



SALLY  
MASON

RENT  
A

HUSBAND



*A Romantic Comedy*

# Table of Contents

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# **Rent A Husband**

A Romantic Comedy

by

Sally Mason

“Love is a game in which one always cheats.”

*Honore de Balzac*

# 1

Glimpsing herself in the mirror at the Book & Bean, Darcy Pringle feels happier than she has in the year since . . .

*No.*

No need to go there now and ruin her day.

*You look good, girl.*

Well, *girl* may be stretching things (she's nudging thirty-six, after all) but—that all important *but*—she doesn't look it.

She's been away for a month, at a *very* exclusive spa being pampered and massaged and detoxed, spending her days sipping health drinks, trying not to gape at the freakishly tall supermodels tripping around, all skittish and gawky off the runway.

Yes, looking good, ready for the night that for the last decade has been the highlight of her year: the Spring Ball, a charity event sponsored by Darcy and Porter Pringle.

Once upon a time Mr. and Mrs. Pringle.

But no longer.

Seeing a frown line creasing her forehead, Darcy banishes that thought.

*Let go, let go, let go . . .*

Darcy hums the little mantra to herself, taking a deep breath.

She will enjoy the Ball she has worked tirelessly to organize. True, it'll be her first year going solo with no Porter to lean on, but she'll do it.

Yes, she will.

Darcy smiles at herself, her good humor restored, pleased—again—at how rejuvenated she looks.

Positively glowing.

Then a face appears in the mirror beside hers.

A young face.

A *very* young, very beautiful face framed by a froth of raven hair.

And a third face fills the looking glass, an all-too familiar one and Darcy stares at the tanned features of the man she woke up beside for a decade and a half.

“Darce,” her ex-husband says, “great to see you.”

When Poor Billy Bigelow tries to save Darcy Pringle he does what he always does: he blunders—snatches defeat from the jaws of victory, as his late father, a sour and unsightly man, would have said.

His father has gone to his reward, but he lives on at full volume in Poor Billy's head.

Every town has a Billy Bigelow, a lightning rod for bad luck. In his mid-thirties, he's never been called William (or even the more manly Bill), he's always Poor Billy Bigelow, those three words like a little train of humiliation chugging through his life.

So, when he reversed his battered old station wagon into a parking bay outside his bookstore cum coffee shop and scraped a fender on a fire hydrant, that was nothing new.

His bad driving was legendary, the whole town knew of the tragic events that unfolded that day when he was sixteen, the proud owner of a newly-minted driver's license and took his mother and little sister Winona out for a drive.

But that, as they say, is another story.

Unloading a box of books from the rear of the station wagon, Billy saw Darcy Pringle crossing the main drag of Santa Sofia, a vision of loveliness in the buttery Californian light, even more beautiful now than when they were at high school together.

Raising a hand to wave at Darcy, Billy forgot that he was carrying the box, lost his grip and took a painful blow to the foot, paperbacks spilling onto the asphalt.

Fortunately Darcy, gliding into the bookstore, didn't see him.

Kneeling, recovering the scattered books, Poor Billy watched as a gleaming new Mercedes slid effortlessly into the bay behind his car and tall, broad-shouldered Porter Pringle stood up out of it, still as athletic as when he was the high school's star quarterback.

Porter opened the passenger door and guided a young woman out and Billy saw something that caused his jaw, and the books he had gathered, to drop.

Again.

By the time Poor Billy blinked, did a double-take, and then realized he really was seeing what he thought he'd seen, Porter and his new bride had disappeared into the bookstore, and Billy knew that the town—still scandalized by Porter dumping his high school sweetheart for a trophy wife—would soon be buzzing about how Darcy was confronted with this new

bombshell in the most public and humiliating way.

How was Poor Billy Bigelow planning to rescue Darcy?

He didn't know, but he knew he must do something.

Anything.

Darcy turns from the mirror and looks up into the eyes of her ex-husband.

"You remember Paige," he says, pointing toward Darcy's replacement, the once-upon-a-time personal assistant (make that *very* personal) who is the new Mrs. Pringle.

"How could I forget?" Darcy says, knowing she has to take charge here.

"What a pleasure to see you, Darcy," Paige says with an unconvincing smile.

"Yes, a wonderful surprise," Darcy says. "Porter, I thought you were off counting your money in the Caymans or wherever?"

Porter shrugs. "Well, even though I don't live up here any more, Santa Sofia is still my home town and I wanted to share the good news with all the old gang."

"Good news?" Darcy asks.

"And we wanted you to be the first to know," the child bride says, touching Darcy on the shoulder, and when Darcy looks down to assess the size of the rock on the ring finger she sees something that robs her of her breath: she's sees a bump.

Not just any bump, a four-months-gone bump.

She's staring at the girl's midriff, and Porter—Port, darling, honey, lover man—lays a proud hand on the bump, lays a hand on the one thing that Darcy (accomplished, witty, smart, stylish Darcy) could never give him.

"I was going to come by the house and tell you . . ." Porter's leading man smile not quite hiding his discomfort.

"Oh, well, what do they say about a picture being worth a thousand words?" Darcy says, feeling very much as if she has just stepped in front of a speeding bus.

By the time Poor Billy manhandles the box into the bookstore, managing to tread on the foot of an unfortunate woman who tries to dodge him in the doorway, he sees that Porter and his pregnant wife are already in conversation with Darcy who has dredged up a smile that resembles a grimace, and even from where he stands he can see that she is fighting to stay composed.

Then he sees Carlotta McCourt homing in on the action, her instinct for

gossip as sharp as her tongue, and Billy knows that if he lets this continue Darcy's oldest enemy's finger will be burning up the touchpad of her iPhone with calls and texts about the humiliation of the woman she has loathed ever since she lost to her as home coming queen.

And lost Porter Pringle to her, too.

So, this tall, ungainly wannabe knight in shining armor sets off across the store, to do what he must.

When he sees the young baker's assistant crossing his path with a tray filled with fresh cream cakes, Poor Billy knows this has the making of one of his famous moments, so he swivels away from the cakes, draws his hands up to his chest to keep them out of trouble and when he turns and trips over his own feet and stumbles, his hands are held at the perfect height to cup both of Darcy's breasts.

Darcy, eyes swimming with tears, sees that gossip-seeking missile Carlotta McCourt advancing, false eyelashes beating like bats wings, mouth open on her capped teeth, slaverling with hungry anticipation.

*Don't cry, Darcy, don't cry, girl.*

But the tears are coming, and she feels a sob building in her throat when huge, clumsy Billy Bigelow—like a gift from above—suddenly appears in front of her, executing a spin and stumble that would have done a silent movie comedian proud and ends up breaking his fall by enfolding her breasts in his giant mitts.

Darcy's sob becomes a laugh as Poor Billy jumps back like he's been tasered and says, "Oh, God, I'm so sorry . . ."

And Darcy smiles at him and says in her best after dinner speaker voice, "Don't be Billy, they have gone a little unappreciated lately." Flicking her eyes over Porter, who has the good grace to smirk. "And I'm sure you'll vouch that they're real?"

Darcy says this with perfect timing as she snaps her gaze to the bitch Carlotta's chest, her top cut low to display her esthetic surgeon's finest work.

And on that note—an unexpectedly high note thanks to Poor Billy Bigelow—she turns and strides between the books to where her dearest friend Eric Royce has swanned into the coffee shop.

"Darling," Eric says, kissing the air in the vicinity of her left cheek, "you look absolutely edible. You have to give me the lowdown on that spa."

Eric, born Ernie Kaminski in the Bronx, affects the voice and manner of a camp Englishman from the thirties.



He draws out Darcy's chair and seats her, whispering in her ear, "Is that the little cradle-snatchee I see over there?"

"Yes it is. Notice anything about her?"

He folds himself into a chair opposite Darcy. "Mnnnn, all those extensions must have left a Mexican village of Kojaks."

"Look at her middle, Eric."

He stares at Porter and Paige as they exit the store and holds a palm to his mouth.

"No!"

"Yes."

He takes her hand. "I'm sorry, Darce."

"Hey, it is what it is."

"The bastard could have told you."

"I know. Porter's always been a coward."

"I would use a shorter word." He squeezes her fingers. "Anyway, darling, just think of those acres and acres of stretch marks."

A waitress appears with menus but Eric waves them away. "Just a teeny little espresso for me."

"Perrier and a slice of lemon, please," Darcy says. She closes her eyes and sighs. "Tomorrow night is going to be a nightmare."

"Relax, darling, I'll be your plus one."

"That's just the problem, Eric. Porter will be escorting his young, beautiful and radiantly pregnant new bride to the Spring Ball and I'll be on the arm of Santa Sofia's gayest bachelor. No offense, sweetheart."

"None taken."

Darcy's Perrier has appeared and she takes a sip. "Where are all the damned single men, Eric?"

"In this town? The possessive wives have them shot as they exit the 101."

Darcy laughs into her glass of water.

"Didn't you meet anybody when you were away?" Eric asks.

"Yes, supermodels I could have smuggled out in my purse."

"Men, Darcy."

"At a spa, Eric? Please."

"I take your point."

"God, being a single woman in a town like this is so damned inconvenient. You know the other day I even had to call Rent-A-Husband?"

"Darling, you're not about to reveal something sordid are you?" he says,

leaning in to catch every word.

“Rent-A-Husband is a handyman, Eric. A chubby guy in his fifties, with a combover and bad breath.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“He was very sweet and he sorted out my backed up drain.”

Eric stirs his coffee, looking out at the street, lost in thought.

Darcy says, “Am I boring you?”

“No, Darce, you’re not. I think I have a teeny weensy little idea.”

“Mnnnn?”

“What you need is to arrive at the Ball tomorrow night on the arm of a handsome, successful man.”

“Stop talking yourself up, Eric.”

“Not me, silly. A *real* man, or at least what you girls would consider to be one.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know, Eric.”

“And I think there’s a way to make it happen.”

“This is my life, Eric, not one of your damned soaps.”

Eric is a successful creator of television shows, managing them by remote from Santa Sofia, two hours up the coast from smoggy LA.

“That Rent-A-Husband thing has got me thinking,” he says.

“I’m not going to the Spring Ball with the plumber.”

“Darcy, there’s someone I know down in LA who would be perfect.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the tall, terribly handsome scion of one of those ancient East Coast families.”

“And why would he want to attend a dance in this hick town with a divorcée on his arm?”

“A beautiful divorcée.”

“Cut the nonsense, Eric.”

“Would you be interested in renting a husband, Darce?” She stares at him. “He’s a failed actor. He’s broke. He’d do it for the money.”

“Ow, Eric, I think that’s my self esteem you just stood in.”

“Darcy, it’s for one night. It’s a bit of play acting and it’ll give you a real boost. And think of how much easier it’ll be to stomach those two,” Eric says, nodding at the window.

Darcy’s eyes are drawn to Porter and his new wife crossing the road from the wine store, arm in arm, laughing as they approach the Mercedes.

“What the hell,” Darcy says, “I’m in.”

## 2

“Not the face,” Forrest Forbes says, curling into a ball, trying to cover his head. “Please, not the face.”

The first kick had been to his groin, which had felled him, leaving him lying amongst the garbage in the alley.

The second kick takes him in the side, beneath the ribs, and as air leaks from him Forrest waits for the third kick, which doesn’t come.

He peers through his fingers at the shaven-headed giant in the baggy pants, tattoos coiling down his arms.

Something is said in Spanish, and Forrest looks across at dapper Raymond Gomez, dressed in a polo shirt, chinos and slip-on moccasins.

The new face of LA bookmakers.

Raymond waves a hand at the giant who takes a step back, then he tugs at his chinos and squats down, careful not to dirty himself.

“Forrest,” he says, in a voice light years from the *barrio*.

“Raymond.”

“The money. You have been delinquent.”

Forrest drops his hands and smiles, and if it weren’t for the insalubrious surroundings of the downtown LA alleyway, he could be in a smoking room in an Upper East Side club, with his fine bones and his patrician accent.

“A cash flow issue. I’ll have it resolved by the end of the weekend.”

Forrest is trying to get up, but the bookmaker places a hand on his shoulder.

“Stay down, Forrest. So you won’t have to fall again.”

“You’re not done?”

“No, I think my message needs to be underscored.”

“Raymond, be a sport. We’ve known each other a very long while.”

The bookmaker pats his shoulder.

“Exactly, Forrest, which is why I’ll tell Edmundo to keep his size twelves out of your pretty face.” He stands. “You have until Monday.”

There’s a rattle of Spanish and Forrest covers up again as the giant steps in and delivers a series of kicks that leave him stunned, lying alone and miserable in this stinking alley, bemoaning fate and life.

No, not quite alone: he sees a rat peering at him from behind a trash can.

It seems to shake its head, as if recognizing a kindred spirit, before it darts away, its pink tail snaking after it.

The day gets no better when Forrest Forbes arrives back at his Hollywood walk-up, after a long and painful trek from downtown—no money for a bus, let alone a cab—and finds his few pitiful belongings dumped out in the corridor, the apartment padlocked.

Forrest sits down on the stairs and leans his throbbing head against the railing. He finds his hand under his shirt, toying with the ring he wears on a chain around his neck.

His mother's ring.

The mother who died giving birth to him.

He knew her only from photographs and the glimpses of her beauty in his own face.

But her imagined love sustained him through years of arid relationships with aloof stepmothers.

The ring, a cluster of diamonds and sapphires, is worth a fortune and Forrest, disgusted at himself for even allowing this thought into his mind, can't stop the awful realization that all that stands between him and the ER are these stones.

His cell phone buzzes.

Amazed it wasn't damaged in the fracas he draws it from his pocket and thinks that things may be looking up when he sees caller ID.

"Eric," he says, not quite masking a groan.

"Forrest, why do you sound as if you're in agony?"

"Just finished a grueling squash session, old man. What's up?"

"How would you like a job?"

"Well, I'd have to check with my agent."

"Stop being silly, darling, this is me."

"Okay, what are you offering? A walk-on part in *Startup*?"

"No, my friend, the leading man in Santa Sofia."

"I haven't seen that show."

"It's not a show, it's a town. Where I live."

"I'm not with you, old son."

"I want to employ you to escort a very dear and very lovely friend of mine to a ball."

"I'm not a damned gigolo, Eric."

“No, what you are is broke and desperate. It’ll be for one night and it’ll pay well.”

“How well?”

Eric names a figure that would make a serious dent in Forrest’s gambling debt.

“Okay, I’m warming to the idea.”

“How lovely. Do you have a tuxedo?”

“It’s at the cleaners.”

“You’re lying to me.”

“Eric, I was burglarized . . .”

“Spare me. Do you know Lightbodys on Beverly?”

“Yes.”

“I have an account there. Go over and get yourself wardrobed. The tux and a casual outfit to travel in. Stylishly preppy, you know the score. Then I want you at Union Station by six to get the train to Santa Sofia.”

“Eric, I’m a little financially embarrassed. I think train fare is beyond my means.”

“Darling, darling, darling, what has happened to the power elite? Okay, James at Lightbodys will make some cash available to you. Enough to get you to Santa Sofia. I’ll meet you at the station at eight.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t.”

As Forrest levers himself to his feet and walks away from the small pile of belongings he no longer wants, he whistles the song from his alma mater to stop himself weeping at the pain in his bruised abdomen.

He no longer feels the bruises to his ego.

### 3

The only time Poor Billy Bigelow isn't clumsy is when he dances, an amazing fact that only a handful of the ancient female inhabitants of the Santa Sofia Senior Center know.

In the last few months of his life, Ben Bigelow (Big Ben, of course, to his cronies) had been too ill for homecare and had to go into assisted living at the Senior Centre where cancer had finally taken him.

Billy had visited his father daily, and one evening had been press ganged by a bevy of old women to dance with them, and found he'd retained all the steps his mother had taught him, to the delight of the widows that made up the bulk of the population of the Center, their husbands keeling over young.

So once a week he danced with these old ladies who smelled of lavender and medication, knowing that he'd never be able to do this with a younger woman.

Like Darcy.

Twirling skinny Mrs. Keeler, with skin as blue as the rinse in her hair, the tubes of a portable oxygen tank in her nose (the cylinder in a bag hanging from her bony shoulder) the woman light as air in his arms as they sway to "Some Enchanted Evening" while the other old ladies look on smiling and applauding, he imagines he's leading Darcy in the first dance of the Spring Ball to the applause of the well heeled citizens of Santa Sofia.

Pretending to be stacking books in the self-help section that abuts the coffee shop, he'd eavesdropped earlier when Darcy spoke to Eric Royce, and caught the first part of their conversation before a customer summoned him.

He'd heard Darcy bemoaning her lack of a date for the ball.

Unbelievable that a woman as desirable as Darcy should have to be escorted by her gay friend Eric.

So, Billy imagines that he's invited her, that she's accepted and they are dancing, light as feathers, under the glow of the chandeliers at the country club.

The song ends and Poor Billy comes back to reality, thanking Mrs. Keeler who gives him what he once heard described as an old fashioned look.

Billy goes out on the porch, taking in the ocean air and the sweetness of

the blooming bougainvillea.

“Who is she?”

He turns to see Mrs. Keeler shuffling out after him, her breath coming in little rasps.

“Who?”

“That sure as hell wasn’t me you were twirling around back there.”

Poor Billy is pleased for the darkness that masks his blush. He shrugs and stares out into the night.

Mrs. Keeler says, “You’re a nice guy, Billy.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s not meant to be a compliment.”

“Okay, sorry.”

“Hell, stop apologizing for being alive, Billy.”

“Sorry,” he says again, before he can stop himself and Mrs. Keeler laughs. The laugh becomes a coughing spasm and he looks away.

When she’s recovered she says, “Look at me.” He does. “I was a hot number, you know, years back?”

“I can believe it.”

“I had more than my share of suitors, and one thing I learned: nice guys really do finish last.”

He has nothing to say to this.

“This girl you’re crazy about . . .”

“She’s not a girl.”

“Honey, next to me they’re all girls. You’ve got to show her you have gumption, okay? Nice is for puppy dogs.”

She coughs again, covering her mouth with a Kleenex.

Gasping she says, “Life is short, sonny. Over in the blink of an eye. Get off your butt.”

She shuffles inside leaving him with the moon and his dreams.



*Madness.*

*This. Is. Madness.*

Darcy Pringle, prowling the sprawling mausoleum of a house—always more to Porter’s taste than hers—feels so agitated that she cracks a bottle of wine for the first time in months, and has slugged half a glass before she even realizes it.

*Slow down, Darcy.*

*Breathe.*

She settles on a couch in the living room, staring blankly at *The Bachelor* on TV, and realizes that she has taken leave of her senses.

That the sight of Porter and his fertile little floozy left her unhinged enough to be hypnotized by Eric Royce and his screenwriter fantasies.

She has an image of Eric as a snake charmer, dressed in pantaloons and a turban, blowing on a flute in some Kasbah or souk—is there a difference?

Porter would know.

God, how she misses him.

They were the golden couple at high school and married while Porter was still at college getting his business diploma.

They’d battled through a few tough years, and then Porter had started making serious money in property development, and the cash rolled in and with it came the big house and the cars and the trips to Europe.

Suddenly Darcy had a walk-in dressing room jammed with Prada and Manolo Blahnik.

But the room that she’d decorated as a nursery stayed as empty as Darcy’s womb.

Porter said it was fine, that he loved her, and when in vitro didn’t take, they spoke of adoption.

But Porter started spending more time in the apartment down in LA, needing to be close to his office.

Spent more time traveling, too, on business.

Taking along his assistant, the froth-haired Paige.

Darcy feels so miserable she is tempted to call her sister Susan, who lives

in a small town up in Maine.

But when she looks at her watch she realizes that Susan and her stolid carpenter husband and their three angelic kids will be asleep.

Darcy, no matter how hard she'd tried, had always felt just a little smug when she compared her life to Susan's.

But now, imagining that family sleeping in their cluttered little wooden house (built by her brother-in-law) with their menagerie of pets, she feels so alone and unloved and empty that it takes all her strength not to dissolve into a puddle of tears.

She has no other family to call.

Her mother died five years ago of an aneurism, dropped dead at the returns counter at Walmart, arguing with a customer representative.

She'd been left enraged when her husband had walked out on the family when Darcy was ten, and had spent the rest of her life directing that rage at the world in random fits of temper.

Where her father is, and if he is still alive, Darcy neither knows nor cares.

But what Darcy does know is who she must call: Eric.

She must stop wallowing in self-pity and call him and put an end to this madness.

No matter how desperate she is, there is no way she is going to pay a man to escort her to the Ball.

Darcy picks up her cell phone from the side table and hits speed-dial.

The phone trills for a few seconds before Eric answers. "Darling."

"Eric, we need to call this off."

"Come on Darce, don't tell me you're getting cold feet?"

"If they got any colder they'd be frostbitten."

"Hah, hah."

"I'm not doing this, Eric. It's crazy. I should never have let you bully me into this."

"Bully? Darling, I object!"

"Object away, but just stop this madness. Get hold of your Forrest Lawn  
—"

"Forbes, darling, Forest Lawn is the cemetery."

"Whatever. Just get hold of him and tell him it's off."

"Too late honeybuns."

"What do you mean?"

"He's en route, clickety clacking your way on Amtrak as we speak."

“Well, derail him.”

“I hope you don’t mean that literally? There are innocent lives at stake.”

“Stop trying to be witty, Eric, and hear me when I say this isn’t going to happen.”

There’s a moments’ pause before Eric says, “Darcy, I understand your apprehension.”

“Thank you.”

“But may I make a teeny-weeny suggestion?”

“No.”

“Why don’t I pick him up at the train station and bring him by? If you don’t like him we’ll send him packing. Think of it as an audition.”

“I won’t like him. This is worse than a blind date. I feel like you’re pimping for me.”

“Ouch!”

“Admit it, Eric, this is distasteful.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it all feels quite sophisticated to me. Almost French.”

“Call the man.”

“Darce, I’ve gone to a lot of trouble on your account.”

“I’m sorry, Eric, I know you have.”

“Please, just take a look at him.”

“No.”

“I may have called you many things, Darcy, but never rude, and turning this poor fellow away sight unseen, is very, very rude.”

*Oh the bitch knows just where to hit.*

Darcy sighs and says, “Okay, bring him here for a drink, then I’ll very sweetly explain that I wasn’t in my right mind, that it has nothing to do with him and pay him some kind of cancellation fee and send him away.”

“Okay, deal.”

“Good.”

Darcy ends the call, feeling more in control.

Then she sees herself in the mirror and realizes she looks like hell.

She can’t receive guests looking like this.

Even though the man is never-to-be-hired-help, standards must be maintained.

## 5

Forrest Forbes (or Forrest Bennett Forbes III to be precise) feels remarkably restored as he sips a more than decent single-malt in the dining car of the train, staring out into the night.

His ribs ache, of course, and there's a nasty twinge in the area of his liver where the Mexican thug sank his boot, but he is dressed in a crisp new Lacoste, chinos, loafers and a cashmere jacket.

A suit bag containing a very elegant tuxedo and dress-shirt hangs beside him.

After his trip to the outfitters, he'd made use of his gym membership (bought during an all-too-brief flush period months ago) and showered and shaved and dressed in his new clothes.

By the time he got down to Union Station he felt almost his old self again.

Lifting his glass to signal for another drink, Forrest feels a sharp pain in his shoulder, and he's back in that filthy alley, being tenderized like the filling of a beef *fajita*.

Forrest's good mood slips a little as he considers his predicament, understands just how messy and unpleasant his life has become, after such a promising start.

He was born into a very old Boston family, silver spoon firmly in place when he exited the birth canal.

The eldest of three children he was sent to Andover and Harvard just like his father and grandfather before him.

His father, Forrest Bennett Forbes II, seemed interested only in blowing the wealth accumulated by *his* father, FBF I, an austere Yankee industrialist who had served two terms in the Senate.

By the time he was ten Forrest had skied at Gstaad, holidayed in Monaco with the Grimaldis and had ridden on an elephant with an Indian princeling.

When he reached his early twenties—even though he'd scraped together a useless degree from Harvard—he'd been encouraged to play just as his father played.

His was a world of women, horses, racing cars and yachts.

Then in Forrest's thirtieth year (on a day in late 2008) his father called him

to his office.

Forrest—tanned as teak from a month in Morocco—assumed that the older man was going to tell him that it was time for him to curb his life of leisure, to at least feign some interest in the family business.

The elder Forrest Forbes, standing by the window, held up a decanter of fine brandy.

“Drink?”

“Of course.”

His father—whose face, disconcertingly, was like an age-ravaged version of his own—poured two glasses, and when he leaned over to pass a tumbler to his son his hand shook and Forrest could smell that this wasn’t the older man’s first drink.

“Good luck,” Forrest said.

“We’re going to need it.”

They sat and his father threw back most of the brandy in one gulp.

“You know my father actually increased his fortune during the Great Depression?”

Forrest nodded, bored. He’d heard this story too many times.

“Yes, he was quite the captain of industry, wasn’t he?”

“That he was. His hands never left the tiller, if I may flog a dead metaphor.”

Forrest laughed politely, his mind on the Austrian princess he had been dallying with.

The filthiest woman it had ever been his pleasure to bed.

“Thing is, Forrest, I’ve never been much of a hands-on man myself.”

“God forbid. Too tedious.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought. So I let the so-called financial gurus handle our money. And, it has to be said, we prospered.”

“Certainly seems that way.”

His father looked at him with an expression he had never seen on the man’s face before. Was this fear?

“What’s up?”

“You’ve heard about Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae?”

“The old Vaudeville act?”

The older man bared his teeth in a snarl. “You know they went belly up?”

“I heard something to that effect.”

“And that Wall Street is in a panic, and that the whole damned financial

bubble has burst?"

Forrest shrugged. "Not really my thing."

"No, mine neither." His father slumped in his chair. "Forrest there's no easy way to say this: our fortune is gone."

"You're not serious?"

"Oh, but I am. Those gurus consulted some poorly informed oracles, I'm afraid."

"It's all gone?"

"Everything."

"What about our properties?"

"Gone. A house of cards."

"The art collections?"

"Seized. Under lock and key."

"So no more trust fund?"

"No."

"You're saying that I'll have to work?"

"Yes, my boy. I'm sorry."

"Good God."

"Yes."

"What will you do?"

His father, suddenly an old man, shrugged.

"I don't know."

Forrest stood. "We'll stay in touch."

"Of course."

Forrest shook his father's clammy hand and walked out into a very different world.

The next day his father took his boat out onto the Sound and never returned.

His body washed up on a Martha's Vineyard beach a few days later, causing an awful fuss at a society wedding.

Accidental death was the coroner's verdict, but Forrest had no doubt that his father had polished off a few bottles of Bollinger and hopped into the cold Atlantic, unequipped and unwilling to live in poverty.

Forrest, though he was alive, fared little better.

He found that his lack of funds caused doors to slam in his face.

His calls went unreturned.

Men he'd thought were friends ignored him in clubs and watering holes.

So Forrest traveled west, to Los Angeles, with the half-baked notion of trading on his patrician looks in the movie business.

There was some initial interest due to the cachet his name carried, and he landed himself an agent.

A part in an independent movie came his way, playing himself, really.

But he found that once the camera rolled being himself wasn't at all easy.

His usually flippant delivery became leaden and—most embarrassingly—he froze, was literally incapable of remembering a single line of the script, take after mortifying take.

So his career was stillborn.

He got a couple of photographic shoots—no lines to forget—posing on the decks of yachts with pretty girls, or stepping out of luxury cars in tuxedos, but somehow the camera just did not love him, as his agent told him when he snipped all ties.

So Forrest Forbes started to gamble.

He'd always been a dabbler—it was in his blood—but now he played with desperation.

Desperation and very little skill.

He lost.

He lost badly.

Lost so badly that he ended up having the pâté kicked out of him in that downtown alley.

And now he is on a train rattling north toward one of those horrible coastal feeder-towns, all new money and Spanish kitsch, he is sure.

He sighs and polishes off his drink as his stop is called.

When Forrest steps out onto the platform he sees Eric Royce waiting for him, waving a languid hand.

“How are you, darling?” Eric asks.

“Peachy.”

“Good trip?”

“It was fine.”

They walk, Eric eyeing him.

“Why are you limping?”

“A jujutsu accident.”

“Ah.”

They arrive at a brand new Jaguar saloon.

“Your chariot, sir,” Eric says.

“Where does this come from?”

“A prop, darling. A rental. To fit with your image of the wealthy young scion.”

Forrest nods.

Eric holds out the keys. “You can drive, I presume?”

“I chased Michael Schumacher around Nürburgring when I was seventeen.”

“Well, I hope he let you catch him.”

Forrest dumps his things in the trunk and Eric directs him out of the train station that is—as he suspected—disguised as a hacienda.

“How can you live up here, Eric?” he asks as they drive down the depressing little main drag.

“It’s quiet and it’s pretty.”

“It’s a backwater.”

“I think you know all about LA and its temptations. Life up here is a simpler proposition. I can get my work done.”

“Sounds dire.”

“Not at all.” Eric turns to look at Forrest. “Now, I need to warn you that Darcy Pringle is a little nervous.”

Forrest bursts out laughing. “That’s her name? Darcy Pringle?”

“Yes, why?”

“God, Eric, Jane Austen meets potato chips! I can only imagine what she looks like.”

“Darcy is my very best friend and she’s a beautiful and charming woman.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Stop the car.”

“Why?”

“Stop the car!”

Suddenly Eric isn’t camp anymore and when he grips Forrest’s forearm it hurts.

As Forrest pulls over to the curb Eric reaches up and clicks on the dome light.

“Listen you two-bit little bastard,” the voice is pure Bronx. “You’re a nothing. A nobody. You’re here on my dime. You’ll cut the smarmy attitude and do what you’re being paid to do: you’ll be charming and gallant and make my friend look and feel good. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”



“And if you put one toe out of line I will personally beat the living crap out of you.”

“I know jujitsu.”

“You don’t know a damned thing,” Eric says, jabbing his fingers under Forrest’s ribs, right where he was kicked.

Forrest groans.

“Now drive.”

Forrest clicks the car into gear and he drives, wondering why, oh why, life keeps humiliating him this way.

## 6

Poor Billy Bigelow is having one of those uncomfortable conversations with his dead father again.

Big Ben saying, "I can't believe I have such a yellow-bellied, chicken-livered coward for a son."

"Shut up, Dad," Billy says, which he'd never been able to say when the old bully was alive.

Billy walks away from the depressing living room of the apartment above the bookstore, an apartment he'd shared with his father after the deaths of his mother and sister twenty years ago.

The deaths that Big Ben Bigelow had blamed on Poor Billy.

Billy shuts down that stream of thought and then he does something very, very dangerous.

He finds a bottle of his father's Wild Turkey in the closet above the sink in the kitchen and pours himself a solid jolt.

*For Dutch courage.*

*Whatever that means.*

Now, a clumsy man like Billy has enough trouble negotiating the world sober, so he has never been tempted to drink.

Has never been drunk, in fact.

But these are desperate times and desperate times call for desperate measures.

So he throws the drink back, coughs and wheezes as it burns, tears in his eyes.

He controls the coughing jag, pours himself another and belts that back, too.

Almost losing his balance he grabs at the kitchen table and knocks the bottle to the floor where it shatters, the dark liquid spreading across the linoleum.

*Just as well.*

Poor Billy's ears are ringing and his vision is just slightly blurred.

But he feels a strange kind of calm.

And with the calm comes an unfamiliar bravery.

By God, he's going to do it.

Before he loses this bottled courage and before Big Ben can talk him out of it, Poor Billy Bigelow heads for the door, stumbles down the stairs—banging his knee painfully on the banister—and hurries out to where his car is still parked hard against the fire hydrant, the warm breeze flapping the bouquet of pink parking tickets wedged under the wiper.

Poor Billy—no, make that Bill, Bill Bigelow—gets behind the wheel and fires up the station wagon, clicking on the windshield wipers, laughing as the pink tickets fly away into the night, ignoring the squeal of his fender as he bumps past the hydrant, swerving around a car that is perfectly within its rights to be driving right at him, and takes off toward Darcy Pringle's house, where he intends to bang assertively on her door and invite her to the Spring Ball tomorrow night.

*He's not bad looking, Darcy has to concede.*

*Come on, girl, he's smokin' hot.*

*Too much reality TV, Darcy, she tells herself.*

*It's starting to erode your vocabulary like candy rots teeth.*

She stands up from the couch and walks across to the sideboard, holding up the bottle of wine.

"Can I top you up?"

Forrest Forbes rises and holds out his glass.

"Please."

Darcy smiles at Forrest and as she pours the wine she feels Eric's eyes on her.

When she looks his way he winks.

He's reading her like an open book.

Darcy dims the wattage of her smile and pulls herself together.

*Yes, the man in good looking.*

*Yes, he is well-spoken and polite.*

But he is a failed actor, and this is a sham, and she has to put an end to it, right now.

Eric says, "Tell Darcy about when you trained to be a mahout, Forrest."

Darcy looks daggers at Eric, who pretends not to see her, sipping at his wine.

He knows her too well.

Knows her embarrassing fascination with colonial India.

Once, when she was a little tipsy she made the mistake of telling Eric that she was convinced she was the reincarnation one of those wan British girls who ended up going native in the heat and dust of the sub-Continent.

Forrest Forbes is saying, "Oh, when I was a kid I had a pal, Bolly Singh."

"That would be Prince Balachandra Singh of Jaipur?" Eric says.

"Yes, Bolly. They lived in a rundown old palace that dated back to the Moguls. They've always kept elephants and when I spent a few months with them one summer during the monsoon their old mahout showed me a few tricks. I got quite close to a young bull elephant named Kipling. It was silly,

really. But fun.”

He smiles at Darcy and she can’t deny that she enjoys listening to this man’s self-deprecating tales, his throwaway tone making them all the more exotic, and suddenly she has a real sense of how limited her life with Porter was.

How sterile.

How provincial.

Always staying at new, impersonal hotels that all looked the same no matter if they were in St. Louis or St. Tropez.

No run down palaces in Jaipur for Darcy and Porter Pringle.

She wonders how Forrest sees her house.

Is it nouveau riche?

Is it kitsch?

Forrest Forbes is smiling at her even more warmly and she can feel the muscles of her face stretching in reply.

She bites down on her teeth, killing the smile.

Darcy stands, thumping her wine glass down hard enough to spill liquid onto the marble table top.

“Mr. Forbes,” she says.

“Please, call me Forrest.”

“Forrest, I really do appreciate you traveling all the way up here.”

“Oh, not at all.”

She feels Eric kicking her ankle, so she steps away.

“But really, I can’t—”

And as she’s about to send him packing, with his Bollys and his mahouts and his perfect profile, the doorbell rings.

“Excuse me just one moment,” Darcy says and hurries over to the door, opening it to reveal Poor Billy Bigelow.

“Billy? This is a surprise.”

“Darcy, hello.”

He moves toward her, but trips on the top step and he’s falling, those huge catcher-mitt hands headed—yet again—for her chest.

Darcy steps to the side, light as a toreador and Poor Billy crashes through the open doorway and ends up on his hands and knees, staring up at her.

“Darcy,” he says, struggling to get up.

“You’re not going to propose are you, Billy?”

He gawks at her, then looks down and realizes he is now on one knee.

He hauls himself to his feet, so tall that his wild hair nearly brushes the chandelier that lights the hallway.

When he laughs awkwardly does she smell liquor on his breath?

He certainly looks flushed.

“Darcy,” Billy says, too loudly, “would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Spring Ball tomorrow night?”

When Darcy, stunned, looks past him and sees Eric and Forrest watching from the couch, she realizes that all her options are present in one room: the clumsy, sad, and just plain embarrassing book dealer; the gay screenwriter and the down-on-his luck Boston Brahmin.

Darcy puts a hand on Poor Billy’s shoulder and he rears away from her like a startled horse.

“Billy, that is so sweet of you and I’m terribly flattered, but I already have a date.” She takes his hand and leads him into the living room. “I’d like you to meet my very special friend, Forrest Forbes.”

Darcy speaks the line as if it were scripted by Eric who raises his eyebrow along with his glass and gives her a smile of naked triumph.

*Men.*

*A procession of men going into Darcy Pringle's house.*

*Somethings afoot.*

*But what?*

Carlotta McCourt, her husband's binoculars pressed to her lifted and tucked eyes, stands in the dark in her bedroom, spying on the house opposite.

A house that for years has left her in a state of toxic envy, occupied by the loathsome Darcy Pringle living the life that should have been Carlotta's, with the man who should have been Carlotta's husband.

But the last months have been delicious, seeing Darcy dumped for a young bimbo.

And earlier, at the bookstore, Carlotta feared that her heart was going to simply explode with delight when she saw Darcy confronted with the pregnant trophy wife.

*Oh joy!*

Even Darcy's catty comment about breasts—the barren bitch hadn't whelped twins now had she? And who could blame Carlotta for shoring up what motherhood and gravity had dragged down?—couldn't dampen her mood, and she'd rushed out to her car, A/C blowing icy air at her while she spread the news to the many, many members of her gossip network.

Speaking to Sylvia at the beauty parlor: "The new wife is at least three months preggio. It was priceless, absolutely priceless, you should have seen Darcy's face."

To Jenny at the boutique: "The Ball tomorrow night is not to be missed, darling. Darcy Pringle will be steamrollered by Porter and his very pregnant young thing."

To Elsie at the drugstore: "Stock up on Ambien my dear, our darling Darcy's nerves are going to be absolutely shredded by the time this weekend is over, what with Porter shoving his new bride *and* their lovechild in her face."

Ringin' of before Elsie—always such a stickler—could finish telling her that *lovechild* applied only to a baby conceived out of wedlock.

The thought of going to the Ball tomorrow night, seeing Darcy on the arm of that hideous queen Eric Royce, watching the parade of the Young and the Pregnant was something she looked forward to with almost sexual yearning.

But now: these men.

When she saw the new Jaguar purr up, she grabbed the glasses and stood in the window where she had stood for so many years that her footprints were engraved in the pile of the carpet and watched Eric Royce slide out of the passenger seat.

The driver, lit by the bright beam of a streetlight, stood a moment, inspecting the house. He was a hunk. If he were gay—and since he arrived with Eric he must be—it was a criminal waste.

But he didn't at all resemble the toy boys Eric usually favored, discarding them like used Kleenex when he was bored.

He was tall, in his mid-thirties, with those finely chiseled looks that spoke of a very deep and very exclusive gene pool.

And when he and Eric walked up toward Darcy's front door, Carlotta's gaydar—finely-calibrated and usually infallible—didn't peep once.

The men went inside leaving Carlotta simply overcome with curiosity.

She couldn't see the license plate of the car from upstairs, so she went down to the living room where her slob of a husband lay slumped in his recliner, asleep in front of a ball game.

She couldn't look at this man without feeling revulsion.

Porter Pringle had been the gorgeous quarterback, who had kept his looks and athletic frame.

Walt McCourt had been a linebacker, and at thirty-six he was bald and fat and didn't seem to give a damn, spending his days selling houses and playing golf and eating like a pig at a trough.

He had planted twins in Carlotta's womb the night of the prom, Carlotta so furious at seeing Darcy and Porter together that she'd allowed Walt to ply her with booze and have his clumsy way with her in the backseat of his father's car.

So, she'd married him.

The McCourt's had money: unglamorous, realtor and car dealership money, and Carlotta had wanted for nothing financially.

But seeing Darcy and Porter together day after day, and seeing her twins—a boy and a girl—growing up with the unfinished features and thick bodies of their father, had left her feeling cheated.



Walt, snoring on the chair, doesn't waken as she bumps past him to get to the window.

She pulls the drapes open and scans the car.

Los Angeles plates.

A very familiar old station wagon clatters to a halt outside Darcy's house and she sees Poor Billy Bigelow shamble up to the front door.

He hesitates, speaks to himself, turns away and heads toward his car, then spins violently—almost losing his footing—and rushes back to the door where he rings the bell.

The door opens and Darcy lets him in and not two minutes later he comes speed-walking out.

He gets into his car and fights it into gear, lurching off down the road, collecting a trash can as he goes.

Carlotta continues her vigil upstairs.

After an hour Eric Royce leaves, walking next door to his house, but the mystery man stays the night, and Carlotta is left sleepless, in the grip of tormenting curiosity.

A hot wind blows open diaphanous curtains and Darcy can see a minaret spearing the molten sun like a cocktail olive, the trill of a sitar wafting up to her and the sexy, earthy beat of a drum getting her bare feet dancing on the mosaic floor, ankle-bracelets whispering.

Despite the fans dangling from the painted ceiling—dusky, bearded men and shameless women bursting out of their saris as they demonstrate sexual positions of incredible athleticism—the air is thick with heat, and Darcy feels a sheen of sweat beneath the sheer silk shift that covers her naked body.

She hears the sound of a footsteps and turns to see Forrest Forbes striding into the room, wearing jodhpurs and carrying a riding crop.

“Darling,” this husky, British-accented Darcy says, “I thought you’d never come.”

Forrest tears off his sweat-stained shirt, revealing a lean torso corded with muscle.

He reaches for her, the riding crop still clenched in his fist. As he takes her in his arms, she smells sweat and musk.

Forrest flings her onto the huge bed, enclosing in billowing drapes, and rips the shift from her.

Lying on her naked belly, looking over her shoulder at him, she licks a bead of sweat from her upper lip and watches as he lifts the rising crop, ready to discipline her in a way she knows she will love oh so terribly much.

When Darcy wakes, she *is* on her belly and she *is* sweating, but she’s in her bed, in her modest PJs, and there is no riding crop threatening her butt.

She clicks on the lamp and checks out the clock.

1:20 a.m.

She gets the A/C going and sips on the Perrier at her bedside and tries to compose herself.

The dream is absurd of course, enough to bring a blush to her cheeks.

The only man she has ever made love to is Porter.

And the only man she has ever had an erotic dream about is her ex-husband.

Until tonight, that is.

She sees Forrest Forbes smiling at her over his wine glass down in the living room, staring at her with those eyes that—she's sure—have drawn endless weak, silly women into his bed.

But whatever Darcy Pringle may be, she's neither weak nor silly, and when she showed Mr. Forbes to the guest room on the lower floor last night, she was polite, but aloof, as if she were dealing with a slightly over-familiar employee.

She closes her eyes.

But when she sees that torso and that nasty little black leather riding crop and hears jangly sitar music she opens them again, pretty darn smartly.

*Breathe, Darcy, breathe.*

*Just get through this damned Ball and then you can go on with your life.*

*But what is my life, she asks?*

She feels a yawning emptiness and when she closes her eyes tears sting her cheeks and she tries in vain to bring back the sitars and the sweat and the riding crop.

## 10

Forrest Forbes has felt his share of pain.

He was gored by a bull in the run at Pamplona, broke three ribs during a luge mishap in St. Moritz and was once squatted upon by a sumo wrestler at a school near Osaka.

But, as he sits up in bed in the nauseatingly bland guest room of Darcy Pringle's shrine to nouveau riche taste (or lack of it) he feels as if his insides are being jabbed at with a molten rod.

And his head hurts like ten kinds of hell.

He curses himself for not stocking up on painkillers.

The drinks on the train and the wine he had earlier served to dull his aches, but now they have returned with a ferocity that has him moaning.

To distract himself he takes himself on a little virtual tour of this house.

*So bland.*

*So sterile.*

*A place where style comes to die.*

Forrest could identify Chippendale furniture and Meissen porcelain and Ottoman rugs before he was ten years old, and (outside of the occasional airport hotel that he's been forced to sleep in when a flight was delayed) he can't recall being in a dwelling so devoid of mystique.

He thinks about Darcy Pringle.

Once you got past the sitcom name, she wasn't bad looking.

Good features, no tell-tale signs of esthetic surgery.

A trim body beneath the white cotton shirt and oatmeal pants.

Like her house: clean and bland.

No hint of the decadence, the wantonness, that arouses him in a woman.

Not that he's had the pleasure of bedding a woman like that in a long while.

With his looks, waitresses and shop girls and baristas are his for the taking, but his taste runs to the kind of women for whom good looks are a given, but wealth is the greatest aphrodisiac.

Since the loss of his fortune his bed has become an empty place.

A jab at his ribs has him wincing, and he can no longer ignore the pain.

Dressed in his boxer shorts he goes into the en suite bathroom and checks the medicine cabinet: a toothbrush and toothpaste, dental floss, Listerine, but no painkillers.

Still in his boxers, he leaves the bedroom and hurries along the corridor toward the kitchen he glimpsed as Darcy led him to his quarters.

*Surely she must have some Tylenol stashed in there?*

He hits the lights and recoils as the harsh glare shows him a room as white and sterile as a laboratory.

*How can she cook in here?*

*Or is she some calorie counter who subsists on smoothies and sprouts?*

He has the cupboard open, rooting through bowls and cups and saucers when a voice says, “May I help you Mr. Forbes?”

When Forrest Forbes turns to Darcy he reveals the lean, muscular torso she dreamed of, but her eyes widen in horror rather than admiration when she sees bruises the color of burst fruit—purples and yellows and mauves—that pattern his stomach and back.

Before she can stop herself she says, “My God, what happened to you?”  
He shrugs, and she sees his attempt at nonchalance causes him to wince.  
Darcy holds up a hand.

“I don’t want to know.”

“Smart girl.”

“I suppose you’re looking for painkillers?”

“Unless you have some morphine lying around?”

“Wait here,” she says and goes upstairs to where Porter’s stash of prescription painkillers is still in her bathroom.

When she sees herself in the mirror, her hair mussed, her face shining, her eyes still swollen from her pathetic little crying jag, she is tempted to do a little repair work before she goes back down to him.

Then she thinks, *what the hell?*

Why would she want to primp and preen for a man who is clearly a degenerate?

Those bruises came from a boot applied long and deliberately.

Darcy can only imagine what he did to deserve that.

She curses Eric for bringing this man into her house.

Darcy has to swallow her anger and resist the impulse to call a cab right now and send Forrest Forbes packing.

All that prevents her is a flashback of Porter with his hand on the bimbo’s belly bulge.

So, she runs fingers through her hair (damn this female programming) and goes back down, wearing her PJs, her bare feet and her shiny nose like a badge of pride, a rumble in her stomach reminding her of what had drawn to the kitchen in the first place: comfort food.

A slice of bread and cheese and some hefty scoops of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Therapy.

Forrest Forbes sits at the kitchen table when she returns.

She pours him a glass of water and dumps a couple of yellow and black bombs on the table.

"Those look like fun he says," but his smile is weak and he glugs two of the pills immediately.

"I was married to an ex-jock. Old football wounds."

Darcy crosses to the fridge and gets out some cheese and finds a loaf of bread.

"I'm going to make a sandwich. Want one?"

"No, I prefer to take my drugs on an empty stomach. They metabolize faster."

She shrugs and slices bread, avocado, tomatoes, brie and lettuce.

Forrest says, "Eric filled me in a little about your ex-husband and his pregnant paramour."

"Good."

"So what you're doing is all about saving face?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Hell, is he worth it?"

Darcy looks up from her preparation, wiping a strand of hair from her cheek.

"No, I guess not."

"Then why do it?"

Darcy says, "Mr. Forbes, let's keep this professional, okay?"

"Sure."

She sits opposite him and takes a bite of her sandwich.

"So, talking professionally," he says, "what's our backstory?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where did we meet?"

"I don't know."

"Well, definitely not here in this town."

"No. But I was away, recently, at a spa."

"Men like me don't go to spas."

"I don't suppose you do . . ."

"Where was this spa?"

"Up in Napa."

"Okay, that I can work with. Let's say I was up there buying a vineyard and you were playing hooky from the spa and we met at a bistro and one

thing led to another.”

“A little farfetched.”

“But serviceable?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“My family once owned a vineyard up there, actually.”

“Really?”

She wipes a smear of avocado from her chin.

“Long ago.” He waves a dismissive hand. “Okay, so we met and I swept you off your feet and here I am to take you to the gala event of the year.”

Darcy stares at him.

“You think I’m really boring and small town, don’t you?”

“Not at all.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind. I just don’t want you to show it tomorrow night. This Ball is everything you’re going to hate.”

“How do you know?”

“Realtors and used car salesmen and dentists in badly fitting tuxedos, their wives squeezed into gowns from hell? The Hamptons it is not.”

“I’ll contain my distaste.”

“We raise a lot of money every year. There’s a children’s shelter that’s pretty much dependant on us for its existence. I know I’m a pathetic joke right now, but those kids aren’t. I want the Ball to go well. I want to look good and feel good, so I can skin those jumped-up bumpkins of their cash. That’s my mission tomorrow night. Can I count on you?”

“Yes,” Forrest Forbes says.

She wipes her face on a napkin and leaves him sitting there and doesn’t look back.



## 12

Poor Billy Bigelow knows he really owns his name this morning. He has barely slept, his humiliation at Darcy Pringle's house looping in his mind.

How could he have done that?

How could he have made a fool of himself in front of Darcy and smarmy Eric Royce and that guy who looked like he had stepped out of a Chivas Regal commercial?

*Idiot.*

Billy Bigelow is no stranger to bad days, but today is one of the worst he can remember in a very long while.

A day when he has to face the death of a twenty-year-old dream.

Darcy Pringle will never be his.

Sweet, kind, Darcy Pringle, the only person who had showed any real sympathy back when he did the unspeakable thing that he did.

Darcy Jennings, as she was then, with her blonde hair and her freckles and the neat bulges in her letter sweater that even in mourning he'd had a tough time keeping his eyes off.

And he can't stop it now, the old memories are flooding in: Billy Bigelow at sixteen, just back from getting his drivers license, excited, insisting he take his mother and sister for a spin; his father going off to do what he did best, drink and stare morosely at his team of perennial losers whacking at a hockey puck.

Billy drove away with his mother beside him and his little sister in the rear, and what happened—even though it was tragic—had all the properties of a farce.

As they turned off the main road, heading toward the ocean, they found themselves at the foot of the only hill in Santa Sofia, and found themselves directly in the path of a runaway ice cream truck, its speakers blaring a tinny, distorted version of the theme from that old movie *The Sting*.

The driver of the truck, dressed in clown make-up with an orange wig, had been battling to control the truck from the top of the hill, and had his hand on the horn.

If Billy had been a more experienced driver he would have swung his car out of the way and the ice cream truck would have sailed by harmlessly and come to a halt in the sand of Long Beach.

But Billy was a greenhorn and he panicked and stalled the car.

It was like something out of a silent movie: a car trapped on the tracks, a train thundering on.

Billy pumping the gas and turning the key and only succeeding in flooding the engine.

His mother and his sister screaming.

The horn and the distorted music growing louder and then the truck hit and there was a massive explosion and when Billy woke up in hospital with minor burns, concussion and a broken arm, his father leaned into him and said:

“Well done you little bastard, you’ve gone and killed your mama and your sister.”

And that’s how it was every day for the next twenty years, until Big Ben was felled by cancer.

Never missing an opportunity to blame Billy for what he had done.

And to this day, Poor Billy can’t eat a snow cone or hear ragtime music or go near a circus without shaking uncontrollably.

Billy drags himself into the shower and down the stairs and opens the store.

His cell phone rings and, expecting more humiliation, he checks caller ID.

He is relieved when he sees that it’s Darlene, his waitress from the coffee shop.

“Yes, Darlene?”

“Just phoning to tell you I’m quitting.”

“Why?”

“Got a better offer is why. I’ll be in later to fetch what you owe me.”

And she’s gone before Poor Billy can even think of demanding she work a notice period.

He scribbles on a piece of paper and sticks it on the glass door of the bookstore: HELP WANTED.

*Was that ever the truth?*

## 13

Eric Royce loves Darcy Pringle.

Loves her with all his heart and none of his lower organs, which makes it the perfect friendship.

But love her he does.

Fiercely and protectively.

Ever since he became her next door neighbor four years ago—exiled from the absurd excesses of Los Angeles—they have been friends.

Their friendship started about a month after Eric moved in, when, as he was taking a little tour of his garden (admiring less the hibiscus and the palms than the oiled limbs of the dusky young man—Raul? Ramon?—wandering around aimlessly with a pool scoop wearing the most adorable denim cutoffs and nothing else) a hedgerow parted and a blonde woman, pretty in a suburban way he'd thought at the time, popped her head through and said, "Hi, I'm Darcy Pringle."

"Eric Royce," he'd said, extending a languid hand, feeling oh-so-superior to this little matron.

"Mr. Royce," Darcy said.

"Eric, please."

"Eric, may I ask you a question?"

"Ask away, my dear."

"Why do you have a pool man when you don't have a pool?"

This had been delivered all wide eyed and deadpan (with the ghost of Marilyn Monroe swishing around in the mix) and then Darcy had laughed her surprisingly full laugh and shoved a flute of fairly decent champagne at him, clinked his glass with hers and said, "Welcome to Santa Sofia."

So, of course, they became friends.

And Darcy had helped him chart the surprisingly shark-infested waters of Santa Sofia's society.

The first fin she'd pointed out was the jagged dorsal belonging to their neighbor, Carlotta McCourt.

Not surprising, really, that they all lived cheek-to-jowl, like some silly sitcom.

Santa Sofia had one street of large houses, all built in the faux hacienda style that was *de rigueur*, and here the wealthy realtors and dentists and car retailers sported with their wives and their SUVs and their Webers.

Eric's friends in LA—the very few he stayed in touch with—had been aghast at this move into the depths of stucco suburbia.

But for him it was a quite literally a do-or-die decision.

Fleeing New York fifteen years before, he'd invented a new life and a new name and Los Angeles had welcomed Eric Royce.

He was young.

He was witty.

Within a year he was writing soaps.

Not art, but good, solid money.

Money that bought him an apartment in West Hollywood and nights of partying at the bars on Santa Monica Boulevard.

By the time he was twenty-five he had created *Startup*, the steamy, sexy, Machiavellian story of love, loss and betrayal in the dot.com era.

It was a goldmine.

And soon Eric had a house in the Hollywood Hills and a platinum-plated drug habit.

Until he woke up one morning after a week of sad sex and chemical excess, drove north and found Santa Sofia.

Saw a house for sale and bought it on the spot.

And now he ran *Startup* by remote.

His company in Los Angeles, helmed by a pit-bull of a lesbian who had a healthy profit share, churned out the series, and he wrote the character bibles and the story arcs and the odd episode, and oversaw the scripts via email.

*Life was good.*

*Life was golden.*

But he felt for his neighbor and dearest friend.

He had, of course, been very pleased to see the back of Porter Pringle, but unlike many of the members of Santa Sofia's excuse for a society he hadn't rejoiced in Darcy's heartache.

He simply believed that Porter Pringle wasn't good enough to lick the pair of Manolo Blahnik's Eric had taken Darcy down to LA to buy for the Ball—along with a *very* fetching little Valentino number.

Porter, though he had a cute smile and a pert ass, was a Neanderthal.

A boring man who had kept his wife trapped inside his lowbrow world.

Eric saw something in Darcy: she had potential.

Real potential.

Potential to soar far beyond the suburban cage Porter Pringle had fashioned for her.

But Darcy didn't see it herself.

Or not yet.

As Porter takes his daily stroll on Long Beach, the Pacific stretching blue and limpid, surfer boys jogging by with their boards, he remembers walking along here with Darcy shortly after Porter left her, their arms entwined, Darcy's hair tugged and teased by a chill little wind coming in off the ocean.

"Do you believe in pair-bonding, Eric?"

"No, darling, I don't."

"I do. Look at swans. They pair for life."

"Darce, where are you going with this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your cob has flown."

She stopped and blinked, wiping a tendril of her from her eyes.

Eric said, "A male swan is called a cob, darling."

"Oh, okay."

"And if you're trying to write some silly fairy story using a swan analogy, forget it. He's gone. He's not coming back. Good riddance."

This had brought tears to her eyes and he'd held her in his arms. "Oh Darce, Darce, Darce. What a cheap little bastard he is."

"I still love him, Eric."

"I know and he doesn't deserve it."

"I keep hoping he'll come crawling back."

"Swans don't crawl, Darcy."

This got the weak laugh it deserved. "Well, come flapping back with one broken wing."

"You'd take him back?"

"Yes."

They'd walked on without speaking for a minute, then Darcy said, "Each morning I wake up and look in the mirror and ask myself what I did wrong."

This got Eric turning, and his posh accent slipped for a moment, "Hell, Darcy, that's the ripest crap I've ever heard coming from your mouth."

She stared at him in astonishment.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, darling, if I misspoke. But really, what

is it with you silly women?”

“What do you mean?”

“That idiot dumped you because of some inadequacy, some flaw in himself. Some need to prove his virility, or have some mush-headed bimbo tell him how great and all-powerful he is. He’s the one who has the problem, not you.”

“I couldn’t give him a child.”

“That’s just making an excuse for him, Darcy and you know it.” He hugged her. “You’re wonderful. He’s a stupid, limited boy who never bothered to grow up. Move on, darling. Move on, you beautiful pen, move on.”

She's staring at him again, and he sees his Hallmark poetry has confused her.

“A female swan, Darce. A pen.”

“God, I thought you were calling me a ballpoint.”

“No, never. If you were a writing implement you’d be a quill.”

They laughed and walked on, Darcy doing a good job of pretending she was stitching together her broken heart.

As he returns his to Jeep, something of the screenwriter stirs in Eric, and he marvels at this little scenario he has set in motion with Darcy and Forrest.

Eric’s not naïve enough to expect anything lasting to come of it—Forbes is a gadfly—but he hopes that an evening in the company of decadent, debauched but very, very worldly and sophisticated Forrest Forbes may be the start of Darcy broadening those horizons.

He’s looking forward to the Ball, not for the reasons the rest of the town is: to see Darcy reduced and humiliated (why do good, kind-hearted women become the targets of this kind of vindictiveness?)

He’s looking forward to seeing his little swan starting to spread her wings.

Eric, deep in thought, starts the Jeep and turns out of the parking lot at the beach, crossing the intersection that in Santa Sofia has become known as Bigelow Bend (Darcy filling him in on the awful but side-splittingly funny tale of the runaway ice cream truck) when he nearly flattens a young woman who steps off the sidewalk right in front of him.

Eric stands on his brakes and the Jeep comes to a screeching halt just inches from the woman who stares at him blankly.

He has never seen her before, and with her wild hair and pale, windswept beauty, she looks like she’s been blown off one of the Brontë sisters’ moors,

not stepped out of a Santa Sofia strip mall.

Her name, remarkably, is Brontë.

Brontë Baines.

And when other kids were falling asleep to Dr. Seuss and The Brothers Grimm, her mother was reading her *Jayne Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. And even though she'd been born in the Imperial Empire (Riverside) not the seat of the British Empire, she had grown into a distracted and vague girl with a delicate and romantic disposition, at odds with the world of Twitter and Facebook an on-line dating.

Or any kind of dating.

So, fleeing by Greyhound Bus from the latest Mr. Rochester-not (a grabby traveling salesman from Gardena) she finds herself in this little town without knowing quite how she got here or what she's going to do now.

She stepped off the bus to use the bathroom at the gas station, became distracted by a display of flowers in the little garden, and quite failed to notice that the coach had driven away with her bag in its belly.

*Oh well.*

These things happen to Brontë Baines.

Happen with remarkable regularity.

So, with nothing but the clothes on her back and a couple of dollars in the little cloth bag that hangs from her shoulder, she walks along the sidewalk, the breeze tugging at the long dress she wears, showing a pair of bird-like ankles ending in ballet pumps.

Following some internal GPS she steps off the curb almost in front of a jeep thing—the driver shouting and saying something unflattering.

He roars off and she wanders across the road, pleased at the near-accident, because it got her looking where she was going, otherwise she would have quite missed the bookstore with the sheet of paper Scotch-taped to its glass door: HELP NEEDED.

*Good, this was a sign.*

*Well, of course it's a sign, Brontë, you clot.*

*A rather untidy, handwritten sign.*

No, not that kind of sign.



A sign sign.

A message, telling her that she has come to the right place.

And when she pushes open the door to the store and sets off the first few bars of “Greensleeves”, she knows this is another sign.

Standing there, inhaling her two favorite smells—books and coffee—mixed into a heady perfume, Brontë feels a sudden jolt of raw happiness.

“Morning, need assistance?”

She turns to see a tall, wild haired man, with a beautifully ugly large-boned face.

He holds a huge cream cake on a tray.

“No, but clearly you do.”

“Do I?”

He stares at her, perplexed, and she sees he has eyes blue as robin’s eggs, wide and without guile.

The tray is balanced precariously in his hands and he rights it at the last moment, stopping the cake from sliding to the floor.

Brontë points toward the door.

“The sign.”

“Ah, the sign. The sign. Yes. Yes I do.”

He stares down at the cake, and turns and sets the tray down on a small bench that is parked near one of the shelves of books.

“Do you have any experience?” he asks.

“Well, I read books and I eat cake and I love coffee.”

“Oh, okay. Great, Miss . . .?”

“Brontë Baines.”

“Brontë like . . .?”

“Charlotte and Emily.”

“Not to forget Anne.”

Brontë, impressed, says, “No, of course not.”

“I think *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is very underrated.”

Brontë is even more impressed. “Gosh, so do I!”

The man sticks out a hand and says, “I’m Billy Bigelow.”

She shakes the huge hand and this touch seems to send him into a spin—literally—he rotates 360 degrees, scratches his head, and then decides to sit.

Before Brontë can warn him, this huge wonderful man has planted his backside in the cream cake.

He shoots to his feet, twisting to see his butt.

“Oh, hell.” Then he shrugs. “Still want the job?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“When can you start?”

“Greensleeves” trills as the door opens and a couple of very tanned women in tennis togs come in and head for one of the tables in the coffee shop.

Brontë lifts two menus from the counter—something about this man has stirred a boldness in her—and says, “Right now.”

Carlotta McCourt and Jenny Johnson from Jenny's Fashions (Santa Sofia's smartest boutique) take their seats in the coffee shop.

Carlotta, still flushed and pumped from beating the slightly younger and taller Jenny in straight sets over at the country club (the two of them pausing between points to watch the tables and bandstand and paraphernalia being delivered for tonight's Spring Ball) looks around in the hope of spotting Darcy Pringle and her mystery man, but the bookstore is empty of customers.

A girl she has never seen before, a strange, pale creature with the face of a horse and a thicket of wild hair, comes over carrying menus.

"Where's Darlene?" Carlotta asks.

"I have no idea," the girl says.

Carlotta sighs. "God, how boring. That means I'm going to have to break you in."

"Sounds painful," the girl says, deadpan.

Carlotta searches her face for signs of insolence, but finds none.

Finds nothing, in fact.

*What a blank slate she is.*

Carlotta launches into a detailed description of how she wants her coffee and her croissant, the instructions so intricate and pernickety they have reduced many waitresses to tears.

But this girl writes nothing down.

"Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"I don't see a notebook."

The girl taps her unruly mop. "All up here. I have an eidetic memory."

"A what?"

"What's commonly known as a photographic memory. I forget nothing."

"Well, you get my order wrong and you won't be forgetting me, you hear?"

"I also have perfect pitch. That means my hearing is remarkably developed."

"You getting fresh with me, missy?"

“Oh no, ma’am.” And she’s gone.

Jenny shakes her head. “Where does Poor Billy find them?”

“Poor Billy is an idiot.”

“What was he doing at Darcy’s house last night?”

“God, I wish I knew. But even more I wish I knew who the guy was who spent the night.”

Jenny leans forward, whispering. “Tell me about him again.”

And even though Carlotta, in the locker room at the club, had regaled Jenny with the events of last night, she describes the man again, in great and fulsome detail.

“He sounds gorgeous.”

“He was,” Carlotta says, batting her false eyelashes.

“You’re sure he didn’t slip next door with that Eric character?”

“No way. Eric went home on his little old lonesome.”

“How absolutely intriguing.”

“Isn’t it just?” Carlotta says. “Tonight is going to be a once-in-a-lifetime event. I would not miss it for the world.”

The girl arrives with her coffee and Carlotta, ready for battle, sips at it.

“Is it to madam’s satisfaction?” the girl says.

To Carlotta’s annoyance the coffee is perfect.

“It’s okay.”

With just the hint of a curtsy the girl is gone.

“I don’t like her,” Carlotta says.

“She’s creepy.”

“She won’t last.”

“No.”

“Nobody can take working for that bozo for too long.”

And as they watch, Billy, on a low ladder stacking a bookshelf, forgets that he is suspended in the air and steps backward.

How she does it they aren’t sure, but the weird girl (as if this were some circus routine she and Poor Billy have performed for years) rushes out of nowhere pushing a box of books and Billy steps down onto the container and then onto the floor, noticing nothing as he walks off in his usual daze.

But Carlotta notices something: she finally sees an expression on the girl’s face.

She is smiling as she watches Billy walking away.

“Ooooh,” Carlotta says. “I think Miss Downtown Abbey’s got the hots for

Poor Billy Bigelow.”

“Well good luck to her,” Jenny says. “He’ll never stop mooning over Darcy.”

“No, he won’t.”

“I don’t suppose he’ll be there tonight, will he?”

Carlotta shakes her head. “No, sadly. That would’ve added even more spice wouldn’t it?”

“Mnnnn. But it’s spicy enough, Lottie.” Jenny is one of the very few permitted to call her this.

“Oh, it’s going to be a regular Five-alarm Chili.”

And they laugh and lean into one another, toothy as a couple of great whites circling in bloody waters.

Darcy sits at her make-up table, blinking as she applies eyeliner. She stares at herself in the mirror and suddenly feels drained of all vitality. *Come on, girl*, she tells herself. *Come on, Darcy*.

But she turns on the stool and looks at the empty bedroom, remembering all the nights she'd dressed for the Spring Ball, going back ten years, when Porter made his first million (some property coup that had resulted in a horrible condo development farther up the coast) and she'd persuaded him to bankroll the event.

Porter, if not exactly a mean-spirited man, was no philanthropist, but he'd been shrewd enough to see the benefits of the Ball: the wealthy from Santa Sofia and its sister towns gathered together in one room in the spirit of charity, and he'd agreed.

The Ball became an institution.

Each year Porter made a short speech and then handed the microphone over to Darcy who had the most charming way of shaming and bullying the partygoers to part with their money.

Getting dressed had always been really sexy to her.

There'd been a ritual.

She and Porter had made love and then showered, and he'd poured them champagne as they started the business of getting ready for the Ball.

Porter so handsome in his tuxedo, coming to her to tie his bowtie and fix his cufflinks.

Darcy, radiant in one of the simple black outfits she bought each year for the Ball.

But tonight Porter is over at the Ramada Inn with his new wife, and Darcy has the sickening image of the two of them spread naked and sweaty on the hotel bed, his hand on Paige's belly.

Darcy, dressed only in her bra and pants, jumps up from the make-up table, filled with a wild panic that leaves her desolate and disorientated.

Champagne.

That's what she needs.

There may be no Porter this year, but there damned well will be champagne.

And so beside herself is Darcy that she quite forgets that she is nearly naked.

And quite forgets that she has a house guest as she runs down the staircase to the kitchen, to find a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator.

The sound of applause shocks her from her fugue.

A man, a ridiculously handsome man dressed in the most stylish tuxedo she has ever seen—a tuxedo that perfectly fits his tall, broad shouldered frame—stands at the bottom of the stairs, watching her, clapping his hands.

“Bravo,” Forrest Forbes says, “you make me feel overdressed.”

Darcy stares at him, catapulted out of her trance.

She shrieks and falls into the comical routine of trying to cover too much flesh with two few hands, all the while edging back up the stairs.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry, I . . .”

He widens his eyes then makes a production of covering them with his hand.

“You forgot you had company. I understand. Is there anything I can get you?”

Darcy, safely in the corridor upstairs, shouts: “Champagne. There’s champagne on ice in the kitchen. Pour us some please, I’ll be down in a minute.”

She sits back down at the mirror and shakes her head at her reflection.

“Hell, girl, you’re in a bad way.”

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

*Breathe.*

She finishes her make-up, slips on her ridiculously expensive Valentino ball gown and walks down the stairs to where Forrest Forbes waits with a glass of champagne.

“You look beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“Although I still think the earlier number was a little racier.”

“Mr. Forbes you’ll kindly erase that from your memory.”

“Not easily.” He raises his glass. “To us.”

“To us,” Darcy says and drinks her champagne.

As Forrest leads her toward the door, Darcy checks out the mirror in the

hallway and she has to admit they make a striking couple.

Maybe it's the champagne doing its mischief in her empty belly—*when last did she eat?*—but the image of Forrest Forbes wielding a riding crop flits across her mind and before she can stop herself she says, “Do you ride, Forrest?”

“Of course. Why?”

“No reason.”

But she's smiling to herself as they cross to the Forrest's car.

*Are you flirting, Darcy?*

Yes, she decides.

She is.

And little excitement stirs in Darcy.

*Maybe tonight won't be so bad, after all.*



Carlotta McCourt, teetering down her driveway on stilt-like high heels, nearly falls when she sees the most gorgeous man who ever drew breath handing Darcy Pringle into the shiny new Jaguar.

So discomfited is she that Carlotta—who hasn't touched her vile husband in years—grabs hold of Walt's arm to stop herself from landing flat on her face.

"Whassamadder?" Walt says in his Homer Simpson voice, even in a tuxedo looking like what he is: a fat loser.

"Nothing," Carlotta says, retrieving her hand and using her Pilates-toned core muscles to steady herself.

But she can't drag her eyes away from the opposite sidewalk, where Darcy and the mystery man are lit by the dome light of the car.

They are laughing and Darcy looks far too happy for a woman in her situation.

*And the man . . .*

*God, the man . . .*

When Carlotta watched him through the glasses last night she saw he was a hunk, but now, as she and Walt approach their Lexus—her slob of a husband not dreaming of opening the door for her—she can see the stranger up close and what she sees has her starved for breath.

He is tall and moves with the kind of grace that only a man skilled between the sheets possesses.

His face, as he turns to smile at Darcy, is chiseled and handsome without being pretty.

No way this guy is anything other than a far-too-desirable heterosexual male.

*How did Darcy get so lucky?*

Carlotta, lowering herself into the Lexus that stinks of stale cigarettes and soiled golf socks, understands her mission for tonight: find out the truth about The Tall Dark and Handsome Stranger.

Eric Royce hands the keys to his vintage Bentley to the valet—Eric is a car nut and has one for every occasion—and stands a while on the lawn of the Santa Sofia Country Club, watching the last of the sun fade from the sky.

It's a beautiful evening, and he can smell hibiscus, and even the clichéd palms look somehow exotic silhouetted against the mauve sky.

Does Eric feel awkward arriving alone for the Spring Ball?

No.

Since he was a kid, he's had to deal with being The Outsider, and he's learned to make it work for him, so watching the expensive cars gliding up, he tells himself that he's Tom Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby*, observing the goings-on at West Egg through clever, cynical eyes.

And if he's Tom, then Darcy, walking toward him on Forrest Forbes's arm, has to be Daisy, and Forbes would have been a natural for the part of Jay Gatsby if only the damned man could act.

Which reminds Eric that he's not here to indulge himself in faux-Fitzgeralding; he's here to watch his best friend's very lovely back.

"Darcy, you look gorgeous," he says.

"Doesn't she just?" Forrest Forbes says in that overbred voice of his.

As Darcy waves and calls a greeting to a couple who are walking up the stairs into the club, Eric puts his mouth very close to Forrest's ear and says in his best Bronx accent, "Screw this up and I'll have your nutsack dangling from my rearview? Hear me?"

"Loud and clear, old boy. Loud and clear," Forbes says.

"What's loud and clear?" Darcy asks.

Eric says, "Just boys' talk, Darce."

But she is no longer looking at him, she's looking across to where Porter Pringle and his young bride—a vision of loveliness, even Eric has to acknowledge—approach them up the stairs.

Forrest Forbes comes face-to-face with his natural enemy: the jock.

Even though Forrest is no slouch when it comes to physical prowess, he's never been able to tolerate team sports.

All that sweaty male camaraderie (the joshing, the flicking of backsides

with towels in the locker room) revolts him.

And the man walking toward him, as tall and broad-shouldered as Forrest, is a man who thrives in that atmosphere, wallowing in the admiration of lesser specimens.

Forrest needs no introduction to know that this is Porter Pringle.

But Eric does the introductions, and when Porter takes Forrest's hand and squeezes it in a painful grip, Forrest (sighing inwardly) squeezes back and sees the little glimmer of surprise in Porter's eyes.

Then the surprise is replaced with something cold and calculating, and Forrest curses himself for being drawn into this pathetic display of machismo.

He should have left his grip limp as a banana.

The last thing he needs is this idiot's attention.

"So where do you hail from, Forrest?" Porter says.

"Boston, originally."

"And how have you washed up on our shores?"

Darcy takes Forrest's arm and says, "We're cluttering the stairs, let's go on in. We can chat inside." She flicks her eyes over to Paige. "You look wonderful, my dear. Isn't it amazing what they can do with maternity wear these days?"

And Forrest, letting her draw him up the stairs and into the ugly little fake Spanish building, feels a twinge of admiration for Darcy Pringle.

Darcy walks into the spotlight that has been waiting to ambush her, and the band strikes up "Livin' La Vida Loca," the song that had always been Darcy's and Porter's.

Nobody had thought to brief the bandleader to come up with an alternative.

And, with every eye on her and Forrest Forbes, it's all Darcy can do to smile and nod graciously at a smattering of applause from the packed room.

The spotlight skids off Darcy and finds Porter and Paige, right on their heels.

She is gratified at the noticeably less enthusiastic applause, the major clapping coming from Carlotta McCourt, standing up out of her seat at her aisle table, leaning into Porter and whispering something into his ear that makes him smile one of his hungry smiles.

As she and Forrest take their table right up by the bandstand, Darcy thinks back to that moment on the stairs.

What was it that she had seen when the men shook hands?

There was that very male sizing up thing, and she couldn't help but notice the silly schoolyard squeezing session, but it was the expression in Porter's eyes that she couldn't shake, when he'd looked from her to Forrest.

An expression of ownership.

*He still loves me*, Darcy thinks and despite herself her heart skips a beat.

*Idiot.*

*It's just that alpha male thing.*

Even though he's moved on, in Porter's mind Darcy is still his property.

If bigamy were legal in this country, she realizes, Porter would have stocked up on wives like gangbusters.

She looks over at Porter sitting at the next table, lifting a glass of champagne to his lips, and conflicting emotions swirl through her.

Sadness.

Loss.

And something unfamiliar.

For the first time she's able to really *feel* what Eric has been urging her to feel for months: a raw jolt of hundred-proof anger.

Porter, lifting his glass to her in salute, says, "Cheers."

And she smiles her best smile, raises her glass in turn and mouths, "I hope you choke on the bubbles, you cheating bastard."

This is Eric's fourth Spring Ball, and the food (canapés and some chicken thing that he shoves away in disgust) is as revolting as ever.

The band are somnambulistic, snoozing their way through elevator-muzak standards.

He (like the awkward family member at a wedding) is seated at a table at the rear, with the horribly dull couple who own the dry-cleaners.

They are clearly terrified of him (a real live one of *them* at their table) and he knows it was clod-heads like these who'd been so pleased with Proposition 8.

Not that Eric Porter would consider marriage, even if it were legal in this state.

*No, no.*

He values his freedom far too much.

And marriage causes pain and heartache, as the lovely Darcy can attest.

Then he shoves these thoughts from his mind.

The only part of the evening that Eric enjoys is about to begin.

Porter struts up to the microphone as the band wheezes to a halt.

Smiling the best smile that money can buy, he thanks one and all for coming, vacuums up the applause like the true egoist he is, and allows Darcy the stage.

This is where Darcy Pringle shines, and tonight, in her beautiful dress, with her diamond earrings and matching necklace dangling over those very shapely collarbones, is no different.

“Welcome,” she says, scanning the crowd, “it’s a real pleasure to see such a wonderful turnout.”

Eric is filled with pride when he hears no hesitation in her voice, even though he knows how tough this is for her.

“Please get ready to dig deep into those wallets. There are a bunch of very special children out there whose lives will be transformed by your generosity.”

And so begins the auction.

The objects are not important: drinking glasses, bottles of unremarkable wine and boxes of chocolates, merely an excuse to get these people to part with their money.

Darcy holds up an ugly German beer stein.

“The opening bid for this is one thousand dollars.”

With no trouble at all, Darcy rattles through a series of bids and unloads the tankard on a local contractor for five thousand dollars.

She gets good money for a Chilean cabernet and the ugliest vase he has ever seen.

Eric, as always, waits for the last item to be auctioned before he joins the fray.

This is when the fun begins, when the big boys take each other on.

Darcy, holding up a bottle of sparkling wine says, “We are now on our last bid. Traditionally showdown time here at the Spring Ball. Who will give me five thousand dollars?”

And Porter, also waiting, lifts his hand. “Six,” he says.

Eric wags a finger. “Seven.”

“Eight,” Porter says.

“Nine,” Eric says, alarming the couple at his table.

And so it goes on, a realtor and a hotelier entering the brawl, and finally at fifty thousand, Porter thinks he has it all sewn up as always—the guy with biggest bid—when Eric says, “Sixty thousand.”

Mrs Chemi-clean nearly swallows her dentures, and Eric is pleased to see

Porter narrowing his eyes like a gunslinger.

Porter has money, but sixty thousand in this economic climate—with an expensive divorce under his belt—has got to bruise him.

“Sixty-five,” Porter says.

Eric, enjoying himself now, keeps increasing the bid in multiples of ten, and Porter looking increasingly less affable, trumps him each time.

The room falls silent when Eric says “One hundred thousand dollars,” by far the biggest bid every recorded in the history of the Spring Ball.

You could hear a mouse burp as Eric looks across at Porter.

The man glugs down his champagne and blinks.

When he speaks his voice is just a little hoarse.

“One hundred and five thousand dollars.”

Eric is tempted to go higher, but he decides he has punished Porter sufficiently and shakes his head.

Darcy, her smile as dazzling as her necklace, says, “Sold to the fabulously generous Porter Pringle for one hundred and five thousand dollars.”

The band strikes up something noisy and Darcy steps down, blowing Eric a kiss.

He raises his glass.

“Bad luck,” Mr. Chemi-clean says with a smug smile.

“Oh, the better man won,” Eric says, drowning his laugh in the cheap bubbly.

Forrest, rinsing his hands in the men’s room, sees Porter Pringle in the mirror, stepping up to the sink beside him.

“Congratulations,” Forrest says.

“Why, thank you.” Porter squirts soap onto hands and washes them. “I notice you never bid, Mr. Forbes?”

“Oh, I don’t believe in meddling in tribal rituals foreign to me.”

Porter flicks water off his fingers, deliberately splashing Forrest’s face.

“Is that how you see us? As tribesmen?”

“Merely a figure of speech.”

Porter crosses to the wall where he yanks a loop of towel from the dispenser. Forrest is amused to see that the man is battling to contain his rage.

Forrest dries his hands under the hot blower and nods to Porter.

“Enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Porter sticks out an arm and blocks Forrest’s way.

Forrest, still feeling the pain of the recent beating, knows he is in no shape

to take this moron on.

And the painkillers, lack of food and too much sticky champagne have left him lightheaded.

"I'm on to you, Mr. Ivy League," Porter says.

"Are you now?"

"Word is that you met Darcy up at some vineyard in Napa?"

"Yes, that's true."

Forrest is relieved to see an elderly man entering the washroom.

"Evening, Porter."

"Evening, Earl."

"Very generous as always," the man says.

Porter grunts and when Forrest prods at his arm he lets it drop, but he dogs Forrest's heels, whispering in his ear.

"This whole thing stinks."

"Yes, maybe they should throw a few more of those little balls into the urinals."

"Listen you smug bastard, I know what's going on."

"Really?"

"That little fairy Eric Royce organized this, didn't he?"

"You've lost me, old boy."

"I think you're playacting, *old boy*. I know my Darcy, she'd never get involved with someone like you."

"She's hardly your Darcy any longer, is she?" Forrest says as lightly as he can.

"I'm going to put the word out, smartass. You'll leave here tonight with your tail between your legs."

As he walks away Forrest feels Porter Pringle's eyes on his back, and he realizes that he has underestimated the man.

A small town oaf he may be, but a shrewd one.

Carlotta McCourt, fanning herself with a menu, watching couples lumbering around the dance floor, thinks she's dreaming when somebody takes her arm and she turns and looks up into the face of Porter Pringle.

"May I have the honor of this dance?" he says.

"Oh, Porter, of course," she stammers, back in high school again, her braces getting in a tangle every time she sees to-die-for Porter in his football gear.

Porter takes her onto the floor, and leans in close.

For one crazy, wonderful, second Carlotta thinks he's going to kiss her, and her eyes are already closing, her lips puckering, when he whispers, "You don't like Darcy much, do you?"

Her eyes blink open and she stumbles.

Porter keeps her afloat with a strong arm at her waist.

"Why do you say that?" she says.

"C'mon, Lottie, it's okay. I'm on your side?"

"You are?"

"Yep. And I know something that I think you'll find very interesting."

"You do?"

"Uh huh."

"What?"

"This guy, this Forrest Gump character who Darcy has dragged here tonight, I think he's a fake. I think it's a set up to get back at me."

"Really? He seems very attentive to her."

"He's playing a role. He's some, what do you call them? Gigolo."

Carlotta stares at him in amazement. "How do you know this?"

"I just know it, Lottie. No way in hell is that guy Darcy's type."

"He is . . . unusual for a town like this."

"He's a stooge. It's all the work of Eric Royce, that I can tell you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"What you do best, Lottie. Talk. Gossip. Get the word out." The music ends and Porter gives her a little shove. "Go on, what are you waiting for?"

Carlotta seeing him walking away from her, realizes that—yet again—he cares only for Darcy.

Still cares enough to want her humiliated.

Carlotta bottles her anger and disappointment and focuses it, staring across the room at where Darcy stands chatting to a group of people.

And, like a cowcatcher on the snout of a train, Carlotta forces her way through the crowd, ready to go and confront Darcy and bring the little bitch down a peg or two.

Forrest—hand under his shirt, rubbing at his mother's ring to soothe him—watches Porter dancing with a hard-faced woman, their eyes drawn to Darcy, and has a crystal clear flash of precognition.

He knows without knowing how he knows that this woman is Darcy's enemy.

And that Porter is priming her with what he has intuited.



When Porter unhands her at the end of the dance, and virtually shoves her in his ex-wife's direction, the woman elbowing her way through the revelers to where Darcy stands, Forrest asks himself why he gives a damn.

This isn't his fight.

He's way above this.

And that's his answer right there: why the hell should he stay meek and quiet in this room full of poorly dressed, jumped-up peasants?

He is a man of pedigree.

Of breeding.

He is also a man filled with painkillers and cheap bubbly.

A man looking for trouble as he spins on his heel and heads toward the bandstand.

Darcy, drinking champagne, talking to a group of Santa Sofia's most prominent citizens—the mayor pumping her hand and thanking her for what she has achieved tonight—has been able to put her sadness and her anger aside.

The night has been a success.

Money (more money than ever before thanks to Eric) has been raised.

And Forrest Forbes has played his part impeccably.

He has drawn no attention to himself—even though his looks are show-stopping—and let her do what she is here to do.

He's made sure she always has a drink in her hand, he's danced with her (a good dancer without being flashy) and she feels that he somehow has *got* her, understood without being told what she needed tonight.

He deserves her thanks, but when she looks around the room, her eyes skidding over the odious Carlotta McCourt who is bearing down on her, and tries to find Forrest, he is nowhere to be seen.

Carlotta grabs her arm and says, "You're paying him aren't you?"

Darcy turns to her, "I beg your pardon?"

"That Forbes guy. You're paying him. He's like some escort, isn't he?"

The mayor, his wife, and their friends are staring at Darcy, who feels her composure slipping.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You couldn't bear to come here tonight on Eric Royce's arm, not with Porter being here with his pregnant wife, so you paid some guy. I saw him arriving at your house with Eric Royce last night. He's just some actor isn't he? Pretending to be your date? God, Darcy, how *humiliating!*"

Darcy feels her cheeks burning and she's ready to flee into the night when the band comes to a ragged stop and she hears Forrest Forbes's voice, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen if I may ask you to indulge me for a minute."

She looks at the bandstand, and there he stands, in the spotlight, staring at her.

*Is the man drunk?*

*Drugged?*

*Deranged?*

*All of the above?*

"I'm sure some of you are wondering who I am," he says.

"Oh, I've got your number, buster," Carlotta says.

"Wondering how I was lucky enough to meet the wonderful Darcy?"

He points at her.

"I've known Darcy for only a few short weeks, but by knowing her my life has been transformed and—even though she will find this display of public affection embarrassing—I want to declare my love for her and ask her a question."

Darcy stands stunned as Forrest steps off the bandstand—looking nimble and lithe, no sign of his injuries—and walks over to her, the spotlight following him.

He gets down on one knee and holds up a ring that sparkles like flame in the light.

"Darcy, will you be my wife?"

And Darcy, knowing in that moment exactly how a deer in the headlights feels, stares around the room:

Sees Porter with a stunned expression on his face.

Sees his silly child bride looking bewildered.

Sees Carlotta McCourt's mouth fallen open in a cartoonish O.

And then she hears something, in the absolute silence that has followed Forrest Forbes's outrageous declaration, hears a voice, realizes that it is her voice and that she is saying, "Of course, Forrest, of course I will marry you."

And that ring—good God how many rocks on that thing?—slides onto her finger and when he stands and kisses her (*the man can kiss*) she swoons into his arms and allows herself to be swept onto the dance floor to the sound of loud applause, and it's not the band she's hearing stumbling through "Isn't She Lovely", it's the sound of sitars and drums and swirling flutes.

Poor Billy Bigelow is down on the beach at dawn, staring at the wooden pier that disappears out into the fog, thinking the rickety jetty is a great metaphor for his life, his future stretching off into a cloud of nothingness.

When he humiliated himself the other night at Darcy's he'd thought he'd hit bottom, but in the early hours of this morning, after his good friend Teddy the catering manager at the Country Club came to fill him in on the Ball ("I don't care how late it is, you stop by and give me a blow-by-blow," Poor Billy had instructed his old school pal) he'd sunk into a depression as thick as this ocean fog.

Darcy was to be married.

She'd been proposed to in a ridiculously public (and absurdly romantic) manner.

And, of course, she'd said *yes*.

Twenty years of dreams, gone.

Poor Billy looks down and sees that he is standing up to his ankles in the surf, his shoes and pants bottoms soaked.

When he retreats and walks across the sand to the main road, he squeaks.

Averting his eyes from the spot where the horrible accident happened, he crosses the road toward Peggy's all-night diner.

Perhaps a cup of coffee and a plate of Peggy's eggs will restore him.

Usually Billy keeps a weather eye open for Topsy, Peggy's terrier, built at the perfect height to trip him up, but today he is too preoccupied to take his usual precautions and the dog—a cunning little beast—darts from nowhere and gets under Billy's feet and there he is, spinning and pirouetting, that long, graceless body flung around as if he's suffering some kind of seizure, and to break his fall he grabs hold of a table and finds himself falling into a booth, staring at the face of Brontë Baines.

"Good morning," she says, "how nice of you to join me."

"Oh, thanks, yes," he says, getting his breath back. "I hope you don't mind?"

"No, I don't. Not at all." She looks at him with those wild, soulful eyes. "May I ask you a question?"

“Of course.”

“Are you terribly attached to the name Billy?”

“No, I’m not, actually. Why?”

“You look far more like a William to me. Billy, I feel, is more suited to a child or a yahoo, and you are neither.”

“Uh, no, I suppose I’m not. Well, definitely not a child.”

“And far too refined to be a yahoo. So, William you shall be.”

Peggy is there in her apron, her dyed blonde hair fighting a silly hat. “Your usual, Billy?”

“Yes, Peggy. Thank you.”

Peggy glowers at Brontë. “Heads-up missy: the bottomless cup of coffee just hit bottom.”

The woman strides off, the dog falling in behind her, but not before the mutt has shot Billy a look of triumph.

This is a war that has dragged on for many years, and it is usually Billy who is bested.

“So, Brontë, how are you liking Santa Sofia?”

“Oh, I find it very congenial, thank you.”

“Found yourself a place to stay?”

When the girl stares at him and then blushes into her empty coffee cup, something dawns on Billy and he surfaces from his all-consuming and terribly selfish funk.

“Oh, God, you spent the night here, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“But where are your things?”

“I have no things.”

And she tells him about becoming distracted by that display of petunias and the bus driving off with her bag.

Billy shakes his head, this is a story worthy of him.

“Okay, I know somebody at the bus company. I’ll make a couple of calls and I’m sure they’ll be able to deliver your bag sometime today.”

She’s staring at him. “You’d do that? For me?”

He shrugs. “Sure.” He clears his throat. “Now, forgive me if this is embarrassing, Brontë, but I have to ask: are you, I mean, do you . . .”

“I’m broke, William, if that’s what you’re so kindly asking. I spent my last money on the bus ticket.”

“Ah, right. Well, you must allow me to give you an advance on your

wages.”

“That would be an extraordinary act of kindness.”

“Oh, please, it’s nothing.”

“No, it’s not nothing. It’s very definitely something. A bigger something than anybody has ever done for me.”

Billy’s eggs arrive, and Peg—kind hearted despite her prizefighter face and shoulders—pours Brontë another cup of coffee.

“Just because you’re a pal of Billy’s I’ll make an exception,” she says, “but only this one time, hear?” She shoves a thick finger in Brontë’s face. “And get yourself a room.”

The girl cowers and nods, sipping at her coffee.

Billy manages to eat his eggs and swallow his java without major mishap—although it is touch-and-go when he whacks the bottom of the ketchup bottle, and only a smart move by Brontë gets her out of the path of a stream of thick red sauce—and he leaves money on the table and stands.

The girl, so waiflike and pale, stares up at him.

“Come with me,” he says, feeling unusually commanding and masterful.

“Where to?”

“I can offer you a place to stay. It’s not fancy, but it’s a roof over your head.”

“Where is it?” she asks.

He points across at the bookstore. “Above the store. With me.”

Her eyes cloud over and he feels a blush rising, leaving him looking like a red stop light.

“Oh, God, no, I don’t mean *with* me, with me. I mean above the store, next door to where I live. A place that is completely separate and self-contained.”

She’s smiling up at him as she slides from the booth.

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Wonderful may be stretching it,” he says, leading her out into the morning.

When he sees that she’s about to wander into the path of the postman’s truck, Billy shoots out a hand to restrain her.

“Oh dear, thanks, William. I seem to do that all the time, step in front of cars, I mean.”

Peggy, standing in the window of her diner, smiles as she watches them make their way across the road, Brontë chattering, swiping wild hair from her face, Billy running a huge hand through his own unruly thatch, and disappear

up the stairs beside the bookstore.

Peggy, one of the first on the scene that horrible afternoon twenty years ago, shakes her head and says, “You go, Billy. You go for it.”

The most ridiculous dream wakes Darcy.

A dream that Forrest Forbes proposed to her at the Spring Ball.

And the craziest part of the dream is that Darcy said yes, with the whole of Santa Sofia looking on.

As she surfaces from under the comforter to face the day, a sledgehammer strikes Darcy on the back of the head, and it takes all her willpower to stay upright.

She groans and as she lifts a hand to her face and a hot beam of sun finds its way through a chink in the drapes, striking the constellation of rocks on her ring finger, she realizes that it was no dream.

*Oh. My. God.*

*It happened.*

*It honest-to-girl-scout-cookies happened.*

He proposed and she accepted.

With the whole town as witness.

Darcy falls back and covers her face with Porter's pillow—unused this past year, but still she inhales his musky scent, too silly and sentimental to change the pillow case.

She sees Porter staring at her in shock as she smiled down at the kneeling Forrest Forbes and agreed to marry him.

The memory of that look—the normally oh-so-cool Porter Pringle caught with his jaw dragging on his bootstraps—almost makes her feel better.

Almost but not quite.

*Handle this, Darcy.*

*Contain this madness.*

As she rises from the bed she sees she's dressed in her PJs, but has no recollection of shedding her ball gown that lies on the floor like something from the last act of Swan Lake.

In fact, she has very few recollections beyond agreeing to Forrest's proposal and then proceeding to drink enough champagne to sink a battleship.

Darcy reaches the bathroom mirror and assesses the damage.

Raccoon eyes.

Porcupine hair.

Lion breath.

She brushes her teeth and her tongue and rinses with mouthwash, then scrubs her face and tames her wild mop of hair.

Looking more like the sane and sensible Darcy Pringle, she sheds her PJs and slips on jeans and a T-shirt and takes to the stairs, each step setting off a steel band in her head.

As she reaches the hallway she hears the sound of somebody busy in the kitchen, and—straightening herself up to her full height—sails in saying, “Mr. Forbes we have to talk.”

But it’s Eric Royce who stands at the spitting and gurgling coffee maker, looking disgustingly fresh in a pair of Banana Republic shorts and Lacoste top.

He lifts a cup. “Want some?”

“God, yes, black as pitch and pile on the sugar.” She slumps down at the table. “Where is he?”

“Your betrothed?”

“Cut the wisecracks, Eric.” She closes her eyes, then looks up at him. “Please tell me it didn’t happen.”

“Oh, but it did, darling and it was the most sensational bit of theater I’ve seen since the opening night of *Les Mis*. This little burg was shaken to its core.”

Darcy groans. “I have no idea what got into me.”

“Well, let’s say quite a lot of bubbly and a perfectly understandable desire to get even. And you know what they say, darling: if you can’t get even, get married?”

“Who says that?”

“I just did and it’s damned good. I’ll use it somewhere.”

“Okay, Spencer Tracy let’s cut the screwball routine. Did you put Forrest up to it?”

“The proposal?”

“Yes.”

Eric stares at her in genuine astonishment.

“Good God, no, darling. As talented a scenarist as I am, I couldn’t have scripted that one. Wowee, talk about a season finale!”

“Then why did he do it?”



“You’ll have to ask him.”

“I will. Where is he?”

“Driving the Jaguar back to L.A.”

She wags her ring finger. “He left this behind.”

“He knows he did. He came knocking on my door at an indecently early hour, terribly contrite. He says you gave him some pain killers.”

“Yes, something Porter used to take for his knee.”

“Well, Forrest is blaming them. Says they turned his brain to Jell-O.”

“And he ran away, too scared to face me?”

“Actually, it was my suggestion that he disappear.”

“Why?”

“To heighten the drama, darling. Deepen the mystique. The tall dark and handsome stranger proposes to the town’s most eligible bachelorette—”

“Divorcée.”

“Have it your way. Proposes and then leaves, called away on urgent business, his bride-to-be pining and staring at the far horizon, dreaming of his return.”

Darcy glugs down her coffee, not even noticing when it scalds her throat.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Enormously. And so should you.”

“I have to come clean about this. Publicly.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“I’ve lied to the town I’ve lived in my whole life, Eric. To the people I’ve known since I was in pigtails.”

“Mnnnn.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why, because I’m some gay Johnny-come-lately who lives a lie himself? Fake name, fake accent, fake tan?”

“The tan’s real.”

“Thanks for noticing. Well, newsflash sweetie, I do understand. I understand that all those dear down-homey chums of yours, the one you’ve known since forever, have been spreading their morning toast with thick dollops of *schadenfruede*.”

“Speak American.”

“They have enjoyed seeing you torn apart. They have enjoyed seeing you suffer. You were too good, too nice, too perfect. They have loved, loved, loved, seeing you bleed. So screw them, Darcy. Screw them.”

She stares at him. "You really believe that?"

"You know I'm right. At least Carlotta McCourt nails her skull and crossbones to the masthead, but the rest of them are even worse, watching from behind their little smiles and polite hellos. You owe this town nothing. No, I'm wrong, you owe it a swift Jimmy Choo in the rump."

Darcy stares out the window at the perfectly blue sky.

"I can't do it, Eric it's not me."

She tugs at the ring on her finger but it doesn't budge.

"God, I'm going to have to use soap to get this thing off."

"It's like the Cinderella slipper, Darce. It's made for you."

"Stop being kitsch." She wags her finger. "Are these rocks real?"

"Well, I don't have my jeweler's loupe screwed in, but, yes, they're real. Diamonds and sapphires."

"It must be worth a fortune."

"Oh it is, but its value is far greater than that."

Darcy waits for the one-liner but it doesn't come.

"What do you mean?"

"It was Forrest's mother's ring. She died giving birth to him, and he's worn it on a chain around his neck his whole life. It's his lucky charm. I'm sure you realize he's been financially strapped the last while?"

"Yes. You told me."

"But he never hocked that ring. Not even to save himself a beating."

"Then I must return it to him."

"He told me he wants you to keep it safe for him. Away from temptation."

"It should be in a vault somewhere."

"He trusts you, Darce." Eric gives her a long look. "Do me a favor."

"What?"

"Keep the ring on your finger. Keep up this pretence, just for a day or two."

"Why?"

"Because it's been a tonic for you, darling. I thought I'd lost the Darcy I know and love until I saw her again at the Ball last night. It's a bit of magic. Stay under its spell just a little while longer." He takes her hand. "Promise?"

She stares at him, then at last she nods.

"Okay, I promise."

## 21

Forrest Forbes returns the Jaguar to the rental company near the Château Marmont and stands a while outside the lobby of the hotel, tempted to stroll into its bar and order a cocktail.

God knows he's earned one and the money that Eric Royce gave him for playing his little role burns a hole in his pocket.

No, he's going to jump a cab and head over to Raymond Gomez's lair and give the bookie enough money to get him off his back for a while.

But, as Forrest stands on Sunset Boulevard, trying to hail a cab, he sees a bar across the road, one of those tacky places that grow out of LA's sidewalks like toadstools.

Rick's it's called with a cheesy deco neon sign that's meant—he assumes—to recall the faded glamor of *Casablanca*.

Forrest has been there before, drinking to the retro tunes on the jukebox and placing bets with the bartender who keeps a very hush-hush book.

But that's not why he's is crossing the road, he assures himself.

It's for a drink.

One of the cheap daytime drinks the place is famous for.

Forrest walks into the bar's windowless gloom, Frank Sinatra ushering him to a stool at the counter.

Except for an old guy nursing a beer, it's just Forrest and the bartender.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Rick says.

"I've been away."

"The usual?"

Forrest nods. "And whatever you're drinking."

The man has a prodigious memory, and Forrest watches in admiration as he pours a Maker's Mark over two blocks of ice.

He slides Forrest's drink over to him and pops the cap on a beer, raising the bottle in salute.

"Cheers."

"*Sláinte*."

"That's Irish right?"

"Yes. I have a drop of the blood, on my mother's side."

The old geezer needs another drink and when Rick crosses to him Forrest gets to thinking about his mother, and his hand reaches by reflex for the chain at his neck.

The chain's there, but the ring isn't.

It's on Darcy Pringle's finger, of course.

What the hell did he think he was doing last night?

Easy to blame his outrageous behavior on the painkillers and the booze, but Forrest in his day has had more experience of chemicals than a pharmaceutical rep, and has never been driven to an act as wild as last night's stunt.

Did he really give a damn about Little Miss Potato Chip?

No.

Maybe her heart was broken but she had tons of loot to sweeten the pain.

And she was well rid of Porter Pringle.

So why then did he do what he did?

Forrest, not given to introspection or self-analysis, decides he did it because he was bored.

Bored with being on the bones of his ass.

Bored with getting kicked half way to Sunday by a Mexican thug.

Bored with what he'd allowed himself to become: a lap dog at the beck and call of people like Eric Royce.

That morning, when Forrest went to Eric's house to collect his money and prevail upon the man to get his mother's ring back from Darcy (even Forrest had qualms about invading her bedroom and yanking the rocks off her finger) the TV hack treated him like the hired help.

"God, what a brutal hour to come calling," Eric said, even though he was freshly showered and coiffed, sipping a fruit juice. "I have a good mind to dock your pay."

"I'd like to hit the road."

"Understandable."

"But first I need you to get the ring back."

"Whose ring is it?" Eric waved a hand. "Wait let me guess: your mother's?"

Forrest nodded.

"You're in a deep hole, financially?"

"You know I am."

"Then why don't you sell the thing? It's worth a fortune."

When Forrest didn't reply, Eric burst out laughing.

"Well, well, who would've thought that Forrest Forbes has a sentimental streak?"

"I'm a regular Hallmark card. Come on, Eric, help me out."

"Leave the ring with Darcy for safekeeping. I can assure you it'll be safer with her than with you."

Forrest couldn't dispute this, but he sniffed other motives.

"You just want to play this marriage thing out, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons. Tell you what, why don't I throw another Grover Cleveland on this little pile," Eric lifted the envelope containing Forrest's wages off the table and wagged it, "in payment for you *loaning* the ring to Darcy?"

"For how long?"

"A week or two."

And Forrest had agreed.

Rooting for crumbs at the feet of a man who polluted the world with trashy television.

Forrest throws back his drink and holds his empty glass up to the bartender.

His eyes are drawn to the TV above the bar—horses being loaded into the starting stalls at the Santa Anita race track.

One horse fills the lens in close-up, its name flashing briefly on the screen: Mr. Darcy.

Forrest laughs.

*What's this, some kind of a sign?*

He feels that wad of banknotes in his pocket and before he can think things through, he says to Rick, "Still keeping that book?"

"For you, sure."

Forrest lays all his money on the counter.

"Mr. Darcy for a win."

The bartender raises an eyebrow.

"That things a mutt, buddy."

"You'll take my action?"

"At fifty-to-one? Sure I'll take it."

And the money disappears into Rick's pocket and another drink

materializes in front of Forrest, who feels a sudden sweat on his brow.

*What are you doing?*

And with the question comes a vivid flashback of that gangbanger's shoe finding its way deep into his internal organs.

Then the manic-voiced commentator shouts that they're off and Forrest sits glued to the screen.

Mr. Darcy hangs at the back of the pack, seemingly worthy of his rank outsider moniker.

Then around midway through the race, something happens.

Mr. Darcy starts to wake up and horse, by horse, moves forward.

And with the finish in sight, he noses into the lead.

Forrest grips the bar counter, his heart beating like a wild thing.

Then the favorite, like a sleek piebald Ferrari, cruises past, the jockey already waving his crop in celebration.

"Tough luck, bud," the bartender says, but he can't smother his smile.

"Those are the breaks."

Forrest throws back his drink and heads for the street.

Suddenly he is no longer bored.

He's hungover and in pain and terribly, terribly afraid.

At the door the old man grabs him with a palsied hand.

"Hold on, sonny."

Forrest stares at him, ready to slap his veiny old paw away.

"Take a look at the tube," the old guy says.

As Forrest turns back toward the TV the bartender zaps it dead with the remote.

"I'd appreciate you turning that back on, Rick," Forrest says.

"Race is over, man."

"Rick," the ancient drinker says, "you do as the nice man asks."

The old geezer, whoever he is, has clout and the bartender sighs and clicks on the tube in time for Forrest to see an action-replay of the finish of the race: the jockey on the favorite celebrating prematurely, standing up in his saddle and suddenly—unbelievably—falling from his mount, the horse crossing the finishing line without a rider.

The elderly drinker chortles.

"Jockey can't win no race munching the turf of the home straight."

The old man's quaint locution gets Forrest grinning.

And the grin becomes a laugh when it is announced that the favorite has

been disqualified.

Mr. Darcy has won.

“Pay the man, Rick,” the old boy—Forrest’s new best friend—says.

Rick glowers at Forrest but he pops the cash register and delves deep and long before he sets down a very nice wad before Forrest.

“Dumb luck.”

Forrest takes the money, peels off a fifty and leaves it in front of the old guy.

“A little something for your arthritis,” he says.

The geezer spits out a loose-dentured chortle.

“Much obliged, good sir, much obliged.”

And, as Forrest walks out into the Hollywood sunshine, he thinks that maybe, just maybe, his luck is changing.

Carlotta McCourt spends the morning in bed, unable to rouse herself, depression smothering her.

The house is empty, Walt skulking around on some golf course, the ugly twins out doing whatever unappetizing teenagers do.

Carlotta, like some primitive warrior, never enters the day without her war paint.

Her ritual—come rain or come shine—is to rise and bathe and scrub her face and then spend hours in front of the vanity mirror applying lotions and unguents and painting on, layer by layer, her make-up.

She does this no matter if she is planning on spending the day lounging at home, reading fashion magazines and watching TV—you never know who may ring the doorbell—or whether she is going to take the Carlotta McCourt show on the road, getting out there in town and doing what she does best: gossiping and stirring up dissent and disorder among the matrons of Santa Sofia.

But today, in the wake of the Ball, she feels lethargic and depressed.

She lies in bed trying to shut down the image of Darcy Pringle accepting that outrageously romantic marriage proposal, while that gorgeous man slipped onto her finger a ring that could square the national debt of an African nation.

*How could it have happened?*

*How could Darcy have risen phoenix-like from the ashes of her broken marriage?*

Finally Carlotta can no longer tolerate lying trapped in her bedroom and she slides from the bed in her Victoria's Secret negligee—what if the house burned down and some handsome firefighter had to carry her to safety?—and shrugs on a satin robe.

She avoids all mirrors (no easy feat in a house littered with them) and shies away from the windows like a vampire.

For years she has reveled in the views of the Pringle residence that her windows offer, watching for any sign of a crack in Darcy and Porter's oh-so-perfect marriage, and when, finally, it had come—*oh happy day!*—she'd



relished her grandstand view of Darcy's anguish.

But today she knows she will be reduced to a screaming wreck if she sees the smiling face of her neighbor and oldest enemy.

So she creeps down the kitchen and brews herself a cup of black coffee, the bitter liquid perfect for her mood, and sits at the table, sipping it, morose.

Walt Jr's laptop lies amidst the debris of his breakfast: he is as much a slob as his father.

On a whim Carlotta drags the laptop over.

She is no computer buff—she finds keyboards very unfriendly to her long nails—but she knows enough to Google Forrest Forbes.

What Wikipedia tells her blackens her mood further.

The man is the real thing: a member of the East Coast elite.

Born into a family that came over on the Mayflower.

She's ready to shove the computer away in disgust when something catches her eye: an image of Forrest Forbes stepping out of a sports car with a beautiful woman on his arm.

But the image hasn't been snapped by some hungry paparazzo—there is a bottle of aftershave slapped at the bottom of the pic.

*An advertisement.*

*Forrest Forbes in an advertisement.*

Long talons or not, Carlotta begins a frenzy of typing and mouse-clicking and what she discovers sends her mood soaring like a weather balloon.

The Forbes's lost their fortune in the crash of 2008.

Forrest has been reduced to modeling and unsuccessful attempts at acting (he couldn't even hack it as a soap star, for pity's sake) to keep the wolf from the door.

Porter was right.

The whole thing was a sham, the work, undoubtedly, of that nasty little fairy, Eric Royce.

Carlotta reaches for her phone and starts to light a fire under Darcy Pringle's pert little *derrière*.

When Darcy walks into the Book & Bean she knows how one of those slaves must have felt when they were tossed into the lion's den.

The tables of the coffee shop are full of the women of the town: Carlotta McCourt and her crew.

And all eyes are on Darcy as she enters and looks around for Eric, keeping, at his insistence, their ritual of afternoon coffee.

Of course, after last night's idiocy, she would be in the limelight.

But she's sensing something, as if these harpies are sniffing the air in expectation.

She hurries across to where Eric sits flicking through the newspaper, languid and unfazed as always.

As he stands to exchange air kisses, Darcy says, "Something's going on."

"You're the center of attention, Darce. Enjoy it."

"No, they're smelling blood. Mine."

"Nonsense."

But as he looks around Darcy sees him narrow his eyes.

"I'm right aren't I?"

"Relax, darling, no matter what happens I have your back."

"Oh good, then you can pull the knives out."

He blows her a kiss as the new waitress, an unusually pale girl in this world of bronzed surf bunnies, arrives to take their order.

When the girl leaves, Carlotta McCourt strolls over.

All conversation dies and every eye is on her.

Darcy's stomach tightens.

She's right.

This is an ambush.

"Darcy, darling," Carlotta says, her voice pitched to travel to the far reaches of the store.

"Hi, Carlotta."

"Or should I say Mrs. Forbes?"

"That would be a little premature."

"Has a date been fixed?"

“Not yet.”

“I suppose you’re going to have to choose one that doesn’t conflict with Mr. Forbes’s busy schedule?”

“Yes, I guess.”

“What is occupying him at the moment?”

Darcy shoots a panicked look Eric’s way, then says, “Well, he has many interests.”

Like a second rate magician Carlotta produces a dog-eared magazine from behind her back.

“Of course. Like Stature fragrance for men?”

She holds up the magazine, showing Forrest in an aftershave ad from a few years ago.

There is laughter in the room.

“Or, I’m told, one can still find his laxative commercial on YouTube? ‘*When it’s tough to go, use Easyflo?*’ ”

Louder laughter.

“Last night was all a sham, wasn’t it Darcy? Forrest Forbes is just some failed actor who you paid to take you to the Ball. Paid to propose to you because you’re so jealous of Porter and his lovely new, and radiantly pregnant, wife!”

Like some lawyer in a show trial, Carlotta throws the magazine down on the table and turns, hands on hips, to the room full of women, as if they are the jury about to find Darcy guilty.

Darcy is pushing her chair back, ready to flee, when Eric grabs her arm in a surprisingly strong grip and says, “Stay.”

She stays and he stands, clinking a knife against a glass, as if he’s about to make a speech at a wedding.

“I hadn’t anticipated going public so soon, but since Carlotta has been sniffing around, allow me to spill the beans.”

Carlotta is staring at him.

With a dismissive sweep of his hand he says, “You can take your seat now, Lottie. Go on, shoo.”

Carlotta looks ready to fight, then she shrugs and sits.

“I suppose you all know the show *Punked?*” He looks around. “No, you’re probably all a bit long in the tooth for that. How about *Candid Camera?* Ring any bells?”

He has the attention of the room.

“Of course last night was a set up. A bit of theater. A bit of performance art. The brainwave of my dearest friend, the lovely, philanthropic, Darcy Pringle.”

Eric places a hand on Darcy’s shoulder.

“You all know the wonderful work Darcy does for her children’s charity. And on her behalf, a big *thank you* for your generosity last night. But the proceeds from the Spring Ball, as welcome as they are, aren’t nearly sufficient to cover those kids’ needs. So, last night was the first taste of a new hidden camera show that my company, Startup Productions, is going to produce. And that the talented and very handsome Forrest Forbes is going to host. And a serious chunk of the profits from the show will go to the Darcy Pringle Children’s Fund. ”

He smiles at the women who are staring at him, rapt.

Carlotta jumps up and says, “Oh come on girls, don’t tell me you’re buying this trash? You didn’t see any cameras last night, did you?”

Eric smiles. “Lottie, darling, a hidden camera show is so named because the cameras are *hidden*.”

Carlotta, the wind sucked from her sails, sends a panicked look around the room and then slumps down in her seat.

Eric continues. “My assistants will be in touch with each and every one of you who were caught on camera to sign release forms. Ladies, you’re all going to be on TV!”

There is a buzz of excitement in the room and Eric takes Darcy’s arm.

“Let’s beat it.”

Once they’re out on the sidewalk she turns to him.

“More lies, Eric?”

“Well, teeny little white ones.”

“What are you going to tell them when none of them appears on TV?”

“Oh, technical hitches. That kind of thing.”

“Lying is one thing, Eric, but dragging those kids into this, making false promises about donations going their way . . .”

“Oh, don’t worry, darling, they’ll get their money.”

“How? There’s no show.”

“Not yet.”

She’s staring at him.

“I’m going to do it, Darcy, the silly hidden camera thing. The network that screens *Startup* has been talking to me about doing a reality show for them. It

all came together back there. Nothing like thinking on one's feet, huh?"

"You're going to do a show?"

"Yes. I'll get my concept people busy on it right away."

"And Forrest Forbes is going to host it?"

"Why not? He's great looking and I must say I saw something in him last night that just might work."

"Eric, stop, you're swallowing your own lies."

They've reached the beach and he comes to a halt, staring out at the ocean.

"Okay, Darcy, maybe you're right. Maybe I won't be able to get this show to fly. Maybe the network'll think a hidden camera show is a dumb hackneyed idea."

"Which it is."

"Hell yeah, too many candid camera type shows, right?"

"Way too many."

"Like there are way too many soaps?" She looks at him. "You know how I got to do *Startup*?"

"No."

"I got a call asking if I had any ideas, that a network was shopping for a new show. There was a pitch session in an hour. I said hell, yes, I'll be there. Know what I had?"

"I'm not your straight man, Eric. Hit me with the punch line."

"Okay, I had zip. Bupkis, as they used to say back in the Bronx. I was sitting in a coffee shop in Westwood with an apocalyptic hangover and nostrils bleeding from a night of blow. I looked around, saw all these idiots on their laptops and it came to me: a soap about dot-commers. About internet start ups. About the loves and lives of those social misfit geeks with the truckloads of money pouring in. I went into the pitch session and I *killed*."

"That was a great idea at the time. If you pitched it now it'd go down like a lead balloon."

"You're right. It would. But I'd have another idea, one that is more *au courant*."

"Eric, you're brilliant, but you're also sad and lonely and unloved."

He looks at her, stung.

"Darcy . . ."

"You live through your characters. You play God, control them, choose their victories and defeats while you stay isolated behind your superior manner and your witticisms."

“Okay, Darce, that’s enough.”

“I love you, Eric, you’re my best friend, but I’m not one of your characters, I’m flesh-and-blood. I have to deal with everything the world throws my way and I think it’s time I stop letting you write my lines.”

Darcy walks off, eyes tearing up, about as upset as she’s been since the day Porter dumped her.

*Stop being an idiot, Billy,* he tells himself, standing behind the cash register of the Book & Bean.

*Sure, she's not getting married.*

*Sure the whole proposal thing was just a stunt, but that doesn't mean she's going to look at a clown like you.*

*Not in a million years.*

But as he watches Darcy walk out of the coffee shop with Eric Royce, Poor Billy Bigelow can't help it.

He feels little tendrils of absurd hope unfurling in him, and as he takes cash from Brontë and makes change, he can't stop himself whistling a happy tune.

Brontë sees how William looks at the woman named after a high-calorie snack.

She knows what that look means, even though a man has never looked at her that way.

She's seen it in the eyes of couples mooning over one another in restaurants, on buses, on the beach.

They seem to be everywhere, these love-sick people.

And here's another one.

The man she's feeling all soft and gooey over.

Just her luck.

Brontë hides her disappointment, finishes her shift and helps William to tidy up and lock the store at six p.m.

"What are your plans, tonight, William?"

"Oh, I have a thing I need to do."

"Like a date?"

He laughs. "No, no. Just a . . . thing."

*It's something to do with that woman,* she tells herself.

*Something to do with that Darcy Pringle.*

William locks the front door.

"Okay, you have a good night now."

"You too, William."

Brontë watches as he walks down the sidewalk, disappearing around a

corner.

And, when she heads in the same direction, Brontë tells herself that she's not following him.

*Never.*

She's just out for a stroll, getting to know the town.

William, in his own world, shambles along.

He has a nasty altercation with a trash can.

He bumps his head on the low-hanging branch of a tree.

When he crosses to the opposite sidewalk he trips on the curb and only a desperate lurch and spin stops him from falling.

He is, without a doubt, the clumsiest man Brontë has ever met.

And the most adorable.

When she sees him enter the Senior Center she tells herself that decency demands that she turn around and go home.

But curiosity, that old cat killer, has her in its grip, drawing her into the garden.

She hears music, something very old and scratchy.

Strings and horns and a high croony voice waft out into the night, and the music draws her toward a picture window.

Hiding in the shrubbery, Brontë peers through the window and sees the most incredible sight.

A gaggle of old ladies, bent and wrinkled, some tiny as children, mob huge, bumbling, William Bigelow.

He takes one of them by her birdlike arm and leads her onto the dance floor.

*Oh God, Brontë thinks, I can't watch this.*

Is this some strange method of euthanasia, turning this massive clumsy man loose on these tiny, fragile women?

But then William takes the old woman's hand in his, places his fingers on her spine and moves her around the dance floor in the lightest and most graceful of waltzes.

Brontë blinks, convinced she's dreaming.

But when she opens her eyes and sees the big man twirl the old lady and sweep her into his arms, the woman smiling in delight, Brontë realizes that it's official: she's in love with William Bigelow.



Eric Royce sits on his porch in the dark, his demons dancing around him in the shadows.

Darcy's words stung, and he feels as empty, shallow and unloved as she said he was.

How easy it would be to hit speed-dial on his phone and summon a dealer from down in Ventura.

In forty minutes a car would draw up outside his house and a man in a bad suit, gripping an attaché case filled with chemicals, would oil up his pathway and the last few years of living clean would be gone.

*Poof.*

Eric takes his phone from his pocket, but when he dials a number it's not his dealer he's calling.

"Forrest," he says when a voice answers, "how are you?"

"I'm good, Eric. I returned the car as promised."

"Of course you did, that's not why I'm calling."

"Oh?"

"There's a situation."

"A situation?"

"Yes. That stunt of yours has had repercussions, I'm afraid."

"Oh? You're not telling me I have to go through with the wedding are you?" Forrest says, laughing. "I mean, come on, it was all in the way of fun."

"Yes, and fun it was. No, it's about Darcy."

"What about her?"

"She's low, Forrest."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but what can I do?"

"Call her up. Ask her out."

"She loathes me."

"No, she doesn't."

"Eric, she's a nice woman. She doesn't need a guy like me in her life."

"Oh, *au contraire*, I think you're exactly what she needs. She's lived amongst philistines for far too long. Show her that there's more to life than the low horizon of this bloody town."

“I thought you loved it up there?”

“I do, but only because I’m jaded, Forrest. I’ve seen it all. Darcy has seen nothing, and I want you to give her a glimpse of the big, wide world out there.”

“How?”

“Talk to her. Tell her things. Tell her about India, about Africa. Intrigue her, for God’s sake.”

“I don’t think so, Eric.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“How?”

“I’m putting together a pilot, for a reality show.”

“Hell, that’s really scraping the barrel.”

“I could say something about glass houses and stones, old son, but I won’t.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.”

“I’d like you to audition for presenter.”

“Me? When I tried-out for *Startup* you told me that my wooden performance lived up to my name.”

“Maybe I got a little carried away by my own cleverness.”

“Maybe.”

“Forrest, I’m sincere. I’ll have my people line up an audition. I saw something in you at the Ball last night that caught my interest. But I need you to help me with Darcy.”

“Okay, I’ll ask her out, even though she’ll probably turn me down.”

“I suspect she won’t. But one thing, Forrest, she’s never to know that we spoke, understood?”

“Sure.”

Eric ends the call and feels not the slightest twinge of guilt.

He can master his addiction to chemicals, but nobody—not even his dearest friend and neighbor Darcy Pringle—is going to stop him from playing God.

Wearing her darkest dark glasses, Darcy reverses the SUV (a clunky relic of the Porter-era as she now finds herself calling the twelve years of her marriage) out of the garage and turns it toward town.

This is the first time she's left the house since her coffee date with Eric at the Book & Bean three days ago.

She's been lying low.

Ben and Jerry have been her BFFs and she's watched enough ten-tissue weepies—*Nicholas Sparks should be tried for crimes against the female heart!*—to turn her brain to mush along with her midriff.

She doesn't look at Eric's house as she passes, and if a lace curtain twitches at Carlotta McCourt's lair she doesn't allow herself to see it.

Darcy drives down the main road, fights off the temptation to dash into the Book & Bean for a caramel iced mocha and a cream Danish to go, and heads for the hills.

The quaintness of Santa Sofia dribbles away into the brush as Darcy crosses a ridge and winds down to the town of Bascomb.

Once the center of a minor oil boom, Bascomb was flooded with money a hundred years ago—people living high-on-the-hog as her absconded dad (a wildcatter in his youth) may have said—but is a sad and depleted place now, with rusted oil rigs littering the horizon and storefronts in the main road boarded up.

The place depresses her deeply and if she didn't have a mission to accomplish here, she would turn the fat-rumped SUV around and head home to continue her career as a miserable shut-in.

But she drives on and parks outside a freshly painted building with a small yard filled with flowers, an oasis in the midst of the grim surroundings.

Darcy checks her face in the mirror and judges her appearance adequate to the task at hand, and as she steps down from the high vehicle, she even manages to find something resembling a smile.

The smile becomes real, and the sadness and humiliation of the last days is forgotten, when kids spill from the entrance of the building and mob Darcy, resisting the attempts of their harried minds to contain them.

If they think of pretty, nicely-put together Darcy Pringle as their fairy princess, what harm can it do?

Darcy visits once a month, always with gifts and provisions and she knows most of the children by name.

Had even chosen—one of the most difficult choices she'd ever had to make—a beautiful freckled five-year-old, Sam, as the child she and Porter would adopt.

*Before.*

*Before.*

*Before . . .*

Darcy on her knees talking to Sam, feels the prick of tears.

*God, girl, I thought Mr. Sparks had you all wrung out.*

She's saved when one of the saintly women who run the center appears in the playground with a giant check: the proceeds from the Spring Ball.

The check, of course, is purely symbolic, prepared for a photo-op with the *Bascomb Bugle*.

The money raised a few nights ago has already made its electronic way into the Children's Center's bank account.

Darcy stands and the kids crowd around her as she holds one side of the check, the editor-cum-journalist-cum-photographer of *The Bugle* hurrying up, looking as harried as ever, his combed-over hair flapping in the slight breeze in the open playground.

He looks around and says, "Your husband on his way?"

One of the women makes frantic signals, tapping her own ring finger—indicating Darcy's empty one (Forrest Forbes's ring is back home in her safe) but the man doesn't get it, staring in confusion.

"Mr. Pringle and I are no longer married," Darcy says, with as much composure as she can muster. "So I'm afraid you're going to have to make do with just me today."

"Of course, I see. I'm sorry, I had no idea," the man mumbles, fussing with his camera.

The photograph is taken and Darcy spends a little more time with the kids, her broken heart broken all over again (*is that even possible, Darcy?*) when she has to say goodbye, watching Sam—always the last to go inside—waving at her through the fence.

As she drives home, the afternoon sun silhouetting the rusted oil rigs, she feels a sadness so profound that when her phone (left untouched in her purse

these last days) rings she draws it out, expecting it to be Eric, begging to be recalled from purgatory.

But it's not Eric.

CALLER UNKNOWN is displayed on the face of her BlackBerry, and she almost ignores it, thinking it'll be a phone marketer trying to unload something useless on her.

But she answers and hears a voice saying, "Hi, Darcy, this is Forrest. Forrest Forbes."

Forrest has found the last few days strangely liberating.

What was it that great 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Kris Kristofferson once said about freedom being just another word for nothing left to lose?

With his winnings—Mr. Darcy has his eternal gratitude—Forrest was able to square the debt with Raymond Gomez.

The bookmaker had seemed almost disappointed when they met at a juice bar in Westwood.

“I thought I was going to have a bit more fun with you, Forrest.”

“Sorry to deprive you, Ray.”

Raymond shrugged. “So, what do you fancy today?”

Forrest shook his head. “I’m swearing off the gambling, Raymond. I’ve learned my lesson.”

The bookmaker laughed. “You know how many times I hear that on any given day, my friend?”

“I mean it.”

“Yeah?”

“You can make book on it.”

“Sure. I’ll take that action.”

Forrest laughed too, declined the offer of a Spirulina Surprise, and headed out into the eternal Californian sunshine, off to look at a couple of apartments in the Hollywood area.

He found a furnished studio off Bronson—close enough to the Hills to hear the wail of the coyotes at night—as soulless a place as he’d ever seen, but it was conveniently located.

Lying on his bed, staring up at the ripples made by the communal pool catching the afternoon light—trying desperately (and failing miserably) to find some Hockneyesque glamor in all of this—he wondered what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

*Face it, old fellow, you don’t even know what you’re going to do with the rest of your day.*

The answer to that, at least, was supplied when his phone rang and a very youthful-sounding girl told him to be at a studio down in the Valley in two

hours for the casting session of Eric Royce's show.

He was to wear a tuxedo.

Forrest muttered something and hung up.

Did he want to host a hidden camera show?

*God, no.*

Was he going to attend the audition?

*Hell, yes.*

He showered and shaved and put on the outfit he'd worn to the silly Ball.

Wearing a tux during the day made him feel like a parking valet.

He sat down on the bed, staring at the blank white wall.

Forrest was mildly surprised that he'd been called in for this audition, he'd been convinced it was merely a ploy to get him call Darcy Pringle.

Which he had no intention of doing.

But since Eric seemed to be making good his promise, wasn't Forrest obliged to honor his?

He dialed Darcy's number, sure that the conversation was going to be short and by-no-means sweet.

Darcy, driving into the late afternoon sun, tries to hide her shock at hearing Forrest's voice.

"Mr. Forbes," she says, putting some permafrost into her tone.

"I imagine you're a little surprised to hear from me?"

"No."

"Really?"

"I guess you want your ring back. How come nothing lasts with you guys?" When she hears only silence she says, "That was a joke, Forrest."

"Oh, of course. Sure. No, I'm not calling about the ring."

"Okay."

"I'm calling to ask you out, actually."

"Mr. Forbes don't you think you've had enough fun at my expense? How many pranks can a poor girl stand?"

"Darcy, this is no prank. I'm calling to ask you to have dinner with me."

"Why?"

"Why does a man usually ask a woman out to dinner?"

"In the normal world that would be because he finds her interesting and attractive."

"That's it exactly."

"But since you clearly don't live in the normal world, I can only imagine that you have some ulterior motive."

"Such as?"

"I really don't know. Money perhaps?"

"Money?" The man sounds genuinely offended.

"Well, I did pay you to date me the other night. Perhaps you're just coming back for seconds?"

"Darcy, I can assure you that's not why I called. I feel I owe you an apology. I'd like to take you to dinner. My treat."

"Let's back up a bit shall we?"

"Okay, backing up."

"Apology for what?"

"Well, for that whole crazy proposal thing. I can imagine it has been an



embarrassment to you.”

“Oh, just toss it on the humiliation pile, Mr. Forbes. Anyway, I enjoyed it at the time, I seem to remember. You don’t owe me an apology and you certainly don’t owe me a dinner.”

“And what if I said I want to take you to dinner because I like you?”

“I’d say you’re lying. To a guy like you I’m just some boring little house mouse.”

“Not at all. I think you have . . . verve.”

“Verve?”

“You know, vivacity, vitality.”

“I know what the word means.”

“Of course you do.”

“But I’m going to have to turn you down, Mr. Forbes.”

“Well, I’m very sorry to hear that.”

But he doesn’t sound sorry, he sounds relieved.

And even in her morose state that pricks Darcy’s interest.

“Eric put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“No, of course not.”

“For a member of the elite you’re a very poor liar, Mr. Forbes. Didn’t they teach you to fib through your teeth at Choate or Groton, or wherever?”

“I went to Andover.”

“That must have been nice. What’s Eric offering you?”

“Nothing. You’ve got this all wrong.”

“No I haven’t. Oh, okay, I think I understand what’s going on here. He’s promising you a shot at that dumb hidden camera thing in exchange for wining and dining me, isn’t he?”

“Darcy, please . . .”

“God, he’s a manipulative little creature. I almost have to admire him. Can I ask you to be completely honest with me, Mr. Forbes?”

“Of course.”

“You really don’t want to take me to dinner do you?”

“Well . . .”

“Come on, Forrest, give it to me straight.”

“No, I don’t want to take you to dinner.”

“It’s pretty much the last way you’d want to spend a night, isn’t it, short of emergency root canal?”

“Well, yes.”

Darcy laughs. "Okay, then I accept. Let's do it."

She hears him strangling. "I'm sorry, I'm a little bamboozled."

"That's okay, you'll catch up. I'll come down to LA tomorrow. Text me the venue and the time."

She ends the call as Santa Sofia comes into view.

For reasons Darcy can't begin to explain, the conversation leaves her cheered as she drives down toward the ocean.

Forrest Forbes sits at the bar at the Chateau Marmont in a state of confusion that has nothing to do with the four Maker's Marks he's downed in quick succession.

His head is still spinning from the conversation he had with Darcy Pringle hours earlier.

Forrest had once claimed he could write the book on female perversity.

He'd been a connoisseur of the subject since his French tutor had let him pay to see her in her underwear—disappointingly staid underwear for a woman who spoke with such a seductive accent—when he was in the third grade.

But he'd never before encountered a woman who would agree to a date only when she'd established that he really didn't want to go out with her.

*Bizarre.*

It had left him perplexed during the taxi ride down to the casting session where he found himself being asked to leap out from behind a light stand (pretend it's a wall, the bored video cameraman had said) and shout, "Bam, bam, bam! You're on SpyCam!"

Eric, of course, was nowhere in evidence, the casting run by a couple of girls who looked like they were still in high school.

One of them had muttered something about getting back to him, and Forrest spent another hour in a cab inching its way through the traffic, still trying to solve the enigma of Darcy Pringle.

When the tower of the Chateau Marmont appeared against the night sky, Forrest stopped the cab and decided he owed himself the drink he'd skipped the other day.

So, here he sits in his tuxedo, a sophisticate, a man of the world, contemplating the actions of a small town house mouse.

He won't text her, of course.

No way is he going to get caught up in her game.

As he signals for another drink a hand with long pearl talons lands softly on his shoulder and a Russian-accented voice purrs his name.

He turns to look up at the magnificent Tatar cheekbones of Tatiana

Volkova, a much-photographed member of the tribe of jet-age Bedouins that Forrest had once belonged to.

“You have been vere, darlink?” she says.

“Oh, here and there, Tat. Here and there.”

“You are lookink very handsome, Forrest. Buy me please a drink. You still remember?”

“Of course,” Forrest says beckoning the bartender. “A Rusty Nail for the lady. What the hell, I’ll join her.”

And that Rusty Nail is the first of many that get driven into Forrest’s coffin, and a while later he and Tatiana are up in her room on the fifth floor, drinking champagne and catching up on old times.

The room is being paid for by some Middle Eastern princeling who is off getting his polo ponies shod and will only be back tomorrow or maybe next week.

“I am hearink you are now poor, Forrest?” Tatiana says from the coffee table, busy vacuuming up some designer drug so new it hasn’t yet been named.

“Yeah, Tat. I’m a pauper.”

“Is okay, you are still very much pretty.”

Forrest passes on the drug, but gets steadily hammered on the endless supply of booze.

The conversation slides into a twilight zone of name brands and celebrity hang-outs in New York and LA and Paris—Nobu, Henri Bendel, 40/40 Club, Toast, Hotel Meurice—and as they talk Tatiana sheds her clothes with as much eroticism as if she were in a doctor’s surgery, and, weirdly, Forrest finds himself thinking of Darcy Pringle in her underthings on the stairs of that awful house, like a scene from some old sitcom.

He gets as far as untying his bowtie, then he finds himself sitting on the bed staring at the wall of the hotel room.

*What’s with all the wall-staring?*

“So, Forrest, you are losing your horny appetite also with your money?”

“Yeah, Tat, that must be it,” he says as he walks out on one of the most beautiful and debauched women he has ever known, gets the elevator down to the lobby and strolls the few blocks to his apartment.

When he gets home he clicks on a lamp and lies on the bed and listens to traffic and that peculiarly LA soundtrack of police helicopters and distant gunfire.

At last he digs his phone from his tuxedo pocket and spends a long time composing a text message to Darcy Pringle.

Brontë Baines, long a sufferer of insomnia, opens the window of the little room to allow in the ocean breeze, moves the standing lamp in closer and lines up her Moleskin journal precisely parallel with the edge of the small wooden desk.

She likes to keep everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion.

Her fondness for outdated British expressions often leaves her misunderstood in crass, straight-ahead 21st Century America.

But, as Brontë knows only too well, even if she spoke everyday American she would still be misunderstood.

She is an anachronism.

She always has been.

And loneliness and a desire for romantic love fostered by the tormented prose of the sisters who gave Brontë her name, have caused her to make errors of judgment.

To allow herself to imagine that traveling salesmen, bus drivers and pasty-faced clerks were romantic figures from the pages of old novels.

To imagine that these inferior specimens were gentlemen, when all they wanted was a grope and a fumble in the back of a car, on a park bench, or in a smelly motel room, before they went home to their wives or onto their next sad and sordid conquest.

Yes, Brontë Baines has been the victim of her own silly fantasies.

So she decided to move warily with William Bigelow.

Initially, she thought he was just another lecher when he proposed that she move in next door to him.

She waited for the furtive knock on the door that first night, but it had not come.

*A very good sign.*

And then there had been that heartbreakingly wonderful tableaux at the senior center.

However, there was, of course, a dark cloud on the horizon: the Darcy Pringle woman.

But Brontë has decided to take even this as a positive.

It means that a warm heart beats within William Bigelow's chest.

All she has to do is engineer a little heart transplant—*oh, she likes that!*—and make sure that she becomes the object of William's affections.

Darcy Pringle may be boringly regular in her looks and hair color, but, despite her name, she wouldn't know Jane Austen from Jane Russell.

So, Brontë has to play to her strengths.

Earlier today, during a lull in business in the coffee shop, she helped William stack the bookshelves.

"Who is your favorite author?" she asked.

He pondered this long and hard.

"Well, I have to admit to a fondness for the Russians."

"Oh, of course. Who in particular?"

"So difficult to narrow it down. How do you chose between, say, *War and Peace* and *Crime and Punishment*?"

"Exactly."

"Well, if you have a table with one short leg, you would, of course, choose *War And Peace*."

Brontë stared at him, bewildered.

"Forgive me for being frivolous," he said. "Just a little joke."

Brontë had little understanding of humor, but since she'd been told that he'd made a quip, she felt she had to laugh and released a strange, warbling titter.

When she saw his expression she hastily covered her mouth.

William scratched his head.

"I would say Tolstoy. Yes, Tolstoy. And not for his massive tomes, but for his novellas. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is incredibly moving."

Brontë stared at him and he colored.

"I'm sorry, I'm jawing on here."

"Oh, not at all, William. It's such a pleasure to talk to a man who is so well read."

He blushed even more deeply and hurried off, leaving a few chairs scattered in his wake.

*How adorable he is!* Brontë thinks as she sits at her little desk.

She lifts her Montblanc—the only thing of her mother's that she has kept—and writes in her journal: *I love William Bigelow and I shall not rest until he loves me in return.*

Even though a falcon would rather prey on game fowl, it'll eat nasty little rodents when it absolutely has to.

Carlotta McCourt, sitting alone at a window table at the Book & Bean, the morning light strong enough for her to keep her sunglasses on, reassures herself with this thought as she watches the annoying new waitress mooning over totally oblivious Billy Bigelow.

Carlotta is bored.

Frustrated.

She needs to get her talons into something.

Right now there seems to be nothing more to be squeezed from the Darcy Pringle saga.

What should have been a complete humiliation for Carlotta's oldest foe, ended as something of a damp squib.

Yes, it was revealed that Darcy's date was a fake, but that mincing little manikin, Eric Royce, spun the outlandish story about the TV show.

Carlotta, newly initiated into the marvels of Google, hijacked Walt Jr's laptop again last night and discovered that StartUp Productions did indeed have a show called SpyCam in development.

It was probably all fluff, of course, but it had robbed Carlotta of one of her finest moments.

So, she would have to sharpen her claws on rodents, while she waited for Darcy to break cover.

The new waitress brings Carlotta her breakfast—irritatingly, prepared exactly the way she had demanded, although the girl (again) took no notes—and then she goes across to where Poor Billy is taping a poster for a performance of the Santa Sofia Amateur Dramatic group to the glass of the front door.

Of course, the poster is upside down.

The girl waits until Poor Billy is distracted by a customer and quickly peels the poster free of the glass and turns it the right way up.

The silly little creature is clearly gaga over the addle-headed Billy.

*Pathetic.*



Carlotta crooks a finger at the waitress.

“Something Madam requires?” the girl asks, making these words of subservience sound like insults.

“Madam wants a side order of fries,” Carlotta says.

“I’m afraid we don’t serve *fries*,” the girl says, as if Carlotta has requested something obscene.

Carlotta holds out a banknote.

“What’s that?” the girl asks.

“It’s a five dollar bill.”

“I’m quite aware of that, Madam.”

“Good, then take it and scuttle across to Peggy’s Diner and get me those fries, toot sweet.”

“I don’t think it’s my place to get you take-outs.”

“Listen little girl if you displease me I’ll spread the rumor that the food prepared here is riddled with E. coli. How do you think that’ll be for business?”

Two red spots the size of coins appear on the girl’s cheeks and she stares at Carlotta for a long moment, then she snatches the money from her hand.

“Would Madam prefer ketchup or mayo with those fries?”

“Regular all-American ketchup, thank you my dear.”

Carlotta waits until the little frump has crossed to Peggy’s greasy spoon before she stretches her face into what she imagines is a disarming smile and wafts a hand at Poor Billy.

“Yoo-hoo,” she calls, “Billy Bigelow.”

Billy steps away from the cash register and makes his way toward her.

After upsetting two tables and three chairs he arrives at Carlotta’s side, red faced and panting.

“Lottie,” he says, “is something wrong?”

“Sit,” Carlotta says.

“I’m a little busy . . .”

“Sit!”

He sits.

Carlotta leans in conspiratorially.

“You know of course that Darcy Pringle’s marriage proposal was fake?”

“I heard that, yes.”

“Mnnnn. But do you realize how low she’s been? How depressed?”

“No. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes, it’s awful. What we, her old friends in the town, feels she needs is to be in the company of somebody she has known a long while. Somebody familiar, who can help her through this difficult time.”

“Who did you have in mind?”

“You.”

The simpleton’s jaw gapes very unattractively.

“Me?”

“Yes. You’re perfect. A local fellow, a prominent businessman at that.”

She sees the fear in his eyes. “What are you suggesting?”

“Invite her to that theater thing,” Carlotta says pointing at the poster on the door.

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

Carlotta has one of her intuitive moments that leave even her astonished.

“You invited her to the Ball didn’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

“Oh, the grapevine buzzes, you know? Buzz, buzz, buzz.” She remembers seeing him rushing up to Darcy’s front door, then emerging crestfallen. “She only turned you down because she was hooked into that hidden camera thing of Eric Royce’s.”

“You think she would have gone with me otherwise?”

“Are you kidding? Of course she would’ve.”

“I don’t know . . .”

Carlotta gets even more up close and personal, whispering in Billy’s ear: “Don’t breathe a word of this, but Darcy has let it be known that she likes you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She’s tired of the jockish, domineering Porter type. She wants a man who appreciates literature and theater and the finer things in life.”

“Well, I don’t know . . .”

“Stop being so damned selfish, Billy Bigelow.”

“Selfish?”

“Yes, stop thinking only of yourself. One of our oldest and dearest friends, a school buddy no less, is in a bad way. And you can help her out. How can you refuse?”

“Well, if you put it that way.”

“You’ll do it?”

“You’re sure she’d want me to?”

“I’m more than sure.”

The door jangles and the silly girl returns with a pack of smelly fries that Carlotta McCourt would no more eat than she would nibble at road kill on the highway.

“Your fries,” the girl says.

Carlotta stands and makes a dismissive gesture.

“I’ve lost the yen.” She points a finger at Poor Billy. “I’ll be watching.”

She swans out, pleased with her little intervention.

Sometimes even a low calorie snack can be quite satisfying.

*I'm going down to the Getty to look at art*, Darcy tells herself as she turns the SUV onto the 101, heading toward Los Angeles.

The text message from Forrest Forbes—*Jaipur Palace. 5065 Fountain. 7 p.m. Bindi optional*—lies unanswered on her phone, and, of course, it's definitely not the reason she's driving south.

And if her hair is freshly washed and blow-dried, and if she's applied just enough make-up to give her face a glow, and if she wears her favorite blue shirt over jeans that make her ass look small but shapely, it's not for Mr. Forbes, it's just to make her feel good.

Darcy has decided she needs to broaden her horizons.

Develop an appreciation of the finer things in life.

Like art.

Art wasn't part of her life with Porter.

He had paintings made to match the furnishings of the house—huge oatmeal and beige landscapes so lifeless they could have been manufactured by machines.

When they'd traveled abroad it was always to see things that interested him: prisons and dungeons and battlefields.

Art museums were never on the agenda.

So, she's driving down to the Getty—a place she's never visited—to get herself a dose of culture.

A Nora Jones soundtrack takes Darcy into the smog belt, where she mutes the music and uses the GPS to guide her to the Getty Center crouching on its hilltop.

She parks the car, takes a minute to admire the views of the city, then joins a gaggle of tourists as they ride the white tram that links the parking lot to the Center.

Darcy lets a stream of people draw her into the museum and she wanders through the halls staring at paintings and sculptures, dazed by the sheer volume of what she's seeing.

A thought strikes her that if Forrest Forbes were with her she would be appreciating this more.

*He would know about art.*

*He would have opinions.*

Darcy loses track of time until an announcement tells her that the museum is closing and she walks out into the late afternoon light.

The tram returns her to her car, where she sits a while, staring out over the sprawling city.

She can't recall a single painting or sculpture in any detail.

They're all a blur.

*You're out of your depth, Darcy.*

*You're a small town girl getting ideas above her station.*

As she starts the car she decides she's going home.

Mr. Forrest Forbes can dine alone on his Tandoori.

*Is Tandoori even Indian, she wonders?*

To still her mind Darcy clicks on Nora Jones again, until she remembers that the singer is the daughter of a famous Indian sitar player.

*Ravi somebody . . .*

And does she imagine a swirl of strings and a warble of flutes beneath Nora's syrupy voice, bringing with them an uncomfortably steamy recollection of the dream she had about Forrest Forbes and the riding crop?

Darcy stops the music, finds a loud and bouncy drive-time radio show and lets the endless patter of the host flush away any memory of that dream as she finds the freeway and turns north into rush hour.

He can't possibly be nervous, Forrest decides as he sits in his favorite booth at the Jaipur Palace, the garish interior, the North Indian ragas swirling from the speakers, and a double Scotch failing to soothe him as they usually do.

Darcy Pringle is late.

Or she's standing him up.

She never replied to his text, so perhaps he's on a fool's mission.

Perhaps mousy little Ms. Pringle is safely up in her Santa Sofia pueblo, drinking unspeakable wine and watching *The Bold* or whatever a matron of her ilk watches.

Of course he's not nervous.

He has no need of Darcy Pringle and her silly games.

But still, her face is very vivid in his memory: that smile exposing those all-American teeth.

Not his type.

*No, not at all.*

Strangely, though, he can recall Darcy Pringle's features more easily than those of the exotic Tatiana Volkova.

To end this pointless internal waffle he holds up his glass and the proprietor, his friend Lakshmi, swathed in layers of silk, her generous midriff sporting a navel jewel, approaches.

"You can't have another drink on an empty stomach, Forrest," she says in her prim accent that's more *Brideshead Revisited* than Bollywood.

"Then bring me a couple of papadams."

"Where is your friend?"

"I have no idea."

"Very well, I'll get you some onion bhaji with your drink."

"Fine, but bring the Scotch first."

Lakshmi raises an eyebrow.

"What's going on, Forrest?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're sweet on this girl, mnnnn?"

“You’re being both ridiculous and over-familiar. Now fetch me my  
booze.”

Lakshmi laughs, takes his glass and walks away with the languid slowness  
of a princess raised in the labyrinthine corridors of a Rajasthan palace.

Darcy got as far as the Ventura exit when the devil took the wheel and turned the car back toward Los Angeles.

And it's the devil, still, who parks the SUV on Fountain, the neon of the Jaipur Palace flooding the car in gaudy yellows and reds.

Darcy flips down her visor and looks at herself in the mirror, less to check her make-up then check her state of mind.

*What are you doing, girl?*

When she gets no answer she opens the door and steps down into the familiar muggy, gasoline-scented nighttime air of Los Angeles.

For Darcy, LA has always been about Porter.

As teenagers they'd driven down to catch the latest movies (before the Santa Sofia Cineplex made this unnecessary) or to a club to watch live music.

LA had seemed impossibly huge and glamorous.

By the time they were in their late twenties Porter had made enough money to buy an apartment in upscale Brentwood, where he stayed over some nights if he was late doing business in LA.

And where he got to know his personal assistant all too well.

By the time Darcy was in her thirties LA was all about shopping trips to the Westside.

The scruffy eastern parts of the city were off her map.

But here she is in Hollywood for the first time in years.

Darcy walks into the restaurant, all gold and red and filigree and brocade and cushions and mirrors (not where she'd imagine Forrest Forbes dining, wasn't he more a Mr. Chow or Nobu man?) and looks around.

A couple in their fifties sit in silence, shoveling food into their mouths.

A big man in a check jacket, alone a table, eats something with his fingers.

Of Forrest Forbes there is no sign.

"May I help you?"

A beautiful, plump Indian woman in a lush purple sari appears.

And all at once the devil is gone and it's little Darcy who says, "No, thank you. This is a mistake."

She's ready to turn and flee when the woman says, "Are you perhaps here



to join Forrest?”

“Yes,” Darcy says, “but I don’t see him.”

“He’s washing his hands,” the woman says, delicately. “Please follow me.”

Without waiting for a reply she takes off through the restaurant, her hips undulating like a belly dancer’s.

Darcy hesitates then follows her and the woman shows her to a table where a glass of liquor and a half-nibbled papadam hint at Forrest Forbes’s presence.

“May I get you something to drink?”

“A glass of white wine.”

“Of course.”

Smiling, the woman withdraws.

The music has Darcy drumming her fingers on the table top and for a moment she’s naked on a bed in a vast room, diaphanous fabric billowing.

“Darcy,” Forrest says, sliding into the booth opposite her, “I thought I’d been stood up.”

“Well, here I am.”

Darcy can’t help being struck, again, by his good looks, somehow accentuated by his slightly rumpled white linen shirt—open at the neck, sleeves rolled up—and the hint of stubble on his jaw.

“Did Lakshmi offer you something to drink?” he asks.

“She did. Where did she get that fancy accent?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. So how are you?”

“I’m well and you? Are you over your,” she waves a hand, “whatever it was that got you all black and blue?”

“I’m healing up nicely.” He sips his drink. “It’s good to see you.”

The woman returns with Darcy’s wine and two menus.

“You’re obviously a regular here,” Darcy says to Forrest. “Why don’t you order for me?”

“Anything you don’t eat?”

“No.”

He rattles off a series of dishes and Lakshmi favors Darcy with a lingering smile before Forrest shoos her off.

“Go on, get out of here. Go cook us some food.”

The woman laughs and strolls away.

“There’s a story here, isn’t there?” Darcy asks.

“The restaurant?”

“Yes.”

“Remember I told you about visiting an Indian palace as a kid and buddying up to an elephant?”

“Yes. I didn’t believe a word.”

“Well, it happens to be true. My friend Bolly is Lakshmi’s brother.”

“So she’s . . . ?”

“She’s a princess.”

“Then what’s she doing in an Indian restaurant in Hollywood?”

“Bolly’s a great guy but he has a weakness for blackjack and booze and fast cars and the women who like to drive in them.”

“Your soul mate?”

He shrugs. “We understand one another.”

“So he lost the family fortune?”

“Something like that. The palace is crumbling and their dad, the maharajah, lives in poverty in a couple of rooms. Lakshmi dreams of turning it into a hotel and she’s trying to earn the money to do it by running this place. She cooks like a dream, as you’ll see.”

Darcy looks around at the near-empty restaurant. “Looks like it could take a while.”

“Sadly, yes.”

On cue the woman arrives with an assortment of starters.

Darcy tries one and closes her eyes in delight.

Forrest watches her, smiling.

“What did I tell you?” he says.

“God, this is sublime.” She licks her fingers. “Do you don’t bring all your conquests here?”

He shakes his head.

“This place is my refuge, the closest thing I have to a home and family. You’re the first woman I have ever invited here.”

“What makes me so special?”

He narrows his eyes. “I really don’t know.” Then he smiles. “So come on, put me out of my misery, why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Having dinner with me?”

She shrugs. “It’s safe.”

“How so?”

“When your husband dumps you for an upgrade, it’s kind of bruising. Not

great for the confidence. So being here with you, knowing you're not at all interested in me, takes the pressure off."

"I imagine there's some kind of logic hidden in there."

"And I've decided that perhaps Eric's right, maybe my mind needs to be broadened. Please, go ahead and impress me with your wit and your sophistication."

"So you're going as some kind of *Pygmalion* character?" She stares at him blankly. "*My Fair Lady*? The cockney girl who is made into a lady?"

"By that professor guy . . ."

"Henry Higgins."

"Right. Didn't she fall in love with him?"

"Yes."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that."

"I'm very relieved."

She stops eating. "Forrest, you're not obliged to be here. We can go."

"What, and offend Lakshmi? That's out of the question."

"I'm serious. Maybe I'm just being perverse."

"I like perverse." He smiles and touches her hand. "Relax, Darcy, I'm having fun. Now eat your vegetable korma."

They eat in silence for a while, the astonishing food and two glasses of wine bringing a little shine to Darcy's world.

She wipes her mouth on a napkin and says, "I went to the Getty this afternoon."

"How was it?"

"A little overwhelming. Do you ever go to art museums?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I grew up around people who had old masters hanging in their living rooms." He shrugs. "I guess you could call me spoiled."

"What is it with you rich kids?" she asks.

"Rich no more, alas."

"Okay, but you were born with all the advantages. You have a great education, grew up knowledgeable and sophisticated. Why can't you get a job?"

He laughs. "I was educated to understand wine and which knife and fork to use and when to go to St. Moritz or St. Barts, but in real world terms, I'm useless."

“It’s sad.”

“Is it? Aren’t you similar?”

“Me? My father ran out on us, and my mother was a waitress.”

“But you were groomed to become a wife to someone like Porter. And now that he’s gone, you seem lost. As if your life has no purpose.”

When she lays down her fork and stares at him, he holds up a hand.

“I’m sorry, that was mean.”

“No, it wasn’t. You’re right. I was bred to be Mrs. Porter Pringle, and now that an ex has crept in there, I’m left feeling pretty useless.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“You don’t have to be gallant, Forrest.”

“I’m not being gallant. The man’s a clown.”

She nods. “Maybe.” Suddenly deflated, she looks out the window at a smiling couple passing hand in hand. “I should go. I have a long drive ahead.”

“I enjoyed seeing you.”

“I’ve already said you don’t have to be gallant, Forrest.”

He calls for the check and Darcy manages to smile and compliment Lakshmi on the food. When she tries to slip her credit card under the check, Forrest pushes it back to her.

“Please, this is mine. I get a family discount.”

He pays and they step out into the night.

She points over to the SUV.

“That’s me there.”

“I hope not. That thing has a fat backside.”

She smiles and lets him take her arm and lead her toward the car.

They pass a club that’s having an opening, a line of people crowding the sidewalk and suddenly they’re ambushed by photographers, flashbulbs exploding in their faces.

Then one of the paparazzi says, “Wait, they’re nobody.”

And another says, “Yeah, they’re nobody, man” as if this is some kind of accusation.

The flashbulbs fade and the paparazzi rush off when a limo slinks to the curb.

“God what a relief it is, to be a nobody,” Forrest says.

The incident lifts Darcy’s mood and she’s laughing as they reach her car, and when she looks at Forrest the devil is in control again, and somehow she

doesn't want to let this handsome man walk away.

She points to a nearby bar.

"Let me buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

They walk into a little Hollywood dive with a couple of booths and a tattooed guy behind the counter.

Forrest seats Darcy and goes to get drinks.

She watches him as he stands and talks to the bartender.

Now that he is no longer in pain, he moves with an easy elegance.

Porter, despite his bad knee and back, has the grace of a natural athlete, but there's something about Forrest Forbes that's different.

Porter's body language is all swagger, Forrest's is more subtle.

*I wonder what he's like in bed?*

The question pops into Darcy's head as Forrest returns with their drinks and sits opposite her, and she's grateful for the dim light that hides the blush on her cheeks.

"Can I ask you something?" she says.

"Sure."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Well, I've had passions and obsessions . . ."

"But you've never fallen in love?"

"No. I don't think I know how."

"But I'll bet you've slept with tons of women?"

She speaks before she can stop herself, and feels the blush deepen.

"A gentleman never tells."

She gulps her drink and says, "I've only ever slept with one man."

"Really?"

"Yes. Porter. I was a virgin until the night of the prom, when, of course, we ended up in the back of his car. I fell in love and married him."

"Isn't that the plot of *Grease*?"

She laughs and some boldness seizes her.

"I'm thinking maybe it's time to shoot for number two."

"Are you propositioning me, Darcy?"

"Yes, I am."

"Why me?"

"Because I could never fall in love with you."

"That safety net thing?"

“Yes. Are you interested?”

“I could be.”

“So take me to your place.”

Bolder than she could ever have imagined being.

“You know what Raymond Chandler said about Los Angeles?”

“Who’s Raymond Chandler?”

“A writer. He said that LA has the personality of a paper cup.”

“Sounds like a smart guy.”

“He was. But he could have been talking about my apartment.”

“Are you just making a polite excuse, Forrest?”

He looks at her and smiles.

“No, I’m not. I’m finding you bizarrely attractive.”

“Bizarrely?”

“Well, admit it, we’re an odd match.”

“Yes, we are. Which makes it kind of appealing.”

“Exactly.”

“So let’s get a hotel room. Don’t worry, my treat. Or Porter’s rather. He still pays my MasterCard.”

“There’s something poetic about that.” He stands and takes her hand.

“How about the Beverly Hills Hotel?”

She holds her car keys out to him.

“You drive.”

When Forrest ushers Darcy into the bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel he sees her blink at the pillared living room, the grand piano and the massive bed visible through lightly frosted bedroom doors.

Porter Pringle is going to choke when he gets this credit card tab.

*Serves the bastard right.*

“Wow,” Darcy says.

“I seem to recall that Marilyn Monroe stayed in this bungalow while she was shooting *Let’s Make Love*.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

Forrest opens the patio doors onto the thick foliage of the garden, allowing in the sweet perfume of hibiscus and blooming bougainvillea.

Popping a bottle of Krug, he fills two flutes and hands one to Darcy.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers,” she says.

When she walks toward the patio he can see the tension in her body.

Forrest takes his champagne over to the piano and starts to play “That Old Black Magic.”

“You play very well,” she says, watching him from the doorway.

“Oh, hardly.”

“Maybe you can get a job in the Polo Lounge.”

“Funny.” While he drinks he plays a few trills with his left hand. “Darcy, you look terrified.”

“No, I’m not,” she says, “this is me looking seductive.”

She strikes a Monroe-esque pose—does it rather well—but her voice betrays her.

“We don’t have to do this,” he says and stops playing.

“Are you getting cold feet?”

“No, but I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

“I’m not seventeen, Forrest. I’m a big girl.”

“Okay, I’m just letting you know there’s no pressure.”

She disappears onto the patio and his mischievous hands start to play “Let’s Do It,” as if he’s cool and composed.

But there is pressure, and he—astonishingly—is feeling it, too.

Forrest has lost track of the women he's been with in hotel suites just like this.

Nights fueled by alcohol and expensive pharmaceuticals, where sex was just something you did, like eating or drinking.

Nobody got hurt.

Nobody fell in love.

Nobody gave a damn.

They woke up in the morning and spent another wasted day and then repeated the whole exercise with new partners.

But Darcy Pringle is different.

This small town girl brings with her none of the ironic detachment of the women Forrest is accustomed to.

*What are you afraid of, Forrest?* he asks himself, adding a few frills and trills to what he's playing.

And the answer when it comes, astonishes him: he's afraid of feeling something.

He couldn't deal with that.

Not now.

Forrest stands and he's almost at the door of the bungalow when Darcy says, "You running out on me?" She stands on the patio, holding her glass of champagne. "Don't you think I've had enough rejection?"

"I'm not rejecting you."

"Oh?"

"I'm a shallow, trivial man, Darcy. You don't need somebody like me."

"Oh, but I do, Forrest. You're exactly what I need."

And the playbook gets tossed when it's Darcy Pringle who crosses to Forrest Forbes and takes his hand, leading him through to the bedroom where she pushes him onto the giant bed, straddles him and starts to kiss him with a hunger that shocks them both.



Carlotta McCourt prowls her bedroom, listening to the snores of her husband—like a chainsaw attacking a redwood—wishing she could sleep.

She washed down two Ambien with a jolt of vodka but still sleep evades her.

She spent an hour in a hot bath, the foamy water treated with every unguent and lotion she could find to relax her and allow her to nod off.

*No good.*

The root of her insomnia is, as always, Darcy Pringle.

Carlotta, at her post at the window yesterday afternoon saw Darcy drive off in her SUV.

And she hasn't returned.

Her house is in darkness.

Her garage door yawns on the empty interior.

Carlotta checks the display on the digital clock beside Walt: 5:53 a.m.

*Where is Darcy?*

And, more importantly, who is she with?

Not Eric Royce, Carlotta knows that much.

The little swish didn't leave his house last night and his bedroom light clicked off at a sedate 10:24 p.m.

*No, Darcy Pringle has some kind of date.*

*Some assignation.*

And not knowing who it's with is gnawing away at the lining of Carlotta's gut.

When she hears the low rumble of a car she rockets across to the window and cracks the drapes.

Darcy's SUV drives into the garage of her house and the door closes.

After a few moments a light comes on downstairs and, as Carlotta watches, the glow of a lamp warms the bedroom curtains.

*Who has Darcy been with?*

Carlotta will find out.

Even if it kills her.

Darcy gets as far wetting her left foot in the shower when she backs out and turns off the spray.

No, she decides, she wants to fall asleep with the heady perfume of sex on her body.

And if this makes her blush, well, she has done a lot more blushworthy things in the last couple of hours.

When she reaches her bed she ignores her PJs laid out on the chair and slips naked beneath the covers.

She clicks off the lamp and lies in the dark, feeling more alive, more vital than she has in years.

The last few hours have already taken on the quality of a dream.

How could she have been so up-front?

So predatory?

And she feels a little twinge of guilt about charging the suite and the three bottles of champagne to her credit card.

Then she has to laugh when she imagines Porter's face as he opens the card account.

Imagines the questions he'll ask her, about what she was doing in that bungalow and who she was with.

*A lady never tells*, she'll say, borrowing Forrest Forbes's line.

*Forrest.*

Sex with him had been a revelation.

He was so different from Porter.

Sex for Porter, like everything else, had been all about him.

He hadn't been a bad lover, exactly, but the whole experience had been tailored to his maximum pleasure, Darcy there to provide that pleasure, and if she had a good time too, well that was fine and dandy.

Forrest Forbes had been amazingly unselfish, and his elegant hands were as soft and skilled on her body as they had been on the piano.

The sex had been slow and sensual—none of Porter's charging to the finish—lifting her to such levels of intense pleasure that she'd heard herself moaning aloud.

With Porter, Darcy had always kept quiet—nothing more than a few muted sighs, knowing instinctively that her ex-husband would have found more vocal expressions of her pleasure unseemly.

But Forrest had encouraged her to express herself—“Don’t worry, Darcy, these walls are thick”—and express herself she had.

*Again.*

*And again.*

*And again.*

*Stop, Darcy, she tells herself.*

*Get a grip.*

But as she falls into the most delicious, languid sleep she can remember, she feels Forrest Forbes’s wet skin against hers.

Forrest wakes to the sound of a hummingbird, morning sunlight flooding the room, and it takes him few moments to remember where he is.

When he does, and remembers who he was with, he sneaks a glance at the other side of the bed and sees that it's empty.

He listens for sounds from the bathroom and hears nothing.

As he sits, a familiar weight taps against his breastbone and he sees that his mother's wedding ring has been returned to the chain around his neck.

Darcy must have done it while he slept.

He stands and pads naked through to the living room.

"Darcy?"

No reply.

He checks the absurdly ostentatious bathroom.

Empty.

Reaching for one of the wall-mounted phones he calls reception and is told that *Madame* checked out a few hours ago after settling the tab.

Laughing, Forrest sits down at the piano.

How many times has he done this?

Quietly dressed and left some woman—hair a bird's nest on her pillow—  
asleep while he snuck out?

Too many times to count.

But this is the first time it has ever been done to him.

When he finds his hands playing "A Day in the Life of a Fool" he  
withdraws them from the keyboard and walks into the bedroom to dress.

Eric Royce is no Carlotta McCourt, but he too has been keeping a weather eye on the home of his neighbor and friend—*erstwhile friend?*—and couldn't help but notice when she drove away yesterday afternoon, and that her house was still in darkness when he went to sleep.

He knows that Forrest Forbes showed up for the *SpyCam* casting session yesterday.

Does that mean he wined and dined Darcy last night?

Eric, in his kitchen drinking a freshly squeezed fruit juice, is thinking of calling Forrest when his iPhone rings.

Darcy.

Eric hesitates, then answers in his breeziest voice, "Darling."

"Are you in the kitchen?"

"Yes, why?"

"Look out the window."

He does as she says, staring out at Darcy's house over the hedge, and sees something white dangling from her bedroom window, catching the breeze.

"Why are you shaking a bed sheet out of your window?"

"Because I don't have a white flag."

"You're surrendering?"

"Let's call it a truce."

He laughs. "Okay."

"Meet me for breakfast at the Book & Bean?"

"You're on."

Brontë Baines is terribly, terribly late.

Her shift started ten minutes ago and she's still at the florist, spending money she doesn't have on fresh flowers.

She hurriedly makes a selection, pays, and sprints from the store, arms filled with the flowers, bottles of wine (for William, she's a teetotaler) and bread and cheese.

Of course, she runs into the path of an oncoming truck and narrowly avoids death.

Reaching the sidewalk at the Book & Bean she risks a glance into the coffee shop and sees the horrible Carlotta McCourt lurking at her window table.

William, his back to Brontë, is serving her.

Brontë takes the opportunity to dash past the bookstore with her booty and clatter upstairs to her small apartment.

She stows the wine and cheese in the tiny refrigerator and shoves the flowers into water.

*That'll have to do for now.*

During her half-hour lunch break she'll sneak up and arrange the flowers and make the little place look as inviting as she can.

Position the candles and set up the old turntable and speakers she bought cheap from a junk shop near the liquor store yesterday.

Managed to get the man at the store to throw in some records, too.

Dance music.

The kind of old tunes William waltzed to when she'd spied on him at the Senior Center.

She's going to invite William to join her for cheese and wine this evening after work.

Then she's going to play one of those old discs and invite him to dance.

And, if things go according to plan, that will be the beginning of a beautiful romance.

She locks up and flies down the stairs, wondering when she should issue her invitation.

*It'll have to be later*, she decides.

The coffee shop is filling up and she waves at the flustered looking William, mouthing *sorry* as she grabs menus and hurries over to where Darcy Pringle has just joined Eric Royce.

“My God, darling, I want what you’re on. You look radiant,” Eric says as Darcy sits opposite him.

“Nonsense. I have bags under my eyes.”

“Well, if you do, they’re Louis Vuitton.”

Darcy laughs, and not even Carlotta McCourt lurking at a window table can dampen her good spirits.

They order, then Darcy reaches over and takes Eric’s hand. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“Bygones?”

“Bygones.”

“I want to thank you for fixing me up with Forrest.”

She lifts a hand when she sees he’s about to protest.

“I know it all, Eric, and it’s fine. It was the best thing that could have happened.”

“Has it mended your broken heart?”

“No, but it’s mended something else.”

“Don’t be crude, darling,” he says, leaning in close, eager not to miss a word.

“Spending time with Forrest did wonders for my self-esteem. He made me feel better about myself than I have in a long while.”

“So, what was he like? Spill!”

“Close your eyes.” He obeys. “Now imagine that hottest, sexiest night you can.”

“I’m imagining.”

“Okay, now double it.”

He opens his eyes, grinning.

“I may need an iced coffee.” He takes her hand. “So you’re going to see him again?”

“No. Never.”

“Why not?”

“Forrest Forbes is a onetime experience, like skydiving or base jumping.



Something you'll never forget but don't dare repeat."

"You're sure about that?"

"Quite sure."

Their breakfast comes and as they make small talk, Darcy feels a sense of well-being and optimism.

Maybe she has a future, after all.

Eric shoots a cuff and looks at his wristwatch. "I have to dash. I'm interviewing a new pool man in five minutes."

"You really must get a pool, Eric."

"It's on the top of my list."

He blows her a kiss and hurries out.

Poor Billy Bigelow has been prowling behind the cash register like a caged jungle cat, watching Darcy and Eric.

When Royce gets up to leave, Billy feels Carlotta's eyes on him and she points a finger toward Darcy.

Billy nods, knowing that if he doesn't do it now, he'll never find the courage.

He's mapping the easiest route through the tables toward Darcy when he sees her stand, leave a banknote under her saucer, and stroll toward the door.

"William?" he turns and sees Brontë at his side.

She moves very quietly, this girl, like a Stealth bomber.

"Yes?" he says.

"May I speak to you?"

"Just give me a moment please, Brontë. I'll be right back."

He barges toward the front door trying to head Darcy off and doesn't see the low display bin of sale books that Brontë placed there a few minutes ago.

Darcy hears a deafening clatter and Poor Billy Bigelow ends up sprawled at her feet, books spread around him.

She crouches. "Billy, are you okay?"

"Yes," he says. "I'm sorry, I tripped."

"Yes, you did."

He stands, dusting himself off.

"No harm done."

"Good."

Darcy rises, smiling at him as she opens the door, unleashing the strains of "Greensleeves".

Billy dogs her heels.

“Darcy?”

“Yes?”

All at once the poor man is tongue tied, and he resorts to pointing at the poster taped to the door, advertising a performance by the local amateur dramatic group.

Billy is trying to say something but gives voice only to a series of glottal grunts, his large frame masking the poster.

When he moves and Darcy sees that it is a one-night-only performance of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, she smiles and understands him as perfectly as if he’s speaking the Queen’s English.

“I’d love to,” she says.

“Huh?”

“I’d love to go to the theater with you. Why don’t I meet you here at eight?”

“Okay,” he stammers.

Laughing to herself, Darcy gets into her SUV and drives into a day that seems bursting with promise.

Brontë Baines has heard the entire exchange and as she retreats behind the cash register her vision is blurred by the onset of tears.

“Are you okay, Brontë?” William asks, his command of the English language miraculously restored now that Darcy has gone.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just a pollen allergy.”

“Oh, that can be nasty. Why don’t you go upstairs and get yourself cleaned up?”

“Yes,” she says, “maybe I’ll do that.”

Once she’s on the stairs she lets the tears come in great flowing rivers and even though Brontë Baines is not by nature a mean-spirited person she feels hatred in her heart.

Hatred for that perky little blonde with her smile and her flashy car.

Hatred for Darcy Pringle.

Carlotta's SUV—gallingly a couple of years older than Darcy's—is parked beside her neighbor's in the small lot adjacent to the Book & Bean, and the two women arrive at their cars simultaneously.

"Hi, Lottie."

"Hi, Darcy."

Darcy slides into her car.

"Lottie, what an interesting effect you're creating with your mascara. What do you call that? Ravished Raccoon?"

Darcy says this with a smile sweet enough to induce sugar shock.

Carlotta bottles her rage and heaves herself up behind the wheel of her SUV—she's shorter than Darcy and has none of her mortal enemy's nimbleness.

She waits until Darcy drives away before she flips down the visor and inspects her make-up.

Her eyes look stunning, she decides.

*Dramatic.*

But still a doubt lurks: is she overdoing the mascara?

She smacks the visor out of the way and starts her car, cursing Darcy Pringle for making her question herself.

Then she hums a little tune and, as she takes herself along the coast road—not ready to return to her house where furtive Walt Jr. spends hours in the bathroom with skin magazines and Carly grows fatter and more acned by the minute—she hits speed dial on her cell phone, eager to put to good use the fruits of her eavesdropping session in the coffee shop.

"Porter Pringle."

As always, the sound of the man's voice takes Carlotta's voice away.

"Hello? Anybody there?" Porter asks in his *time-is-money* tone.

"Porter, hi, this is Lottie."

"Yes, Lottie?" he says, impatient.

"Porter I thought you may like to know that Darcy spent last night with Forrest Forbes."

"Come on, Carlotta, we know that whole Forbes thing was just a sham to

make me jealous.”

“It was, yes. But I’ve just overheard a *very* steamy conversation between Darcy and Eric Royce. I have to say it made me blush.”

“Lottie, the last time you blushed was behind the bicycle shed in the fourth grade.”

“Oh, Porter, you have such a memory!”

“Mnnnn. Are you sure you’re not just gossiping here, Lottie?”

“Darcy left home early yesterday afternoon and only returned at dawn. And minutes ago at the Book & Bean she told Eric Royce in no uncertain terms that she spent the night with Forrest Forbes.”

“Okay, in my experience the best way to track Darcy’s movements is via her credit card.” She hears fingers on a keyboard. “I’m just calling up her account on my laptop.”

“Porter, you’re so smart!”

A few seconds pass then she hears him say, “Sweet jumping jockstraps!”

“Found something?” she asks, all honey.

“She spent the night in a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel and ran up a bar tab that could bail out Zimbabwe!”

“My, my . . .”

“Okay, Lottie, this is damned serious.”

“Most certainly.”

“That Forbes character is after Darcy’s money.”

“Of course he is.”

“Which means he’s after *my* money, since I keep darling Darcy living happily in the style to which I made her accustomed.”

“Oh, you were always *such* a generous provider, Porter.”

“I’m coming up there,” he says. “Tomorrow.”

“How masterful of you.”

“And I’m going to talk sense into Darcy’s head.”

“Well, good luck, Porter and godspeed.”

Carlotta launches into a terrifyingly tuneless rendition of “Oh Happy Day” as she drives along the coast.

Darcy sits at her make-up table, applying subtle lipstick and base—the memory of Carlotta’s terrifying war paint still vivid in her mind—regretting that she’s got herself into this arrangement with Poor Billy Bigelow.

Of course, the *Pygmalion* thing had been hard to resist, the synchronicity making her feel that she was still in the warm embrace of something magical.

When, really, she wanted to be in the warm embrace of Forrest Forbes.

*No, girl.*

*Stop.*

*There will be no more of that.*

But she can’t keep her mind from replaying delicious fragments from last night, and she can’t keep her eyes from traveling across to where her phone lies on the vanity table.

What would she do if he called?

Ignore him of, course.

Would she be strong enough?

But he won’t call.

She was just a little snack for a guy like Forrest Forbes.

He’s probably in a cocktail lounge right now with some model or actress, smiling that oh-so-perfect smile of his, trotting out his irresistible stories.

The thought of this so disconcerts Darcy that she ends up with lipstick on her teeth like some old lush, and she has to rub at them with a Kleenex.

When her phone rings she grabs for it so hurriedly that she sends it flying to the carpet, face down.

Snatching it up, she answers, convinced that it’ll be Forrest on the other end.

But it’s Porter who says, “Darce, it’s me.”

“Hi, Porter,” she says.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

She waits for him to explode about her MasterCard, but instead he says, “You know, things weren’t great at the Ball. Kinda awkward.”

“They were a little. You could’ve handled things better.”

He exhales, battling to keep his temper.

"You may be right about that. So, look, I thought I'd come up Santa Sofia tomorrow, tie up a couple of loose ends. Maybe we can talk."

"Talk about what?"

"I don't want to do this on the phone, Darce. Let's meet. Please."

"Okay," she says, her voice betraying her lack of enthusiasm.

"Shall I come by the house, say 4 p.m.?"

She can't face him here.

"No, rather meet me at the Book & Bean."

"I hate that place."

"Sorry, Porter, you'll just have to grit your teeth."

He sighs. "Well, okay then. See you tomorrow."

She ends the call, her mood a little deflated.

*Come on, she says to her reflection, pick yourself up.*

*Go and see the local librarian and the gas station owner putting on silly British accents and stumbling around the church hall stage.*

She stands and drops her robe, and for just a second as she catches a glimpse of her near-naked body in the mirror, she hears Forrest playing "Let's Do It" and feels his hands on her skin.

When Forrest finds himself staring at the wall again, he knows its time to get out of the apartment before he weakens and calls Darcy.

He leaves his cell phone lying on the bed, locks up and makes his way past the pool where a fat man floats on an inflatable chair, a drink with little umbrellas balanced on his massive belly.

Forrest finds himself wandering down to Rick's bar and steps into a replay of the last time he was there: the bartender slumped at the counter reading a horseracing formbook, the old man at his station near the door, sucking on a beer.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Lucky," Rick says.

The old man lifts a bottle in salute and Forrest says, "A round on me."

"You're a gentleman," the old timer says to Forrest when Rick thumps a fresh beer down in front of him.

Forrest raises his Maker's Mark.

"Cheers."

The barkeep waves the formbook under Forrest's nose.

"I see your Mr. Darcy is running again Friday at Hollywood Park."

"Good for him."

"You gonna give me a shot at winning some of my money back?"

"I'm done with gambling."

The barkeep laughs. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"But the question is: is gambling done with you?"

"Very Zen, Rick."

A couple of men in cheap suits come in and the bartender goes across to serve them.

Forrest hears a sigh as the old man settles on a stool beside him.

"You mind?"

"No."

"Made my day, you winning like that."

"Made mine too."

"So you've sworn off the ponies?"

“Yes. I’m done with all of it.”

“More power to you.”

The old man stares at him.

“Something wrong?” asks Forrest.

“No, just that looking at you is like looking in a mirror.”

Forrest smothers a laugh, staring into a face creased and wrinkled as a tortoise.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“You’re clairvoyant?”

“Nah, just been around a while.” He drinks. “You’re what, thirty-five?”

“Yes.”

“ ‘A very good year . . . ’ ”

“Not so much.”

“Looking at me you wouldn’t think that I was quite the swell in my day, would you?”

“Oh, you have a certain . . . panache.”

“I like that. Panache.”

The man slurps the last of his beer and Forrest beckons to Rick to bring a refill.

“Appreciated,” the old geezer says as he takes a frothy sip.

“Sure.”

“Would you be offended if I offered you a word of advice?”

“No.”

“I look at you, I see a handsome guy, well brought up, but maybe down on his luck.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh. You not careful, you’re gonna go into a tailspin and end up like me, wondering where the hell all the years went.”

“Sounds bad.”

“It is. But, you’ve still got the time to set things straight.”

“And how would I do that?”

“With the love of a good woman.”

Forrest stares at the old man, trying to see if he’s joking, but he’s not.

“I’m serious. Find The One.”

“Capitalized?”

“Yessir, capitalized. The. One,” he says underscoring the words with his finger.



“Did you find her?”

“I did. And I’m ashamed to say I let her go. Too busy chasing tail and drinking and throwing money away on the ponies. Got nothing to show for it but these arthritic old bones inside a sack of wrinkled skin.”

“Where is she now?”

“Hell, I lost track of her in Cleveland back in ’72. But hear me, son, and hear me good. You find The One you hold onto her real tight.”

Forrest downs his drink.

“I hear you.”

He tips a salute to Rick and walks out into the gasoline scented night, feeling a yearning that reminds him of another lifetime . . .

*The stuff of dreams, Billy.*

*No, let's try that again: the stuff of dreams, William.*

As he speaks to himself in the mirror, preparing for his momentous date with Darcy Pringle—*Darcy Pringle!*—Poor Billy Bigelow feels a momentary twinge as he remembers Brontë Baines looking at him with those huge eyes saying, “You look like a William to me,” and he finds himself wondering what she’s up to, in the little room adjacent to his apartment.

Then all thoughts of Brontë are banished when he sees Darcy smiling up at him earlier, her beautiful face aglow, saying in her breathy voice, “I’d love to go to the theater with you.”

As he runs a brush through his hair in a futile attempt to tame it, Billy marvels at how she read his mind, intuited the words that his twisted tongue had been unable to speak.

*What a wonderful woman.*

How had she tolerated that oaf Porter Pringle for all those years?

Another flashback hits Billy, this one from long ago, but it’s lost none of its power to hurt.

He sees himself a few months after the deaths of his mother and sister, still locked in a private hell of grief and guilt, walking out of the high school, past a knot of kids gathered around the brand new convertible Porter got for his sixteenth birthday.

Billy didn’t really see them, deep in a funk.

Didn’t see the trash can either, until he’d ploughed into it and sent it flying, the garbage inside flung at the feet of Porter and his friends, and some of it striking the shiny red paintwork of the new car.

Billy felt hands on him and then he, too, was flying, as Porter and his acolyte Walt McCourt upended him and shoved him head first into the trash can.

Then they’d loosened his jeans and pulled them to his ankles, the kids sniggering as he kicked his legs and bellowed.

It was Darcy who’d saved him.

He couldn’t see her, of course, but he heard her voice, saying, “Get him

out of there, Porter!”

“He messed with my car.”

“I said get him out of there. Now!”

And the boys pulled him out and dropped him to the asphalt, where Billy hitched up his jeans and wiped crud off his cheek with his sweater.

Darcy knelt beside him, her lovely face blurred through his tears of humiliation.

“Are you okay, Billy?”

He’d said nothing, just grabbed his backpack and fled.

Billy Bigelow shakes his head at his reflection in the mirror.

*No time for nonsense like that.*

*Not now.*

He reaches for a pair of cufflinks on his dresser—a gift from his mother on his sixteenth birthday—and sends them flying to the floor, where one of them skids under the bed.

As Billy gets down on all fours, reaching for the errant cufflink, he hears the pants of his suit rip at the backside.

The cufflink forgotten, Billy rockets to his feet, striking his head a painful blow on the bedside table and sending the lamp flying, plunging the room into darkness.

A minute of muffled oaths and bumps and groans follows, before he manages to find the lamp and plug it in again.

When he rises and inspects his rear in the mirror, he can clearly see the white of his underwear showing through the tear.

He’ll have to keep his suit jacket pulled low.

Billy sees that his hair looks like the coat of a rabid dog.

He rushes into the bathroom and wets his wiry curls at the sink, plastering them down on his head, toweling away the rivulets of water that trickle down his face.

He selects a necktie from his closet and as he returns to the mirror he takes a deep breath.

Neckties are his mortal enemies.

The last time he’d worn one, to his father’s funeral, he’d been unable to tie the thing and had to endure the humiliation of asking Peggy at the diner to do it for him.

He glimpses the watch on the dresser: 7:56 p.m.

There is no time to go across to the diner.

He'll have to do this himself.

Billy drapes the tie round his neck and with the concentration of Houdini busy with one of his more perilous escapes, he tries to knot it.

The necktie has a life of its own, rearing like a snake in his hands and it ends up flying to the floor.

He tries again.

7:58 p.m.

Again the necktie defeats him.

Red in the face, panting, almost ready to pound on Brontë's door and beg her to help him, Billy flashes on Porter Pringle in the bookstore a few days ago, with that little bimbo on his arm.

Dapper Porter, wearing an expensive suit over a dress shirt buttoned to the collar, but with *no necktie*.

Billy closes his eyes, challenging his memory.

Could he be right?

Could Porter—a man who has traveled to Paris, who entertained business associates in fancy restaurants—really have been wearing a suit without a necktie?

Yes, Billy decides, it was what he'd seen.

So he throws the necktie to the floor, shrugs on his suit jacket, making sure that it covers the rip in his pants and hurries to the door.

Other than a painful tumble on the stairs—he'll bear a bruise on his knee tomorrow—he makes it down to the parking lot in time to see Darcy's SUV ease to a halt.

As he walks over to the car the driver's window slides down and Darcy, a vision of loveliness in the spill of light from a streetlamp, says, "Hi Billy, why don't you ride with me?"

He grunts something and falls up into the passenger seat of the car as Darcy pulls away.

She's wearing a black dress and smells like heaven.

For a few seconds Billy wrestles with the seatbelt, then surrenders and lets it coil itself back into its mount with a little click.

They stop at a light and Darcy smiles at him.

"I like the no tie look. Very continental."

Billy gulps and tugs at his collar.

The light goes green and as Darcy accelerates her dress rides up a little, showing her shapely knees and Billy, quite overcome, has to look away at the

passing stores.

Now, Darcy is no expert on plays (she snoozed through Shakespeare in high school and her idea of a theatrical experience is curling up on the couch with a tub of butter-free popcorn and a *Cats* DVD) but even she knows that this performance of *Pygmalion* would have the fearsome looking George Bernard Shaw—glowering from the program with his pointy beard and piercing eyes—spinning in his grave.

The local librarian, Miss Simms, as Eliza Doolittle begins with an accent that's more Calypso than Cockney and—during the flower seller's transformation into a lady—sounds like she's speaking around a mouthful of marbles.

Eddie Hancock, owner of the Chevron station, forgets more lines than he remembers (Miss Simms prompting him in a hissing whisper) and plays Professor Higgins as a cross between Christopher Walken and a gigolo on *The Love Boat*.

By the intermission Darcy is ready to hurry home, but she puts on a brave smile and lets Billy get them drinks (*will he spill them?* she wonders) as she head for the ladies' room.

She checks her muted cell phone for messages.

*Nothing.*

As Darcy washes her hands, Carlotta McCourt sweeps in, dressed as if she's going to a gala performance at the Lincoln Center.

"Darcy, how nice to see you have a date. I've always thought Billy was more your type."

"Billy's a treasure," Darcy says, drying her hands.

"Yes, a deeply buried one."

"And how's Walt?" Darcy asks with a smile like a dagger. "As husky as ever?"

She pushes out of the bathroom before Carlotta can dredge up a reply and returns to where Billy stands with his back to her, staring at a corkboard of photographs of the stars of the show.

His jacket has ridden up and Darcy has to bite back a smile when she sees a tongue of white poking through a split in his pants.

She eases up behind Billy, and without him noticing, slides down his jacket.

He spins and—of course—sends half of Darcy's white wine over the front of her dress.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry!"

He sets down the drinks and fishes a handkerchief the size of a table cloth out of his pocket.

When he advances on her, Darcy backpedals dabbing at herself with a Kleenex.

"It's fine, Billy, really," she says and is relieved to hear the bell announcing the second part of the play.

She takes his arm. "Come, let's go in."

"Are you enjoying it?" he asks.

"I'm loving it."

He leans in and says, "Darcy, it's awful, isn't it?"

She has to nod.

He whispers in her ear, "Eddie Hancock's doing Christopher Walken."

She nods again, giggling.

"Let's get out of here," Billy says and she feels a surge of affection for him when he takes her arm and leads her out.

He trips up only once between the hall and her car.

As Darcy drives them back toward the bookstore Billy knows he only has a few minutes before she'll leave him in the parking lot of the Book & Bean.

He has to make his move.

*But how?*

Billy remembers Carlotta McCourt speaking to him the other day in the coffee shop: "Don't breathe a word of this, but Darcy has let it be known that she likes you."

*Could it be true?*

Well, Darcy had agreed to come tonight, and seemed genuinely pleased.

And Carlotta said she was all alone and unhappy.

Before he can stop himself, Billy says, "I'm sorry if you're lonely, Darcy."

She looks at him, moving a strand of hair from her face as she drives.

"Well, divorce is never easy. But you know all about being on your own, don't you, Billy?"

*Was this an opening?*

*Was she leading him on?*

"Yes, I do," he says, "and it's not something I enjoy."

"Oh, then you must do something about it."

This, even a man with Billy's limited—make that non-existent—experience knows is a come on.

"Oh, I intend to change it."

"Do you have somebody in mind?"

"Yes, I do."

"And who's the lucky lady?"

This is going really well, way better than he could have imagined, and as Darcy turns into the Book & Bean parking lot, Billy takes a deep breath and says: "You."

Darcy brings the car to such a sudden halt that Billy, unfettered by a seatbelt, bumps his head on the windshield.

"Oh, Billy, I'm so sorry" Darcy says, and Billy knows this is the moment.

He must kiss her.

He's leaning in, puckering up, when he feels Darcy retreating from him.



“Billy, no, this is a terrible misunderstanding.”

His mouth opens and closes like a goldfish, before Billy says, “It is? I thought, when you wanted to go out with me, that you liked me?”

“Oh, but I do like you, Billy. You’re a wonderful friend.”

“That’s what I am? A friend?”

“Yes, Billy. And you always will be.”

He sags back in his seat, deflated.

“Of course. I’m sorry I tried to kiss you.”

“Don’t be, it’s very flattering.”

“You don’t have to be nice, Darcy.”

“I’m not being *nice*. It’s true.” She takes his hand. “Billy, I’m just coming out of a divorce, I’m not ready for a relationship.”

“And even if you were, I’d be the last man on the planet you’d look at . . .”

“Billy, I’ve known you too long to see you as anything other than a very, very dear friend. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“But when you said just now that you had someone in mind, I thought you were going to ask my advice about Brontë Baines.”

“Brontë?”

“Yes, haven’t you seen the way she looks at you, Billy?”

“No,” he says, confused.

“Hell, what do you need? Brontë to send you a message in skywriting? She’s crazy about you. And you two would make a perfect couple.”

“We would?”

“Yes. You both love the same things, like books and culture.”

“Mnnnn,” he says, “I suppose we do.”

She touches his cheek.

“Promise me you’ll ask her out.”

“Okay, I promise.” He looks at her.

“What?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but there’s something I’ve wanted to do with you since high school.” He sees her face and has to laugh. “Relax, Darcy, not that. I’ve wanted to dance with you.”

“Dance?”

“Yes.”

He clicks on the radio and searches for a station.

After a buzz of static he hears Billie Holliday crooning “My Man.”

Billy climbs out of the car, steps out into the beams of the headlights and says, “Darcy, would you do me the honor of this dance?”

If Billy’s clumsy pass surprised Darcy—she knew he had a crush on her, but never thought he’d act on it—this invitation to dance leaves her flat-out astonished.

She sits behind the wheel of the SUV, staring open-mouthed as Billy executes a courtly little bow.

Darcy fears for her feet—imagining those delicate little bones crunching and cracking beneath Billy’s size thirteens—but she’s already spurned the poor man’s advances so how can she refuse his request to dance?

Breathing deeply, summoning all her courage, Darcy steps down from the high car and walks toward Billy who takes her in his arms, and to the sound of Billie Holliday’s husky voice, sweeps her into an elegant quickstep.

The hulking, buffoonish Billy Bigelow is transformed, and as Darcy—never anything more than an adequate dancer—is led expertly around the parking lot, she laughs with sheer delight.

Brontë Baines is woken from a sleep haunted by dreams of William Bigelow and Darcy Pringle—oppressive, tormenting dreams.

Music wakes her, and it takes her a moment to realize that it's coming from the parking lot below.

She edges toward the window, lifting a corner of the drape, peering out.

When she sees William twirling Darcy Pringle around the lot, the two of them spotlit by the beams of the idling SUV, it is her worst nightmare come true and she tears herself away from the window, falling face down on the bed, covering her ears with a pillow to smother the music, her tears soaking the comforter.

The dance ends and Billy releases Darcy, taking a step back.

She blinks and shakes her head.

"My God, Billy, where did you learn to dance like that?"

"My mother taught me. She said I was a natural."

"Well, she was right. You're brilliant."

He shrugs, and lifts a hand, "Good night, Darcy. Thank you."

When he turns toward his apartment he is clumsy Billy Bigelow again, and almost takes a nasty tumble on the step up to the sidewalk.

"Billy?" Darcy says, from behind the wheel of her car.

He steadies himself and turns back toward her.

"Yes?"

"Remember what you promised? About Brontë?"

"I remember."

"She's a lucky girl," Darcy says, and drives away into the night.

Billy, his blood aswirl with a cocktail of emotions, unlocks the door and takes himself up the stairs.

He hesitates outside Brontë's room, listening for a sound from within, but hears nothing.

Then Billy is back in the car with Darcy, when she told him that Brontë is crazy about him, and a wild impulse urges him to knock on the door.

He gets as far as raising his fist but stops as his knuckles brush the wood and lets the hand fall again to his side.

Maybe Darcy was wrong, just as Carlotta McCourt had been wrong about Darcy's feelings toward him.

Poor Billy Bigelow turns away from Brontë's door and trudges toward his apartment.

He's had enough rejection for one night.

Brontë, even with the pillow over her head, hears William on the stairs.

How could she not?

He sounds like an elephant thundering up the staircase, and despite what she just saw in the parking lot, her heart swells with love for this huge, wonderful, clumsy man.

And her heart nearly misses a beat when she hears him stop outside her door.

*What does he want?* she wonders.

To talk of Darcy, she supposes.

To ask Brontë's council on how to proceed from here.

And, even though she suspects this is his mission, she begs silently for him to knock.

But he doesn't.

He turns and clumps off, banging his way into the apartment next door.

Brontë covers her head again, to mask the sound of William blundering around on the other side of the thin wall.

*So near, yet so far . . .*

Forrest Forbes tells himself that he's at the Jaipur Palace by accident, that he was merely out for a morning stroll along the star-encrusted sidewalks of Hollywood when his feet brought him here, unbidden.

Tells himself that he isn't here for succor, to be held—metaphorically of course—to Lakshmi's ample bosom, to unburden himself about these uncomfortable feelings he's been wrestling since his night with Darcy Pringle.

The Darcy Pringle he has heard not one word from.

The Darcy Pringle he is too chicken-hearted to call.

But since he's here, it would be rude not to go inside and greet his friend, he decides, even though (since it is too early for the restaurant to be open) this means going down an alley to the kitchen door.

As Forrest passes a row of dented trash cans he feels a little twinge in his ribs when he remembers his last time in an alleyway.

This flashback is enhanced when a very large, very loud man backs out of the kitchen door of the Jaipur Palace, waving his fist at Lakshmi, who holds up her hands beseechingly.

Forrest quickens his step.

"I have the rent money by Friday or you're out on your ass," the man shouts.

"Please Mr. Kleinmann, can I have a few days grace?"

"Grace? Who's she?" the man says with a sneer.

"What's going on?" Forrest says, getting between the big man and Lakshmi.

"It's okay, Forrest, it's all under control."

The man quietens now that Forrest has arrived, but his parting words are ominous.

"The money, Friday, or I'm locking these doors and calling the sheriff's department."

He storms off down the alley.

"Your landlord?" Forrest asks.

"Yes. A most disagreeable man."

“So it would seem.”

“I’m sorry you had to hear all that.” She takes his arm. “Come inside, Forrest, let me get you some cardamom tea.”

As they walk through the kitchen where Lakshmi’s assistants are busy over bubbling pots, the heady smell of spices thick in Forrest’s nostrils, Lakshmi says something in Hindi, and they have barely settled at a table near the cash register when a pencil-thin Indian man appears with a cup of tea and a glass of water.

“You’ll stay for lunch, of course, Forrest?” Lakshmi asks, sipping at the water.

“No, I just came by to say hello.”

“Nonsense. Umesh is cooking up a mutton vindaloo that could strip paint from the hood of a Bombay taxi.”

“Then how can I refuse?”

“Good.”

Forrest regards his friend over his tea cup.

“Lakshmi, you’re not in any trouble, are you?”

“No, it’s just that my cash flow is more sluggish than the Ganges.”

“Stop trying to be lyrical. This place isn’t paying, is it?”

She shakes her head.

“Just a poor couple of months, Forrest. We’ll be okay.” She smiles, but he knows her too well to be fooled. “Now tell me about that nice lady friend of yours. Darcy. What a fine, Jane Austenish name.”

“Oh, I haven’t heard from her since the other night.”

She gives him a long look.

“You didn’t do something ungentlemanly, did you Forrest?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“There was something about you when you were with her. Something I’ve never seen before.”

“What?”

“If I didn’t know you for the heartless beast you are, I’d swear you’re in love with her.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Mnnnn, maybe.”

He drinks his tea, gazing out of the window, but he’s not seeing the seedy buildings, he’s seeing Darcy Pringle with her hair spread across the pillow in Marilyn Monroe’s bungalow.

“Have you ever been in love, Lakshmi?” he asks, turning.

“Only once.” She sighs. “I was wild about one of my fellow students at the university, but he was a commoner of a lower caste and my father would never have approved, so the boy ran off to Delhi and I never saw him again.”

A look of such wistfulness crosses Lakshmi’s face that Forrest reaches across and takes her hand.

“It was a mixture of everything that is heavenly and hellish all at once.” She laughs. “A lot like eating a hot curry: it hits you in the belly and leaves you with heartburn.”

Lakshmi squeezes his fingers. “Is that how you feel when you think of your Darcy?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“That confirms the diagnosis. You’re lovesick and there’s only one cure.”

“A killer curry and a bottle of Scotch?”

She shakes her head.

“I think you know better than that.”

“I have to see her?”

“Yes, you do. Post-haste.”

“What if she doesn’t want to see me?”

Lakshmi shrugs. “You know all about gambling, Forrest. Time to take a risk.”

“We’re not talking about money here. We’re talking about my heart.”

Lakshmi claps her hands.

“Good. It is such a delight to hear you speak this way, Forrest. You go to Darcy, and you tell her how you feel and then you bring her here for a meal, very, very soon.”

On cue bowls of food arrive and Forrest is forced to put Darcy out of his mind when a forkful of fiery curry sets his mouth alight.

Brontë Baines rises from a dream-addled sleep as slowly as if she's surfacing from a great depth.

When she opens her eyes to bright sunshine she's surprised she slept at all.

The clock beside her bed tells her that it is after nine a.m. and she can hear the clatter from the coffee shop downstairs.

Nobody (least of all William) will have noticed her absence, for this is her day off.

Lying in bed, she finds herself caught up in a silly fantasy: William—missing her presence downstairs—comes knocking at her door, enquiring after her health, and sweeps her into his arms, declaring Darcy a witch, an enchantress, and swearing his troth to Brontë.

*You idiot*, she tells herself.

*You don't beat women like Darcy Pringle.*

*Ever.*

On cue her memory trots out a montage of *Brontë Baines's Worst Moments at the hands of Cute Blondes*.

Brontë being heckled by cheerleaders.

Being scorned at dances in favor of chesty blondes who popped gum and sneered at her.

Brontë being shouldered aside on buses and trains by men eager to squeeze themselves in beside some bouncy blonde who wore most of her parts outside of her dress.

So, this is all too familiar.

But no less painful, for that.

Dressed in her cotton sleeping shift, Brontë rises from the bed, and despite her best attempts not to, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the door of the closet.

Her hair looks like a brush fire.

Her skin is as blotchy as if she has some kind of plague.

Her shoulders are so rounded she looks like a question mark.

She makes it as far as the little table by the window that offers her a glimpse of the ocean over the roof of Peggy's Diner, and finds herself



opening her journal.

Brontë reads the last few entries, in her cramped spidery, scrawl.

All about Joy.

All about Love.

All about meeting the man of her dreams, the wonderful, big-hearted William Bigelow.

But now, alas, that big heart belongs to another.

The transplant has failed.

Darcy raises her old Montblanc and pens an ode to William.

An ode to love and loss.

She writes from the depths of her tormented soul, oblivious to the tears that flow unchecked down her checks, dripping onto the page of her journal, smudging much of what she writes.

Darcy sits with Eric Royce under the umbrella beside her pool, enjoying the morning sunshine, drinking the freshly squeezed juice he brought over from his house.

“What’s happening with the hidden camera show?” she asks.

“Is this your not-so-subtle way of asking me if I’ve spoken to Forrest Forbes?”

“No, I just want to know what’s going on.”

“Interest has cooled, I’m afraid, darling.”

“Why?”

“The network chews through development VPs quicker than Kim Kardashian chews through husbands. I phone-pitched the new guy yesterday and he told me that he had an unfortunate experience with a hidden cam show a few years ago.” Eric shrugs. “*C’est la vie.*”

“Does Forrest know?”

“One of my people will call him today.” He looks at her and smiles, “You care, Darcy! Isn’t that just *adorable!*”

“I know he’s pretty hard up.”

“Now why can’t I find it in my heart to get all weepy when a lucky spermer has the *kilim* pulled from under his feet?”

“Cue the theme tune from *West Side Story*, while Eric Royce—née Ernie Kaminski—tells of *Rising to Great Heights from Humble Beginnings.*”

“You’re funny, Darce. Ever thought of a career in daytime television?”

“No, but I have an idea that I want to pitch you.”

“Well, pitch away, Ace, pitch away.”

“You should do a show about Forrest.”

“What, like some reality thing? I don’t think so.”

“Wait, hear me out.”

“Okay, fascinate me.”

“Forrest has had an interesting life, right? The whole riches to rags thing?”

“Moderately interesting, I’ll grant you.”

“And he has some great stories to tell.”

“That he does.”

“So what about a show, a sitcom or a soap, based on his life? And you get him to work on it.”

“As pretty as you clearly find him, I don’t think that Forrest has the presence to hold a show like that, darling.”

“Not in front of the camera, Eric. Get him involved in the writing.”

Eric looks at her, sipping his juice.

“You’re suggesting that I use Forrest’s life as the basis for a series and get him to work with screenwriters as a kind of story consultant?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

He tugs at his lower lip as he gazes out over the sparkling pool.

“Not the worst idea I’ve ever heard. People do seem to have an enduring fascination with the silver spoon brigade.”

“Good.”

He gives her a long look.

“What?” she says.

“This little idea could have legs, we’ll see. But there’s something that interests me more.”

“What?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Uh huh. Or should I say the feelings you have for Forrest.”

“I have no feelings for Forrest.”

“You’re lying, Darcy,” Eric says and she sees that, for once, he is not being flippant. “And I’m experiencing pangs of guilt.”

“Why?”

He spreads his hands, palms upward.

“I fixed you guys up. I engineered this thing.”

“Slow down Svengali. Forrest and I aren’t a couple of kids.”

“No, you’re not. But you’re both vulnerable. Forrest needs money and sees me as a possible meal ticket. And you spent your whole damned life with that philistine Porter Pringle. A man like Forrest can only shine by comparison.”

“Let’s leave Porter out of this.”

“Gladly, he’s souring my pomegranite juice. Look, Darce, Forrest is gorgeous, witty, sophisticated and—by all accounts—skilled between the sheets. In other words, a fun guy to hang out with while you gather yourself for the next chapter in your life. But Forrest is meant to be just a footnote, someone you think fondly of while you’re moving on.”

"I understand that, Eric."

"So you say, but I'm sitting here looking into your baby blues and what I'm seeing worries me."

"What are you seeing?"

"I think you've developed feelings for this guy. And all I can say, Darcy, is don't. You're about to climb Heartbreak Ridge."

"So now I'm in a Clint Eastwood movie?"

"Promise me you'll cool down on Forrest?"

"My heart's a meat locker when it comes to Mr. Forbes, Eric. I swear."

"Mnnnn."

"Scout's honor." She raises three fingers. "By the way, Porter called me. He's coming up to see me today."

"Really?"

"He wants to talk."

"About what?"

"I'm not sure. He was very nice on the phone, apologizing for the way he sprang the pregnancy on me."

"Porter Pringle apologized?"

"Yes, he did."

"A worrying sign. In my experience a man like him will only play the apology card for one of two reasons."

"Which are?"

"Money."

"And?"

"He wants to win you back."

"Don't be silly," Darcy says. "He's married. A father-to-be."

"Mere details for Porter."

"That's ridiculous, Eric."

"Is it? Is it really?"

"Yes, of course. You're crazy."

But is that a little leap Darcy feels in her heart?

The morning for Poor Billy Bigelow is a series of disasters.

Alone in the coffee shop, he scalds his hand on the cappuccino machine.

He serves a sandwich left over from the day before, the bread hard and stale and the cold cuts curling out like shoe leather.

The customer, a regular, storms out without paying, swearing never to return.

He upsets a latte in the lap of the mayor's wife. (She has to fight him off with all her strength when he tries to mop up her nether regions with a wad of napkins.)

Poor Billy is unsurprised by these mishaps.

Pretty much business-as-usual for Billy Bigelow.

But he is surprised at the cause of today's absent-mindedness.

He's thinking of a woman and realizing what a fool he has been.

And the woman he's thinking of isn't Darcy Pringle, amazingly.

No, the person who occupies his thoughts is Brontë Baines.

He realizes that he misses her.

Misses her strange, aloof (but terribly efficient) presence.

Misses her oddball allusions to dusty old books that only he understands.

Misses the shy looks she sends him when she thinks he won't notice.

And, if he glances at her, the way she colors.

Now he does think of Darcy Pringle.

Darcy Pringle saying that Brontë Baines is crazy about him.

*Could it be true?*

Billy, so deep in thought that he finds himself carrying a tray of cake and coffee out of the front door, only realizes where he is when a horn blares and cars whiz by him.

He returns to the coffee shop and delivers the order to the customer.

Weighing the evidence, Billy decides that there is a good chance that what Darcy told him was the truth.

He understands now that Carlotta had dark motives when she prompted him to pursue Darcy, but Darcy has no agenda, he is sure.

He is about to hang the CLOSED sign in the window and make his way

upstairs to talk to Brontë Baines when the coffee shop is invaded by a klatch of women, hair freshly styled, smelling of hair spray and perfume.

Billy wanders across to them, trying to find some enthusiasm as he takes their long, complicated and ever-changing orders.

When Eric leaves, Darcy feels a creeping depression.

The house is oppressive, thick with memories of Porter.

The chunky leather furniture, the terrible paintings—her visit to the Getty has, at least, given her the assurance to hold this opinion—are all Porter’s legacy. Even the kitchen (which should by tradition have been her territory) had been designed and decorated the way her ex-husband demanded.

Wandering the house like a ghost, Darcy realizes how little of her soul is in the place she has lived for a decade.

The only room Porter let her take control of was the nursery, and as she stands in the doorway, seeing the mobiles and the gaily painted walls (carefully gender-neutral) it seems to symbolize her life.

A well-appointed, empty shell.

Darcy leaves the nursery, closing the door after her, and trying, too, to close the door on an image of Porter’s hand on Paige’s belly, she avoids her bedroom where the scent of her ex-husband still haunts the air, and goes down to the kitchen and does something right out of character: she pours herself a glass of white wine long before sunset.

Wandering out into her garden with the wine, she consoles herself among the plants and shrubs she’s nurtured over the years.

Porter, a man totally disinterested in nature, went out into the garden only a few times, ritualistically barbecuing on his Weber.

Darcy catches the heady whiff of flowering bougainvillea, and is transported back to the night in the bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel, feeling Forrest Forbes’s hands on her.

Feeling the wine in her belly.

Feeling the weight of her cell phone in her pocket.

She gets as far as removing the phone and thumbing Forrest’s number before she comes to her senses.

*Eric was right.*

*Forrest is a mere footnote.*

*No more than a very, very pleasant footnote.*

She is too fragile for a man like that right now.

*And anyway, Darcy, an inner voice (that sounds unpleasantly like Carlotta McCourt's) says, why would Forrest Forbes be interested in seeing a little mouse like you again?*

She stows the phone and walks through to the kitchen where she fills her glass.

*What the hell.*

*Who's counting?*



*You're doing it again,* Forrest tells himself.

*You're staring at the wall.*

He sits on the bed and watches the play of light from the pool dance across the plaster, feeling so empty and insubstantial that he's surprised he doesn't just float out the door and up into that menacingly hot sky.

One of Eric's girl minions called him a while ago.

"Hi, Forrester?" she asked, chewing gum.

"It's Forrest."

"Yeah, okay, right, Forrest. Listen, Eric's kinda bummed but the network have, like, passed on the whole *SpyCam* thing."

Despite himself he felt a twinge of disappointment.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah. Major bummer."

"Well, if anything else comes up . . ."

"Hey, for sure Forrester, you're on the top of the list."

With a smack she popped her gum and ended the call, and Forrest let his phone slide from his hand onto the grimy carpet and has sat for a long time staring at the wall.

He shakes his head and lifts the phone, scrolling down for Darcy's number.

*Why?* he asks himself.

*Why Darcy Pringle?*

He can't answer, but he knows that he wants to hear her voice.

Not just hear her voice, he decides.

He wants to see her.

Before he can talk himself out of it he stands and leaves the apartment, hailing a cab in the street.

"Union Station," he says.

For Brontë Baines her departure from the Book & Bean and the loss of her beloved William Bigelow, is fully the equal of the privations and oppression suffered by Jane Eyre in *Wuthering Heights* when her love for Edward Rochester was thwarted.

Brontë dresses carefully in a long flowing black dress—the funereal hue contrasting dramatically with her pale skin.

So taken is she with her role of the tragic heroine that she pays little attention as she shoves her few belongings into her battered old suitcase, and doesn't notice her journal—years' worth of outpourings of her tormented soul trapped between its creased covers—slip from the case as she closes it, and skid halfway under the bed.

“Goodbye room,” she says as she leaves and quietly closes the door, making her way down the stairs.

She hesitates a moment on the sidewalk and darts a glance into the Book & Bean, hoping for a last glimpse of William Bigelow.

What she sees is like a sword to her heart.

Darcy Pringle, all blonde hair, white shirt and blue jeans—horribly Californian—strides into the coffee shop and William shows her to a table, bowing and fawning.

*All he needs to do is tug his forelock . . .*

Without a backward glance Brontë Baines sets off in the direction of the bus station and when a breeze tugs at her wild hair it is not the warm wind off the Pacific, but an icy blast charging across the desolate Yorkshire moors.

When Poor Billy takes a menu across to Darcy, he feels oddly light for the first time in years.

He considers what this may be.

Is it his shoes?

No, these are the same brogues he has worn for far too long, as the rounded heels will attest.

Has he lost weight?

No, his belt still digs into the little paunch that swells his shirt.

Then he gets it: he's no longer in love with Darcy Pringle!

Of course he can see how beautiful she is, and he can see the kindness that radiates from her wide blue eyes.

But he no longer wants her.

*What a relief it is.*

"Is anything the matter, Billy?" Darcy asks, narrowing those eyes in concern.

"No, Darcy, not at all. The reverse in fact."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"Yes, and I have you to thank."

A small vertical crease appears between her eyes.

"You do?"

"Yes, for what you told me last night about Brontë Baines," he says, in what he thinks is a whisper, but carries across to Carlotta McCourt who sits sucking up a cup of black coffee.

"Have you spoken with Brontë?"

"Not yet," he says and falls into chair opposite Darcy, almost upsetting the table. "Do you mind if I ask your advice?"

"Not at all, Billy, but keep your voice down, okay? There are unfriendly ears wagging."

Darcy says this for Carlotta's benefit and Billy almost laughs when the woman chokes on her coffee.

"It's Brontë's day off," Billy says, "so I haven't had a chance to see her yet."

“Good. These things are better left for the evening.” She sees his blank look. “More romantic, Billy.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Quite true. I was thinking of asking her out to dinner.”

“That’s a great idea. Where are you going to take her?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what she likes to eat.”

“Take her to Captain Ned’s out on the pier. It’s such a beautiful setting.”

He looks delighted.

“Yes. Fantastic idea.”

“And, Billy, an invite like that is made all the sweeter with a bunch of flowers.”

“Really?”

“Go across to the florist and ask her to put together a little arrangement of wild flowers. No girl can resist that.”

“I’ll do it,” Billy says. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, Billy. I know Brontë will be thrilled.”

“Okay, now I’ve wasted enough of your time. Can I get you the usual?”

Darcy shakes her head.

“No, I think I’ll have a glass of wine. White.”

Billy hides his surprise.

“Of course. I’ll get that for you right away.”

Opening a bottle of wine is always a nightmare for Billy and this afternoon is no different: he smacks his jaw with the corkscrew and has to fish bits of cork out of the glass with a teaspoon before he serves the wine to Darcy, but none of this can cloud his happy mood.

Good things are coming for William Bigelow.

He can feel it.

Sitting in the rear of the taxi, driving away from the train station en route to Darcy Pringle's house, the strip-malls and kitsch *pueblo* style architecture on Santa Sofia's main drag blurring past his unseeing eyes, Forrest remembers the one lie he told Darcy.

A lie he's told himself for the last nineteen years.

When Darcy asked him if he'd ever been in love, he'd answered with an emphatic *no*.

But he had been in love.

Just once.

When he was sixteen he lost his heart to a siren named Emily Yates, she of the lissome limbs and honey blonde hair and lips (as some forgotten song would have it) like cherries.

It was summer vacation and his father swanned off to Europe with the latest wicked stepmother after dumping Forrest with relatives out on the Hamptons.

Forrest loathed his cousins, twin yahoos who drank beer and farted and chased waitresses, and he loathed this bland and anodyne world of privilege.

Walking along the beach one morning, smoking a joint and plotting his escape—he had the notion to make his way to Manhattan where he would find clubs and drugs and the knowing and slightly soiled girls he favored—he was presented with a vision of such loveliness that he was left breathless, coughing out a lungful of weed.

A girl emerged from the waves, golden in the sun, a sheer one-piece swimsuit hugging her body.

It wasn't just the drug: she seemed to move in languid, slow-motion as she reached up to shake the water from her long, golden hair.

She walked straight toward Forrest, who—despite his coughing fit—found his most charming smile, the one that had all the females swooning.

"Hello," he said, "and who are you?"

"I'm the girl whose towel you're standing on," she said, an expression of scorn marring those lovely features.

Forrest looked down and saw that his tennis shoes were, indeed, planted on

a very large, very white towel.

Nimbly, he skipped onto the sand and reached down for the towel, holding it out to her.

“Allow me,” he said.

The girl snatched the beach towel from him and walked away, the view of her rear equally breathtaking, disappearing into one of the mansions that littered the shore.

Forrest was smitten, all plans to decamp to Manhattan forgotten.

Suddenly he was best friends to his cousins Jed and Joe, and through them discovered the girl was Emily Yates, the daughter of some oil tycoon.

Using his cousins’ connections, Forrest wangled an invitation to a party at the Yates’s house, where he focused his charm—even at that age a normally irresistible force—on Emily.

She had remained unmoved.

Over the next weeks Forrest was obsessed.

He pursued her relentlessly and, finally, it seemed that he was winning her over.

One unforgettable night, with the moon dangling over the ocean as big as a dinner plate, Emily allowed him to kiss her on the beach right where he’d first seen her.

When his hands started to explore that astonishing body she gracefully disentangled herself.

“Slow down,” she said, “take it one step at a time.”

Then she disappeared into the garden of her house, leaving him boiling with love and lust.

But her words gave him hope.

Take it one step at a time.

He could do that.

A few nights later he glimpsed her through the crowd at a black tie ball at a beachfront mansion, those unmistakable curls moving down toward the ocean.

He followed and saw her slip into a boat house.

She had seen him, he was sure.

She was leading him toward the next step.

Forrest crept up to the boat house and heard Emily’s giggle.

He was about to announce himself when he heard an all-too-masculine chuckle, and, like some poor sap in a Hollywood comedy, he saw Emily in

the arms of Ben Butler, a Princeton sophomore with a shock of blond hair, unnecessarily white teeth and muscles that threatened the seams of his tuxedo.

Emily and Ben stared at Forrest, then both of them laughed.

“Lost your way, sonny?” Ben asked.

“Leave him, Ben. He’s just as little out of his depth.”

Their mocking laughter followed him into the night.

The next morning Forrest had hopped a bus to Manhattan and spent a wonderfully debauched couple of weeks drowning his sorrows in booze and drugs and an endless succession of available flesh until his father’s security men had tracked him down and hauled him back to Boston to dry out in time for the next semester at Andover.

After that Forrest had declared himself done with love, and he’d never made that mistake again.

He kept his heart carefully guarded, and lived in a happily superficial world of luxury and pleasure.

Until the luxury ended, and the pleasure seemed to leak from his life.

And here he is, in a dull little Californian town, in pursuit of a little Californian blonde who has already dipped a toe into middle-age.

As the taxi turns into Darcy’s street, Forrest has to fight the urge to order the driver to turn the car and take him back to the train station.

But the memory of Darcy’s eyes looking up at him on the bed in Marilyn Monroe’s bungalow keeps him silent.

The car stops outside her house and Forrest pays the driver, squares his shoulders and walks up to the front door.

Eric Royce is a closet watercolorist.

Not even Darcy knows his dark little secret, and he keeps his messy daubs hidden in the upstairs room that he has come to think of—pretentiously he knows—as his *studio*.

He took to painting when he went sober, on the advice of a counselor who told him to get an interest, a hobby, something that would focus his mind.

Walking past an art supply store in the Beverly Center Eric saw watercolor paints and brushes in the window and impulsively went in and bought everything he needed to become a rotten painter.

He favors seascapes and often snaps pictures during his walks on the beach to use as reference for his watercolors.

The process of making these clumsy paintings soothes him, takes his mind off work and the occasional tempests in his private life.

Today he is painting to forget what he has come to call *The Darcy Situation*.

He loves his friend dearly and has hated watching her pain and torment these last months.

Eric's motives for engineering a collision between Darcy and Forrest were good, but—as he splashes cerulean blue into the sky of his painting—he fears that he has introduced a complication that her life doesn't need.

And this business with Porter is worrisome.

Porter Pringle is a snake and it's all Eric can do not to hurry off down to the coffee shop to watch Darcy's back.

*No, she is mistress of her own destiny*, he decides.

She would be justly furious if he interfered.

So he carries on painting, making a hash of the waves frothing on the shore.

Taking a break, his brushes soaking in a jar of water, Eric hears the sound of a car in the street, and when he peers out the window he sees a taxi stop outside Darcy's house.

Eric watches in astonishment as Forrest Forbes marches up the pathway and rings Darcy's doorbell.



Ducking away from the window, Eric grabs his phone and dials Darcy's number.

When he gets her voice mail he doesn't leave a message and—usually the most decisive of men—he has no idea what to do next.

When Porter stands up out of his Mercedes, Darcy, observing him through the window of the coffee shop, can't help feeling a surge of emotion.

Anger, yes, and hurt, but also—undeniably—a love that seems almost as old as she is.

And Darcy can't suppress an unwanted flare of hope when she sees the care he has taken with his clothes.

He's wearing the lightweight linen suit that was her gift to him on his last birthday.

His cotton shirt, buttoned to the collar, is one of her favorites.

His gleaming tassled loafers were bought at Darcy's urging on a trip to London.

Porter spots her and smiles, even more handsome now than when she met him a lifetime ago.

When he strolls into the coffee shop (only Darcy able to detect the very slight limp that comes from his bad knee, the injury that ended any dreams of a pro-football career) Carlotta McCourt tugs at his sleeve.

"Porter, how wonderful to see you."

"Always a pleasure, Lottie," he says, but he doesn't linger and comes on over to where Darcy waits.

She stands and he plants a kiss on her cheek, that Porter scent—musky, spicy and very masculine—triggering far too many old memories.

"Let's get out of here, Port," she says.

"Why?"

"I feel like a walk on the beach," she says, but she wants to get away from the toxic presence of Carlotta.

"Hell, Darce, I'm not dressed for the beach."

"You can take your shoes off, Porter. A little beach sand won't kill you."

She leaves money on the table, waves to Billy and heads for the door.

Porter has no option but to follow her.

They cross the road and slip past Peggy's Diner and then they're on Long Beach, the sky turning from blue to orange.

Darcy steps out of her flip-flops and leaves them lying on the sand.

Porter, looking less than pleased, slips off his shoes and socks and follows Darcy onto the endless stretch of beach, empty but for a couple of surfers.

Carlotta McCourt is crestfallen when that little bitch Darcy leads the gorgeous Porter Pringle out of the coffee shop, toward the beach.

*How cunning of Darcy to take him out there.*

Carlotta is not a beach person.

She loathes the sand, finding it itchy and abrasive to her feet, and the ocean is greasy and polluted.

The only water she can tolerate is in her bathtub, after it has been treated with her many potions.

So, she is left marooned in the coffee shop, while the most gossipworthy event in the last while is taking place tantalizingly close by.

She raises her hand and clicks her fingers at the dopey Billy Bigelow.

“Another coffee, Billy. Black as night.”

Carlotta sits staring out the window and as she watches the usual small town parade she’s struck, suddenly, by how empty and useless her life is.

Her fat, ugly, husband will get fatter and uglier.

And older.

Her gruesome twins will clump off into their stolid, boring lives and—no doubt—produce gruesome children.

The thought that she will, at some point in the very foreseeable future, be a grandmother gets Carlotta’s heart racing, and she feels a panicky sweat on her forehead.

*A grandmother!*

When Billy arrives with her coffee she seriously considers asking him for something alcoholic.

*But, no.*

She has an image to preserve.

It would not do for the town to whisper about Carlotta McCourt driven to hard liquor after seeing Darcy and Porter Pringle stroll off into the sunset.

So she sips her coffee and tries to recalibrate her attitude.

And then, just like that—as if a magic wand has been waved—all her worries disappear when she sees a tall, gorgeous hunk of manflesh stride into the coffee shop, and she understands that the gossip gods are orchestrating

everything perfectly.

She stands. "Mr. Forbes," she says. "How nice to see you again."

The man blinks at her, no recognition in his eyes.

She extends her hand.

"Carlotta McCourt. We met at the Ball."

"Ah, yes." He gives her hand a rather perfunctory shake. "I'm looking for Darcy Pringle. You haven't perhaps seen her, have you?"

"Oh, I have, I have," she says, relishing the sweetness of this moment.

"Was she here?"

"She was, until but a minute ago," she says in her best Blanche du Bois purr.

The man barely manages his impatience.

"And where is she now?"

Carlotta wags her talons in the direction of the ocean.

"I do believe she is taking a walk on the beach."

Without bothering to thank her Forrest Forbes hurries out of the coffee shop and jogs across the road, ignoring a couple of irate horns, and disappears in the direction Darcy and Porter were last seen heading.

Carlotta sets off in pursuit.

Scratchy sand and dirty ocean be damned, this is not something she is going to miss.

When Porter slips his arm through hers as they stroll along the beach, Darcy doesn't pull away, allowing herself to feel the familiar warmth of his body.

God how she has missed him.

*Get it together, girl*, she tells herself, and she frees her arm from his.

"So, Port, what is it that you want to discuss?"

"I really just wanted to see you, Darce?"

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I miss you."

She laughs. "Aren't you far too occupied to miss little old me?"

"You don't just erase twenty years, Darce."

She stops, looking up at him.

"Oh, but that's exactly what you did."

"I never meant to hurt you."

"Come on Port, you're not a fool. Didn't you think that bedding your bimbo assistant and then dumping me for her would hurt just a teensy-weensy bit?"

"I'm sorry."

"Of course you are," she says, walking away from him.

He catches up with her and when he tries to take her arm she pushes his hand away.

"Darcy," Porter says, "I never realized how tough my life would be without you."

She shakes her head at his audacity.

"What, doesn't Paige organize your closets and keep the shoe trees in your loafers?"

"Darce . . ."

The breeze picks up and she brushes a strand of hair from her face.

"Why are you doing this, Porter? Coming up here today to open wounds that have just started to heal?"

“Maybe I still have feelings for you.”

“Really?”

She injects as much scorn as she can into her voice, but her traitorous heart yearns for him, and she feels tears welling in her eyes.

He shrugs. “I do. For years you completed me.”

“You’ve really got to watch some newer movies, Port.”

“I mean it.”

She walks again, trying distance herself from the weakness within as much as from Porter, blinking away those tears.

He is beside her again.

“I did things I regret, Darcy.”

Porter puts his hands on her shoulders.

Darcy doesn’t shrug them off, and the late sun shows her his green eyes and his easy smile, and when he draws her toward him she doesn’t resist, and before she knows it she feels his lips on hers.

Her eyes close and she returns the kiss and Darcy forgets everything that has happened in this last, awful year.

When Forrest ducks past the diner and sees the blue water stretching out toward the horizon, seagulls wheeling in the darkening sky, he is reminded of Emily Yates, of the moment she had emerged Botticelli-like from the waves.

Why is the memory of that painful summer haunting him today like a portent?

He pushes the recollection from his mind and heads toward the beach, anxious now to find Darcy Pringle, to end this silly, messy, humiliating—and positively *adolescent*—love sickness.

When he found himself stranded outside her house, the garage door yawning on an empty interior, he felt both foolish and agitated, and realized the absurdity of what he was doing.

He'd jumped on a train without thinking, driven by this crazy desire to be with Darcy.

*What if she were out of town?*

*That's what cell phones are for, bozo*, he reminded himself.

But he was thwarted, again, when he dialed her number and was left listening to her voice mail.

Forrest considered banging on the door of Eric Royce's house to see if he knew where Darcy was, but he couldn't bear subjecting himself to the TV hack's smug condescension.

Then he remembered Darcy telling him that each day she frequented a coffee shop in the main road of Santa Sofia.

So Forrest walked back toward town, sweating in the late afternoon sun, his shirt sticking to his back by the time he arrived at the Book & Bean—even in his disheveled and confused state he still found time to cringe at the name.

He thought all hope was lost when the coffee shop was empty save for a woman as over-painted as a Reeperbahn street walker.

It took Forrest a few moments to recognize her as Darcy's nemesis, and when Carlotta sent him off in the direction of the beach, he wondered if this was a lie, part of some ruse to keep him and Darcy apart.

*Stop being paranoid, for God's sake.*



*Get a grip, man.*

Forrest trudges over a low dune, sinking to his ankles in the sand, and sees the beach spread out below, washed in the rosy hues of sunset.

And he sees the unmistakable form of Darcy Pringle walking alone on the sand, her hair blowing in the wind.

“Darcy, hello!” he shouts, but the breeze throws his words back at him, and Darcy doesn’t hear.

Forrest, once again feeling that he has stumbled into an absurd romantic comedy, fights his way down the dune, scuffing and sliding, still calling Darcy’s name.

Then he sees that she is not alone, that a man has caught up with her.

A broad-shouldered man in a suit.

Porter Pringle.

And as Darcy falls into Porter’s arms and kisses him, Forrest relives the heartache and humiliation he felt in that boathouse on the Hamptons all those years ago.

For once Poor Billy Bigelow is utterly blameless.

He's standing on the sidewalk outside the florist holding a bunch of flowers, waiting for a gap in Santa Sofia's modest version of rush hour, when a man comes hurtling around the corner and collides with him, sending the blooms flying into the gutter.

When the man pauses long enough to mutter an apology, Billy knows he has seen him before, but can't remember where.

It is only when Poor Billy kneels to gather the flowers—the florist's neat arrangement destroyed—and shove them back in their cellophane wrapping, that he realizes that the disheveled sprinter (his hair almost as untidy as Billy's, his shirt glued to his body by sweat) is the debonair man he saw at Darcy's house the night before the Spring Ball.

The man who'd flashed a pitying smirk at Billy in his moment of abject humiliation.

Billy spends little time pondering the circumstances that have left the man in a state of such disarray, all his concentration is on trying to make the little bouquet look as presentable as possible, then he hurries across the road and thunders up the stairs to Brontë's room.

He hesitates a moment at the closed door, clears his throat, runs a hand through his hair, and then, at last, raises his hand to knock.

When his knuckles strike the door it creaks open.

"Brontë?" he says.

There is no reply and he slowly pushes the door until he is presented with a view of the entire room.

The bed has been stripped, the bedding neatly folded on the mattress.

The one closet stands open, empty but for a few hangers.

Even though he understands that Brontë has gone, Billy still says her name again as he steps into the room.

And, of course, there is nobody there to answer.

Deflated, he lets the mangled arrangement of flowers fall to the floor.

How could she have left without even telling him?

Poor Billy sighs and is about to withdraw from the room when he spies

something poking out from behind the dresser.

He kneels and snags the edge of a small book—a Moleskin journal—and as he stands he (naturally) bumps his head on the dresser and the book tumbles to the stripped mattress, falling open on a page of cramped, spidery, handwriting.

Billy Bigelow is the last man to invade anybody's privacy and he's about to close the book and take it down to the store for safekeeping in case Brontë contacts him and asks him to forward it to her, when he sees his own name, written too many times for him to ignore.

And when he lifts the journal and reads the page he understands everything.

Understands that Darcy was right about Brontë Baines's feelings for him.

Understands that when the poor girl saw that dance in the headlights of Darcy's car she'd—quite understandably—assumed that Billy Bigelow and Darcy Pringle were romantically involved.

Billy's heart contracts in anguish.

How crushing it must have been for her.

He snaps the journal closed and stows it safely in the closet before hurrying from the room.

He has to find Brontë Baines.

He has to stop the only woman who has ever loved him from disappearing from his life.

Still dazed from that kiss—a kiss that unleashed a torrent of emotions—Darcy sits on the warm sand, gazing out at the deep azure of the ocean.

When she looks up at her ex-husband his face is inscrutable in the gathering gloom.

“What just happened, Porter?”

“We kissed.”

“I know that, but why? Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I wanted to.”

She taps the sand beside her.

“Sit, Port, let’s talk.”

He hesitates, then hitches up his suit pants and crouches.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

He shrugs. “You know . . .”

“Now don’t get all alpha male and incommunicative on me, Port. Not after what just happened.”

He sighs and shrugs his shoulders.

“Okay, there are some issues that I’m having to deal with.”

“Issues?”

“Yes.” He looks off over the ocean. “I accessed your MasterCard account on-line.”

“Okay . . .”

“And I saw that you’d spent a night at the Beverly Hills Hotel.”

“So?”

“Were you with Forrest Forbes?”

“I don’t see that’s any of your business.”

“Oh, I think it is when I’m the joker picking up the tab.”

“I’m confused, Porter. Is this all about money?”

“No, not entirely.”

“Okay, then spell it out for me.”

“Look, I’ve had some reversals lately. In my business.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it’s a tricky climate. A couple of deals have gone south and put a

crimp in my cash flow.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Darcy says, but she’s feeling something unusual coursing through her veins.

Rage.

“Yeah, it’s been tough for me and Paige,” Porter says, “what with the baby coming.”

“I can imagine.”

Darcy clenches her fists to keep a lid on that rage.

“So, when I saw the card account, I realized we needed to make some adjustments.”

“By we I’m assuming you mean me and you?”

“Correct.”

“And what adjustments do you have in mind?”

“Well, I may have been a little overgenerous in our divorce settlement.”

“Really? My attorney told me *I’d* been too lenient.”

“Well, let’s not get into a fencing match here, Darce.”

“No, let’s not.”

“What I’m thinking is we scale back on the monthly alimony, just to ease me through this tough time.”

“I see.”

“And maybe we sell the house.”

“There’s no we when it comes to the house, Porter. You signed it over to me.”

“I did. As I said, perhaps I was overgenerous.”

“And *if* I were to sell the house, what are you proposing?”

“That we split the profits, fifty-fifty.”

Perhaps even a man as self-obsessed as Porter Pringle hasn’t entirely lost the ability to read non-verbal signals, because he stands and takes half a step back from Darcy as he says, “I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

*Breathe girl, breathe.*

Darcy breathes and when she speaks her voice is ominously calm.

“So you softened me up with the whole *I miss you* thing? And figured if you put your tongue in my mouth I’d just turn to mush and be the good girl I always was and say, *oh of course, Porter, anything for you and your little baby mama?*”

“Now hold on, Darcy, Paige isn’t my baby mama. We’re married.”

The rage is finally uncorked and—amplified by the glasses of wine—it

drives Darcy to her feet.

“You selfish, manipulative bastard!”

Porter shakes his head.

“Darcy, come on, don’t be unreasonable.”

“This,” she says slapping him through the face, “is me being unreasonable.”

Porter lifts a hand to his cheek, staring at her in shock.

“And this is me being downright contrary!”

Before Darcy knows what she’s doing she has swung back her leg and planted her foot fairly and squarely in Porter’s groin.

He sucks air and folds slowly to the sand.

When he tries to speak, only a soft mewl escapes his lips.

“You stay away from me, Porter. You stay *very* far away from me.”

Darcy hurries off into the dusk, rage still boiling so hot in her blood that she doesn’t see Carlotta McCourt standing like a scarecrow on a sand dune, her mouth fallen open in astonishment.

Brontë Baines has a talent for misery.

Just as other people can sing or dance or play the flugelhorn, she has a unique ability to extract the maximum unpleasantness from any given situation.

She comes to this conclusion as she sits at the dingy bus station, her battered suitcase at her feet.

It is not enough that she has endured the anguish of having to flee both her job and the man she loves, she's had to sit for hours in a cramped waiting room, the air a ripe cocktail of the junk food favored by her fellow travelers, their body odor and the fecal stench that wafts from the filthy restrooms.

All that has saved her from succumbing to the vapors is a lilac-scented handkerchief held to her nose and the certainty that a bus will be arriving soon to deliver her from all this misery.

But an announcement has just warbled through the public address system, a genderless voice informing the group of travelers that the coach to Los Angeles has broken down in Goleta—wherever that may be—and there will be no bus service to the city tonight.

The voice invites the passengers to collect their refunds at the ticket office.

Brontë drags herself to her feet and, humping her suitcase, stands in line until she reaches the window where a thin man with a goiter and a parrot's beak for a nose returns her money.

"I absolutely must get away this evening," she says. "What am I to do?"

"Try the train station," he says, counting out the bills and coins. "You may be in luck."

So Brontë joins the other passengers as they trudge to the train station, which is mercifully adjacent to the bus depot—a small building that looks like Pancho Villa may have used it as a hideout during the Mexican Revolution.

The relief that she feels after being told that, indeed, there is a southbound train in a few minutes is muted when, her ticket gripped tightly in her hand, she sits on a bench on the platform only to be accosted by a raving lunatic.

A tall man with the kind of Byronic looks that under other circumstances

may have brought Mr. Rochester to mind, taps her on the arm.

Brontë flinches. "Yes?" she says.

"You don't happen to have anything to drink, do you?"

"There's water at the drinking fountain."

"No, I'm talking about booze. I'm told there's none to be had until the train arrives. Scotch, brandy, hell I'd even drink potato wine right now."

"I'm afraid I don't drink," she says, deeply offended.

"Pity. You look like a girl who knows her way around a bottle of hooch."

She can only shake her head.

He leans in closer and says, "Maybe something chemical then: a Xanax or an Ambien?"

She stands. "What on earth do you take me for?"

Without waiting for a reply she grabs her suitcase and stalks off.

It is only when Brontë enters the ladies' room and confronts a figure in the mirror with hair so untamed it appears as if birds have roosted in it, a face drawn and hollow and eyes wild and staring that she understands why the man singled her out as either a dipsomaniac or a drug fiend.

And, standing at the sink, she starts to cry and doesn't believe she will ever, ever stop.



Back on the train a scant hour and a half after he arrived, Forrest heads straight for the dining car and slumps into a seat by the window, staring out at the platform, watching the weird girl he accidentally offended earlier—if she isn't a juice head or a pill freak then he's a monkey's uncle—wander like a sleepwalker through a knot of youthful passengers waiting for the night train heading north to San Francisco.

They are some kind of child musical ensemble, carrying their instruments.

Forrest identifies violin, cello and horn cases, and sees the unmistakable outline of a harp beneath a dust cover.

A woman with mauve hair fusses over the kids, ticking names off on a clipboard.

When a waiter appears at his elbow, Forrest says, "Bring me five double Maker's Marks on the rocks."

The man stares at him, blinking.

"You heard me," Forrest says, holding up a hand with all fingers spread. "Five doubles."

When the weird girl enters the dining car and walks toward him Forrest nods in greeting and says, "Look, I apologize about earlier. I didn't mean to offend you."

She rears back as if he is about to attack her and says, "Stop following, me! Leave me alone or I'll call the police!"

Forrest shrinks in his seat, his hands raised in surrender and the girl scuttles by.

The waiter arrives with his drinks and Forrest grabs a glass from the tray and has downed it by the time the other four touch the table.

Reaching for the next glass, Forrest says, "I think we'd better have another five."

The jolt of neat alcohol has brought tears to Forrest's eyes.

It must be the booze.

What else could make a sophisticated man of the world like Forrest Bennett Forbes III cry?

Then, as a whistle blows and the train slowly starts to move, a sight so rich

in comic potential yanks Forrest Forbes from his melancholia, and he stares out of the window, open-mouthed.

A man comes pelting down the platform, seemingly in pursuit of the train.

A man who seems blind to the youthful musicians and their instruments who block his path like skittles.

Oblivious to them until . . .

It's been all about near-misses for Poor Billy Bigelow.

He arrived at the bus station to discover that the service has been cancelled and the passengers sent next door to catch a train down to Los Angeles.

The uniformed man in the ticket booth reluctantly allowed that a girl answering Brontë's description had been amongst the disgruntled travelers he'd refunded.

"You missed her by a minute," the ticket seller said, slamming closed the window in Billy's face.

So Poor Billy took off for the train station, scanning the information board as he ran.

A train waited at the platform.

A train that would leave for Los Angeles in seconds.

Then Billy saw her.

Saw Brontë Baines walking slowly across the platform, dragging her suitcase behind her.

"*Brontë!*" he yelled, but his voice was lost in the piercing shriek of the whistle.

And now, from all the way up the platform, he watches as Brontë steps up into the train and disappears.

Another near-miss.

Billy sets off in a sprint, running faster than he has since he was last in a race in the fourth grade—an event so embarrassing that its memory sears him even now, and he forces it from his mind as he rockets down the platform.

"*Brontë!*"

The train is clanking and creaking and slowly starting to move.

Billy, his eyes fixed on the compartment that's swallowed up the love of his life, picks up speed, oblivious to the thirty members of the California Children's Orchestra standing with their musical instruments.

And this time he doesn't miss.

Later, after the train is long gone and Billy has been released from police custody—the authorities finally convinced that he had not launched a solo attack on the youthful musicians—he is able to piece together what

happened.

He barreled in the second violinist first, a slight girl with braces.

And she tumbled into the stocky cellist, whose bulky instrument collected the harpist in the jaw and she went down, taking with her the kettle drummer and his apparatus, and then down went all the others like a row of dominoes, leaving Billy lying under a pile of small screaming bodies and large instrument cases, kicking and yelling “*Brontë! Brontë!*” as the train clattered away into the night.

It's dark by the time Darcy drives the SUV into her garage and triggers the remote that lowers the door.

She sits in the gloom, listening to the car click and ping, loathing the idea of going inside the house that is nothing so much as a monument to her bastard of an ex-husband.

How could she have kissed that loathsome reptile?

She scrubs her lips with a Kleenex, as if that will rid her of twenty years of stupidity.

*What need you need is a glass of wine and a long soak in the tub.*

*In the morning you can start afresh.*

*Start living your life.*

The memory of Forrest Forbes and his hands and his tongue and his skin wafts into Darcy's consciousness and almost brings a smile to her face.

She leaves the car and lets herself into the kitchen.

Heading straight for the fridge she splashes white wine into a glass, throws most of it back and fills the glass again.

As Darcy walks through to the living room she hears the front door bell.

*Porter.*

The selfish, egocentric creep has followed her home.

She slams her glass down on the table and yanks open the door, ready for mortal combat.

Eric Royce, seeing her face, quickly raises his hands in dual V signs.

"I come in peace, neighbor."

Darcy sighs and slumps against the door.

"God, Eric, am I pleased to see you."

She stands aside to let him enter.

He stares at her.

"Tough day in paradise?"

"Yes."

She drops down on the couch and glugs her wine.

"Porter?" he asks.

"Yes, Porter," she says with a moan, closing her eyes.

“Did you see Forrest?”

She blinks and stares at Eric.

“No. What are you talking about?”

And he tells her about Forrest Forbes appearing at her door in a taxi, then heading off toward town on foot.

“I tried to call you, but you didn’t pick up,” he says.

Darcy fishes her muted cell phone out of her jeans and sees a missed call from Eric.

And a missed call from Forrest.

And she knows with an awful certainty that Forrest went to the coffee shop and the vile Carlotta McCourt sent him off to the beach where he saw Darcy kissing Porter.

She dials his number and when it goes directly to voice mail she kills the call, and slumps back with her eyes closed tight.

*A horrible, horrible day has just got even worse.*

The one thing that had still glowed like a small symbol of hope—the fantasy of another liaison with Forrest Forbes—had now been trashed.

“Eric, be an angel and pour me another glass of wine. In fact, why don’t you bring the bottle?”

“It’s like that is it?”

“Yeah,” she says, “It’s like that.”

When he returns he carries not only the wine bottle, but a tub of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Therapy and two spoons.

“Eric, your feminine side is way too developed.”

“That’s what my dear old pop used to say when he was beating the stuffing out of me.”

He scoops a spoonful of ice cream and licks it.

“Mnnnn. But, as they say, living well is the best revenge.”

He hands the tub to Darcy.

“Eat and drink, darling. You can fight on tomorrow.”

She eats.

She drinks.

She even smiles.

“So,” he says. “Dish.”

And dish she does, telling him all about Porter and his slimy maneuvers.

“He’s a cockroach, Darcy. The lowest form of life.”

“He is. How could I have fallen for it? And how could I have *kissed* him?”

Eric takes her hand.

“Because you’re human, and because you loved him deep and true for many long years.”

“I did. What a loser I am.”

“No, sweetheart, he’s the loser. Now, give yourself some props girlfriend and forget the kiss. I want you to remember the slap and the kick and savor those memories.”

She laughs as she sees Porter sinking to the sand, clutching his middle.

“Boy, I got him good.”

She spoons ice cream.

“Poor Forrest. What do you think he was doing up here?”

“Well, he wasn’t canvassing for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, was he?” Eric says around a mouthful of Benny and Jerry’s. “He’s smitten, Darcy, and clearly he came up here to tell you as much.”

“And now he’s fled, never to be seen again.”

“Nonsense. Tomorrow you’re going to drive down to LA and make nice with Mr. Forbes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“And tonight?”

Eric tops up her wine glass.

“Tonight you’re going to get completely stinko and have a slumber party with little old *moi*. Up for it?”

“You’re the doctor,” she says throwing back half her drink. Then she moves a strand of hair away from her face. “You’re a good friend, Eric. Thanks for being here.”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be, Darce, nowhere at all.”

Later, when the wine and the ice cream have worked their magic and Darcy snores softly on the couch, Eric tiptoes into the kitchen and thumbs Forrest Forbes’s number on his cell phone.

“Just let him answer,” he says to the kitchen ceiling, “and I promise I’ll quit trying to do your job ever again. Deal?”

But nobody is listening, because Forrest Forbes’s phone goes straight to voice mail.

Eric sighs and returns to the living room to watch over his sleeping friend.

Humiliated, depressed and defeated, Billy leaves the Santa Sofia sheriff's office.

He has been released after formally apologizing to the members of the Children's Orchestra and their shrewish mauve-haired chaperone, a woman who'd demanded that Billy *rot in jail* before the sheriff suggested she turn the other cheek.

"I would," she'd said. "But it's bruised!"

She relented, however, and Billy is free to go.

Walking out into the night he thinks that the name Poor Billy Bigelow has never suited him better.

*Bill* be damned.

*William* be damned.

It will be Poor Billy Bigelow carved on the headstone the day he's buried in the Santa Sofia cemetery beside his mother, father and sister.

And, as he shuffles down the stairs to the sidewalk, Poor Billy hopes that day isn't long in coming.

Then he hears two sheriff's deputies leaning on a patrol car, talking about a freight train derailed down near Los Angeles.

Billy recognizes one of the men from school, a thickset bully by the name of Bucky Eckhard.

"Evening, Bucky," Billy says.

"Hi, Billy. Run into any interesting musicians lately?" Eckhard says in his braying voice and his pal slaps the roof of the cruiser in appreciation.

"That's a good one, Bucky." Billy stretches his face into an ingratiating grin. "What's this I hear about some trouble with the railroad?"

"Yeah, a freight train jumped the tracks down near Oxnard."

"So, it'll delay the passenger train from Santa Sofia?"

"Reckon it will, unless it can sprout wings and fly," Eckhard makes flapping motions.

The other deputy takes pity on Billy. "You got somebody on that train?"

"Yes, a close friend."

"Okay, latest we heard is that there'll be at least a two hour delay. So just



call your buddy and tell them to sit tight.”

Billy turns and sprints to where his old station wagon is still parked outside the train station.

Two hours to get from Santa Sofia to Union Station in LA.

Can he make it?

He has to.

Forrest, as the old saw would have it, can drink as if he has a wooden leg.

He's one of those people who reach a level of inebriation and then, rather than plummeting into oblivion, plateau out and seem to be able to keep on drinking forever.

Of course, sitting in the train that's stalled somewhere in God-forsaken SoCal (how can people use that hideous abbreviation?) he knows that this isn't quite true.

There is a drink out there waiting for him, a drink with the power to drop the hammer that'll send him into a state of unconsciousness that could last for as long as a day.

He raises a fresh glass of Scotch and says, "Do your worst," before he throws it back in one gulp.

*Nope.*

*Not that one.*

He's still upright, still staring out into the darkness.

Still able to summon his very special friend the waiter, who—he has come to believe—has a bet going with the barkeep, a hirsute fellow with a forehead like a motorcycle helmet, on how many more drinks Forrest will be able to absorb.

The new quintet of drinks arrives and Forrest starts in on them.

The notion of a bet sets his addled mind off on a toxic train of thought.

He sees another bartender, the oily Rick, polishing a clean glass with a dirty rag saying, "Your Mr. Darcy is running again Friday at Hollywood Park."

*Friday.*

*That's tomorrow.*

Friday has another significance, Forrest knows, and tries to tease an answer from his brain that, quite pleasantly, feels as though it's wrapped in cotton wadding.

Music gives him the cue.

A few bars of an Indian raga.

Whether it comes from inside the train before it is abruptly silenced, or

whether it's a product of his imagination is unimportant, it takes him back into the stinking alley behind the Jaipur Palace, Lakshmi's thuggish landlord threatening her with eviction if he doesn't get the rent money on Friday.

Forrest feels a moment of booze-fueled affection for Lakshmi that almost has him weeping again.

She is his oldest and dearest and truest friend and he's ignored her plight, so wrapped up was he in his teenage passion for Little Miss Girl Next Door.

A gut-twisting flashback of the kiss on the beach damn nearly pitches Forrest into that looming coma.

*Enough.*

He slams down his glass on the counter, waving away the waiter who is as keen as a greyhound at the starting gate.

*The starting gate.*

*Yes.*

*Mr. Darcy at Hollywood Park.*

*Yes, yes.*

Forrest will win a bundle of cash tomorrow and square Lakshmi's debt.

A deflating thought needles its way through the protective layers of booze: how can he expect a repeat of that fluke win the other day?

Is it likely that another jockey will tumble from his mount?

*No, he decides, drinking deeply.*

Then the alcohol—*what a magical potion it is!*—allows him an insight that he would never have sober.

He's back in the final moments of the race the other day, the almost-victorious jockey urging the favorite toward the finish, raising his arms and half-standing in his stirrups, pumping his fists in celebration.

Then Forrest sees—as clearly as if he's right there—the little man dive from the horse, rolling himself into a ball to protect himself from injury as Mr. Darcy leads the rest of the field home.

Forrest laughs out loud.

*Of course! The race was fixed!*

And Forrest's mind, made so nimble—*almost acrobatic!*—by the booze takes him into a smoky backroom, where swarthy men in check sports coats and green eyeshades, stogies clamped in their jaws (men whose surnames all end in vowels) hatch a diabolical plan to make a chunk of money off of a half-ton of horsemeat called Mr. Darcy by buying jockeys and fixing races.

*Brilliant,* Forrest says out loud, referring both to their dark scheme and his

ability to detect it.

*I'll bet on Mr. Darcy tomorrow.*

*And I'll bet heavily.*

Another brief moment of deflation.

All he has in his skinny wallet is a couple of dollars.

How, then, is he going to finance this bet?

His hand answers him, delving beneath his shirt, fingers finding the comforting contours of his mother's ring.

He'll use the ring as collateral.

Raymond, his bestest old buddy boy, will not refuse him.

As Forrest raises a triumphant hand and signals for more drinks the train jolts and groans into motion.

Poor Billy Bigelow has never driven his car beyond the outskirts Santa Sofia.

He seldom travels out of town, but when he does—occasionally visiting the Los Angeles Book Fair—he uses the train.

So, hunched over the wheel of the station wagon, peering into the night, his foot flat to the floor, the old car wallowing on the highway like a whale, he's terrified.

Terrified of losing his once-in-a-lifetime shot at love, sure, but it is an older terror that causes rivers of sweat to flow from his body.

Memories of the runaway ice cream truck and that awful collision that killed his mother and sister fill his mind, and when, down near Carpinteria, he drifts from his lane and a huge, rumbling rig nearly turns him to hamburger beneath its eighteen wheels, the theme from *The Sting* plays loudly in his head.

But once the rig, air horns blaring, speeds away into the night, Billy feels a strange kind of fatalistic calm settle upon him.

He will get to Union Station or die trying.

So Billy races toward Los Angeles in some sort of trance until he sees the city's infinity of lights spread before him, and a new fear seizes his gut.

How will he not get lost in this vast metropolis?

The old car, needless to say, has no GPS, and even if it was furnished with one, Billy wouldn't have a clue how to work it.

So, using a combination of dumb luck and improvised prayers he barrels toward downtown LA until—as if by magic—the Union Station exit sign blooms in the night.

Billy hurls the car at the off-ramp and sees ahead of him, lit up like something from an old movie, the white clock tower of the train station rising above a row of palms.

A sign directs him to valet parking and Billy flings the keys into the hands of an attendant and sprints for the ticket concourse with its high wooden ceilings, tiled floors and chunky leather arm chairs.

The concourse is filled with travelers and their luggage, and Billy—as he

searches the vast room—knows he has to exercise extreme caution and, in the moment he turns to dodge a porter wheeling a mountain of steamer trunks, he misses Brontë Baines who slips through an exit into the night.

Dragging her suitcase out the art deco concourse, her heels clicking on the glossy tiled floor, Brontë decides that perhaps it is time she left behind her the distant era of those frail English sisters and allows herself to live in the modern world.

Or as modern as she can tolerate.

Which would be about the time this train station was built: the nineteen thirties.

Yes, she will get lost in this vast city and sustain herself on scraps of its glamorous, cynical past, like a character from Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*.

As she is about to raise a hand for a taxi, she hears a voice calling from behind her.

She turns to see the man who accosted her on the platform in Santa Sofia, who she later saw in the dining car of the train drinking an astonishing amount of alcohol.

"Leave me alone!" she yells and he retreats.

Then she sees he holds her silk scarf in his hand.

"You dropped this."

Brontë nods and walks back through the doors and with as much grace as she can muster, takes the scarf from the man and drapes it around her neck as she turns again for the exit.

Suddenly she is grabbed and lifted from her feet—*the lunatic is attacking her!*—but when she's swung around she looks up not into the face of the drunkard, but the flushed beaming features of William Bigelow.

She blinks.

"William?"

"Brontë."

"Put me down," she says and he obeys. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you back."

"Back where?"

"Back to Santa Sofia."

"Why?"

"Because I, what I mean to say is . . ."

"Yes?"

“I feel as you do.”

“How do you know how I feel?”

He produces her journal from his pocket.

“Uh, you left this behind.”

“You read my journal?”

“Well, it kind of fell open and I saw something on the last page, just a little, about how you felt about me . . .”

She snatches the Moleskin from his hand.

“How could you?”

“I’m sorry. It was just a few of lines.”

“A Zen kōan is just a few lines and it has the power to alter consciousness.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to pry.”

She stares at him.

“Mnnnn. And what about your dance partner? Little Miss Potato Chip?”

“That was nothing.”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, we’re just friends.”

“So you really want me to go back with you to Santa Sofia?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And then?”

“And then we’ll live the rest of our lives together.”

This is just the most impossibly romantic thing anybody has ever said to her.

Brontë steps close to William and, as the “Begin the Beguine” wafts through the public address system, she says, “Dance with me.”

Without a moment’s hesitation William Bigelow—never again to be called Poor Billy—takes Brontë Baines in his arms and leads her masterfully across the tiled concourse in a slow rumba, the chandeliers bathing them in buttery light, travelers encircling them, enchanted, applauding as the huge man and the slip of girl twirl and glide like a vision from Hollywood’s flickering past.

Darcy is woken by Eric brandishing a cup of black coffee like a lethal weapon.

“Here, darling, drink this,” he says.

Darcy shrouds her head with the comforter and burrows deeper into the couch.

Eric, about as sympathetic as a drill sergeant, yanks the covers free and leaves Darcy blinking at the bright sunlight that floods the room.

“Eric, did I really drink an entire bottle of wine last night?”

“You did.”

“And I’m remembering something about a tub of Ben & Jerry’s . . .”

He holds up the empty container.

“Gone to the great ice cream parlor in the sky, sadly.”

“Hell, I really pigged out.”

“Well, I did help you with the Chocolate Therapy. You could almost call it couple’s counseling . . .”

“Funny.” She sits up, groaning. “Were you here the whole night?”

“Uh huh, curled up in that armchair watching over you like a little gnome.”

“You’re very sweet.”

“Aren’t I just?”

Darcy lifts the cup and manages to get a couple of mouthfuls of the coffee down.

“Okay, now it’s off to the shower with you,” Eric says, “and then I want you in that hideous SUV heading south.”

“No way.”

“Oh, way, darling. *Way, way, way.*”

“Forget it.”

“You’re going to get over that creep of an ex of yours in the arms of another, very hot man.”

“Don’t worry, I’m *waaaay* over Porter. Besides, I’m the last person Forrest wants to see.”

“Let’s ask him,” Eric says dialing a number on his cell.

Darcy jumps from the couch like she’s seen a snake and backs away.



“No, God, Eric! I’m not prepared!”

He listens to his phone, then grimaces.

“Voice mail.”

He tosses the cell onto the couch.

“Okay, you drive down and you see him face-to-face. Even better.”

“I have no idea where to find him, so that’s the end of that scheme.”

“Not so fast. There’s that Indian restaurant he took you to.”

“What about it?”

“The owner will know how to find Forrest. She’s his friend.”

Darcy shrugs, “Maybe.”

Eric stands and puts an arm around her.

“Darce, you need to do this, otherwise you’re going to slump into a deep and miserable and terribly boring depression.” He strokes her tangled hair.

“And you owe Forrest a teeny-weeny little explanation, don’t you think?”

She sighs. “I guess you’re right.”

“I am. Go down and find him and take it from there. What’s the worst thing that can happen?”

“He slams the door in my face?”

“Well, I doubt it. But if he does, you just shoot along to Valentino and buy yourself something outrageously expensive and charge it to your card. Give Porter another aneurism.”

Darcy has to laugh.

“Well, when you put that way . . .”

“Go, go, go! Get yourself in the shower. You’ve got a life to start living.”

As she climbs the stairs, despite her throbbing headache, Darcy can’t help feeling a little buzz of excitement—no, *desire*—spread through her body at the thought of seeing Forrest Forbes again.

Forrest stands a little unsteadily in the doorway of the bar, letting his eyes adjust to the dim interior and the banks of monitors tuned to every sporting event known to man.

A girl in a letter sweater and tight shorts approaches him.

“A booth for one?”

Forrest says, “I’m looking for a friend.”

“Aren’t we all, Sailor? Does she have a name, this friend?”

“She’s more like a he,” he says.

The girl shakes her head.

“Wow, complicated gender stuff here.”

“Raymond. His name is Raymond.”

“Sharply dressed guy who looks a bit like a young Andy Garcia?”

“Yeah, Andy Garcia in . . .” Forrest waves a hand as if he’s trying to pluck something from the air, “*8 Million Ways to Die*.”

“Hey, you’re good. Follow me.”

Using the backs of seats for support he tails her to a booth in the corner where Raymond sits with the giant thug who tenderized Forrest’s upper body a week ago.

“Forrest, good to see you, my friend.”

Raymond gestures toward the Mexican giant.

“You remember Edmundo?”

“Yeah. He’s got that whole *Nacho Libre* thing down, even the mask.”

Forrest pretends to squint at the big man. “Oh, pardon me, I see that’s no mask . . .”

When Edmundo growls Raymond pats him on the arm.

“You’re funny, Forrest.” He points to the seat opposite him. “Why don’t you sit before you topple, my man.”

Forrest sits and says to the waitress: “Bring me five Maker’s Marks. Doubles.”

“Five?”

“Yeah, one always looks so very lonely.”

She shrugs and walks away.

“So, Forrest,” Raymond says, “I was a little surprised to get your call. Aren’t you a reformed man? ”

“Well, there’s a horse . . .”

“There’s always a horse,” Raymond says.

“A horse called Mr. Darcy.”

“Yeah, he should be called Mr. Glue, man. He’s ready for the . . .”

Raymond mimes a shot between the eyes.

“He won a few days ago.”

“A fluke. Whatever little bit of juice he ever had is gone after that crazy sprint.”

“Well, I want to bet twenty thousand on him for a win. At fifty to one.”

“Twenty thousand?”

“Yes.”

“Dollars?”

“Yes.”

“American?”

“As American as I am.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No sir, I am not.”

“Well, as you *Americans* say, show me the color of your money.”

“I have no money.”

Raymond sighs. “And there I was having such a pleasant day.”

“But I have this.”

Forrest digs beneath his shirt and struggles to free his mother’s ring from the chain, the diamonds and sapphires gleaming like Christmas when, at last, he drops it onto the table.

Raymond stares at the ring, then he picks it up and turns it in his fingers.

He takes out his cell phone and uses its beam like a flashlight, spending a long time examining the stones.

When, at last, he looks at Forrest there is no humor in his face.

“This ring is very valuable.”

“Yes. *Invaluable*.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was my mother’s.”

“Okay, so you’re saying I hold this until the end of the race? If you win, you get it back plus one *million* dollars?”

“Not if I win, when I win.”

“And if you lose, I get to keep the ring?”

“Yes.”

Raymond regards the ring, then he places it carefully on the table.

“Forrest, you’re very drunk. I think you should take your pretty bauble and go home.”

“No.”

“This is something you’re going to regret.”

“If you don’t take my action, I’ll find somebody who will.”

Raymond stares at him, then he shrugs.

“Okay, Forrest, you have yourself a bet.”

As Darcy drives south the little bubble of enthusiasm she felt for Eric's plan bursts.

She sees a tired, melancholy woman—a woman who is definitely not getting any younger—staring back at her from the rearview.

A woman who should know better than setting off on this idiotic mission.

Darcy frees her phone from her purse and dials Forrest's number.

Voice mail.

*This is stupid, girl.*

*You're setting yourself up for more humiliation.*

She's looking for an exit, ready to loop back and go home (Eric Royce be damned) when her phone rings and she sees Porter's name on caller ID.

She's tempted to ignore the call, but when she stopped for gas earlier her credit card was declined—Porter's handiwork—and a little streak of malice has her answering.

"Hi, Porter," she says, breezy as can be.

"Darce. I tried the house first."

"I'm in the car."

"Okay. Listen, about yesterday . . ."

"How are your testicles, Porter," she asks sweetly.

She hears him choke.

"Oh, uh, fine. Everything's just fine down . . . there."

"I'm so pleased. I really wouldn't want to you not to be able to express your love for your wife in the most natural way."

"Darcy, I know you're upset."

"Not any more, Port. Over that."

"Well, good. I'm glad. I just wanted to revisit our chat yesterday."

"Would that be before or after I kicked you in the nutsack?"

"Darce, I was hoping you'd seen reason about the house—"

"No, Porter, what I saw was a selfish, scheming, miserable little son of a bitch. If you *ever* try to come near me or contact me again, I'll get a restraining order."

Darcy kills the call and says to the woman in the rearview: *what the hell,*

*I'm going to LA.*

*I'm going to LA to let the oh-so-hunky Mr. Forrest Forbes jump my bones like I'm a trampoline.*

*Yes, I am.*

“And away they go!”

The strident bray of the race caller jerks Forrest from a stupor, and he stares blearily around the sports bar.

It takes him a few moments to remember where he is and what he’s doing here.

Then he sees Raymond sipping a Perrier, watching the race on the giant screen that hovers in the gloom just above the booth, and he remembers the bet.

Forrest turns in his seat to improve his view, squinting at the screen, trying to separate Mr. Darcy from the pack of horses.

Even for a man as drunk as Forrest this isn’t difficult to do.

Mr. Darcy is the straggler, way behind the rest of the field.

*This is the strategy*, Forrest tells himself.

*This is exactly what he did the other day.*

But he can’t help sneaking a glance at his mother’s ring, lying on the table between him and Raymond, the stones reflecting the light from the big screen.

The commentator is talking up the favorite: “Skylark is moving like a winner. He’s looking the horse to beat.”

At around the halfway mark Mr. Darcy starts to make his move, catching the pack and then surging up toward the front.

The commentator says, “Well, take a look at this, Mr. Darcy looks like he jumped in at the quarter pole. Can he repeat that unbelievable and controversial win of the other day?”

Forrest sits forward, gripping his glass hard enough to crack it.

“It’s Mr. Darcy and Skylark, and Mr. Darcy is edging ahead. This is unbelievable!”

Forrest hears himself shouting Mr. Darcy on, the finish in sight.

Then the favorite, Skylark, regains his lead and surges ahead.

The commentator is almost hysterical: “Skylark looks as if he’s sprouted wings! He’s going to do it! What a finish! Skylark wins from a gallant Mr. Darcy!”

Forrest sags back.

Raymond looks at him and shakes his head.

“There aren’t going to be any appeals today.”

“No.”

Forrest picks up the ring, the enormity of what has just happened starting to seep through the fog of alcohol.

Raymond holds out his hand and Forrest drops the ring onto his palm.

He slides from the booth and walks away without saying a word.



Darcy battles through the traffic before she finds a parking bay on Fountain near Jaipur Palace.

When she walks to the restaurant she sees that the doors are padlocked, even though it's lunch hour.

She's peering through a window when a voice has her turning.

"Darcy?"

Lakshmi appears on the sidewalk, in one of her glittering saris.

"How did your race go? Did you win?"

Darcy stares at her blankly. "My race?"

"Yes, I got this somewhat garbled voice mail message from Forrest, saying something about you running in a race this morning . . ."

Darcy shakes her head.

"No. Last time I sprinted was to get to the front of the line at the Saks Fifth Avenue Christmas sale."

Now it's the Indian woman's turn to look blank.

Then she waves a hand, bangles jangling.

"Wait, I think I have it. Come with me."

She leads Darcy into a convenience store beside the restaurant.

Sitar twang from a huge pair of speakers, and the mustachioed man behind the cash register is straight out of Bollywood.

"My friend, Mr. Patel, is a keen follower of racing and I think he can clear up this mystery."

After an animated exchange with Mr. Patel in Hindi, Lakshmi turns to Darcy.

"A horse named Mr. Darcy ran in a race a short while ago. Sadly for Forrest, he lost. I'm sorry about the confusion."

Darcy says, "Oh, I'd say it's pretty understandable." She sees Lakshmi's face. "What's wrong?"

"I supposed you noticed the padlock on the restaurant?"

"I did. What's going on?"

"A small matter of the rent. My landlord has locked me out. I've been using Mr. Patel's telephone, trying to persuade the man to relent, but he

seems set on this course.”

“I’m so sorry, Lakshmi.”

“It’s an annoyance,” The Indian woman says, waving her arm again. “But what I fear is that Forrest bet on this horse to get money to help me out. He muttered something about that in his message.”

“Where is Forrest?”

“I have no idea. I tried to return his call a few minutes ago, but he didn’t answer his phone.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“Of course. His apartment is a mere few blocks from here.”

Darcy is already walking toward her car.

“Come, Lakshmi, take me there.”

Forrest finds himself standing outside his apartment block with no memory of how he got there.

*Was there cab involved?*

He has no idea.

What he does remember is the insane bet.

And what he has lost.

In some pathetic reflex his fingers find the chain around his neck, feeling for his mother's ring.

*It's gone you drunken fool.*

*It's gone.*

Forrest surveys the flight of stairs leading up to his apartment as if they are the slopes of a Himalayan peak.

There is no way he's getting up there.

He sinks down beside the pool, squinting his eyes at the vicious glare that bounces off the oily blue surface.

Reaching down with a cupped hand, he splashes his face with water.

When this proves ineffective, he kneels and dunks his head under the surface.

The tiles are wet and he is many sheets to the wind and, of course, he plunges into the pool.

Spluttering and gasping he hauls himself out, and stands, dripping and panting on the tiles, as useless and miserable a wretch as ever drew breath.

He'll have to make those stairs now.

Shoes squelching with water he starts to climb, hauling himself up using the handrail.

When he gets to the landing he is confronted by a woman with a canary yellow beehive, wearing a pink negligee and fluffy high-heeled mules.

Convinced that this is some kind of alcoholic hallucination, Forrest tries to step through her, and connects with very real, very sweaty flesh.

"Take it easy, buster! You'll bruise the fruit," the woman says.

"My apologies, madam."

Forrest edges around her, digging his keys from his soaked pants.

“Whatcha doin’ swimming’ in your clothes?” she asks.

“It was a mishap.”

“Yeah?”

He has his door open, and the woman follows him in.

“You look like a guy who’ll offer a lady a drink. My last pitcher of margaritas came up empty.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I’m not in a fit state for company.”

The woman spies a bottle of Maker’s Mark on the counter in the kitchenette.

“There we go. Party time!”

She loosens the cap and pours a stiff jolt into a tooth glass.

Forrest pulls off his shirt and is attempting to remove his shoes when he loses his balance and falls to the carpet. He tries to get up, using the wall for support.

“Whoa, cowboy! Let me help you there.”

The woman pushes him back onto the bed and rips his shoes off.

She hands him the glass of alcohol.

“Here, baby, suck on this.”

Forrest, vaguely aware that the woman is unbuckling his pants, takes a mouthful of the booze.

And there it is.

The drink that has been waiting to ambush him.

And as the woman drags down his pants the hammer falls and everything goes very, very dark.

What had Forrest said about his apartment having the personality of a paper cup?

Darcy, surveying the abject building from the SUV, thinks, *make that a paper cup that has been left out in the trash for a couple of days.*

Darcy and Lakshmi are parked outside a two story block built around a dirty swimming pool.

The paint is peeling and a couple of windows are broken.

A row of bedraggled palm trees flank the walkway.

The graveyard of the Californian Dream.

“He really lives here?” Darcy asks.

“Ghastly isn’t it?” Lakshmi says, exiting the SUV as regally as a princess stepping down from a *howdah*.

Darcy leaves the car and the two women climb the stairs to the landing.

Lakshmi points at a door painted in peeling aquamarine gloss.

“That’s his.”

When Darcy reaches the door she sees that it’s open a crack.

“Forrest?”

There’s no reply, so she shoves the door open on a sight that leaves her speechless.

Forrest lies on his back on the bed in the one-roomed hovel.

He wears only a pair of boxer shorts.

His pants are at his ankles, and a fleshy woman in a negligee is fighting to tear them off him.

She stops, panting, and looks at Darcy.

“Who the hell are you? The wife?”

Darcy just shakes her head.

The woman drops Forrest’s feet and puts her hand on her love handles, raising an eyebrow at Lakshmi.

“And you? The help?”

Lakshmi stretches herself to her full height and looks down her fine Indian nose.

“And who may you be, madam?”

"I'm the neighbor. Having a party with buddy boy here."

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave. This party is over."

The woman looks like she's about to argue, then she grabs the bottle of booze and walks out, slamming the door after her.

"Oh dear," Lakshmi says. "It appears we have wandered into something sordid."

She approaches Forrest and shakes him.

"Forrest, talk to us."

His head lolls and Lakshmi wrinkles her nose.

"He smells like a Bombay brewery."

Darcy lifts the chain from his chest.

There is no ring.

"I have a horrible feeling," she says, "that Forrest has gone and done something really crazy."

Lakshmi stares at her. "What?"

"I think he bet his mother's ring on that horse, Mr. Darcy."

The Indian woman puts a hand to her mouth.

"Good God, no!"

Darcy nods. "Looks that way."

"It's all my fault! He did it for me!"

Darcy puts an arm on Lakshmi's shoulder.

"No, he did it because he was very drunk. And I'm the reason he was very drunk."

"You?"

"Yes, he traveled up to Santa Sofia yesterday to see me."

"At my urging!" Lakshmi looks at Darcy. "Oh gosh, you sent him packing, didn't you?"

"No. Worse."

"What could be worse?"

"He saw me kissing my ex-husband on the beach."

"Oh, dear me."

"I didn't even know Forrest was there until he'd left. That's why I've come to see him, to explain that it was all a terrible mistake."

Darcy sinks down on the bed.

"What have I done?"

Lakshmi sits beside her.

"Darcy, it's hardly your fault that Forrest behaved like a bloody idiot."

“We have to get that ring back.”

“But how?”

Darcy lifts Forrest’s wet pants from the floor and fishes in the pockets, lifting out his phone. It’s drenched, but still works.

She opens his recent call list.

Above her number she sees the name Raymond.

Darcy hits dial and after a few seconds a man says, “Forrest if you’re calling to beg me for that ring it’s too late, my friend.”

“This isn’t Forrest,” Darcy says.

There’s a pause.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a friend of Forrest’s.”

“Okay . . .”

“I want his ring back.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Listen, mister, I think you’re a bookmaker, which when I last checked was illegal in the state of California.”

“Again: I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You admitted to me that you have Forrest’s ring. I’m going to go to the police. They’ll track you down via your cell phone number.”

The man sighs.

“Lady, you sound nice . . .”

“I’m not.”

“And Forrest is lucky to have a friend like you, but you can’t threaten me. You’ll land up in world of sorrow.”

“You’re the one who beat Forrest up, aren’t you?”

Another pause.

“Yet again, I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

“Meet me, please. Let’s work something out.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Please,” Darcy says.

Another sigh.

“Okay, okay. Come to Freddy’s Sports Bar on Highland. I’m leaving here in twenty minutes.”

Darcy is left holding the dead phone.

Lakshmi stares at her.

“Darcy, this sounds unsavory.”

“It is.”

“And dangerous.”

“Oh, hardly . . .”

“You’re going to see some kind of bookmaker?”

“Yes.”

“I forbid it. Let’s get the authorities.”

“Lakshmi, let me do this. Stay here with Forrest and try and get him to wake up. I’m meeting this guy in a public place, nothing can happen.”

Darcy says this with a certainty she doesn’t feel.

She grabs her purse and hurries out of the apartment before her courage fails her.



It's a day of firsts for Darcy.

She'd never in her life been in a place as squalid as Forrest's apartment.

And she's never been in a sports bar: blaring commentary, girls in skimpy shorts serving drinks and snacks to an almost exclusively male clientele, the funk of testosterone enough to choke her.

"You must be Forrest's friend?"

The man who appears at her side is as far from her image of a bookmaker as anyone could be: he's young, slender and good looking, dressed in preppy clothes, his teeth white and regular when he smiles.

"Yes," she says. "Are you Raymond?"

"I am. You leave me at a disadvantage."

"Huh?"

"What's your name?"

"Darcy."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not."

"You've got the same name as the horse?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm sensing a backstory here."

"Yes, there's a story."

He gestures toward a booth.

"Then, please, have a seat and tell it to me."

Darcy sits.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

Darcy realizes she's parched.

"A water."

"Good. I'm a water man myself."

He beckons over one of the girls and orders two Perriers.

Then he lifts his palms to the sky and says, "So, tell me that story."

She tells him about Forrest being infatuated with her.

"That I can understand," Raymond says with a courtly tip of the head.

She tells him about Forrest seeing her with Porter.

About his drunken binge.

About him trying to help out a friend in need.

"A sad and quite moving story," Raymond says.

"I think so."

"And told with the requisite pathos."

"Now you're making fun of me."

He sits back and spreads his arms on the back of the seat.

"Darcy, believe it or not there's a code of honor in the world of gambling."

"Really?"

"Yes. Now, I'm not a bookmaker, mind, but if I were and I took a bet, I would be honor bound to make good on that bet. You understand?"

"Yes."

"And that applies equally to the person placing the bet. In this case Forrest. From what you tell me he used an item of jewelry as collateral. He lost. Therefore he forfeits the collateral."

She leans forward.

"It was his mother's ring. She died giving birth to him. It was the only thing he had left of her."

"Yes. Very sad."

"Do you have a mother, Raymond?"

"I didn't arrive in the beak of a stork."

"Do you love her?"

"Very much." He sips his water. "I know where you're going with this, Darcy. You're trying to appeal to my sentimental side."

"Am I succeeding?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Does your mother know what you do?"

"She knows I'm a businessman."

"But she doesn't know that you're a bookmaker?"

Flashing a smile he says, "Darcy . . ." He shoots his cuff and consults an expensive wristwatch. "I'm afraid I have an appointment."

"I meant what I said about going to the police."

"They'll laugh at you. I'm known to them as a respectable businessman."

"What you mean is you're paying them off?"

"I think you watch way too much TV." He looks ready to stand.

"Wait," Darcy says, "I'm asking you to return the ring."

He smiles at her. "I'm no jeweler, but I have a passing knowledge of

stones. That ring is worth upward of a million dollars.”

She gapes at him. “You’re not serious.”

“I am. You understand my reluctance?”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

He shakes his head again.

Darcy says, “If your mother were here she’d tell you to do it.”

“Happily, my mother’s at home making tortillas for my lunch.”

“That’s your appointment? Lunch with mama?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to be able to look her in the eye knowing what you’ve just done to Forrest?”

Raymond stares at Darcy for a very long time before he speaks.

“You are, as they say, a piece of work.”

He delves into his shirt pocket, fishes out the ring and drops it onto the table.

“I suggest you counsel Forrest to give up gambling. He has no talent for it.”

“You’re a good man, Raymond,” Darcy says.

He stands.

“No, whatever I may be I’m not that.”

Raymond walks away without looking back, leaving Darcy with her heart in her mouth and Forrest Forbes’s ring in her hand.

Darcy clips the ring back on the chain around the neck of the snoring Forrest Forbes

Then she takes a bundle of cash from her purse and places it on the bed.

“What’s that?” Lakshmi asks.

“Ten thousand dollars.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Those are Forrest’s winnings.”

“But how can they be? The horse lost.”

“It came second. He made a place bet,” Darcy says, going back years to when her uncle used to lay a few dollars on the ponies, sitting at the kitchen table shouting at the radio when the race was broadcast.

Lakshmi stares at her in confusion.

Darcy says, “You still win money if the horse places second.”

“I see,” Lakshmi says, when she clearly doesn’t. “And this person, this bookmaker, held onto the ring why?”

“Oh, apparently there is a period of time in which appeals can be lodged. Horses running at the wrong weight or wearing the wrong shoes,” Darcy flaps her hand, her knowledge exhausted, “that kind of thing. Once the all clear sounds, the bets can be paid. Forrest, drunk as he was, left before everything was concluded. Fortunately the bookmaker is an honorable man.”

“Well, good gosh.”

Darcy is no liar and it’s tough not too wilt under Lakshmi’s stare.

She stands and walks through to the kitchenette and pours a glass of water which she pretends to sip from a greasy glass.

It’s not for Lakshmi to know that she stopped off at an ATM and found a credit card that had been in her purse since she and Porter were last in Europe—a back-up card that her ex-husband had organized before they left.

*Had Porter forgotten about it?*

Darcy fed it into the machine, keyed in the code, and when she asked for the maximum of ten thousand dollars, the machine whirred and gurgled and spat out the banknotes.

Darcy walks back to the bed.

“Lakshmi, this money will go quite a long way in India, won’t it?”

“Gosh yes, a terribly long way.”

“So, take Forrest and fly back home and get busy fixing up your palace.”

“Forrest told you about that?”

“He did.”

“I’m a little embarrassed.”

“There’s no reason to be. He tells me you want to open a hotel?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, perhaps Forrest’s crazy bet will enable you to make a start.”

“You think he would come with me? To India?”

“In a flash.” Darcy gestures around the room. “Things aren’t exactly working out for him here.”

“No, they’re not.” Lakshmi stares at Darcy. “What were you coming down here to tell Forrest?”

“Oh, I wanted to apologize for what he’d seen, but make him realize that we had no future. That he should continue with his life.”

“You really think that?”

“Yes,” Darcy says. “I do.”

She stands.

“I want you to do something for me, Lakshmi.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell Forrest that I was here. Don’t tell him about me going to see the bookmaker and getting his ring back. Just tell him you arrived and found him passed out on the bed with the money in his pocket.”

“He’ll smell a rat.”

“He was drunk. Tell him he has alcoholic amnesia. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Lakshmi rises and they embrace.

“The very best of luck to you, Darcy.”

“And to you.”

“Our doors in Jaipur are always wide open.”

Darcy leaves, and if there are tears streaming down her cheeks it’s not from any kind of emotion, it’s from the LA smog wreaking havoc with her eyes.

It's evening and Darcy sits on her couch sipping wine, Eric lounging in the armchair opposite her.

"You really dropped that bundle of cash to send Forrest Forbes out of your life forever?"

"I did it for him, yes. And for Lakshmi. Maybe this hotel will be a second chance for them." She drinks. "But, mostly I did it for me."

"Yeah?"

"Forrest is a dangerous temptation, Eric. One that I find difficult to resist. But look at the man's life: booze, gambling, weird hookers with beehive hairstyles?"

"That does sound pure John Waters. Even for Forrest."

"I just don't think I'm sophisticated or worldly enough for him."

"Mnnnn."

"I'm a small town house mouse."

"I'm not so sure. Not any more."

"Don't be fooled. I am."

"And what is the mouse going to do with her house?"

"I'm going to sell it."

"Surely you're not going to give Porter half?"

"Porter can, in the worlds of some teenage poet, swivel."

She laughs, and so does Eric.

"No, I'm going to give a very generous sum of money to the Children's Shelter, and then I'm going to get myself a small place to live and find myself a job."

"A job?"

"Yes. I'm tired of being useless."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea. That will, as they say, be revealed in the fullness of time."

"I'll miss you, neighbor."

"Oh, I'll still be around. And we'll still meet up all the time at the Book & Bean."

"Surely you mean Brontë's?"

When Darcy looks at him blankly, Eric laughs.

“Oh, darling, what a day it’s been! Poor Billy Bigelow appears to be wildly, crazily, head-over-heels in love with that pale and interesting waitress of his. So in love that he’s renaming the place after her. In your absence he asked my advice and I told him it was a fabulous idea, so much more classy than the Book & Bean.”

“It is.” Darcy smiles. “I’m so pleased for Billy.”

“He goes by William now, I think you should know.”

“About time.”

Eric crosses to the couch and seats himself beside Darcy, putting his arm around her shoulders.

“I love you, Darce,” he says.

“And I love you, Eric.”

Darcy rests her head on his shoulder, closes her eyes and tries very hard not to think of Forrest Forbes.

After two months in India Forrest no longer hears the incessant cacophony of horns (buses, taxis, motorcycles) as he walks along the crowded sidewalk.

He has become used to the constant press of humanity, too, negotiating the hawkers and the beggars as he strolls.

But the smell still intoxicates him: a heady mix of dust and dung and spices.

A smell that is unique to India.

A cow has wandered into the road to graze at something lying on the asphalt, and the surging traffic streams around it, the animal standing chewing, tail twitching, completely unconcerned.

Forrest has been to the post office to post a letter.

A letter to Darcy Pringle.

He could have sat at Lakshmi's laptop, of course, and knocked off something, hit send, and that would have been that.

But this quaint, outmoded form of communication seems well suited to Rajasthan, where bespectacled Mr. Sharma—wearing a jacket and tie over a *dhoti*—sits cross-legged on the sidewalk with his ancient Royal typewriter, selling his services to the illiterate as a letter writer.

Forrest, of course, wrote by hand, in his rusty but serviceable copperplate.

He went through a number of drafts—the letter took him weeks to compose—before he was satisfied with the version that will now wing its way to Santa Sofia.

Lakshmi, after watching him sitting in his room writing, day after day (oblivious to the shouts of the builders who scrambled up and down their bamboo scaffolding, repairing the east wing of the palace) eventually could contain herself no longer and said, “Why don't you just telephone her, Forrest?”

“Who?”

“Oh, don't play the fool with me. Darcy. Darcy Pringle, that's who you're writing to isn't it?” He nodded. “Then just pick up the phone and call her. Stop mooning away up here like Mr. John bloody Keats.”

Forrest shook his head.



“I’d feel too exposed. A letter is about all I can manage.”

Lakshmi gave him that look again, that look he’d seen since he awoke massively hung over in that hovel in Hollywood and allowed her to shovel him onto the plane to Mumbai.

The look of a woman with something to hide.

But she’s stuck resolutely to the story of him winning the money.

Money that bought them coach tickets to India (a new and painful experience for long-legged Forrest) and paid for the first renovations on the palace.

When he’d confronted Lakshmi with sketchy memories of losing the bet—and losing his mother’s ring—she’d laughed him off.

“Alcoholic amnesia, Forrest. Plain and simple.”

As he walks through town he stops off at a sidewalk vendor and buys a bottle of water (kept cold in a bed of ice in a plastic cooler) to sip on his return to the palace.

Forrest has been sober since they left the States.

He drinks water and tea and sweet *lassi*.

But no booze.

For the first time since he was fifteen, he’s seeing the world unmediated by alcohol and chemicals.

And what a strange and fantastical world it is.

Yesterday, Forrest wandered into an internet café and Googled *Mr. Darcy*.

After wading through pages of references to Jane Austen’s hero, he finally found the horse.

The race that Forrest had bet the ring on had been the stallion’s last, and he was now out to stud in Kentucky, which sounded like a fine way to end a life.

But Forrest was interested in the details of the race on which he had supposedly won money on a place bet and he saw that Mr. Darcy had, indeed, come in second to Skylark that day at Hollywood Park.

So it was theoretically possible that Forrest had won the money.

Theoretically.

Forrest, walking along the Rajasthan sidewalk, the domes of the old palace appearing above the rooftops of the crowded town, shakes his head.

Never in his life had he wagered on a place bet.

*Place bets were for ninnies.*

*Fence sitters.*

*Fellows with no gumption.*

*You bet to win or you didn't bet at all.*

So, Forrest had a theory.

And it was this theory that he had spent many weeks crafting into a letter to Darcy Pringle.

His theory was that he had lost the bet and the ring.

That Darcy Pringle had gone to Raymond and (who knew how?) had persuaded him to return the ring.

And that sweet, generous Darcy had provided the ten thousand dollars and called them Forrest's winnings.

Lakshmi, of course, had denied all of this.

"I saw neither hide nor hair of Darcy Pringle that day, Forrest. I found you in a state of total inebriation in your revolting apartment with a pocket full of dollars."

"She told you to stick to that story, didn't she?"

"There is no *story*, Forrest. There is only the truth."

"You're lying, Lakshmi."

"I am not!"

His friend's indignation hadn't fooled him.

Lakshmi was lying, okay.

If Darcy Pringle had been nowhere near Forrest's Hollywood hole-in-the-wall that day, then how had a tube of her trademark lip stick (Dolce & Gabbana Mandorla) landed halfway under the bed for him to find when he dragged together his few pitiful belongings the morning he and Lakshmi fled LA?

The tube of lipstick that's in his pants pocket right now as he crosses the road—the seething traffic somehow leaving him unscathed—his fingers stroking the metal tube like it's a good luck charm.

No, Darcy had been there that day.

She'd come looking for him.

She had not lost herself in the arms of her oafish ex-husband.

This Forrest Forbes has to believe.

And, as he walks into the grounds of the palace and joins the old mahout, Bhogilal, who washes down Kipling—the elephant grown now, only a few years younger than Forrest—and feeds the animal a juicy red apple, Forrest has to believe that Darcy will respond to his letter.

And respond to his invitation to come to India.

To come to Rajasthan.

To come to him.

Carlotta McCourt, habit keeping her at her post at the bedroom window, feels curiously deflated as she surveys her enemy's house.

There has been precious little to gossip about these last months.

Darcy has lived quietly, by all accounts spending her days doing volunteer work at that children's shelter in Bascomb (how saccharine and sanctimonious) and meeting her fruity little friend for coffee in the afternoon at the Book & Bean.

There is no way Carlotta will *ever* bring herself to call the dive Brontë's.

It's bad enough that she has to watch that stuck-up little bookworm parade around like she's Emma Thompson, sneering at the customers.

In protest, Carlotta and her tribe of gossipers tried migrating to a new coffee shop in the strip mall, but it was gloomy and dim and went out of business within a month.

Billy's place, by contrast, is booming.

Hideous new name or not.

*Go figure . . .*

Carlotta perks up a little as she watches Darcy walk down her pathway, past the FOR SALE sign, and check her post box.

She lifts out a letter, and from her body language Carlotta can see that the letter surprises Darcy.

Darcy seems about to open it when a car pulls up and Kathy King, the realtor, climbs out.

The two women chat and smile and then Kathy crosses to the sign and attaches a SOLD sticker.

*So, the end of an era.*

Darcy, still carrying that unopened letter, gets into her SUV and drives toward town.

A sound disturbs Carlotta and she turns to see Walt—*how come he's not on the golf course this time of day?*—yanking clothes from his closet and dumping them in a heap on the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm moving out."

“What?”

He looks at her without expression.

“I’m moving out.”

Carlotta strides across to him.

“Walter McCourt, you stop what you’re doing right this instant, you hear?”

Unperturbed Walt continues unpacking his clothes.

She sees he has acquired a large Samsonite suitcase.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got myself a condo at that new golf estate. A nice little two-bedroom on the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Remember that Glenhaven development of Porter’s that went belly-up when he filed for chapter eleven last month?”

She nods.

The town had been abuzz with tales of high-flying Porter having lost everything.

Even his pregnant wife had fled back to her parents in Montana or Minnesota or whatever hick flyover state she hailed from.

“Well, me and some of the boys got together and bought the estate on auction. Got it for a real good price too.” Walt is beaming as he starts to shove his clothes into the suitcase. “And I got me the pick of the condos.”

“Who is she?”

He stares at her.

“Huh?”

“Who is the little floozy?”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“Believe me, Lottie, there’s no floozy. There’s only peace and quiet and days of golf and nights of sport on TV. Hog heaven.”

Carlotta feels a little dizzy and has to sit down on the bed.

“You can’t just walk out on me.”

“C’mon, Lottie, this is no way to live. You hate my guts, admit it. You’ve always hated me for being fat, ugly Walt McCourt, not pretty, slick Porter Pringle.” He dumps pairs of shoes into the suitcase. “Look where that pretty face got him . . .”

Walt finds a smile.

“It’s for the best. The twins will be at UCLA in a couple of months. The timing couldn’t be better.”

“What about me?”

“You can keep the house, of course. And I’ll be more than generous in the settlement.”

“Settlement? You’re *divorcing* me?”

“I think that would be best. Let’s put this whole sorry mess behind us.”

He zips up the suitcase and wheels it toward the door.

“You take care now, Lottie. I’m on my cell if you need me.”

He leaves her sitting on the bed in a state of shock.

How will she live without having her loathing of Walt McCourt to sustain her?

Carlotta sees her life stretching into an infinite emptiness.

A future in which she’ll fight—and lose—the battle to stay young.

And she knows that for all the Botox sessions and the painful ordeals under the knife of her cosmetic surgeon, age, gravity—and less than stellar genes—will win out and she’ll become one of those sad, wrinkled trolls that wander the streets and the malls unseen and unloved.

And then another unpleasant realization strikes her.

Gossip-starved Santa Sofia will have a juicy morsel to chew on now.

The whole town will be giggling about how Carlotta McCourt hasn’t even been dumped for a big-breasted bimbo . . .

She’s been dumped for a little white ball and ESPN.

Darcy walks into Brontë's and exchanges waves with the love birds behind the counter.

William and Brontë were married in a small ceremony a few weeks ago, the reception held at the community hall near the beach.

Darcy organized the décor and the catering, and persuaded the guitarist from the band that had played at the Spring Ball to come up from LA and serenade the couple on a lute.

Even the gossips of Santa Sofia—with the notable exception of Carlotta McCourt—had agreed that it was an event of surpassing sweetness.

Darcy, with a glass of Perrier in front of her, still has a few minutes before the ever punctual Eric Royce arrives, so she lifts the letter from her purse.

It is in a plain white envelope.

There is no return address, but the Indian postmark is the giveaway.

Looking down at the letter lying on the table, Darcy realizes she's holding her breath.

*Come on, girl.*

*Open it.*

*It won't bite.*

At last Darcy lifts the envelope and carefully tears it open.

She draws out a sheet of fine notepaper, covered in handwriting that is very neat and old-fashioned.

As Darcy starts to read, the hum of coffee shop recedes and she hears sitars and *tabla* drums, but most of all she hears the beautiful voice of Forrest Forbes telling her that he knows what she did that day with the ring and the so-called winnings.

Telling her how grateful he is to her, and how wonderful India is.

It is an enchanting letter, full of humor and graciousness.

The kind of letter that a woman dreams of receiving, and she reads the last line many times, until she spots Eric's Jeep reversing into a parking bay.

Darcy folds the letter, slides it back into its envelope and hides it in her purse.

When Eric arrives they talk of the sale of her house, a new show he is

pitching to the networks and the California weather (what there is to discuss.)

After an hour of chat Darcy goes home and pours herself the single glass of wine she allows herself every evening and makes a green salad.

She eats watching something silly and unmemorable on TV.

After she showers and slips on her PJs, she sits in bed and scans Forrest's letter again.

If anything, it is even more beguiling on the second read.

And the last line coils up from the page at her, as sinuous as a dancing snake.

*Darcy, it says, there is a night train from Mumbai to Jaipur. It passes though the red sands of the Rajasthan desert. Every morning for the next month I will be on the platform when the train arrives. Forrest.*

Darcy folds the letter.

Ridiculous.

A ridiculous invitation from a ridiculous man.

But when Darcy falls asleep, the folded letter is under her pillow.



Darcy is woken by sunlight streaming through the bedroom window.

She takes a while to open her eyes, letting consciousness creep up on her.

When her eyes finally flicker open and she lifts a hand to take the hair from her face—a hand covered in an exotic filigree of henna—she sees the ring on her finger, the diamonds and sapphires firing back the light in perfect little starbursts.

Darcy stretches and smiles, her body naked beneath the silk sheet, her skin, even at this early hour, already covered in a deliciously sensual sheen of sweat.

She's alone in the huge four-poster and extends a hand to move the layers of diaphanous cloth that enfold the bed, casting rainbow colors across her bare skin.

The bed is in a huge room with a ceiling fan and a floor of intricate black and white mosaic.

A window with an ornate wooden frame presents her with a view of a minaret.

Just as she once dreamed.

As she slides from the bed, the breeze from the fan cool on her skin, she is tempted to pinch herself, to make sure she's not still asleep, for the last month has had all the properties of a dream.

Her impetuous decision to fly to Mumbai and catch that night train through the desert.

Finding Forrest, true to his word, waiting for her on the platform.

Living with Forrest and Lakshmi in this crumbling palace.

Deciding to invest some of the proceeds of the sale of her house (after making a generous bequest to the Children's Shelter) in restoring the palace, and finding that she has a previously unknown talent for décor—for creating an environment of fantasy and opulence for well-heeled tourists.

And, most dream-like of all, falling in love with Forrest in this world of spices and dust and chaos and poverty and breathtaking beauty.

Standing at the window, looking out beyond the palace toward the sprawl of low buildings, she thinks of her wedding yesterday, riding with Forrest in a

*howdah* on the back of Kipling—*he is real!*—after being swathed by Lakshmi and her friends in layers of cloth, wearing a garland of flowers that her husband removed once they were alone in their bed.

Vows were exchanged in the garden of the palace, the ancient maharajah officiating, and Forrest slipped his mother's ring onto Darcy's finger as a crowd of locals looked on.

Well, nearly all were locals: she has a vivid memory of Eric Royce in a turban, dancing wildly late into the night.

The festivities had included traditional dancers, snake charmers, fire eaters, jugglers, and even a fortune telling parrot.

Lakshmi tried to shoo away the parrot's handler, but it seemed to be customary for the bird have its say, so it had perched on Darcy's shoulder and rattled away in Rajasthani.

When Darcy insisted, Lakshmi—sworn off lying for life—reluctantly translated the prophecy into English.

"He says you will have many children. I'm sorry, Darcy."

But Darcy, laughing, knew the molting old bird was right.

She's no Mother Teresa, but she knows there are hordes of kids out there who need help.

And she's here, isn't she?

The door opens and Darcy turns as Forrest enters.

He's dressed in a white toweling robe, not jodhpurs, and carries two glasses of fruit juice, not a riding crop.

But, as Darcy crosses to him and he takes her into his arms, she hears sitars and flutes and *tablas*, and the morning sun does look just like a cocktail olive speared on the nearby minaret, and she knows that, yes, dreams do come true.

THE END

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