in a brown suit. He was immediately greeted by the bank president, tie-less and short-sleeved. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who noticed—I mean how could you not notice unless you were friggin' blind—but it ain't that often that you see such hairy, thickly matted arms, as if he was wearing a shaggy rug. I always thought that my arms were hairy, but at least you can see skin. I couldn't imagine a woman, or anyone for that matter, finding that attractive. But what's the alternative? Shave your arms? That's almost as bad as a guy shaving his legs.

The two shook hands, chatting and laughing, as if old friends. Then the bank president returned inside. Zachary briskly approached us, removing his jacket and slinging it over his shoulder; his gold cuff links glistening in the morning sunlight.

"Looks like we're finally getting them raises," said Abe.

Zachary shook hands with Walter. "Nice to see you again." He removed his sunglasses, surveying the circle. "I have an announcement."

No shit.

"While my father was alive, we had our disagreements."

"The understatement of the year," muttered Walter.

Zachary wiped his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief. "Maybe disagreement is too strong? Let's say we had our differences. My father—bless his soul—was a product of his time. For one month out of respect, I did nothing different."

"Didn't even wait a day," whispered Walter.

"Then I renamed us General Construction, determined to become the largest construction company in Massachusetts. We succeeded in one year and now we're the largest in New England."

"Size means nothin'," said Walter.

"Depends how you want to spend your Saturday night," I said.

Everyone laughed, except Paul, of course.

"My father was content with a small company," Zachary continued, loosening his tie. "Back then things were different: business was local, and everyone made a good living. But times change and you have to change with them; a lesson my father never learned. In today's global economy, if you're small and unattached, you don't survive. We're thinking big and building global, and to help meet our goals, we will soon be acquired by CCB, a London-based private equity company."

"How can a goddamned construction company be acquired?" Nick asked.

"They'll own us for a month," I whispered to Nick. "Strip our assets, lay everyone off, then shut us down."

I felt the glare of Zachary's cement-cold eyes. "CCB's given us a green light to expand. We'll operate as a fully independent subsidiary. You won't notice much of a difference: we'll keep our name and logo, our vehicles and equipment will remain green, but our official letterhead will change, and your paychecks will look different."

"As long as they ain't smaller," said Abe.

"Of course not," Zachary said, joining the laughter. "And CCB's offering their own health care, much better than ours. They want us to be profitable." He started toward his limo, then turned back, shooting me an icy glare. "And CCB wants nothing done differently. Nothing."

"I can't imagine Joanna on board with this," I said to Walter, as we watched Zachary's limo pull away.

"One way to find out kid, we'll set up a meetin'."

"You and your friggin' meetings."