

**SALLY
MASON**

**MR.
LOVE**



A Romantic Comedy

Mr. Love

A Romantic Comedy
by
Sally Mason

Also by Sally Mason

[Rent A Husband: A Romantic Comedy](#)

[Gone Hollywood: A Romantic Comedy](#)

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“Any fool can tell the truth,
but it requires a man of some sense
to know how to lie well.”

Samuel Butler

1

When Jane Cooper—exhausted after catching the red-eye from Portland—enters her Manhattan apartment at 6:30 A.M. and hears the muffled thud of ancient disco she assumes it's her vile neighbor and is about to bang on the wall with one of the high heels she's just ditched (what had possessed her to travel in those things?) when she realizes the strains of "Love To Love You Baby" come from her bedroom.

She has to laugh at the image of her live-in fiancé, the oh-so-buttoned-down lawyer Tom Bennett, doing his morning workout to the soundtrack of Donna Summer, something he would *never* let her witness.

Adorable!

As Jane approaches the closed bedroom door and hears thuds and bumps she's pleased she made the impulsive decision the night before to avoid the closing cocktail party of the awful book fair in Oregon—three days of desperate wannabe authors trying to foist their unreadable manuscripts on a real live New York literary agent (okay, *junior* agent) at the interminable pitch sessions—and fly home twelve hours early to surprise Tom on the morning of his twenty-eighth birthday.

She slips a gift-wrapped first edition of *The Firm* from her wheely suitcase and approaches the door. Tom is a big John Grisham fan, which she's almost learned to forgive him for.

The only good thing that happened to her in the last few days was finding this book in a Portland Salvation Army thrift store.

As Jane throws open the bedroom door and shouts "*Surprise!*" she sees something boiling beneath the covers of the bed and is presented with the sight of a pair of naked female butt cheeks dashing into the bathroom.

"Tom?" Jane says.

Her fiancé surfaces from under the comforter wearing a smile designed to win over juries and says, "Janey! Wow!"

Jane, blinking, sure she is suffering some kind of sleep-deprivation induced hallucination, says, "Tom, what's going on?"

Which, really, has to be the dumbest line ever.

Until *he* speaks again, that is.

"Babe, this isn't what you think," Tom says.

Staring down at her fiancé, Jane is aware that the shape under the covers is too bulky to be just that of the slender Tom Bennett, so she whips off the comforter and reveals a blonde woman in some kind of black rubber S&M outfit crouched over his loins like a feeding predator.

Jane, who appears bookish with her glasses and her pale skin, was in fact raised on a diet of sit-coms and edgy stand-up (she knew who Lenny Bruce was long before she made the acquaintance of his near-namesake in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*) and has the habit, when she is stressed, of spewing one-liners.

"Okay, Tom," she says, "please tell me there isn't a large lady with a strap-on hidden in the closet?"

The door to the closet creaks and Jane turns to see a very beefy naked woman sporting a mullet, something oily and obscene jutting from her midriff.

Jane feels her legs turning to liquid and has to put a hand to the wall to stop herself from toppling.

She closes her eyes and breathes away the dizziness.

When she opens them Tom, covering himself with a pillow, stands before her.

His freak show friends, including the blonde who has emerged from the bathroom in Jane's toweling robe—*ew*, this, somehow, is the grossest violation of all—lurk behind him, staring at her.

"Janey," Tom says, "let's keep calm now."

She slaps him through the face with the Grisham novel and he's so shocked that he drops the pillow when he lifts a hand to his stinging face.

Another Jane takes control, and this Jane has her iPhone in her hand, shooting off a succession of pictures of the tableaux that would have made Diane Arbus blush.

"I'm going downstairs to get some coffee," the new Jane says in an admirably calm voice, "and when I return you, your little friends and all your possessions will be gone from my apartment. Drop your keys in the mailbox on your way out. Do you understand, Tom?"

"Janey," he says, "come on, now. Don't do something you'll regret."

"The only thing I regret is not having the stomach to John Wayne Bobbitt you."

This gets a laugh from the blonde, who must be at least fifty, the only one old enough to remember the emasculated Mr. Bobbitt.

“If you’re not gone,” Jane says, wagging her phone in Tom’s face, “these happy snaps will be emailed to the senior partners in your law firm. Are you hearing me, *counselor*?”

“I’m hearing you.”

Jane spins, collects her shoes in the passageway and leaves her apartment.

Alone in the elevator she closes her eyes and rests her face against the cool mirror until she reaches the lobby.

2

That Gordon Rushworth opens the front door of his sister's cottage onto a vista straight from the pages of a travel brochure goes unremarked by him.

He is immune to the charms of the Vermont village—white clapboard houses with picket fences; a picture-ready church with a spire sporting a clock and a weather vane; a cute little Georgian firehouse—and blind to the vivid backdrop of Fall foliage: crimson maples, syrupy yellow poplars and russety oaks, garish in their profusion.

He only has eyes for the postman, a crusty old party who humps his satchel through the streets of East Devon each morning, spending more time exchanging pleasantries with his cronies than he does distributing the mail.

But here he comes, bony knees red as bobbing apples beneath his blue shorts (he seems impervious to the chill that hints at an early winter) and a horsy Puritan's face shadowed by a baseball cap.

Gordon, sipping from a mug of what passes for coffee in his sister's house, pretends to be inspecting a listing wooden fence post, infested with termites, not wanting to appear overeager lest the postman pass the cottage by as he has most days this week.

"Mornin', Professor," the postman says.

"Morning," Gordon says, trying not to let the use of the honorific rankle him.

How is this cretin to know that Gordon's once promising academic career that had begun at Harvard had fizzled and died in a hick college in North Dakota, where as an *assistant* English Literature professor, he was denied tenure and let go with little ceremony or regret three months ago?

That, unable to find employment, he had to return to the loathsome town he'd fled as a teenager and was now camping out in his flakey sister's living room?

Or maybe he does know, this gossip merchant with his tight mouth and rheumy eyes, and uses the title with malice of forethought.

"Professor, you hearin' me?"

"Huh?" Gordon says, focusing on the man's hairy nose.

"Said I got a letter for you."

Gordon all but snatches the envelope from the postman and hurries inside without a word of thanks.

He scans the envelope: that it's addressed to G. Rushworth means nothing.

His sister—who goes by the name Bitsy, from her middle name, Elizabeth—was baptized Gwendolyn, and he flips the envelope half-expecting to see the return address of one of the New Age charlatans who milk his gullible sibling.

When he sees the name of New York's most prestigious literary agency, he feels a tightness in his throat.

This is it, the letter he has been waiting for.

The letter from the most important agent to whom he submitted his massive, ten-years-in-the-writing novel.

There have been rejections already, of course, by email, terse one line dismissals from lesser agents.

But this letter is the one on which he has been pinning all his threadbare hopes.

Too nervous to open it he sets the envelope down on the coffee table and seats himself on the sleeper couch that still holds a blanket and pillow.

Gordon takes a few deep breaths and has just about summoned up the courage to rip open the envelope when the door to his sister's bedroom creaks and she appears, sobbing, her eyes glued to her Kindle as she walks toward the kitchen.

"This is just so beautiful," she says. "So tragically, sorrowfully beautiful."

This is Ivy, the latest bit of self-published chick-lit trash that has captivated the nation.

Even the august *New York Times* reviewed it a few days ago, praising it for its acute insights into the "post-feminist, post-modern, post-everything female psyche."

Bitsy sniffs her way into kitchen, eyes never leaving the glowing face of her e-reader.

Gordon waits for her to disappear from view, mutters what passes as a prayer and opens the envelope.

The page that he draws out is on fine bond paper, with a clean, almost vanilla scent.

When he unfolds the letter and sees that it is handwritten, his heart pounds.

A sign, surely?

Would the great man wield a pen lightly?

Gordon composes himself and reads.

The single paragraph missive has the effect of a hobnail boot in the gut.

Words like *leaden* and *turgid* and *pompous* assault him.

But the last lines are the coup de gras: “Sadly, Mr. Rushworth, your ambitions outstrip your talent and this doorstop of a manuscript could benefit from a crash diet; perhaps if reduced to a modest short story it would be better digested? *Too Long the Night* is too long!”

Gordon lets the page float to the floor and slumps back on the couch, feeling as gutted as one of the deer his savage stepfather had forced the young Gordon to dress on their nightmarish hunting trips.

“Bad news?” Bitsy stands in the kitchen doorway, still holding her Kindle, drinking a herbal tea.

“No, no,” Gordon says, using his shoe to edge the rejection letter and its envelope beneath the couch. “Just some correspondence from South Dakota.”

“You’re lying to me, Gordy.”

“I’m not.”

“I can see it. When you lie your aura turns a nasty shade of puce.”

“Oh, please,” Gordon says, standing, “spare me the tawdry metaphysics.”

“Another agent has rejected your book, right?”

He doesn’t answer, making for the front door.

“How many times have I told you, Gordy, the world doesn’t want brainy novels full of ten-dollar words? It wants this,” she taps her Kindle, “love and light and romance. When are you going to take my advice?”

Hand on the doorknob, he almost spins and says, “Oh, but I did, Bitsy. I took your advice. I hid here all summer when you were away at Camp Chakra or whatever the hell you call it, and in sheer desperation I banged out that execrable piece of junk you and your world can’t seem to get enough of.”

But, of course, he doesn’t.

He just walks out into the street, a thirty-five year old tormented genius in his academic’s uniform of corduroys and tweed jacket with elbow pads.

And the fact that his shlocky piece of chick-lit, written under a female alias, is being downloaded at a rate of one a second—turning him into a very rich man—does nothing to ease his sense of desolation.

No.

If anything, it sharpens it.

3

What gets Jane Cooper through the next couple of hours is a succession of lattes at her local Starbucks and a novel that's absurdly trashy but as addictive as methamphetamine.

Ensnared at her favorite window table she is able to forget her own misery as she loses herself in the life and loves of the wildly promiscuous, totally self-absorbed yet undeniably likeable (and believable) heroine, Suzie Ballinger.

And, best of all, she is reading it for work, so she can dodge any guilt at lowering herself into this treacherous ooze rather than sorting out the messy aftermath of Tom Bennett's little walk on the wild side.

While waiting for her flight last night at Portland airport, Jane had checked her email and found a typically terse communication from her boss, super agent Jonas Blunt, he of the Mensa-endorsed IQ and the Byronic good looks.

"Read *Ivy* soonest & get back to me," he'd written.

Jane had known about the novel, of course, everybody was talking about it at the book fair, all the agents bitching about how yet another self-published writer had evaded them, denying them their juicy chunk of commission.

There'd been a lot of speculation about who Viola Usher, the first-time author, was.

"Oh that *has* to be a pseudonym," Jane said to a fellow agent she met in the washroom between pitches.

"Maybe. I went to school with a Viola."

"But Usher? Come on. Who outside of Poe is called Usher?" Jane said, rinsing her hands at the sink.

"Have you read it?"

"God, no!" Jane said, yanking at the paper towel dispenser.

"I have."

"Really?"

"Yes. And I have to admit, it's not bad. Kinda sexy and kinda smart."

Jane had forgotten the exchange until the email from Jonas got her clicking through to Amazon and downloading the book.

Why he wanted her to read the thing she had no idea, but when Jonas spoke you listened.

On the plane, once the warning lights had died, she'd powered up her iPad fully intending to follow her boss's orders, but instead had been distracted by the latest revisions to a memoir she was desperately trying to get published, written by a woman doctor who'd worked for years in remote parts of Africa and Asia.

The book was touching, affirming and beautifully written and had about as much chance of finding a publisher as tone-deaf Jane did of winning *American Idol*.

An hour out of LaGuardia Jane had reluctantly shut down the memoir and opened the little potboiler that was making a lot of noise and a ton of money.

Within a few pages she could understand why the book was catchy as mono.

As its name hinted, it was set in a fictitious New England college where the heroine was a junior lecturer who, in the first chapters, initiated affairs with the married head of her department; the captain of the lacrosse team; an alcoholic grease monkey from the nearby town and the college's writer in residence, a priapic septuagenarian Nobel Laureate.

By the time the plane was circling to land and a stewardess jabbed Jane's shoulder and ordered her to kill her iPad, she understood the enthusiasm of her fellow agent back in that Portland washroom.

The book was smart.

And sexy.

What Jane hadn't anticipated was that it was also surprisingly moving.

Or is it just tweaking her already fragile emotions, she wonders using a napkin to dab her eyes at her table at Starbucks as she reads the final, heartbreaking pages.

And what does it say about *her* that the first tears Jane has shed since discovering her fiancé of two years—plans well advanced for nuptials in the spring—displaying a side of his character hidden deep beneath his preppy exterior, have been for the travails of a fictional bed-jumper?

But that's it, isn't it?

The success of this book.

It is a finely-tuned soufflé of manipulation.

No wonder women everywhere are shelling out their dollars to download the thing.

She guesses that Viola Usher is the pen-name of some twenty-something graduate of one of those Ivy League colleges.

The details ring too true to be purely fictional.

That Viola Usher remains hidden, refusing to respond to any of the media attention, only increases the mystique of the book.

When Jane's phone warbles Ella Fitzgerald's version of "Dream a Little Dream of Me" (the song she and Tom had already selected for their first dance at their wedding—God she's going to have to change that ring tone pronto) she almost expects her errant fiancé, but comes quickly to attention when her boss's name appears on caller ID.

"Jonas," she says.

"Well? Have you read it?"

"I've just finished it, yes."

"I want to sign her," he says.

"Viola Usher?"

"Yes. I want a piece of this action."

"But she's invisible."

"Exactly."

"So, how are you going to sign her . . . ?"

"You're going to find her."

"How?"

"I leave that up to you. I'm out on the coast and Hollywood is hyperventilating over this book. Find Viola Usher and bring her to me."

He's gone without a goodbye.

Typical Jonas, holding up impossibly high hoops for Jane to jump through.

And little Janey with her Midwestern resilience always grits her teeth and flings herself through them.

But this time, surely, he is asking her for something impossible?

If the slaving media have been unable to track down Viola Usher, then how is Jane going to do it?

She clicks through to the cover of the book and sits staring at it blankly while she sips the dregs of her coffee.

The cover is dominated by an ivy-covered brick wall.

Jane feels as if she is bashing her head against it.

Then she registers a couple of other details.

There is a landscape to the right of the wall.

A Fall landscape: a covered bridge over a creek, with colorful trees in the background.

The bridge that Suzie Ballinger crosses when she flees her life of debauch and returns to the unnamed New England hamlet where she was born, to nurse her ailing mother and recharge herself, no doubt, for the sequel that is certain to come.

Jane stares at the bridge.

Is this a clue?

She copies the cover and emails it to her younger brother.

She could never call him her *little brother*, since he is morbidly obese.

Then she speed-dials him on her cell phone.

“Sis,” he says, answering after the second ring, “what’s up with this book cover?”

“You see the bridge?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“I’ll buy you the game of your choice if you find that bridge for me.”

“Done,” he says and he’s gone.

Her brother is twenty-two and weighs 400 pounds. He still lives at home with their parents, shut in his room, experiencing the world on-line and through Playstation, gaming his brain to mush.

Jane had always felt so superior to him, with her nice job and her nice apartment (which she can no longer afford now that her not-so-nice ex-fiancé will no longer be carrying most of the rental) and her life in Manhattan.

She pays the check and walks the two blocks to her apartment and rides up in the elevator.

When she opens the door she almost hopes Tom is there with flowers, chocolates and apologies.

And some excuse for his bizarre behavior.

But he and his freak show are gone.

Jane sinks down on the couch and feels about as desolate as she has ever felt.

When her phone rings the only reason she yanks it from her pocket is to kill that ring tone.

Her brother.

“Jimmy?”

“East Devon, Vermont.”

“Huh?”

“The bridge. It’s in a town called East Devon.”

“How did you find it so fast?” she asks, her heart sinking.

If it was some well-known tourist site, then it wouldn’t be much of a clue after all.

“Oh, I wrote a quick app that did a visual recognition match to all available covered bridge pics on the web.”

“In English.”

“Look, there’s only one picture of that bridge on-line. On some guy’s *Flickr* account.”

“Is it that shot?”

“No. But it’s definitely the same bridge.”

“Who is the guy?”

“Some German. Looks like he was touring New England a coupla years back. This bridge is seriously obscure.”

“Okay, email me name of the game you want, Jimmy. Thanks.”

Jane ends the call and Googles East Devon, Vermont.

A village in the south of the state.

Not one of the bed-and-breakfast towns.

Not a tourist spot.

Just a little hamlet.

Like the one in the book.

It’s a long shot.

It may be a waste of time.

But something tells her that Viola Usher is in this town.

She calls Jonas.

“So?” he says, “have you found her?”

“Not yet, but I have a lead.”

“Yes?”

“I think she’s in a small town in Vermont.”

“Then why aren’t *you* in Vermont?”

“It’ll mean hiring car and driving up. There will be some expenses.”

“Why the hell do you have a company credit card? Just get going.”

Jane, listening to dead air, lowers her phone and looks at the cheerless apartment, thinking how pleasant it would be to escape and take a long drive through New England in the Fall.

She dumps the soiled clothes from her wheely, steels herself and goes into the bedroom, the tangled sheets and the faint smell of musk still hanging in

the air nearly undoing her.

Hurrying, she finds clean clothes, packs her suitcase, walks out and slams the door.

Gordon Rushworth arrives at the Maple Creek Bridge without remembering how he got there, some internal GPS leading him along in his fugue state.

He hasn't seen this bridge in the nearly twenty years since he crossed it when he left East Devon for Harvard, swearing never to return.

The covered bridge is disused now, blocked off by 55-gallon drums and white stones.

East Devon is connected to the world by a new road that skirts the river and the old bridge has fallen into disrepair, its wooden floor so rotten that the sluggish waters of Maple Creek are visible through it.

The surrounding trees are dense and all that can be seen of the town is the skinny church spire, reaching above the forest that's as gaudy as an over painted old hag.

Gordon is sweating, despite the crisp Fall day, and breathes heavily.

When he sits on a rock to get his breath back he feels as if he's sinking into his past.

As the almost middle-aged Gordon sits staring at the old bridge, oppressed by feelings of failure and disillusionment, he can't help but travel back in time to when last he can remember being truly happy, and his memory returns the bridge to its former glory, pitched roof glistening, wood painted and varnished, twelve-year-old Gordon and his best friend Suzie Baldwin riding up on their bikes, laughing, the golden sun of that endless summer drawing them into the creek that they entered as children and emerged, wet, dripping, laughing as something else when they stood in the shadow of the bridge and kissed for the very first time.

The memory is so sharp and painful that adult Gordon is driven to his feet and he feels a salty sting on his cheeks that is not sweat.

Good God, man, pull yourself together, he thinks as he dabs away the tears with one of the monogrammed handkerchiefs he favors.

But that kiss is as fresh on his lips as if it happened yesterday.

Gordon has had relationships with women, even came perilously close to marrying a few years ago, but he has never loved anybody the way he loved Suzie Baldwin, with her freckles and her cropped helmet of dark hair.

The last time he saw her the wisps that remained of her hair were hidden by a beanie, her face gaunt, eyes made ancient by the chemotherapy and the leukemia that killed her at thirteen.

What made the rejections of *Too Long the Night* doubly painful was that it was his love song to Suzie.

A coming-of-age novel about a boy who watches the girl he loves die and then shuts himself inside his intellect, distancing himself from the hicks around him, fleeing across this bridge into a better life.

A life of ideas and ideals.

Of philosophy.

Of culture.

In the book Suzie Baldwin became Sarah Oatman and Gordon himself was Lance Prescott, a more handsome, smarter, version of himself.

Not smart enough, it would seem, for the publishing gatekeepers of Manhattan.

The irony, of course, is that in the summer, when Gordon, left adrift and rudderless after being fired, found himself alone for a month when his sister went off to some New Age boot camp, it was Suzie Baldwin who arrived unbidden and got him writing again.

The Suzie Baldwin who had lived on inside Gordon's head through his teens and into his twenties, always there with a joke, with advice.

Always there to kick him in the butt when he became lazy or discouraged.

She'd stopped visiting him as he neared thirty, no room in pompous self-important Gordon Rushworth's life for an imaginary friend.

Or any other friends, the truth be told.

The Suzie who colonized his imagination this past summer had grown into a hottie.

A libidinous, fun-loving girl with no patience for conventions.

As Suzie Ballinger, without much intervention from Gordon, she spun a picaresque tale of sex and seduction.

After the decade spent working on *Too Long the Night*, the book that became *Ivy* was a frothy romp.

Made all the more pleasurable because it afforded Gordon the opportunity to take childish revenge on people who had slighted him.

The department head who had scorned his master's thesis was caught, literally, with his pants down when Suzie seduced him in his wood-paneled office.

The high school jock who had bullied Gordon became the moronic captain of the lacrosse team, reduced to tears and laughable attempts at verse when Suzie dropped him.

The alcoholic grease monkey was a barely disguised version of the stepfather who had tormented him.

The Nobel Laureate was a writer-in-residence at a college Gordon taught at years ago, who had read a chapter of *Too Long the Night* and dismissed it as “twinky trash.”

They were all there, gutted and emasculated by Suzie Ballinger, until she had disappeared from their lives to return to her small town and nurse her dying mother and reunite with her teenage sweetheart in a treacly swirl of shame-making wish-fulfillment.

The book, a mere slip of a thing beside *Too Long the Night*, was written in a three week frenzy, at the end of which Gordon was bearded, even skinnier than usual (in his sister’s absence he frequently neglected to eat) and sour smelling.

He accepted that this book was an expiation of sorts.

A dumping of emotional and psychological baggage.

Of one thing he was certain: it would remain on the hard drive of his laptop, hidden from the eyes of the world.

Then his sister returned and brought reality with her.

There were bills to pay and his presence (although she was too kind to say so) was a burden.

Bitsy, divorced and childless, earned a living scouring Southern Vermont and Western Massachusetts for antiques and bric-a-brac that she sold to stores in the tourist towns.

She had an eye and could bargain with the best of them but her income was meager.

And Gordon knew that part of that income was tithed to these hocus pocus organizations she was drawn to.

One morning, eating breakfast (toast and coffee for Gordon, fruit and herbal tea for Bitsy), his sister had said, “Gordon, may I ask a question?”

“Of course,” he said, crunching through his toast.

“Why don’t you try and write something different? Something more . . . commercial?”

When she saw how he was glaring at her she blushed and shrugged.

“I know you think I’m a philistine, but I see writers with no talent at all

making fortunes.”

He slammed down his coffee cup.

“I could no more write some bestselling hokum than you could become Miss Vermont.”

When he saw the hurt on his sister’s plain, aging face, he felt a pang of guilt.

“I’m sorry, Bitsy, I misspoke.”

“No, I shouldn’t stick my nose into your business.”

“It’s just that I don’t write mainstream fiction. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Suzie Baldwin appeared right there in the kitchen, standing behind his sister with her hands on her hips saying, “Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

“Shut up,” Gordon said, speaking to the specter.

“No need to be rude, Gordon,” Bitsy said, standing up to clear the breakfast things. “You’ve made your point.”

“Forgive me, Bitsy, I’m not myself.”

She nodded, faked a smile and dumped dishes in the sink.

The clatter of mail through the slit in the front door drew her from the kitchen.

Gordon followed, and saw her lifting a couple of envelopes.

“Anything for me?” he asked.

“No. Just bills.”

She took the mail to her bedroom and closed the door.

A few minutes later she came out carrying the keys to her elderly Volvo station wagon.

“I’m going across to Pankhurst. The contents of an old house are being sold, I may sniff out a good piece or two.”

“Okay,” he said.

When her car rattled away down the road, he booted up his laptop and opened Ivy.

It took him two hours to read it, and what he read filled him with distaste.

It was slick, trashy and superficial.

Filled with sex and sentimentality.

It shamed him that he had been able to write such a book, that those cheesy tropes had come so easily to him.

He tried to console himself that even the greats wrote trifles.

Entertainments.

But this, he knew, was nothing but garbage.

He used the cursor to highlight the file, right-clicked on the touchpad and was about to send *Ivy* to the recycle bin when he saw his sister's face as she entered the bedroom carrying the sheaf of bills.

Gordon, broke with no promise of employment, was skewered by guilt.

"Publish it."

Suzie appeared, leaning against the wall, arms folded.

"Never."

"It's the best thing you've ever written and you know it."

"It's chick-lit," he said.

"At least it's not that pretentious drivel you usually write, all lofty ideas and philosophizing. It's about flesh-and-blood people with feelings. And appetites."

He shook his head.

"And it'll sell like crazy," Suzie said before she disappeared.

Even imaginary women, it seemed, had to have the last word.

Gordon sat for a long time, staring unseeing at the wall, then he made a decision.

He'd publish the damned thing as an ebook.

Maybe it *would* earn a couple of dollars.

He spent the morning investigating how this could be achieved and discovered that the process was ridiculously easy.

What took the most time was the cover.

Gordon, a promising artist as a boy, put his rusty skills to use, found a photograph of an ivy covered wall on-line and did a bit of work in Photoshop.

The name Viola Usher came to him unbidden.

Viola, from Shakespeare's, *Twelfth Night*, (who had disguised her sex, a little joke of Gordon's) and Usher from—of course—Edgar Allen Poe.

He stared at the cover and it was adequate, he supposed.

Then something, some previously unacknowledged superstition, had him searching through a box of his junk Bitsy kept in a closet in the kitchen, and he very nearly teared up when he found pictures of himself and Suzie.

He skipped them and found a photograph of Maple Creek Bridge that he had taken as a teenager.

He scanned it, Photoshopped it a little, and set it as the background to the ivy-covered wall.

It worked.

By the time his sister returned, the rear of her car jammed with booty she had picked up for a song, *Ivy* had been uploaded and would appear for sale on-line by the morning.

Bitsy, her usual cheer restored by her successful day, made pasta and they split a bottle of wine, and by the time a slightly tipsy Gordon fell asleep on the couch he had forgotten about the book.

But the world had taken note of it . . .

Just as Suzie had known it would.

“She’s dead,” Gordon says, rising from the rock overlooking the bridge. “Will you finally get it through your head that Suzie is dead?”

He almost expects her to appear and contradict him but she doesn’t and Gordon leaves the bridge and wanders home through the town that—though it has all the attributes that would seem to make it a tourist magnet—wears an air of failure like a blanket.

Stores are closed and boarded up.

There are potholes in the streets.

When he arrives back at Bitsy’s house there’s no sign of her Volvo.

Inside he boots up his computer to check his email and finds only the usual spam yelling about Viagra and holidays in Bermuda.

He sighs and clicks open the sales records for *Ivy*.

It has sold over two hundred thousand copies.

Ten thousand today alone.

It’s going to take another week for the first royalty payments to flood Gordon’s parched bank account and then he’ll be able to lift the financial weight from his harried sister’s shoulders.

Gordon knows that he’s going to need all his skills at fiction to come up with an explanation for his sudden windfall.

Jane Cooper feels a giddy rush of happiness as she speeds the nippy little rental Honda across the RFK Bridge, leaving Manhattan (and her misery) behind.

She likes to drive.

Coming from the Midwest she's been driving since she was a teenager and it was one of the things she missed living in Manhattan, where she'd surrendered her car and become just another face on the subway.

Not wanting to play any of the music on her iPod (too many memories of Tom) she tunes the radio to some easy listening station that gets her happily up the Hutchinson River Parkway and into Connecticut, the GPS's reassuringly stern female voice guiding her.

A couple of hours into the drive, somewhere near Hartford, her happiness starts to leak from her and she feels icy tentacles of anxiety playing her nerves like a banjo.

What the hell is she doing?

She's lost her relationship, does she want to lose her job, too?

Taking off into New England on a self-indulgent whim, looking to escape her own misery with nothing but the slenderest of clues linking Vermont to Viola Usher . . .

Getting on the bad side of Jonas Blunt would be career suicide.

She has seen him dispatching previously favored minions with all the emotion of an automaton.

Jane has been with the Blunt Agency for five years, carefully negotiating perilous waters, slowly trying to make herself indispensable to Jonas.

She still earns peanuts, of course, and has to live with *junior agent* printed on her business cards, trusted to represent only a few unimportant authors.

But what if she's right?

What if Viola Usher *is* in East Devon, Vermont?

A coup like that would put her on the fast track to promotion.

Crossing into Vermont from Massachusetts, the Fall leaves a burst of color in the late afternoon sunlight, she tries to calm herself.

She has merely acted on her intuition.

Hasn't that paid off in the past?

About as often as it has failed you, the voice of negativity assures her.

Think of how wrong she'd been about Tom Bennett, a sexually perverse little creep disguised in a Brooks Brothers suit.

How eagerly she had allowed herself to be wooed by him when she'd met him within her first months of arriving in New York.

A handsome young associate at the legal firm that handled the Blunt Agency's business.

At first she'd asked herself why he would be interested in her, then she'd allowed herself to be swept away.

She was attractive in a severe way, with her black bob and her smart-girl glasses, and peeled free of the dark, almost mannish, suits she favored, her body was slender and well formed.

Gamine, Tom had called her.

Said she was sexy in a kind of Audrey Hepburnish way.

Which had delighted her—*Breakfast at Tiffany's* had been her favorite movie as a teenager.

She'd soaked up its sophistication, swearing to herself that she, too, would be one of those chic Manhattan girls one day.

And so she had.

With her apartment in the Meat Packing District, a job at the hottest lit agency in Manhattan and a gorgeous husband-to-be.

She understands now that she'd been perfect for the Jekyll and Hyde that was Tom Bennett.

Her job had her traveling frequently: attending the book fairs and conferences that Jonas Blunt was too mighty to waste his time on.

Acting as his emissary and paying personal visits to the clutch of aging big name authors on Jonas's books.

These crusty literary types didn't make a huge amount of money for the agency, but they lent it a certain chic.

Meanwhile Jonas was able to party on both coasts with his celebrity clients: fashion models and actresses who wrote cookery, yoga and diet books that sold like crazy, made her boss wealthy and had him frequently splashed on the society pages.

And while she was away Tom had shed his suit and turned into something vile and filthy.

In their bed.

Eew.

As Jane crosses into Vermont her cell phone rings and she has to force herself not feel some pang of hope that it may be Tom.

She clears her throat when she sees it's Jonas Blunt.

"Are you there yet?" he asks.

"I'm en route."

"I've just had breakfast with Raynebeau Jones," he says, casually dropping the name of Hollywood's hottest young actress. "She feels she was born to play Suzie Ballinger and I think she's right."

Suzie, despite her sexual proclivities, is very smart, which makes the character memorable.

Raynebeau Jones is an airhead.

Jane says, "That's interesting."

"Very," Jonas says. "I told her that we're on the brink of signing Viola Usher and that we'd very shortly be in a position to negotiate the sale of the movie rights."

"Isn't that a little premature?"

"I thought you'd found her?"

"I'm following a lead."

There's a pause, then when Jonas speaks his voice is menacingly level.

"Okay, here's how it's going to go: you find Viola Usher and sign her and you'll get a corner office with an agent sign on the door. Screw this up and you're history. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Jonas," Jane says, her voice breaking.

6

When Gordon, halfway into a bottle of his absent sister's Chilean cabernet, responds to a knock at the front door and yanks it open to reveal Suzie Baldwin illuminated by the dim porch light, he yells, "Will you for heaven's sake please just go away!"

He is about to slam the door when he sees this isn't the spectral Suzie, but a young woman with bobbed black hair and glasses, who stares at him in shock.

"I'm terribly sorry if this is a bad time," she says.

"No," Gordon says, "my apologies. I thought you were some salesperson who has been bothering me. How may I help you?"

"You're Gordon Rushworth?"

"Yes."

"The author?"

"I am he," Gordon says drawing himself up to his full and not inconsiderable height.

The woman sticks out a hand.

"My name's Jane Cooper. I'm an agent with the Jonas Blunt Agency in New York."

Gordon is suddenly very, very sober.

He submitted a copy of *Too Long the Night* to Jonas Blunt, of course.

But knowing the man's reputation for rudeness and his scorn for unsolicited manuscripts, he had not been surprised when there was not a reply.

But here this woman is, in the flesh.

"You're here about the book?" he says.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, please come in," he says stepping back and opening the door.

As she enters the living room, Gordon is suddenly aware of how squalid it must seem with its tatty furniture (somehow Bitsy's good taste in décor does not extend to her own home) and the blanket and pillow folded up on the couch.

Gordon dumps the bedding on the floor and points to one of the chairs.

“Please, have a seat.”

The woman sits.

“Would you like a glass of wine?”

She hesitates, then says, “That would be nice. Thank you.”

He ducks into the kitchen, returns with a glass and pours some wine into it.

Handing her the drink he says, “So, how did you find me?”

“A woman named Grace at the diner directed me to you.”

“She has a big mouth,” he says and then quickly adds, “And an even bigger heart.”

“I stopped in to ask for information and ended eating too many of her really addictive molasses cookies.”

“*Joe Froggers* they’re called around here. I grew up on them.”

“So you’re from East Devon?”

“Born and bred, but I left as a teenager. I’m just back for a short sabbatical.”

Gordon feels he has paid lip service to small talk and is bursting to get to the subject at hand.

They must want to represent him if this woman has traveled all the way from New York City.

“So, you liked *Too Long the Night*?” he asks.

She stares at him blankly as she lowers her wine glass.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t understand.”

“My novel?”

She shakes her head.

“Oh, God, I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“You said you were here about the book?”

“I am here about a book, yes. *Ivy*, by Viola Usher.”

Gordon feels as if he’s caught in middle of a multiple vehicle wreck, getting hammered from all sides.

His disappointment at Jane Cooper not knowing about *Too Long the Night* is trumped by the terrifying realization that somehow she has broken his cover.

That she knows he’s responsible for that bit of sleazy trash.

That he’s Viola Usher.

“I’m afraid I don’t have the faintest idea of what you’re talking about,” he says, his voice sounding strangled.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Rushworth. Have you heard of *Ivy*?"

He looks down his patrician nose at her.

"I have not."

"It's a very sexy romance, self-published, written by an unknown author who we're desperate to sign."

"I see, and just what does this have to do with me?"

"Oh, nothing directly."

He relaxes enough to gulp the rest of his wine.

"There's a bridge on the cover of the book that I have traced to East Devon. I thought that Viola Usher may live here. Grace didn't know her, but she said you're an author and I thought that perhaps you may have some idea of where I can find Ms. Usher. A long shot I know."

"Yes," he says. "A very long shot."

He's about to shoo the woman out when he sees an opportunity here.

"You say this book is called *Ivy*?"

"Yes."

"Do you perhaps have a copy with you?"

"Only on my iPad. It's not available in print."

"Ah, I'll have no truck with those gadgets," he says.

A lie of course, he has a Kindle hidden in the suitcase he's living out of.

"Did you want to read it?" Jane Copper asks.

"Well, it seems a shame that you've driven all the way out here on a wild goose chase. I thought that if I read it, then perhaps I may be able to help you find the author, if she's a local."

"I could leave you my iPad," she says, digging in the bag that she dumped on the floor beside her chair.

"No, no," he says, holding up a hand. "I'm a real Luddite, but I understand that I can download a copy and read it on my laptop?"

"That's true."

"I'll do it right away and read it tonight. We can meet at Grace's for brunch and I'll report back."

"I'd be really grateful, Mr. Rushworth."

"Gordon, please."

"Gordon."

He looks at her.

"But I'm afraid there is going to be a little *quid pro quo*."

"Oh?"

"I'll read your novel if you read mine."

She smiles at him.

"I suppose that's fair. I'll take it back with me to New York."

He wags a finger at her.

"I was thinking that you'd make a start tonight, and you could give me your impressions at brunch."

"I am a little tired."

"Would it be unreasonable for you to read, say, five or six chapters?"

He digs into his suitcase and withdraws a spiral bound wad of paper as fat as a telephone directory.

He sees her eyes widen.

"That's quite some book," she says.

"I hope you still feel that way when you've read it."

She takes the manuscript and dumps it into her shoulder bag, which hangs heavy when she stands.

"Well, let me get across to my room at the Sugar Maple Inn."

"Don't let the bed bugs bite."

"I hope that's a joke?"

"Only partly," he says, with a smile.

Jane Cooper drags her mouth down in reply and he shows her out, a subtle hint of her perfume left in the air.

Gordon sloshes wine into his glass and takes stock.

A bizarre situation, of course.

And one fraught with peril.

But surely he can turn it to his advantage?

He empties the bottle and falls asleep on the couch, convinced that he can.

Jane Cooper, propped up in a lumpy bed at the Sugar Maple Inn reading Gordon Rushworth's atrocious novel, sees a cockroach scuttling across the wooden floor toward her suitcase.

Before she can stop herself she hurls the bulky manuscript and squashes the roach.

About all the book is good for.

Jane, dressed in a T-shirt and sweats, gets out of bed and, using a Kleenex, her mouth making a little moue of distaste, cleans the splattered bug from the back of the manuscript.

She flushes the Kleenex away, washes her hands and returns to the bed, leaving the manuscript lying on the floor.

No way in hell is she *ever* going to read another word of that tome.

It is pretentious, ridiculously over-written and stultifyingly boring.

To say the characters are made of cardboard would be to suggest they have dimension.

What is she going to say to Gordon Rushworth in the morning?

She'll get him to go first, she decides.

Tell her what he has gleaned from reading *Ivy*.

If he's helpful to her—and, hearing Jonas's cool voice on the phone earlier, prays that he will be—she'll leave him with the impression that she likes his book and will do her best to get her boss to like it too.

If Rushworth arrives with nothing in the way of help, she'll tell him that his book is just not her thing, leave it on the table and head on back to New York

What the hell, if he can't help her she'll be out of a job anyway.

Despite her very distressing day, she feels a twinge of compassion for Gordon Rushworth.

He is clearly an intelligent man, if a little pompous.

And not bad looking, in an appealingly rumpled, bookish way.

But he's monumentally untalented as a writer and she can only imagine how painful it will be for him to have spent a decade on this book, only to face its inevitable rejection.

Well, he can always self-publish.

There may be a few suckers out there prepared to part with a couple of dollars to read his drivel.

But a man like Gordon Rushworth would never be satisfied with that.

He wants his genius to be acknowledged by New York City publishers and the coterie of reviewers who write for the major newspapers and magazines.

He didn't say, but Jane is certain he is an academic of some sort, hence the sabbatical.

Probably teaches English Literature.

Well, better that he forget his ambitions to be a writer and return to whatever crusty Ivy League college he is a faculty member of.

Jane, almost drifting off to sleep, sits bolt upright and, despite her earlier resolve never to touch Gordon Rushworth's book again, she stretches across and snags the manuscript and opens it on her knees, not even worrying that she may be getting roach juice on her sweats.

She skims through the book, zooming along with Lance Prescott as he watches his childhood sweetheart waste away and die (this tragedy presented with all the emotional insight of a Hallmark card, bogged down with pages of Lance pondering the meaning of life and death), fights off the high school bullies who torment the young intellectual, and finally makes his way to an East Coast college where he forgets about love and dedicates himself to (in his words) "the life of the mind."

Jane powers up her iPad and opens *Ivy*, clicking through the pages, until she bursts out laughing.

The coincidences are too numerous to ignore.

The small Vermont town.

The bullies.

The drunken stepfather.

The East Coast college.

Sarah Oatman, the tragic, Salinger-sprouting, ingénue of *Too Long the Night* lives on as Suzie Ballinger, the horny, Salinger-sprouting heroine of *Ivy*.

"Thank you, God," Jane says, slumping down onto the bed with her eyes closed and a stupid grin plastered across her face.

She has found Viola Usher.

And she's having brunch with him tomorrow.

Bitsy Rushworth loves her brother, but she doesn't like him.

A contradiction that she mulls over while driving her Volvo through the breathtaking Fall landscape, leaving East Devon behind, making her usual Saturday morning pilgrimage to a farm forty minutes from her home.

A farm that houses the Quant Foundation, headed by Daniel Quant, a man who has been responsible for a radical shift in Bitsy's thinking over the last year.

It's Quant's philosophy that enables her to embrace her seemingly contradictory feelings for Gordon.

"Be thankful for the challenge of this contradiction," Quant had told her in a one-on-one counseling session shortly after Gordon had dumped himself on her. "You have attracted this relationship with your brother, which means it is precisely what you need in your life at this moment. It is fueling your own evolution."

"And what will happen when I've evolved enough?" she asked.

Quant had laughed, his piercing blue eyes disappearing into a ripple of wrinkles.

"Then you'll be able to tell the freeloading S.O.B to shape up or ship out."

Just one of the contradictions of Quant himself, that he could make solemn pronouncements one moment and then sound like a longshoreman the next.

Part of his appeal, along with his tanned skin and graying hair worn cropped close to his skull.

It was terribly clichéd, Bitsy knew, to fall for a self-help guru, but she'd fallen for Daniel Quant.

And fallen hard.

Since the end of her very short-lived marriage nearly twenty years ago—when her husband, an academic at a minor East Coast college, had burst out of the closet what could Bitsy do but gather her few belongings and what was left of her pride and slink back to East Devon?—she has experimented with everything from yoga, to transcendental meditation to holotropic breath work.

No New Agey event has taken place within a hundred mile radius of East Devon without Bitsy gassing up the old Volvo and hitting the self-realization

trail.

But the only realization she'd arrived at was that she was alone and lonely and probably always would be.

Then she'd picked up a flier at a health food store in Brattleboro, advertising a talk by Daniel Quant of the Quant Foundation.

Located on a farm close to East Devon.

Bitsy had seen too many shaggy, neo-hippie farming communes (topless lactating women with hairy armpits; feral children; weed-smoking men sorely in need of dentistry) to be interested, then she spotted the couple who were handing out the fliers.

They were clean and trim in tasteful summer wear.

He had neatly cropped hair and (when he smiled and handed a flier to a passerby) good teeth. She was pretty enough to play a housewife in a suburban sit-com.

No, not typical at all.

So Bitsy had driven across to the farm the next Saturday and had been pleasantly surprised.

The farm was not a commune, home only to Daniel Quant and a few of his personal assistants.

Assistants of both genders and a variety of ages, which seemed to dispel the horny guru cliché.

Growing from the side of the old brick farmhouse was a new two-story glass and wood structure that housed the Foundation.

It was in a hall in this building that Daniel Quant spoke to an audience of around a hundred people.

What he said wasn't all that revelatory, a synthesis of various Eastern-flavored philosophies all tied together by the string theory, but it was the way he said it that impressed Bitsy.

She was swept away by the sheer force of his personality.

And Daniel wasn't at all creepy.

He was humorous and likeable.

A regular guy.

Almost.

Telling people what they were desperate to hear: how to be happy.

Bitsy became a frequent visitor and spent a month at the Foundation in summer, attending classes and helping with fundraising.

Daniel Quant had some money, it seemed.

But he wasn't wealthy enough to run the Foundation out of his back pocket.

Bitsy, although she'd never been asked to, made a small contribution each time she visited.

Today, as she drives past the Quant Foundation sign, she feels a lifting of her spirits as she always does.

She parks the Volvo beside the other cars, SUVs and fancy sedans rubbing shoulders with old pick-ups, and makes her way into the hall, greeting a lot of familiar faces.

Daniel comes in and although he smiles, he carries with him an air of seriousness, and the assembled group quietens.

"I'm going to say this plainly. The Foundation has been funded both by me and by generosity of the wider community. It was revealed to me yesterday that a trusted advisor has been embezzling funds from my private accounts."

There are murmurs of shock and he holds up his hands.

"The man confessed what he has done and has chosen to hand himself over to the authorities. But the money is gone never to return."

He looks around the room, his handsome face unsmiling.

"Friends, the simple reality is this: unless we are the recipient of a windfall—and I'm talking a truckload of cash here—the Foundation is going to have to close its doors."

He shrugs.

"I'm interpreting this as a positive challenge. As an acid test of where the Foundation is and where it is meant to be. And I've had to remind myself that holding on to the Foundation is like holding my breath—I'll suffocate. So, I'm going to let go and hand it over to the winds and see where they blow us. Thank you."

He walks out, leaving the room in shock.

People start to whisper and chatter and there is talk of cake sales and fairs.

Bitsy is too distraught to join in.

She walks back to her car, devastated, as if the central pillar supporting her world has been pulled loose, leaving her in a freefall that has her panicked and terrified.

9

When Gordon, crossing the East Devon square, finds himself patting his pockets for a pack of cigarettes, he realizes how nervous he is.

He kicked the vile habit a decade ago.

Passing a couple of sad stalls selling junk (trying for the Ye Olde Village market thing and not succeeding) he gets the pungent whiff of tobacco smoke and sees a pimply early-teenage girl with canary yellow hair selling used books, puffing as she bops to music on her iPod.

Gordon has to restrain himself from bumming a cigarette from the delinquent.

He takes a deep breath, trying to tamp down his twin terrors: that Jane Cooper will sneer at his novel and that his sentimental gesture of putting the picture of the old bridge on the cover of *Ivy* has led to his exposure and humiliation—a serious, literary novelist, reduced to writing women’s romance.

Pushing these thoughts away, he does his best to stroll casually toward Grace’s Field to Fork.

The eatery was known simply as Grace’s Diner when he was growing up in East Devon. Even dowdy Grace, with her beak of a nose and plow horse hocks has succumbed to cuteness in the expectation of the tourist boom that has never come to East Devon.

Since his return a few months ago Gordon’s heard many explanations as to why the town hasn’t taken off like its neighbors: the road linking it to Route 7 is poorly maintained; the town is overshadowed by the just-too-nearby Brattleboro; there hasn’t been enough support from the various tourism associations.

Oddly, the explanation that makes the most sense to him is his sister’s hocus pocus take on the situation: East Devon has bad *feng shui*, which she blames on a legacy of negative energy from a massacre in the town during the Revolution.

He doesn’t buy the massacre thing but the town *is* depressing, with an all-pervasive atmosphere of gloom and failure.

A good place to leave.

Gordon, you are a harbinger of doom, he tells himself as he enters Grace's, setting off a distorted electronic version of "Yankee Doodle" when he opens the door.

Even though he's a little early Jane Cooper already sits at a window table drinking coffee and eating a plate of Grace's signature Red Flannel Hash with corn fritters and maple syrup.

"Good morning," Gordon says, sitting opposite the agent.

"Morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

"You weren't kidding about the bedbugs."

"Commiserations," he says, sounding like a pompous idiot.

Grace appears with her notebook and Gordon asks for a coffee, too nervous to eat.

Stilling his hands on the table top when he finds them fiddling with a menu, he leans forward and says, "So . . ."

Jane Cooper sets down her cutlery and dabs at her mouth with a napkin.

Her face, free of make-up, is delicately boned, and her eyes behind the Buddy Holly glasses (is this some trendy New York thing?) are a pleasing shade of violet.

He wishes there was a smile on her unpainted but quite generous lips.

"Are you an honest man, Gordon?" Jane asks, those violet eyes drilling him.

He tries for levity.

"As the day is long."

"Or the night?"

"Hah," he says, "touché."

"If I asked you a question would you give me a straight answer?"

"I would do my best."

There is a suspenseful pause as Grace delivers Gordon's coffee and tries to interest Jane in a slice of Vermont apple pie.

The agent politely refuses but Grace persists and Gordon has to bite his tongue to stop himself from telling her exactly where she can shove her pie.

At last she waddles off and Jane adjusts her glasses on her nose and fixes her eyes on Gordon again.

"Ask away," he says.

"Are you Viola Usher?"

The question that he has feared most robs him of his breath, and he tries to

cover his distress by taking a sip of the coffee.

A mistake.

The java is scalding hot, getting him to spray it onto the table top in a fit of coughing.

He scrambles for napkins and wipes up his mess.

“My apologies,” he says, wheezing.

When he regains his breath, he says, “Why on earth would you ask me something so absurd?”

“You’re answering a question with a question,” Jane says.

“Of course I’m not Viola Usher,” he says. “There, asked and answered.”

He tries to meet her eyes but finds his gaze drifting out to where the geezer of a postman is in conversation with the local reverend.

“You’re lying,” Jane Cooper says.

“I beg your pardon?” he says, shocked at how forthright she is.

“I said, you’re lying.”

He stands.

“I refuse to be insulted like this. I’m leaving.”

“I doubt it,” she says, gaze unwavering.

She could win a fortune playing poker in Las Vegas.

Gordon subsides into his seat.

“The only reason I’m staying is that I feel I deserve to hear your opinion of my novel.”

“Which novel is that?” she asks. “*Too Long the Night* or *Ivy*?”

“You’re toying with me.”

Jane shrugs.

“Well,” she says, “I read the first seven chapters of *Too Long the Night*.”

“And?”

“I was overcome . . .”

“You were?”

“Overcome with the realization that there were far too many glaring similarities between it and Viola Usher’s book.”

“This again.”

“Okay, Gordon, indulge me. Both books have their protagonists leaving small towns in Vermont for unnamed Ivy League colleges.”

“Hardly conclusive.”

“Both Sarah Oatman in *Too Long the Night* and Suzie Ballinger in *Ivy* spend an awful lot of time talking about *The Catcher in the Rye*.”

“Well, they’re both rights-of-passage novels of sorts, so is it terribly surprising that they would reference the greatest bildungsroman of them all?”

“Did you honestly just say *bildungsroman*?”

“I did.”

“You’re pompous *and* a liar.”

“I don’t have to sit here and be insulted,” he says, but he stays in his seat.

“Gordon, I know about Suzie Baldwin.”

He stares at her.

“How?”

Jane shakes her head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Gordon points toward Grace who has her back to them, delivering an order to another table.

“That old gossip monger told you, didn’t she?”

Jane waves this away.

“Look, I don’t want to trample on your feelings—”

“Oh, think of them as little purple grapes and trample away.”

“—but I know you and Suzie were close. Clearly, her death inspired you to write *Too Long the Night*.”

“Wow, you are perspicacious. No wonder you’re a literary agent.”

“I understand you’re upset.”

“*Upset* doesn’t come close.”

“Gordon, please: Suzie Baldwin, Suzie Ballinger? Is that a coincidence?”

“Yes, along with all the others.”

“Okay, I’m going to be straight with you.”

“And what have you been so far?”

“I was just warming up.”

“Okay, fine, do your worst.”

“I spent a little time Googling you this morning and charted the downward trajectory of your academic career. You were fired from some obscure college in South Dakota three months ago and I’d say your chances of employment are slim.”

“I told you: I’m taking a well-earned sabbatical.”

“And you’ve probably received a boatload of rejections already for *Too Long the Night*?”

“Nonsense, I’m weighing offers from three agents.”

“I sincerely doubt that. Twelve-hundred page literary novels are not hot

ticket items right now.”

She shrugs.

“I’m sorry Gordon, I’m being honest here.”

“Am I meant to applaud that?” he says

“I believe that you wrote *Ivy* as a little money-spinner under an assumed name. The alias is a dead give away.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Shakespeare’s Olivia was a woman pretending to be a man. Come on, Gordon, how hard is it to join those dots?”

Gordon feels sick, realizing how he has hoisted himself by his own petard.

The photograph of Maple Creek Bridge.

The clever-clever nom de plume.

Not taking care to disguise Suzie better.

Jane is speaking again.

“Look at the upside, Gordon. *Ivy* is making you a ton of money and if you sign with the Blunt Agency you’ll get to do a print version which’ll make you even richer. Then there’ll be the fortune you’ll earn from the movie rights. And we’ll get you a monster advance when you write the sequel. We can do all this for you.”

Gordon stares at her.

“No, you can do it for Viola Usher. I am not she. I did not write that book.”

“You’re going to be outed, Gordon. I have friends in the media who would just love to tell the story behind *Ivy*. Walk away from me and I’ll set them on you like a pack of hounds.”

Gordon, his legs shaky, stands.

“Ms. Cooper, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Good luck with finding the elusive Viola Usher.”

He throws a ten dollar bill on the table and strides out of the eatery with as much dignity as he can muster.

10

As Jane walks back toward the unspeakable B & B her phone rings and when she sees it's Jonas calling she sends it to voice mail.

She is in no state to speak to her boss now.

To admit to him that she has been defeated.

She's certain that Gordon Rushworth is Viola Usher, but short of breaking into his house and stealing his laptop, she has no way of proving it.

What worries her is that, sitting at the table after he departed, Jane had seriously considered burglarizing Rushworth's home.

Wow, the last couple of days have been tough, but come on . . .

She'd played all her cards in the restaurant and played them well.

She rocked Gordon Rushworth and got him close to cracking.

But he rode it out and never broke.

Her threat about the media was half-baked.

She could speak to a couple of her journalist contacts and perhaps some of them would think it worthwhile to travel all the way up here in search of a scoop, but given that we live in a time of shrinking budgets, she doubts that editors would authorize the expense.

And even if a journalist did unmask Gordon, all that would result would be an agent feeding frenzy, which Jane (or more likely Jonas) were not guaranteed to win.

No.

She was done.

She was single again.

And unemployed.

And she knows that Jonas will poison all the publishing wells.

There will be no job offers forthcoming.

All that will be left for her will be the long road home to her parents' house in Indiana.

God, she's as hopeless as Gordon Rushworth.

At first she thinks her imagination has conjured his voice when she hears Gordon say, "Jane?"

But when she turns there he is, dogging her heels, dressed in his baggy

trousers and tweed jacket, his oatmeal-colored hair mussed—and not in a contrived, boy-bandish way, either.

“Jane,” he says, “let’s talk.”

“I thought we were done talking?”

“Please,” he says, gesturing at a wooden bench on the edge of the village square, “sit down.”

She sits but rises as quick as a jack-in-the-box when he says, “I’m not Viola Usher.”

“Gordon, stop wasting my time.”

“Sit. Hear me out.”

She stares at him then sits.

“I didn’t write that book but I know who did.”

“Who?”

“My sister,” he says. “My sister Bitsy wrote *Ivy*.”

11

Gordon self-medicates on red wine as he waits for his sister to return home, pacing the threadbare carpet in the living room, listening for the clatter of her Volvo.

But all he can hear are the voices of doubt in his head.

Is he mad?

Introverted, withdrawn, wifty-wafty little Bitsy will never agree to Gordon's plan.

A plan that, no matter his empty assurances, would certainly thrust her into the glare of the media spotlight.

All he has managed to do is stall that predatory she-agent, leaving her holed up in the B&B, waiting for him to call her to come over and meet Viola Usher.

Not going to happen, Gordy.

The sneering voice of the high school football captain, the bully who had terrorized him through his teenage years, who he had lampooned in *Ivy*.

Ivy.

God, why had he ever written that thing?

"Because it's the bomb, Gordo."

And there's Suzie, smiling at him from across the room.

"A bomb that's going to blow my life to smithereens," he says, rushing at her.

She disappears, of course, and all Gordon can do is top up his wine glass.

Not too much, he tells himself.

You have to stay focused, in control.

Tells himself this even as he drains the glass of wine.

He's ready to pour another when he hears the old Volvo wheeze to a halt outside the house.

Gordon sits on the couch, legs crossed, fixing a smile on his face.

The door opens and Bitsy enters.

She stares at him.

"What's wrong," she says. "Are you ill?"

"Not at all," he says. "Let me get you a glass of wine. Sit, have a chat."

“You are ill.”

“Please, Bitsy. Join me.”

She shakes her head.

“Forgive me, Gordon, but I’m not in the mood. I’ve had a distressing morning and I think I’ll just do a little reading in my room.”

“I have some very important news, Bitsy.”

She stares down at him.

“About your book?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

She perches on the edge of a chair, hands in her lap, long-suffering eyes on him.

“Can I get you a glass of wine?” he asks.

“Thank you, no. I feel a migraine coming on.”

He pours himself another glass, takes a sip and tells her about writing *Ivy* and publishing it.

Bitsy stares at him, mouth hanging open on her slightly protuberant front teeth.

“Gordon, are you drunk?”

“No, not all.”

“Then surely you’re suffering some kind of breakdown? You don’t honestly expect me to believe you wrote that book, do you?”

“Well, you did urge me to write something more commercial.”

She shakes her head.

“No, Gordon, I have no time today for silly pranks. Please.”

She stands.

He rises, too, and holds up his hands.

“Okay, I’ll prove it to you.”

“How?”

He digs his laptop out from beside the couch and powers it up.

Then he clicks open a folder and calls her across.

“What is this folder called?” he asks.

Bitsy peers at the screen.

“*Ivy*.”

“Yes. And look.”

He opens the folder and shows her all the saved drafts of the book.

Opening them at random, showing her the work in progress.

Bitsy stares at the monitor, then up at her brother.

“My gosh, Gordon, you’re serious.”

“Dead serious,” he says, sinking down onto the couch.

Bitsy sits again, her eyes wide.

“I never thought you had it in you to write something so . . . passionate.”

He shrugs, “Well, there you go. Dark horses and all that.”

“It’s doing terribly well, isn’t it?”

“Selling up a storm.”

“Gordon, how wonderful for you.”

“Us.”

“Huh?”

“Wonderful for *us*, Bitsy. Fret not, you will share in my good fortune.”

“Just help a little with the expenses, Gordon. That’s all I expect.”

“No Bitsy, I want you to have twenty-five percent of whatever *Ivy* makes.”

She stares at him.

“That’s wildly generous, Gordon. I could never accept that.”

“You’ll be earning it, Bitsy, don’t worry.”

“How?”

He stands and paces the room, running a hand through his hair.

This is it.

The crunch.

“You’ll understand that as a serious, literary author, I couldn’t be seen to be writing this kind of lesser fiction?”

“But that’s why you so cleverly used an alias, surely?”

“To access the print deal and to sell the movie rights I would need an agent, do you understand?”

“Oh, I see. And they would have to know your real identity?”

“Exactly.”

“But surely they could be sworn to secrecy?”

“In this on-line age, Bitsy, nothing is secure. No, if I sign on with an agent I will be exposed.”

“It is a quandary.”

“Good word. But I think I have a solution.”

“What?”

He breathes deeply and then says, “You’ll be Viola Usher.”

She blinks at him.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You’ll sign on with an agent as the author of the book.”

“Oh, I could never do that, Gordon. That would be dishonest.”

“No, no. It would be dishonest if you were stealing the work and pretending it was your own. But I’m asking you to do it, Bitsy, so it won’t be dishonest at all.”

“But there’ll be publicity, won’t there Gordon? I’m not the person for that.”

“I’ll shield you from all of it, Bitsy. Don’t worry. I’ll be beside you every step of the way.”

She looks past him, staring into space and he thinks he’s lost her when she speaks: “Twenty-five percent you say?”

“Yes.”

“Of all the profits?”

“Yes.”

“What are we talking in dollars? Thousands?”

Gordon, slightly surprised at his militantly anti-materialistic sister asking this question, says, “Oh, more than that.”

“Tens of thousands?”

“More.”

“Hundreds of thousands?”

“Bitsy, with the print edition, the movie rights and the sale of the sequel, well, we’re talking millions.”

His sister fixes him with an unusually direct stare and says, “Make it fifty percent and we’re on.”

He gapes at her in astonishment.

“You mean that?”

“I do.”

She sticks out a bony hand and takes his in a surprisingly strong grip.

“Say hello to Viola Usher.”

12

Jane's hands are a little sweaty on the wheel of the rental Honda as she drives across to Briar Lane, blind to the blaze of Fall color, the trees radiant in the afternoon light.

Her phone rings and she sees it's Jonas.

Again.

And again she sends him to voice mail, knowing this will drive him crazy.

Jonas Blunt is a man who demands constant accessibility to his minions.

But she will talk to him only when—and if—she sews this thing up.

Jane parks behind a rusted old Volvo and walks up the pathway.

The door opens before she can knock and Gordon shows her in.

"Jane Cooper, my sister Bitsy Rushworth."

Jane steps into the living room and her heart sinks when she sees a small, dowdy woman with graying blonde hair standing up from a chair to greet her.

Is it possible that this little country mouse wrote the sizzling, steamy, *Ivy*?

"I know what you're thinking," Gordon Rushworth says.

"You do?"

"Something along the lines of: how can this drab little woman write something so, well, *hot*?"

Taken aback Jane says, "No, no . . ."

Gordon wags a hand.

"Bitsy was married to an academic at an Ivy League college back in the nineties. She knows what she's writing about, I can assure you."

Looking at this woman, Jane finds it hard to believe.

What are you doing? she asks herself.

Then thinks: *Don't look gift horses in the mouth.*

Even frumpy little ones.

"I assume you'll need some proof that I am, indeed, the author?" Bitsy Rushworth asks in a whispery voice.

"Well, yes, I guess so."

"Follow me, please."

Bitsy leads her into a bedroom as spartan as a nun's cell.

The only color the spines of the books in the shelves beside the desk.

A quick glance tells Jane that Bitsy's library is a mixture of esoteric self-help and romance.

A positive sign.

An ancient desktop computer hums on the writing table and Bitsy jiggles the mouse.

"That's my working file for *Ivy*," she says, opening the folder, shooting a glance at her brother who hovers in the doorway.

Jane takes command of the mouse and clicks through the *Ivy* works-in-progress.

That they're authentic she has no doubt but when she peers up at Bitsy and sees the look she's exchanging with her brother, Jane can't quell the suspicion that she's being duped.

She's certain that Gordon wrote the damned thing and he's getting his sister to front for him.

Jane's about to declare her suspicions when her phone rings and, yet again, she sends Jonas to voice mail.

She can imagine his mood: a meltdown of Chernobyl proportions.

"Bitsy," Jane says, "I can't leave here without you signing an agreement with the Jonas Blunt Agency. I can't run the risk of another agent poaching you."

There's a glance between the siblings before Bitsy speaks.

"Of course. I would be happy to sign."

"I have a standard contract in my briefcase in the living room."

They troop out and Jane removes the agency agreement from her case and hands it to Bitsy.

"Gordon will take a look at it," the woman says. "He's going to act as my advisor."

I'll bet he is, Jane thinks, but she smiles and shrugs and watches as Gordon Rushworth peruses the document.

She has no doubt that he has downloaded similar documents before, all part of preparing for when his magnum opus reached the road to publication.

"Seems boilerplate," he says. "Go ahead, Bitsy."

He hands the document to his sister along with a pen.

Then he holds up a hand and Bitsy pauses with the nib of the pen tantalizingly close to the dotted line on the contract.

"There's just one small matter," Gordon says.

"What's that?" Jane asks.

“Since I have been the, shall we say, matchmaker in this, I think a little reward is in order.”

“A little *quid pro quo*?” Jane asks.

He smirks.

“Exactly.”

“Let me hear it,” Jane says.

“I think we can agree that any one of the big five New York publishers would be desperate to publish *Ivy* and its sequels?”

“Oh yes. No doubt about that.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a deal breaker if in return for getting *Ivy*, they must agree to publish another book?”

“And that book wouldn’t by any chance be *Too Long the Night*, would it?”

“It would, yes.”

“There’s no way I could guarantee something like that, Gordon.”

“What a pity,” he says, reaching across to take the pen from his sister’s hand.

Jane speaks as quickly as a horse race caller.

“But my boss, Jonas Blunt, would have no problem swinging that. Take it as done.”

“Excellent.”

He hands the pen back and Bitsy Rushworth signs the document in her spidery scrawl.

As Jane shakes Bitsy’s hand her phone rings and this time she doesn’t send Jonas to voice mail.

She says, “Excuse me,” to the Rushworths and steps out of the front door into the bare little garden.

“Jonas,” she says.

“Why the hell haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“It’s done.”

“What’s done?”

“I’ve just signed Viola Usher. She’s ours.”

Jonas Blunt is not a man to be at a loss for words, but there is a delicious pause before he says, “You’re sure of this?”

“One hundred percent.”

Although she’s not.

“Well, done Jane. Well done.”

“Thank you.”

“When you return to New York that corner office will be yours.”

“What about Toby?” she asks, referring to the nasty little agent who, in Jonas’s frequent absences, likes to lord it over the agency.

“Toby who?” Jonas says, then makes a kissy sound and rings off.

Jane can’t resist a fist punch and blushes as crimson as the Fall leaves when she sees Gordon watching her from the doorway.

“Jonas Blunt is a happy man?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Well, we’re all happy, aren’t we?” he says stepping aside for her to walk back into the house.

She whispers in his ear, “I know what you’re doing, Gordon. I just hope that you do.”

13

As soon as Jane Cooper takes her briefcase containing the signed contract and leaves the house, Gordon dashes for the bathroom, fearing that the stress of the last day has made him physically ill.

But once he splashes his face at the sink, he feels somewhat restored.

He looks at his reflection in the mirror (he has to duck, the looking-glass is positioned for his much shorter sister) and is astonished to see that none of the distress is visible on his face.

In fact, Gordon looks better than he has in months and can't contain a feeling of elation at what he has pulled off.

Not only has he accessed even more money for his unacknowledged bastard child, Ivy, but (more significantly) is now assured of seeing *Too Long the Night* in print.

"Nicely done, Gordo, I always knew you had it in you."

He turns and sees Suzie Baldwin blowing him a kiss as she disappears through the closed door.

Gordon dries his face, combs his hair and straightens his collar.

Opening the bathroom door, he says, "Bitsy, what do you say to a little celebratory dinner down at Grace's?"

There is no reply.

"Bitsy?"

His sister is not in the living room or kitchen.

He sticks a head into her bedroom and sees she's not there either.

Crossing to the living room window, Gordon pulls back the drapes and looks out into the night. The streetlight shines on empty road where the Volvo was parked.

His sister, very uncharacteristically, has left without saying a word.

Bitsy Rushworth, foot flat to the floor of her Volvo as she speeds through the night, feels—quite literally—not herself.

Which is not to say that she feels *bad*, exactly.

This feeling of dislocation, of watching some new, braver, Bitsy from a slight distance is not altogether unpleasant and her usual reticence and nervousness seem to have drained away and been replaced with a sense of purpose.

A sense that, at last, she has found a way to give her life meaning.

To be truly useful.

Is this the evolution that Daniel Quant had spoken of?

The evolution he assured her would come if she followed the path of mindfulness and self-awareness?

“By far the most creative thing you’ll ever do is create your new self,” he’d said to her during a one-on-one session on a hot afternoon last summer, the buttery sunlight washing the room, making him glow as he stood over her, tanned and lithe in his white T-shirt and linen pants, his feet bare.

She couldn’t help but notice that his toes were shapely and neatly clipped.

Somehow she found this reassuring.

Not to mention attractive.

She’d been about to speak when he held up one of his broad, workman’s hands, and said, “Do I hear a *when*?”

“Yes,” she said, blushing. “Am I being impatient?”

“An all-too-human quirk, Bitsy. Just believe that transformation will come and let it happen.” He rested a hand on her shoulder, and she swore she could feel that an electrical charge course through her. “Don’t try to steer the river.”

Driving her Volvo over the cattle grid and past the Quant Foundation sign, she feels like she has flung herself into a surging river, letting it take her where it will.

Bitsy stops the car outside Daniel Quant’s house, a beacon of light in the darkness, and feels a flash of her old uncertainty.

Then she pushes this away and stands up out of the car, walking toward the house.

A dog barks somewhere far away and she hears a lilting piano melody wafting through the night.

As she nears the front entrance a man appears in the doorway.

Thinking it's Daniel her heart leaps, but as she draws closer she sees Carlos, one of his young assistants.

"Hi," Carlos says.

"I'm Bitsy Rushworth," she says.

"Of course, Bitsy. What's up?"

"I need to see Daniel," she says.

Before he can answer an intimidatingly tall, very beautiful girl whose name she can't recollect, drapes an arm over Carlos's shoulder and stares down at Bitsy.

"Daniel's contemplating. He is not to be disturbed."

Old Bitsy would have fled to her car, but the newer, bolder version, says, "This is important. It's about the financial future of the Foundation."

"Is it now?" the girl says with just the hint of a sneer.

"Why don't you get Bitsy a drink, Una, and I'll see if Daniel is up to an audience?"

Una shrugs and flounces off, folding herself onto a couch.

Carlos, who is clearly her boyfriend—they make an absurdly gorgeous couple—bounds up the wooden staircase, his bare feet drumming lightly.

Una offers no drink.

Nor does she invite Bitsy to take a seat.

Bitsy doesn't mind, she feels too excited to sit, so she wanders the room, looking at the paintings and artifacts, an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western: Buddhas and Ganeshes rub shoulders with colorful abstracts and primitive Africana.

Her practiced eye approves of what she sees.

Daniel Quant has good taste.

Carlos returns and says, "Daniel's waiting, Bitsy. Go on up."

Bitsy mounts the stairs leading to the dimly lit upper level, the piano piece getting louder.

Then the music ends, abruptly and a voice says, "Bitsy?"

She sees Daniel standing at the top of the stairs, barefoot, dressed in a T-shirt and fisherman's pants.

"Daniel, I'm sorry to come here unannounced."

"Oh, but I've been waiting for you, Bitsy."

“You have?”

Was this some clairvoyant, precognitive thing he was laying claim to?

He laughs his deep, melodious, laugh.

“Yes, I’ve been waiting for you for months. And you’ve arrived. The new, improved, much-better-Bitsy.” He laughs again. “I’m not wrong, am I?”

“No,” she says, “something has happened.”

“Something has a way of doing that,” he says and seats himself on a pile of cushions beneath a lamp in the corner of a big, bare room.

He gestures for her to join him and she hunkers down, a little stiffly.

He smiles and watches her, his face serene.

“Daniel . . .”

“Bitsy.”

“I hope you don’t think this is very forward of me, but I think I may be able to access the funds the Foundation needs. If they’re still needed, of course?”

“Very much so, yes. A bloody boatload!” He laughs.

“Well, I think my ship has come in.”

It’s only when he chuckles again that she realizes what she has said, and joins in the laughter.

“I’m going to be the recipient of a vast amount of money very soon.”

“Really?” he says.

“And I would like to give it all to you. To the Foundation.”

“That’s very generous,” he says.

“Over the next year a sum of at least a million dollars should be available.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“I’ll be able to give you the first installment within weeks.”

“Fantastic.”

“Do you want to know where the money is coming from?”

“Not unless you want to tell me.”

She hesitates and he says, “I’m sensing a conflict, Bitsy. Is there anything you want to discuss?”

So, in the belief that her secrets are safe with this charming and enlightened man, she ends up telling him about the book Gordon wrote.

And about her agreeing to pretend to be Viola Usher.

“Am I doing a bad thing, Daniel? Lying like this?”

He shrugs.

"I'm not here to judge you. And neither am I a priest ready with glib promises of forgiveness in exchange for a few Hail Marys. You have made a choice."

"Yes, I have. Why do I feel so deceitful?"

"Do you really think you're being deceitful?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, consider this," he says, leaning toward her. "When we shell out our hard-earned bucks for a movie we do so in the knowledge that we're going to be lied to, that some Hollywood actors are going to pretend to be people that exist only the mind of a screenwriter somewhere. We are happily complicit in this deception and call it entertainment. Do you see where I'm going here?"

"Not exactly."

"Okay, we're lied to, but we're still given a tangible product: the movie. So the transaction isn't fraudulent, is it, although it is predicated on a series of falsehoods?"

"I suppose not."

"In the case of this book there is also a deception. Viola Usher does not exist. But the book does. Therefore the readers, although they are buying the novel from somebody who is not real, still get a book that is. No blame no foul."

"True. But I'm saying that *I* wrote the book."

"If your brother were to acknowledge authorship of the book would it change the transaction? Would the readers not still get a book in exchange for their money?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I think . . ."

He laughs.

"It's all about masks, Bitsy. Some are sinister, dark, like those of an executioner or a bank robber. Others are harmless, even delightful, like those worn to a masked ball. The mask you have chosen to wear falls into the latter category. Your pretence, I would say, is nothing more than a little harmless froth."

"You've made me feel a lot better."

"I did nothing. I merely held up a mirror."

"Well . . ."

He stands and waits as she battles to her feet.

Then he clasps her hands in his.

God how she longs to fold into his arms, breathe in the musky maleness of him.

“I’m very grateful to you, Bitsy. This is a marvelous gesture.”

“The Foundation has changed my life.”

“No, you have changed your life. All we provided was a safe space.”

He leads her toward the stairs.

“I sense you’re about to get booted out of your comfort zone, Bitsy. Just remember: in the midst of all the movement and chaos that is to come, keep stillness within you.”

He raises a hand in farewell and then turns and disappears into the shadows.

Bitsy floats rather than walks down the stairs and even the scornful look from Una, curled up on the sofa with Carlos, can’t dampen the wild soaring of her heart.

It's after 2 A.M. when Jane stops the rental car outside her apartment building and drags herself into the lobby toward the elevator.

Once she got Bitsy Rushworth's signature on the contract Jane had fired up the Honda and headed straight back to Manhattan, the long drive and her lonely apartment more appealing than another night of bedbugs in East Devon's Sugar Maple Inn.

The girl who stares back at her from the mirror of the elevator as the doors start to slide closed looks drawn and gaunt, her black hair a greasy helmet, and is that a zit she sees incubating in the corner of her mouth?

Jane leans in close to the mirror, grimacing, trying to get a better look at the pimple when the doors shudder open again and Tom Bennett bolts in.

If Jane thinks she looks rough, Tommy boy looks as if he was dragged down Broadway tied to the rear of a car.

He's wearing a hoodie and a soiled T-shirt over jeans and sneakers.

And he smells of sweat and something sour and chemical.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tom?" Jane asks, lunging for the elevator buttons.

He blocks her and crowds her against the back of the cabin as the doors close and the elevator rises.

"Get away from me," she shouts.

He raises his hands.

"I just need to talk to you, Janey."

"No. Stop this elevator and let me out."

"I've been waiting since yesterday, down in the street. Where the hell were you?"

She has her phone out.

"I'm dialing 911."

He wrenches the phone from her hand.

"Tom! Jesus!"

He fends her off and thumbs the phone, opening her photo gallery.

As she watches Tommy deletes the pictures she took of him and his little freak show.

“How do you know I didn’t already transfer those to my iPad?” she says as he finishes and throws the phone at her.

“Because you’re too dumb to do that, remember? It was always: *Tommy, how do I do this? Tommy, how do I do that?*”

His voice an ugly parody of hers.

Staring at this terrifying stranger she wonders how he gobbled up nice, even-tempered Tom Bennett.

The elevator pings as it reaches her floor.

Jane sprints out expecting Tom to follow her.

But he stays in the elevator and gives her the finger.

“Have a nice life, you boring little bitch.”

The doors close and Jane finds herself shaking and crying as she fumbles with the locks and finally gets herself into her apartment.

The place has never seemed so empty.

She heads for the kitchen, dumps her shoulder bag on the counter and washes her face in the sink, drying herself on a kitchen towel.

The bedroom and its en suite bathroom are a no-fly zone right now.

Jane opens the fridge and finds a bottle of Heineken.

She uncaps it and as she takes a slug she’s a kid for a moment, sitting on the porch on a summer night with her father, a small town sportswriter, listening to hissing old vinyl recordings of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor and George Carlin, her father allowing her a sip of his favorite beer, the two of them laughing like drains.

She’s almost tempted to call him, her old dad, and cry on his shoulder.

But his heart isn’t good these days and she’ll just freak him out, so she resists the impulse.

These are wounds she’ll have to lick alone.

Jane thinks of Tom and realizes how lucky she was to make that impulsive decision to fly home and surprise him on his birthday.

If she hadn’t she would have married him.

She shudders at the thought of what her life would have become.

Jane chugs back the last of the beer and feels a little of her moxy returning.

She takes her iPad from her bag and powers it up, opening her photo gallery.

And there they are, those disgusting pictures, some impulse getting her to transfer them from her phone while she sat in Starbucks yesterday morning.

See Tom, she says aloud.

I can do it.

Sucker.

Before Jane can talk herself out of it, she creates an anonymous Yahoo email account, finds the addresses of Batton, Barstow and Klinch (the triumvirate of gods who rule over her ex-fiancé's law firm) and attaches four of the juiciest pictures of Tom Bennett at his play date.

Jane hesitates for just a moment before she hits send.

"How 'bout them apples, Tommy?" she says out loud, channeling her dear old dad again.

Then she is suddenly exhausted, literally too tired to undress.

Jane falls face down on the couch and just as sleep claims her she thinks of Gordon Rushworth camping in his sister's living room and she feels an unexpected (and unwanted) sense of kinship.

When Jane, feeling bleary and tired after the restless night on her couch, enters the Park Avenue offices of the Jonas Blunt Agency she is confronted by all the staff, led by the imposing figure of her boss himself, standing to applaud her.

Jonas walks over and kisses her on both cheeks, then he puts an arm around her shoulders (she always feels like a child beside him, fitting snugly into his armpit) and says, “Come with me, my conquering hero.”

He leads her past her cubicle to a corner office, the door of which—as he promised—sports a darling little sign saying: JANE COOPER – AGENT.

He pushes the door open and she sees the desk positioned before a sweeping Midtown vista.

“All yours, darling.”

“Thank you, Jonas.”

“Needless to say, you’ve also nudged yourself up a few notches on the pay scale.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

Jonas slumps on the sofa that occupies a corner of the office.

“Before I leave you to get settled in, let’s have a quick pow-wow about this big fish you’ve landed.”

Jane takes a chair opposite him.

Jonas says, “What’s she like, this Mindy?”

“Bitsy.”

“Bitsy! Okay, first order of business, that name has to go. What’s it short for, anyway?”

“Elizabeth, I believe.”

“Elizabeth Rushworth. Mnnnn, that’s a little staid. How about Liz? Liz Rushworth? A bit racier, what do you say?”

“Yes, but it’s a little, well, unfriendly isn’t it?”

“You think so? Unfriendly?”

“A bit intimidating. The name of an investigative reporter or a scientist.”

“Then what would you suggest?”

“How about Lizzie?”

“Lizzie Rushworth,” Jonas says, closing his eyes, repeating the name as if

he's tasting a vintage wine. He blinks and says, "I love it! It's peppy and saucy, but a name that gets you smiling as you say it. Perfect."

"Good."

"What does she look like?"

"Well . . ."

"Don't doll it up, Janey, just give it to me straight."

"She's around forty. Short and skinny, with mousy hair going gray. When I met her she was dressed by Costco: a shapeless sweater, badly fitting jeans and no-name sneakers."

Jonas shudders.

"God, how awful. Is she redeemable?"

Jane nods.

"Yes, I think so. But she'll need a serious makeover, top to toe. And a new wardrobe."

"When is she arriving?"

"Her train gets into Penn Station around 6:30 this evening."

"Okay, tell her to go directly to The Pierre, I've reserved a suite. Then spend the day with her tomorrow getting her transformed. I'll schedule the media for the following day."

He sees her expression.

"Darling, I know you landed her and you'll be there every step of the way, but this is too big for you to fly solo. You just let me do what I do, okay?"

"Of course, Jonas, I understand."

He flashes her a blinding smile and bounds to his feet.

"Exciting, exciting. When we take this book out to auction there's going to be a frenzy of note."

"Just one thing," Jane says.

"Mnnnn?"

"Bitsy—*Lizzie*—has a brother. Gordon. He's going to be traveling with her, as a kind of chaperone-cum-advisor."

"Fine, get him a room at The Pierre. Nothing too fancy."

"The thing is, Gordon is also a writer and *Lizzie* only signed with us on the understanding that whoever publishes *Ivy* publishes his book as well."

Jonas frowns.

"You agreed to this extortion?"

"I'm sorry, what option did I have?"

"Understood, understood. Have you read his book?"

“The first few chapters.”

“And?”

“It’s terrible. He’s striving for David Foster Wallace by way of Jonathan Franzen and falls horribly short.”

Jonas makes a dismissive gesture.

“No worries, leave it to me. Whoever gets *Ivy* will gladly do a limited release of his abortion. What’s a couple of thousand copies going to cost them? They’ll never even let them out of their warehouse.”

He’s heading for the door.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I had a word with a very nice new lady editor at Exeter Press this morning. She’s just dying for you to send that bleeding heart memoir of yours over. That doctors in distress thing.”

Jonas winks at her and is gone, leaving Jane with her head spinning as she sits behind her new desk, staring out over Manhattan.

Can things keep on going so well?

No, she fears.

And right on cue her cell phone bings and she sees a text from Tom, who she has done her best to keep out of her thoughts on this day of success.

The message is to the point: *Die bitch*.

Jane shoves her phone away and looks out over the city she has come to love.

Is it just the Tom debacle causing her anxiety?

No, she fears, it is not.

And the gnawing certainty that she is conspiring with Gordon Rushworth, that his sister is just his beard, takes some of the shine off the day.

Gordon sits watching the industrial parks that litter the outskirts of New York City blur by in the failing light, lulled almost to sleep by the motion of the train and by the wine he's been consuming since lunch.

He's going to have to reign in this drinking of his during the next few days of what Jane Cooper, talking on the phone earlier, described as "a process of limited media exposure."

He hasn't shared his suspicions with Bitsy, but he's pretty sure that this means that his dowdy sister is going to be tossed to the slaving Manhattan media wolves.

He's done his best to prepare Bitsy, spending the last few hours of travel going through *Ivy* with her, getting her as familiar with the damned thing as if she wrote it herself.

Bitsy may be an underachiever but she's a quick study and he's confident she knows the book well enough to fake being the author.

But it's her nerve—or lack thereof—that worries Gordon.

How convincing will she be?

Bitsy, back from the bathroom, sits down opposite him, looking even more wan than usual.

"I'm terrified, Gordon," she says, giving voice to his own fears.

"You'll be fine."

"No, I won't. You know me, I can't lie."

He stares at her for a few seconds.

"Then why did you agree to do it, Bitsy?"

She avoids his eyes, watching an ugly smear of passing suburbia.

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You're right," he says. "You can't lie."

He reaches across and touches her knee.

"What's going on, Bitsy?"

She shakes her head, then she looks at him, a stricken expression on her face, and it all comes tumbling out about how she has pledged money to a bunch of New Age charlatans.

"And if I don't do it," she says, "the Quant Foundation will disappear."

And it will be my fault.”

Gordon bites back the venom he wants to spew.

No, what business is it of his how his brainwashed sister chooses to spend her money?

Keeping his face expressionless and his voice level he says, “So, overcome your trepidation and do it, Bitsy.”

She hugs herself.

“I’m really scared.”

“This Quant person, didn’t he give you any . . . any *techniques* to deal with anxiety?”

“There is a sequence of breath work. I tried to do it in the toilet, but I was quite overcome by the smell in there.”

Gordon has to laugh and after a moment his sister joins him.

“It’s a game, Bitsy, like we played when we were kids. Dress up, or whatever. It’s just pretence.”

“I don’t remember playing many games.”

“No, me neither. We didn’t exactly have that kind of childhood, did we?”

She shakes her head.

“No.”

“Even more reason to make up for it now. Tell yourself that you’re Viola Usher. That you woke up one morning bursting with a story to tell.”

“Was that how it was for you, Gordon?”

He shrugs.

“I wouldn’t want to bore you.”

“Please,” she says, “tell me. I want to hear.”

So tells her about Suzie Baldwin appearing to him—his sister the only person in the world he could ever share this with.

“Oh, Gordon, that is so wonderful,” she says.

“Is it?”

“Yes. You carried Suzie with you, in your heart, all these years. That’s so beautiful.”

“Well, she did pretty much disappear when I hit thirty. I thought she was gone forever.”

“That’s when you decided you were an adult, Gordon, wasn’t it? That you needed to put away childish things?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, Suzie was your muse. You should feel very privileged.”

"I don't know about muse, Bitsy. She was more a midwife, helping me to give birth to some misshapen bastard child."

She stares at him and shakes her head.

"You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"Get how good *Ivy* is?"

"It's crap, Bitsy."

"No, it's powerful and engaging on an emotional level. Not everything has to be about grand ideas and philosophy, Gordon. You should be proud of it."

"Well, I'm not."

She stares at him.

"What?" he says.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask."

"Everybody's in that book—all the people who had an affect on your life. Except me. I'm not in there, am I?"

"No, you're not."

"Why?"

"Well, save for Suzie, all the characters in the book are people who wronged me in one way or another. Writing it was my bit of childish revenge on them."

He smiles at her.

"You never wronged me, Bitsy. Ever. So take your absence as a compliment rather than a slight."

She seems mollified.

"So?" he asks. "Are we going to do this thing?"

"Yes," she says. "I suppose we are."

"That's the spirit," Gordon says and relaxes back in his seat, watching the saw-toothed skyline of Manhattan rise into view.

Jane, knocking at the door of Bitsy's suite at The Pierre, is unsurprised when Gordon Rushworth answers.

What does startle her, just a little, is that she's pleased to see him.

"Hello, Jane," he says. "Don't you have all kinds of posh book events to attend?"

"Your sister's my priority right now," she says, following him into the suite.

"Bitsy's taking a bath," Gordon says. "She has a thing about public transport and germs."

He yells out: "Bitsy, Jane's here when you're done delousing yourself!"

Despite herself, Jane has to bite back a smile at his unchivalrous behavior.

Gordon points to an armchair.

"Please, sit. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'd kill for a Heineken."

He crosses to the bar.

"I wouldn't have tipped you as a beer girl."

"For me beer's the comfort food of booze."

"Don't tell me: summer nights on the porch with dad?"

He sees her face and laughs.

"Oh, don't worry, I lay no claims to psychic abilities. It's an archetypically American tableaux, isn't it? Almost Rockwellian."

Jane conjures him at the lectern, smugly talking down his students.

He would not have been the professor they would have wanted to buddy up to.

But, despite his priggishness—or maybe because of it—she finds him oddly attractive.

Perhaps because he is the antithesis of her ex-fiancé, who had gone as Mr. Nice before his true nature had surfaced?

Watching Gordon pop the cap of a beer and pour it quite skillfully into a glass, with just the right amount of head, Jane scolds herself.

He isn't different.

He's also a liar.

Remember that, Janey.

Handing her the beer he seats himself opposite her and raises his wine glass.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

Gordon says, “I’m pleased to have a moment alone with you, Jane.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I’m looking forward to your comments on the book, prior to it going to the publishers.”

“I’d rather discuss that with Bitsy present, Gordon.”

He laughs.

“I’m talking about *Too Long the Night*, Jane.”

“Are you serious?”

“Never more so.”

“Gordon, I understand you’re invested in your novel, but—how can I put this without being rude?”

“Oh, speak, speak. I have a dartboard for a skin.”

“Okay. This is hardly the time to talk about *Too Long*.”

“Please don’t call it that.”

“What?”

“ ‘*Too Long*.’ ”

She laughs.

“But it is.”

He looks crestfallen.

So much for the thick skin.

You idiot, Jane!

She needs this man on her side.

Jane scrambles to undo the damage.

“Gordon, I’m just kidding. *Too Long the Night* is a huge book,” she says, somehow managing not to say a huge *stinker* of a book, “that deserves my full attention. You wouldn’t want me to rush through it, would you?”

He shakes his head, seemingly placated.

Jane says, “The next few days are all about Ivy. Then, I promise you, I will take the time to do a detailed reading of *Too Long the Night* and give you copious notes. Okay?”

“I would appreciate that.”

“Meanwhile, I need you to stay in the background, Gordon. Bitsy is going

to be showcased. Yours is strictly a supporting role, do you understand?”

“Perfectly. She’s Meryl Streep and I’m Kathy Bates.”

Jane laughs and so does he.

It’s the first time she’s heard him laugh and it’s surprisingly deep and even a little ribald.

The door opens and Bitsy, drowning in a fluffy toweling robe, appears.

Her sparse, stringy hair is still damp, her myopic eyes blinking.

Jane almost loses her nerve, daunted at the huge amount of work it’s going to take to get this mousy little woman anywhere near camera-ready.

“Are you comfortable here?” Jane asks.

“Oh, gosh, yes. This place is so *grand*. Wow!”

Gordon, seen only by Jane, raises his eyebrows before burying his fine nose in his wine glass.

“There are a couple of things I want to bounce off you,” Jane says.

Bitsy, taking the couch, her feet folded under her like a child, stares at Jane.

“Like what?”

“Well, your name for starters.”

“My name?”

God, is this little woman going to repeat every question the media sling at her?

“I spoke at length with my boss, Jonas Blunt, and he feels that Bitsy doesn’t quite have the ring that it should have.”

“Oh? What do you want to call me?”

“Lizzie. Lizzie Rushworth.”

“Sounds like the madam of an Elizabethan bawdy house,” Gordon says.

Jane shoots him a dirty look and he smirks into his glass.

Bitsy says, “I’ve never thought of myself as a *Lizzie*.”

“It’s just a game,” Gordon says. “Like we discussed on the train.”

“Yes,” Bitsy says. “I suppose it is. That’s okay, I guess. But you two will have to keep on reminding me. I’m terrible with names. Even my own.”

“We’ll be with you every step of the way, I promise,” Jane says.

“Now, I’m not sure what you want me to wear. I brought a few outfits, maybe you could have a look?”

Jane holds up a hand.

“No need. Tomorrow we’re going to give you a complete makeover. Top to toe.”

Bitsy stares at her, looking anguished.

“Gosh, really?”

“I’ll be here at 9 A.M. and we’ll spend the day together, getting your hair done, getting you a range of clothes and working with a stylist on your make-up.”

“I don’t wear make-up.”

Gordon says, “Bitsy, *everybody* wears make-up for TV and photographs.”

“Gordon’s right. It’s just part of the deal,” Jane says.

“I have a terribly delicate skin. I’m allergic to almost everything.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll work with a professional.”

“Oh, I’m feeling all panicky now, Jane. This seems so . . . so *stressful*. Can’t I just be myself?”

Gordon stands and puts a hand on his sister’s shoulder.

“Bitsy, just think of the author photographs on the romance books you vacuum up. Those women make Jacqueline Susann’s war paint look positively understated.”

Bitsy giggles.

“I suppose you’re right. Some of them look almost *embalmed*.”

“Exactly,” Gordon says, tipping Jane a wink.

Jane stands.

“Well, I hope the two of you have a pleasant night.”

“Some meditation and then to bed for me,” Bitsy says.

Gordon shows Jane to the door and Bitsy disappears into the bedroom.

“She’ll be okay, I promise,” Gordon says. “She’s just a little overwhelmed.”

“Thanks for what you said back there. You helped.”

“Oh, it was nothing. That’s why I’m here.”

“It’s weird, Gordon, but when you allow yourself to, you really *get* women,” Jane says. “Which is probably why *Ivy* is so huge.”

“I fear that Heineken has gone to your head.”

“Good night, Gordon.”

“Good night, Jane.”

She walks away telling herself that she won’t look back, but—just before she reaches the elevators—she *does* sneak a look and he’s still standing in the doorway, watching her.

When he sees her turn he ducks inside and Jane steps into the elevator feeling oddly buoyant.

“So this is how a bridesmaid feels?” Gordon says to himself as he unlocks the room two floors below his sister’s suite.

The room is perfectly pleasant (he can’t recall ever staying in a better one) but it pales beside Bitsy’s luxurious accommodation.

“Your ego taking a dent, Gordy?” Suzie asks, appearing by the window.

“You’re not here,” he says, turning his back on her.

She pops up by the mini-bar.

“Oh yes I am. I’m wherever you are.”

“Why are you tormenting me?”

“Because I’m *you*, Gordy. Don’t you see? I’m the other you waiting to be freed.”

“What are you saying? That I have a transgender psyche?”

“You’re a putz.”

When he heads to the mini-bar she disappears and he pours a shot of Scotch, hoping he’s seen the last of her.

But when he turns she’s perched on the bed.

“Lay off the sauce, Gordon. You’re becoming a lush.”

“Why the hell do you speak like a character from a dime novel?”

She smiles at him.

“Because I’m your *id*, Gordy. I’m everything that’s primal and carnal and just plain fun waiting to burst out of you like a geyser. I’ve had enough of this *life of the mind* crap.”

“Please go away.”

“When last did you get laid Gordon?”

He takes a belt of his Scotch and says nothing.

“Four years ago? Five?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer.”

“I saw the way you were eyeing that babe, Jane, earlier. You want to do the wild thing with her. Admit it.”

“Don’t be obscene.”

“Oh, come on. I saw you undressing her with your dirty little eyeballs.”

“This is juvenile.”

Gordon turns from the bed only to find Suzie leaning against the closet, arms folded.

“You haven’t had any action since you ended it with Ludmilla, have you?”

Ludmilla Orson, a fellow academic at the University of Northern Colorado, where Gordon had spent a year.

He and Ludmilla had shared a love of dead philosophers, and this, after many conversation-heavy meals, had led to tentative talk of marriage.

A union of like minds.

When the university didn’t renew his contract and he’d moved on to South Dakota they had promised to stay in touch but a few desultory emails had dwindled to nothing and he hadn’t heard from her in four years.

Suzie says, “And *action* isn’t really the right word to describe you and Millie in the sack, is it? I vividly recall a journal entry of yours at the time: *Ludmilla is about as easy to thaw as a layer of permafrost. And half as passionate.* Quite amusing, Gordy, if a little sad.”

“Go away.”

“C’mon, Gord, own up to some real, red-blooded feelings. You want recognition. You want the limelight. You want to bed hot babes who swoon over you at book signings. Why else did you spend ten years sweating over that monster of a tome?”

“Not for any of the reasons you have just mentioned.”

“Why don’t you come out and admit to writing *Ivy*, Gordon? Think of all the fun you’ll have. It’ll be you, not frumpy little Bitsy getting to hang out with hot Ms. Cooper tomorrow, getting pampered and preened. And it’ll be *you* getting all the media attention. Think of the stir you’ll cause if you reveal that Viola Usher is a *man*.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Don’t talk to me about dead bodies, Gordon, that’s my field of expertise. And it saddens the hell out of me to see you squandering what’s left of your youth and vitality on that boring, pretentious book when a world of pleasure, happiness and even *love* could be yours.”

“I’m a serious writer. That is what I live for. Now leave me in peace.”

And just like that she’s gone, leaving Gordon alone with his empty Scotch glass and a horrible, traitorous impulse to call Jane Cooper and spill everything.

To let the cat among the publishing pigeons.

But he reigns in this urge, pours himself another very small Scotch purely

for medicinal purposes and takes to his bed thinking of Kierkegaard and Sartre and Nabokov and Camus.

And not thinking of Jane Cooper.

No, not at all.

When Bitsy Rushworth wakes she hasn't the foggiest idea where she is.

She lies a moment in this massive, very, very comfortable bed, blinking up at a high, foreign ceiling, sunlight bleeding in at the edge of drapes that are definitely not hers.

Fighting back panic she decides she is dreaming and listens for the familiar morning sounds of East Devon.

Birdsong, the trundle of the milk cart and the tolling of the church bell.

But all she hears is a muffled, almost predatory roar.

A sudden realization has Bitsy sitting bolt upright, throwing off the comforter and rushing to the window, tearing open the curtains to reveal the vertiginous view over Manhattan, with its traffic clogged streets so very far below.

Panic takes hold and Bitsy battles for breath, turning away from the window, fumbling for the glass of water beside the bed.

As she sips from the glass Daniel Quant's gorgeously weathered face appears before her and he says in that deep, melodic voice: "In the midst of all the movement and chaos that is to come, keep stillness within you."

His presence, even though it's a trick of her memory, is enough to calm Bitsy and remind her of her purpose: she is not here for herself.

She is here to save the Quant Foundation.

She will endure whatever hardships and privations are hurled at her to achieve her objective.

Bitsy checks the time on the bedside clock: 7:00 A.M.

Still plenty of time to prepare herself before Jane Cooper arrives.

Drawing on a robe, Bitsy goes through to the bathroom—a huge expanse of marble littered with gold fixtures.

She brushes her teeth and then returns to the bedroom, wondering what she should wear today.

It doesn't matter, does it?

She will be peeled of her unsuitable clothes—like her unsuitable name—and remade in the image of what these New York publishing gurus consider to be a successful author.

How she longs for this to be over.
To be back in Vermont, traveling up to Daniel's farm.
She imagines the moment when she hands over the first installment of the money that will keep the Quant Foundation alive.
Imagines Daniel's smile of gratitude.
Smells the fresh, slightly cinnamony scent of his skin as he takes Bitsy into those powerful arms and holds her close, his lips finding hers.
This absurd, almost sacrilegious, reverie is shattered by the doorbell.
Who is this?
It's much too early for Jane Cooper.
Bitsy crosses the vast sitting room, the buzzer shrieking again.
"Who is it?" she says, standing by the closed door.
"Son of Sam."
"Is that you, Gordon?"
"Who else could it be, Bitsy?"
She opens the door and sees her brother in corduroys and a tweed jacket, his hair still damp from the shower.
"You're up early," she says.
He pushes past her.
"I just wanted to spend a bit of time with you, Bitsy. Brushing up on things."
"I need to meditate, Gordon. To center myself."
"Oh God, Bitsy, you have the rest of your life to gaze at the lint in your navel. We really need to run through things again, I don't want any slip ups."
"Gordon," the new Bitsy says, "please leave."
"What?"
"Leave. Go. I want to be alone until Jane arrives."
He stares at her, mouth agape.
"You're serious?"
She points at the corridor.
"Go. Vamoose."
"Vamoose?"
"Scat. Make yourself scarce."
He steps out of the door, his mouth still hanging open, and as Bitsy closes the door in his face she can't quite smother a laugh.
Maybe today isn't going to be so bad, after all.
Gosh, maybe it's even going to be *fun*.

Jane, sitting in the rear of a cab with Bitsy (she *must* get used to calling her Lizzie) is reminded of the pauper-to-princess fantasies she'd had as a kid.

But those fantasies always cast Jane as the one who was transformed, never in the role of handmaiden to the reluctant princess-to-be.

Watching Bitsy, who sits staring out at the crowded sidewalks with a look of barely concealed apprehension, Jane feels a twinge of sympathy for Gordon Rushworth.

No matter how he may pretend otherwise, it can't be anything but painful for him to watch his dull sister step shakily into the spotlight that should be his.

Serves him right, Jane thinks, dismissing this unproductive train of thought.

The taxi pulls up outside Marcel's, one of Midtown's fanciest hairdressing salons.

Somehow Jonas Blunt, through his society connections, has leapfrogged them over the peons on the wait list, securing them a 9:30 A.M. appointment with Marcel himself.

"Lizzie, we're here," Jane says, but the woman doesn't reply.

"Lizzie!"

At last Bitsy turns and says, "Gosh, I don't know if I'll ever get used to this name thing."

Jane pays the cab driver and leads the way into the salon, assaulted by a toxic brew of perm lotion and hairspray.

A girl who could've just flounced off a catwalk stands behind a rococo desk, staring down at Jane and Bitsy.

"Yes?"

"We're from the Jonas Blunt agency. We have an appointment."

The girl sniffs, then uses a long-taloned finger to check an appointment book.

"Yes," she says, astonished, "with Mr. Marcel."

On cue something straight out of *La Cage aux Folles* appears: a short, plump man with a shock of teased red hair, squeezed into a pink jumpsuit.

“And who is *zis*?”

He looks at Bitsy, dismisses her, then flicks at Jane’s bob with a beringed finger.

“Mnnnn, mnnnn. That was done with a guillotine not a scissors.”

“The appointment’s not for me,” Jane says, “it’s for Ms. Rushworth.”

The man steps back and stares at Bitsy in horror.

“Holy mother of God, I am a hairdresser not a magician! What ees zat on your ’ead? Last week’s linguini?”

He flounces off and Jane nudges Bitsy in the side.

“Go with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, go on.”

“He’s terrifying.”

“He’s just French,” Jane says, although she’s sure this guy is more familiar with the Bronx River than the Seine.

The mousy little woman sighs as she shuffles into the massive salon, the eyes of the society bitches sitting under hairdryers lasering her as she passes.

Jane perches on a spindly legged chair by the door and thumbs through a fashion magazine.

This is going to be one *very* long day.

After hours of aimlessly wandering the streets of Manhattan, Gordon—never an eager tourist—finds himself in Barnes & Noble on Fifth Avenue.

The smell of books is reassuring and he spends an hour browsing, entertaining a little fantasy of seeing *Too Long the Night* on shelves like these in the not-too-distant future.

The fantasy sours a little when he remembers that the literary opus he has toiled over for the past decade is riding piggyback on *Ivy* and when *Too Long the Night* is published there's no guarantee bookstores will buy it.

But what is certain is that the shelves will be thick with his unacknowledged piece of trashy chick-lit.

There is no justice.

Suddenly he feels sapped of energy and leaves the bookstore, making his way along the crowded sidewalks to The Pierre and the mini bar that awaits him like an oasis.

Gordon nods when the doorman salutes him and is crossing the lobby when he hears somebody call his name.

He turns and sees Jane Cooper coming toward him.

"Hi, Jane. Where's Bitsy?"

Jane laughs and Gordon realizes that the editor is accompanied by another woman, who walks a few steps behind her.

A woman in her mid-thirties, with short, modishly cut hair, dressed in a very chic suit—the skirt showing off a pair of shapely legs.

The woman is laughing, too, and Gordon wonders what he has done to deserve being the butt of their joke.

Then his mouth sags open as he stares down at Jane's companion.

"My God, Bitsy, is that you in there?" he says.

"Lizzie," his sister says. "I'm Lizzie now."

She hooks an arm through his and says, "Come on, let's all go up and have a drink in the suite. I'm parched."

Gordon, staring at this stranger in the mirror of the wood paneled elevator, feels a little lightheaded as the cabin zooms skyward.

By the time Bitsy has finished half a glass of wine, Jane can see the woman is wilting.

The day has taken its toll, even though the transformation—externally, at least—is remarkable.

The Ms. Rushworth who will face the media tomorrow will bear very little resemblance to the country mouse who arrived yesterday.

Gordon, with two glasses of red wine under his belt, can't take his eyes off his sister, and her metamorphosis seems to have left him uncharacteristically subdued.

Jane stands.

"Well, I should go. I was going to invite the two of you out for dinner but it looks to me like you're done for the day," she says to Bitsy.

"Thanks, Jane, but I'll just about manage room service. Thank you for everything. It was quite an experience."

"You were a Trojan. And you look gorgeous."

"Well, I don't know about that, but I don't look like *me* anymore, that's for sure."

"I'll be here at eight in the morning to do a final briefing on the interviews."

Jane sees the look of apprehension on Bitsy's face.

"Don't worry, you'll ace the media stuff."

Gordon stands.

"I should go too. Jane, let me walk you out. Night, Bitsy."

"Night, Gordon."

They leave the suite and head toward the elevators.

Gordon says, "Now that Meryl Streep is indisposed, I guess it's out of the question to have dinner with Kathy Bates?"

All Jane has in the refrigerator of her apartment is a bowl of dubious left overs.

If she takes Gordon to dinner she can legitimately charge it to her expense account.

And—what the hell?—it'll be better than spending another lonely night.

"I'm game," Jane says, pressing for the elevator. "Just one proviso."

"What?"

"No shop talk."

"We can't talk about books?"

"Oh, I think it would be very difficult for either of us not to talk about books. Just not *Ivy* or *Too Long* . . ." She sees his face. " . . . *The Night*."

The elevator arrives and Jane steps inside, laughing.

Gordon follows her. "You have a deal."

"Any objections to going down to the Meat Packing District? It's close to my apartment and I know a nice Italian place."

"I'm in your hands," he says, as the elevator doors close.

Forty-five minutes later they're drinking Chianti and eating pasta at Luigi's on Washington Street.

Tom Bennett loathes Italian food and had refused to set foot in the trattoria, so the place has no unpleasant memories for Jane.

Gordon, it seems, has no such reservations and he's tucking into his gnocchi.

"So, Jane, tell me about the authors you represent," he says, dabbing his chin with a napkin.

"Well, I've just made the step up from junior agent, so my list still has to grow. Until now I've been nurturing a memoir written by a doctor who worked with *Médecins Sans Frontières* in Africa and Asia."

"Sounds worthy," he says.

Jane sucks in a string of fettuccine with a little smack of her lips.

"Don't be so dismissive."

"Oh, I'm not. I imagine there's an appetite for that kind of thing among the women who're addicted to those awful agony aunt talk shows."

Jane shakes her head.

"You're such a prig. The book is beautifully written and very inspirational."

"The author is a woman, I'm assuming?"

"Yes, but why is that relevant?"

He shrugs.

"Women are drawn to writing about certain themes."

"Like what?"

"Oh, the bleeding heart, ten-tissue weepy kind of stuff: love affairs and

failed marriages and so on.”

“So you’re dismissing all women writers?”

“Oh, not at all. They have their place in the literary firmament.”

“But they’re less important than men?”

“Well, I don’t think it can be argued that the *great* writers are all men. Certainly, those who have strived to write the Great American Novel have always been male.”

Jane laughs.

“God, Gordon, that is so Axis of Dick.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You and your boys’ club! Is a novel only significant when it’s a testosterone-heavy epic about war or adventure?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“I think you are. And tell me this, why is it that supposedly lightweight *feminine* themes like divorce, adultery and family life suddenly become *important* when tackled by male novelists like Updike, Eugenides or Franzen?”

“Perhaps because those men elevated them beyond chick-lit?”

Jane shakes her head.

“God, you’re insufferable.”

She throws back her wine.

Jane knows she should shut up but the alcohol, the stress of the last few days and this man’s pomposity have lit her fuse.

Her eyes narrow dangerously.

“I assume you consider *Too Long the Night* to be superior to *Ivy*?”

“I thought talk of those books was *verboten*?” Gordon says with a smirk.

“Answer me.”

He throws down his fork with a clatter.

“You’ve read enough of *Too Long the Night* to answer that absurd question yourself.”

Jane can no longer hold back and all the walls she has built around her contempt for his book come tumbling down.

“That book is amongst the worst I have ever read, and believe me I have spent enough years wallowing in the Blunt Agency’s slush pile to see some lulus. It takes a compelling story of human emotion—the story of a boy broken by the loss of his first, and it seems, only love—and turns it into a clumsy and intellectually bankrupt meditation on the meaning of life and

death. It *stinks*, Gordon, and only through your extortion is *Too Long* ever going to be published. It does not deserve to be. And yes, *Ivy*, is the superior book. In every way. It deals with emotions and desires in a lighthearted and humorous manner, but it's honest and moving, and even—dare I say it?—profound.”

She sees the color drain from his face and realizes she has gone too far. Reaching across the table she takes his hand.

“Gordon, I’m sorry, I spoke in anger.”

He yanks his hand away and stands, almost toppling his chair.

“I will be outside getting some air.”

He strides away and Jane beckons their waiter and settles the check.

She exits to find Gordon trying unsuccessfully to hail a cab, flapping his arms like a penguin.

She flags down a taxi and opens the rear door.

“Get in, Gordon. My apartment’s just a couple of blocks away and then you can get the driver to take you on to The Pierre.”

Gordon sits beside her, staring out into the night.

They drive in silence until they reach her apartment building and as she slides out she says, “I’m sorry, Gordon. Let’s talk about this another time, okay?”

He ignores her and she slams the door and walks toward her lobby, fishing in her purse for her key.

Before she can get her key in the lock she feels somebody grab her arm and turns to see Tommy, a nasty grin twisting his face.

He’s dressed in a suit, but his tie is pulled askew and that chemical smell hangs over him like a mushroom cloud.

He throws Jane up against the wall beside the door and says, “You’ve ruined me bitch, now this is where I get to ruin you.”

What makes Gordon look back as the cab pulls away he doesn't know.

Perhaps it's still the shock at what Jane Cooper said about his book?

Perhaps he looks back in some pathetic belief that she is going to be waving at the cab to stop, that she'll come running to his window and say, "I was just kidding, Gordon. I love your book. It's going to be huge, I promise."

But when he looks back all he sees is her walking toward the lobby of a building, about to let herself in.

And then he sees a man appear out of the shadows and throw her against the wall.

Before he has time to think Gordon shouts, "Stop! Stop the cab!"

And before the taxi has halted he is out the door, sprinting down the sidewalk, shouting, "Hey! Hey! Leave her!"

Believing that his cries will scare the mugger away.

But the thug merely turns to him and stares him down.

This gives Gordon—never the bravest of men and certainly no pugilist—pause, and he slows to a walk.

"Let her go," he says.

"Who is this nerd, Janey?" the man says. "Your new boyfriend?"

"You should go, Tom."

"You know this man?" Gordon says.

"He's my ex-fiancé," Jane says.

"I see."

Believing that good manners trump all, Gordon sticks out a hand.

"Gordon Rushworth."

The man takes his hand, but not to shake it, merely to bend Gordon's index finger to the point of breaking.

Gordon yelps and sinks to his knees.

"Jesus, Tom, what the hell are you doing?" Jane says, pulling at his assailant's arm.

Gordon, eyes blurred by tears, sees the man let go of his hand and swing on Jane, slapping her through the face.

Gordon scrambles to his feet and lunges at the swine.

He is met with a shoe to the groin that fells him, leaving him lying curled like a worm on the sidewalk, weeping.

As Gordon topples, Jane's fear is replaced by raw, red, rage.

She spots a cyclist's lock and chain lying on the sidewalk and grips it, swinging it at Tom's skull.

It connects and blood wells, soaking his hair and seeping through his fingers when he puts them to his head.

"Jesus, Janey, what have you done?" he says with a whimper.

"The question, Tom, is what I'll do if you don't get lost. Right now."

She swings the chain again and he backs away, blood dappling the sidewalk, then he turns and sprints into the night.

Jane kneels down beside her would-be savior.

"Gordon, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says in a high voice, "I just may never sing tenor again."

She laughs and so does he, even though it causes him to suck in his breath in agony.

Jane helps him to his feet.

"You'd better come upstairs," she says and they lurch into the lobby.

"Okay, but please don't offer me an ice pack," he says.

“So, are you going to tell me why you were engaged to Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*?” Gordon asks as he slumps on Jane’s couch, taking the glass of water she brings him from the kitchen.

She sits opposite him, her face even paler than usual.

“Are you okay?” she says.

“I think my pride is more bruised than my . . .”

He wags a hand in the vague direction of his groin.

“Why?” Jane says. “You were very brave.”

“Well, the damsel in distress *did* end up having to rescue her rescuer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Gordon. If you hadn’t come charging up like that God knows what Tom would have done. You distracted him and took most of the punishment.”

“You’re dodging my question,” he says. “What were you doing with that creep?”

Gordon drinks his water as Jane tells him how she was duped by Tom Bennett’s buttoned-down charm.

How she walked in on him sporting with a trio of playmates in her bedroom.

And how she emailed the photographs to his bosses.

“God, Jane, I’m sorry. You must be devastated.”

“Humiliated, more than anything, that I was taken in by him.”

“He’s clearly a sociopath. That’s his talent: duping people.”

“Perhaps. But it still stings.”

Gordon puts down his water glass and can’t suppress a grimace as he shifts to the front of the couch.

“You have to call the police. That guy is dangerous.”

“You’re right of course, Gordon, but just think of the publicity? On the eve of the *Ivy* media blitz tomorrow?” She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

“So work comes before your own safety?”

She shrugs.

“You boss must love you,” Gordon says.

“I’ve waited years for this break. I’m not going to let Tommy screw it up.”

Jane stands and walks over to the window, staring out into the night.

"I owe you an apology, Gordon," she says, turning toward him.

"Why?"

"You were the unintended target of a lot of my rage against Tommy when I lashed out at you earlier tonight."

"Perhaps, but I *was* being a real prig." He shakes his head. "The thing is, I don't even believe half the nonsense that I sprouted. It's like somewhere along the road I started playing the role of the cranky academic and it became a suit of armor that I'd trot out whenever I was nervous."

"You were nervous? Tonight?"

"Come on," he says. "You're the only person I've ever sat face-to-face with who has read my book. Or part of it, at least."

"Hasn't Bitsy read it?"

"Good God, no! I never had the courage to give it to her."

"Then I'm even more sorry, Gordon. I was cruel."

He shakes his head.

"No, you were honest."

"It's unfair of me to give an opinion based on seven chapters."

"Seven very *long* chapters."

"Admittedly."

"And you weren't exactly champing at the bit to read on, were you?"

She stares at him, saying nothing.

"It's okay, Jane. Give it to me straight."

"I'd rather have my fingernails ripped out with pliers than read more of your book."

He laughs, and then yelps, and has to restrain himself from cupping his nether regions.

She approaches him.

"Are you okay?"

"What's the old gag about 'only when I laugh'?"

He waves a hand at a chair.

"Sit, Jane, you're making me nervous."

She sits.

Gordon says, "I no longer want *Too Long the Night* published, Jane."

"Oh come on, Gordon. There may be an editor out there who loves it."

He shakes his head.

"There won't be. I've had enough rejection letters to wallpaper your

apartment. It's time I moved on."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

She nods.

"Well, okay then."

"Don't tell me you aren't relieved?"

Shrugging, Jane says, "I hated the deceit, Gordon. I hated having to hide my feelings about the book and I hated being complicit in the extortionate way in which it would have been published."

"Talking of deceit . . ."

She looks at him warily.

Gordon says, "Perhaps it's time for me to be completely honest about *Ivy*."

Jane rockets to her feet, holding up a hand as if she's halting traffic.

"Hold it right there, Gordon, before you say another word. If you raise issues about the authorship of *Ivy* I'll be obliged to put a stop to tomorrow's media junket. And—talking hypothetically, of course—if the author should be a person other than your sister, then the identity of that person is going to be revealed in a *very* public way. I know that tonight has been emotionally charged and perhaps you aren't thinking clearly, so I'm going to make some coffee and give you a couple of minutes to ponder this."

She leaves Gordon alone.

Well, not quite alone.

Suzie appears on the couch beside him, resting her chin on her hand, staring at him with her green, slightly almond eyes.

"Spill the beans to her, Gordo. You know you want to."

He looks away, hoping she'll evaporate, but she doesn't.

"Spill the beans and take her into the bedroom and bang the bejesus out of her. That old aphrodisiac, adrenaline, is still coursing through your veins and it's plain to see that you're dying to tear into each other like alley cats."

"Go away!" he hisses.

"Did you say something, Gordon?" Jane calls from the kitchen.

"No, I sneezed."

"Gesundheit," she says.

Suzie is doubled up with laughter beside him.

"God, you're such a wimp! Play Tarzan with Jane and then get in front of the cameras at The Pierre tomorrow and claim what's yours, Gordo. You know you want to."

As Jane steps back into the room carrying two mugs of coffee, Suzie dematerializes.

Jane, handing Gordon, a mug says, “So? Is there something you want to tell me?”

And the words are right there, lining up on his tongue, ready to fly out and change his life, but all Gordon can do is shake his head and say, “No, Jane. There’s nothing I want to say to you, nothing at all.”

And is that relief he sees in her eyes, or disappointment?

“This promises to be a red letter day for the Blunt Agency,” Jonas Blunt says by way of greeting when Jane joins him for breakfast at The Pierre.

He called her at 6:30 A.M., waking her from a troubled slumber, the events of the night before leaving her nerves raw.

Insisting that she “get cleaned up and meet him soonest” he’d rung off before she could protest, so she’d jumped under the shower, dressed and rushed over here all in under forty-five minutes.

Breathless, she falls into a chair opposite her boss and takes a slug of spring water.

Shoveling Eggs Benedict into his mouth, Jonas says, “Right here in my briefcase I have a contract from Raynebeau Jones’s production company for the movie rights to *Ivy*. Three million dollars will be Lucky Lizzie Rushworth’s once she puts pen to paper.”

“Wow,” Jane says.

“Wow indeed. And the Blunt Agency will be a production partner in this little enterprise. We’re spreading our wings, Janey, all thanks to you.”

He reaches across and honest-to-goodness chucks her under the chin.

But Jane doesn’t see her suave, smirking boss, she sees Gordon Rushworth sitting on her couch last night, coming within a hairsbreadth (she’s all-too positive) of owning up to being the author of *Ivy*.

And she’d stopped him.

Given him time to retreat behind his little wall of lies.

Again.

All because she was terrified of facing Jonas Blunt with the truth and seeing the inevitable disintegration of her career.

“Janey? Jane?”

Jonas clicks his fingers before her eyes like a hypnotist bringing a subject back from a trance.

She blinks and laughs.

“Sorry, Jonas, I’m just a little overawed by those numbers.”

“Then hold onto your seat my little petal. Yesterday I very subtly leaked news of our impending auction of *Ivy*. I already have pre-emptive bids from

three of the big five, with offers of four million for this book and a sequel. By the time we go to auction we'll get double that."

Jane shakes her head.

"I don't know what to say."

Jonas raises his tomato cocktail and clinks his glass against hers.

"Just say *cheers*, Janey, and enjoy the moment. Days like these come seldom in the benighted world of publishing."

They drink and then he sets down his glass.

"There is to be an addition to the media schedule. At 8 P.M. Eastern Raynebeau Jones will be interviewed live in L.A. by Bernadine Class from *Entertainment Tonight*. She'll be breaking the news about *Ivy*. A camera crew from *ET* will be upstairs in Lizzie's suite and she'll be able to field questions and chat with Raynebeau."

"You're saying this is all going out live?"

"Oh yes, we're talking prime time. And then it'll be picked up by dozens of *ET*'s syndication affiliates."

He stares at her.

"You look concerned?"

"I'm just a little worried that Lizzie Rushworth is going to pull this off. Live network TV? Talking to a Hollywood star? That's quite a leap for her from selling bric-a-brac in Vermont."

"That's why you're here, my precious. To nurture and guide her while I bait the media piranhas."

"I'll do my best."

"I'm counting on you."

Jonas stands.

"Now why don't you take me upstairs and introduce me to our little cash cow?"

Bitsy Rushworth can't honestly remember feeling more stressed and disoriented since the day her ex-husband sat her down and told her that he was gay and that he was leaving her for their landlord, a bluff man in his fifties with a spray tan and a hairpiece.

A small army of scuttling women have invaded her bedroom at The Pierre, and with little regard for her decency, have stripped her to her underwear and are busy dressing her, selecting outfits from a rail that was wheeled in when the unsuspecting Bitsy, wearing the fluffy robe she hopes she can take home with her, opened the door fifteen minutes ago.

The women ignore her and talk amongst themselves in whispers, as curt and intense as Marines about to go into battle.

A skinny girl holds up a blouse.

"This?"

A squat woman with bangs says, "Too much cleavage."

The girl holds up another.

"This?"

"Lovely," says an Asian woman with a British accent, and the blouse is pulled onto Bitsy and buttoned.

A skirt is offered.

"Too hot for her," says a towering blonde in a jumpsuit and boots.

Bitsy knows this is not a reference to the weather.

Finally she is dressed and the skinny girl gets down on her knees and tries at least five pairs of shoes before the others grunt their approval.

The platoon of women withdraw, leaving only the girl to take care of emergencies.

Then it's the turn of the make-up artist and her assistant, who shove Bitsy down at the vanity and proceed to scrub and smear and tweezer and preen, finally forcing her to pout while greasy lipstick that tastes unpleasantly like burnt toast is applied to her lips.

Finally, primped and painted and dizzy with perfume and nerves, Bitsy is led through to the living room of the suite where Gordon stands with Jane Cooper and a very tall, dark-haired man with a dazzling smile.

Jane says, "Lizzie, you look fabulous." She points at the big man. "I'd like you to meet my boss, Jonas Blunt."

Blunt takes her hand in both of his and says, "Enchanted. Let me say how delighted we are to have you join our stable."

As if he's talking to a brood mare.

Bitsy mumbles something and then she's seated on the couch with Jonas Blunt beside her, reeking of some cloying aftershave.

He flaps a wad of paper before her eyes and she hears something about movie rights.

She blinks up at Gordon, shaking her head.

"We've talked it through, Bits—*Lizzie*," Gordon says, "and you should go ahead and sign."

Jonas hands her a fancy fountain pen and she signs the document and he smiles even more broadly as he takes it from her and slips it into a very slim leather briefcase.

"Now if you'll excuse me," he says, rising, "I'm going down to the lobby to meet the first journalist."

Jane points to a pair of chairs facing one another.

"Sit here, Lizzie," she says, drawing one of the chairs away from a low table that holds a simple flower arrangement. "Do you need anything? Water? Coffee?"

Divine intervention, Bitsy thinks but shakes her head and says, "No, thank you, Jane. I'm fine."

"Gordon and I will be in the bedroom watching everything on a monitor," Jane says. "Jonas will introduce you to Petula Montclair from *The New York Times* and then leave the two of you alone. Okay?"

"Okay," Bitsy says, wanting to yell and make a mad dash for the door and freedom.

But she stays in her seat when Jane and Gordon disappear into the bedroom and conjures the smiling face of Daniel Quant.

She tries to slow her breathing but feels close to hyperventilating when Jonas Blunt returns with a very severe-looking woman with a gray hair.

Rising to meet her, Bitsy is sure she looks as stricken as the proverbial bunny in the headlights.

Perched on the edge of the huge bed, Jane Cooper seated beside him, Gordon watches the TV monitor that a kid who looked like he was still in high school had lugged in a few minutes before the first journalist arrived.

The kid, a nerd from Jane's office, set up a webcam in the front room of suite (positioned to be invisible to the media people) which beams picture and audio through to the bedroom, where Gordon and Jane watch.

"We'll also record all the interviews straight to hard drive," Jane told him when they came into the room. "It means we can challenge any inaccuracies in the media."

Gordon, dry mouthed, stares at the monitor, watching Bitsy shaking hands with the journalist, Petula Montclair, who wrote the glowing review of *Ivy*, praising it's "post-feminist, post-modern, post-everything" take on the female psyche.

How in the name of God is his addled-headed sister going to deal with this woman, who routinely interviews the greats of world literature?

On the monitor Jonas Blunt says, "I'll leave the two of you alone," exits frame and appears through the bedroom door, where he stands towering over Gordon and Jane, cupping his alpha male chin in his hand.

Petula Montclair clicks on a small voice-recorder and says, "Lizzie, perhaps you could start by telling me how it all began, how you came to write *Ivy*?"

Bitsy, staring at the journalist, says nothing for a few moments, then she leans forward in her chair and says, "Petula, first I think I need to be completely honest with you and make it clear that I'm not the author of *Ivy*."

Gordon feels a sick dread take hold of his gut and sees what little color there is drain from Jane Cooper's face.

Bitsy says, "*Ivy* is entirely the creation of Viola Usher."

Gordon takes a ragged breath and sees Jane relax just a little.

Petula Montclair says, "Aren't you being just a little disingenuous? You are Viola Usher, after all?"

"No. Viola Usher is like a sibling who wrote *Ivy* and then handed it over to me, complete in every way."

The journalist laughs, “I think you’re very neatly explaining the somewhat schizophrenic relationship an author has with their work. Many I’ve interviewed have described the process as some sort of out-of-body experience.”

“I would agree with that,” Bitsy says.

“This is fascinating, particularly since *Ivy* is very racy, very modern. Certainly it allows a view into the mind of a young woman who has stepped outside any boundaries society has drawn for her.”

“Yes, Olivia Usher seems to understand all this very well.”

“But you don’t?”

“Good heavens, no!” Bitsy says.

Gordon knows she is being nothing but honest, but the journalist, enchanted, says, “So where does this all *come* from? Is it in anyway autobiographical?”

“Certainly not, I’m a terrible prude.”

“But you are from a small town in Vermont, not unlike the one in the book?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And I understand that you once lived on an Ivy League campus where your husband was a faculty member?”

“I did, yes.”

“But you didn’t indulge in any of the shenanigans described in the book?”

“Gosh, no. I observed, though, of course.”

“Ah, you were an observer?”

“Yes,” Bitsy says, leaning forward and smiling an artless smile, “I always have been. You might say I like to watch.”

The journalist hoots with laughter.

“Brilliant,” Jonas Blunt says, “she’s simply *brilliant!*”

The *Entertainment Tonight* camera crew lug the last of their gear out of the suite, and all that's left is the smell of overheated klieg lights.

Jane sinks down into a chair opposite Bitsy, who, now that she is finally away from the glare of the media, slumps like a puppet that's had its strings cut.

"Jane, promise me I won't ever have to endure a day like that again," Bitsy says.

"Lizzie—"

"Bitsy. Please call me Bitsy. Let me feel a little like myself again."

"Bitsy, I promise," Jane says, lying through her teeth.

She wants to say: *you've just stepped onto the roller coaster, sister, buckle up tight*, and exchanges a look with Gordon who is pouring himself a huge Scotch.

He holds up the bottle, his eyebrows raised.

Jane nods, mouthing, *please*.

Jonas swans back into the room and plants a kiss on Bitsy's forehead.

"You have been astonishing. You handled the TV thing like a seasoned pro."

"Thank you," Bitsy says in little more than a whisper.

Jonas says to Jane and Gordon, "Didn't you just love it when Raynebeau Jones cooed, 'Lizzie, I really want to come up and visit with you in Maine' and Lizzie said, 'Vermont' and Raynebeau went 'Vermont?' and Lizzie said, 'If you hit Canada you've gone too far.'?"

"It was priceless," Gordon says, sagging into a chair with his drink.

Jonas consults his Breitling chronometer and says, "I'd love to take you all out for a celebratory dinner but I have a client appearing on Broadway and I promised to show my face. So, safe traveling back home tomorrow and I hope we'll be seeing a lot more of each other in the future."

There are air kisses and handshakes and Jonas is gone, leaving just a whiff of his Bulgari aftershave.

"God, how do you stomach that man?" Gordon asks Jane.

"He's very good at his job."

“So was Pol Pot.”

“Funny, Gordon.”

Jane stands.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m bushed.”

“I can’t even move,” Bitsy says.

Gordon walks Jane to the door.

“Are you going to be okay?” he says when they’re out of Bitsy’s earshot.

“Alone at your apartment?”

“I’ll be fine. Even Tommy’s not crazy enough to pull that stunt twice.”

“You’re welcome to take my room and I’ll bunk on the couch up here. God knows, I’ve had enough practice.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Gordon, but no. I think it’s time I started to get my life back together again.”

“Well, okay. I imagine we’ll be seeing one another shortly?”

“Yes, the auction will happen over the next few days and there’ll be the usual slew of paperwork. I guess it’ll be easiest for me to come up to Vermont.”

“I look forward to that,” Gordon says.

“Me too,” Jane says.

And, oddly enough, she realizes that she means it.

Bitsy, lying in the huge tub, soaking in the various potions that she found in the bathroom and added to the water, is almost asleep when she hears her cell phone ringing.

She is tempted to leave it but, anxious that it's Jane or Gordon, she rises from the water, pulls a bathrobe over her dripping body and hurries into the bedroom where her phone lies chirping on the dresser.

When she sees the number for the Quant Foundation displayed on caller ID her heart nearly skips a beat.

"Hello?" she says.

"Bitsy?"

"Yes?"

"This is Daniel."

Even after this astonishing day—a revolving door of high-powered journalists, culminating with her chatting to some movie star in Los Angeles—Daniel Quant's voice is enough to weaken her knees.

"Daniel, this is a surprise."

"I'm the one who is surprised, Bitsy."

"Oh?"

"I saw you on TV."

"You watch TV?"

He laughs.

"Oh, yes. I'm a sucker for sit-coms. Anyway, I caught you on *Entertainment Tonight*. You were a tonic, Bitsy. I never knew you had such a naughty sense of humor."

Naughty sense of humor?

Was he talking about her?

"Well, thank you, Daniel."

"So, really, this is just a call from a fan."

She can't suppress a giggle at the absurdity of this.

"You were radiant, Bitsy. You have truly transcended your old self. What a joy it is to behold."

"Thank you," she says.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’re busy being feted and wined and dined,” he says.

“No, I’m just taking a bath.”

Daniel laughs.

“Well, enjoy that and I hope to see you very soon.”

He’s gone and Bitsy wanders back into the bathroom in something of a daze.

It is only when she has lowered herself into the tub that she realizes she is still wearing the robe and carrying her phone, both of which are now drenched.

Bitsy heaves herself out, sodden and dripping and stares at her face in the mirror.

“Daniel Quant is looking forward to seeing you,” she says. “He said you looked radiant.”

And the palatial hotel bathroom disappears and she is in a field with Daniel, a field of lush green grass and sunflowers, and he takes her in his arms and kisses her and she sinks to ground and submits to his will.

Gordon sits on the bed of his room and stares at the wall.

The day was a resounding success, Bitsy's idiot savant routine—which he knew came from sheer terror and an old Puritan addiction to the truth—catnip to the media.

He and his sister are going to be very rich.

"So why the hell are you so damned glum?" he asks himself.

"Good question, Gordo," Suzie says, leaning a haunch on the mini-bar.

"Have you come to crow?" he asks.

"No, I've come to say goodbye."

"Really?"

"Yes. You're a hopeless case, Gordon. You blew the opportunity to finally rip off that hair shirt you've been wearing for twenty years and *live*."

"It's a very well-tailored hair shirt."

"Gordon, I know what happened to me was tragic. Hell, I should know, I was the one who *died*. But you have to move on, Gordy. You can't carry on mourning me."

"I'm not mourning you."

"You sure as hell are. What was that decade plus spent writing that awful book if it wasn't some act of mourning?"

"It was me trying to find some meaning in my life."

"Just live, Gordo. Fall in love again."

"I think I'm done with love."

"Then I'm done with you. Have a nice life, Gordon."

And she's gone.

He looks around, certain she'll pop up in another corner of the room.

"Suzie?" he says, but he's talking to himself.

Feeling a profound emptiness, Gordon lies on the bed and stares up at the ceiling.

He sees the rest of his life stretching out before him.

A life of great financial comfort, to be sure, but with little else.

When he finds his hand on the telephone he realizes he's about to call Jane Cooper.

Gordon withdraws his hand.

No, he is better alone.

Miserable, yes, but still with his dignity intact.

For what, after all, is a man without his dignity?

He waits for Suzie's ribald rejoinder but, of course, it doesn't come.

All he hears is the muted whisper of the traffic and the slow, measured tick of the bedside clock.

The two days since the media blitz at The Pierre have passed in a blur for Jane.

Lizzie Rushworth is officially *hot*.

Trending on Twitter.

Ablaze in the blogosphere.

Splashed across the pages of the major newspapers.

Jane's hardly slept and barely eaten.

The upside is that she's been too busy to fret about Tom Bennett.

Jonas Blunt has jetted off to Los Angeles to booze and schmooze Raynebeau Jones and her acolytes, eager to keep his noble profile high in the shark-infested Hollywood waters.

He's left Jane, as he put it, *at the tiller*, managing the slaving media and the auction of *Ivy*, which is happening today.

Before he left Jonas set the terms of the auction with the five major publishers who are bidding: it's to be a "round robin" auction, with 11:00 A.M. today the deadline for first offers.

Once all the initial offers are received, the lowest bidder will be given the opportunity to outbid the highest or drop out, then the next lowest bidder will be given the opportunity to top the highest bid and it will continue until there is one winner standing by tonight.

Three hours ago Jonas, air kissing the vicinity of Jane's forehead as he dashed to the airport limo, said, "Over to you, Janey. I'll be on my mobi."

There are many things that Jane loathes about her boss, but his new affectation of using British slang for his cell phone had her biting back a snide rejoinder.

But, as she sits in her gorgeous new office watching the clock edge toward eleven, she understands how much she owes him and how she merely needs to bob in the wake of his insufferable ego for another couple of years and then (who knows?) perhaps she'll be able to hang out her own shingle.

The Jane Cooper Agency, has a nice ring.

Or maybe *Cooper Literary*.

Her computer bings like a door chime as she sees the first bids land in her

inbox.

She clicks on one.

An offer of \$3 million.

She gulps and clicks on the next.

\$3.5 million.

Jonas is right: they'll be able to get around \$6 million by the end of the day.

The door to the office opens and Jane's new assistant, Belinda, sticks her head in.

"Jane, there are two detectives here to see you."

Before Jane can reply Belinda pushes the door wide and a flabby guy in a badly fitting jacket followed by a tired looking woman in a pantsuit invade the room.

The man wags a badge at Jane and mumbles two names she doesn't get.

"What's this all about?" Jane says, hearing her computer chime as another bid arrives.

"You know a Thomas Bennett?" the woman says.

"Yes."

Jane sees her assistant still lurking in the doorway.

"You can go, Belinda, and close the door, please."

Jane waits until the girl departs before she speaks.

"Tom Bennett is my ex-fiancé," she says.

"You wouldn't happen to know his whereabouts?" the man asks.

"No. I haven't seen or heard from him in a couple of days."

"But he lives at your apartment?"

"He did," Jane says. "He moved out a few days ago. What's wrong? What's he done?"

The woman says, "He is a person of interest in an ongoing investigation."

She flaps a piece of paper under Jane's nose.

"This is a warrant authorizing us to search your apartment."

Jane stares at the woman cop.

"What for?"

The man says, "Ms. Cooper we need you to accompany us to your home. Immediately."

Jane shakes her head.

"I can't. That's impossible. I'm in the middle of something vital here."

"Don't make us arrest you, Ms. Cooper," the woman says, staring her

down with very cold eyes.

Jane stands.

“Okay, I’ll go with you. I just need to brief my assistant before we leave, okay?”

“Make that briefing brief,” the man says, chortling.

His partner looks pained.

Jane, her computer chiming again, abandons her desk on the most important day of her career.

Jane sits at her kitchen table watching as the detectives and a squad of uniformed cops turn her apartment upside down.

A man built like a basketball player knocks a bowl from a shelf beside the fridge and it crashes to the floor, spilling sugar on the tiles.

He doesn’t seem to notice, crunching over it in his size eighteens.

It’s after noon and Jane, who had to surrender her iPhone and iPad to the detectives (a nerdy looking plainclothes cop sits opposite her, trawling through phone and tablet) feels close to panic.

Her landline rings and the female cop crosses the living room to answer it.

“Yes?” the woman says.

After a pause she says, “Ms. Cooper is unavailable right now,” and she hangs up.

“Who was that?” Jane asks, standing, heading toward the doorway.

“I look like your secretary?” the cop asks.

Jane walks toward her.

“I need to be in touch with my office—”

“Just step back into the kitchen and stay there, Ms. Cooper, otherwise I’m going to have to restrain you.”

Jane obeys, watching the wall clock advance toward 12:30 P.M.

The nerdy cop leaves her phone and iPad on the table and goes through to the living room, speaking to the male detective who grunts and comes into the kitchen and sits down opposite Jane.

“Okay, your apartment’s clean.”

Jane wags a hand at the spilled sugar and broken bowl.

“Hardly.”

“Believe me, sugar is the least of your worries.”

He leans in and gives her the benefit of his breakfast breath.

“You look like a nice girl, what you doing with a loser like Bennett?”

"I'm no longer with him."

"So you say. Thing is Counselor Bennett was supplementing his income by supplying his preppy crew with dietary additives, if you get my drift."

"I don't."

"Drugs, Ms. Cooper. Cocaine, to be specific. You indulge?"

"Certainly not!"

"Tom Bennett ever use drugs in your company?"

"God, no. He hardly even drank."

The cop stares at her.

"Looks like there's a lot about this guy you don't know."

She nods.

"I'm realizing that."

The cops grunts his way to his feet.

"We're outta here. You're free to go. But you hear from him, you call me, okay?"

He hands her a card.

And just like that they're gone, leaving Jane with an apartment that looks like Hurricane Sandy took a detour through it.

Jane's cell phone rings and her stomach knots as she sees Jonas's name on caller ID.

"Jonas," she says.

"I've just landed in L.A. and I've already had five editors calling me, screaming about their bids being ignored."

"I can explain—"

"Hell, I thought I knew you, but this!"

"I'm sorry, Jonas?"

"Sorry? Sorry!? Why? You have *cojones* of steel, Janey. You've got these editors in a spin. They're all swearing that they're prepared to double their bids. Or they would if they could track you down!"

He laughs.

"Where are you, anyway?"

"Uh, I'm at Starbucks."

"Well, have a Peppermint Mocha on me. Then trot on back to the office and bleed those suckers dry."

"I'll do that."

"Oh, and Janey . . ."

"Yes, Jonas?"

“Remind me never to play poker with you.”

He’s gone and so are Jane’s knees.

She falls into a chair and sits for a minute before she finds the strength to go out into the chaos that has become her life.

Gordon finds himself on one of his aimless meanders through East Devon, shoulders hunched, hands deep in the pockets of his corduroys, eyes fixed on the sidewalk, oblivious to the autumnal blaze of color.

Since returning from New York he's felt rudderless.

Adrift.

You're in mourning, he tells himself.

In mourning for that God-awful book and all the years you spent writing it.

He has no idea what he's going to do with his life now that he has abandoned his novel and academia has abandoned him.

At least he no longer has financial worries.

Since the media blitz *Ivy* is being downloaded at a dizzying rate and the first royalty payment hit his bank account yesterday, an obscene amount of money that left him almost panic-stricken when he went on-line and checked his account balance.

He felt as if the door was about to be kicked down and some shadowy truth police were going to invade Bitsy's house, dragging Gordon out into the street and demanding that he own up to his deception.

Before they emptied his bank account of his ill-gotten gains.

Ridiculous, Gordon tells himself as he approaches Grace's restaurant, the absurdly named Field To Fork.

He's drawn from his reverie by the sudden realization that there's way more traffic than usual in East Devon.

Cars line both sides of the street, strangers browse the stores and when he looks into Grace's he sees the tables are all full.

A hand-lettered sign in the window of the eatery invites diners to "Try the delicious Joe Froggers that Suzie eats in *Ivy*."

Is it possible that the awful novel is attracting people to East Devon?

Gordon's question is answered by a plain woman with permed hair who heaves herself from the passenger seat of a Ford with Massachusetts plates, saying to her husband, a skinny, long-suffering fellow: "Isn't it *quaint*, Desmond? It's *just* like the book."

They disappear into Grace's and Gordon walks on, leaving the main road and finding himself standing outside the house where Suzie Baldwin lived all those years ago, now the home of lesbian potters.

"Hi Suzie," he says, staring at the upper window that had been her bedroom, but he knows it's no good.

She has kept her promise.

He hasn't seen her since that night at The Pierre.

One of the potters appears in the window, scowling down at him.

"You're losing your mind, Gordon," he says and takes a deep breath and strides off in the direction of his sister's house.

As he arrives home he is accosted by the postman, heaving a bulging mailbag.

The old coot, his face red as a beet, says, "They got me working double shifts because of the sister o' yours."

The postman upends his bag, pouring a pile of letters onto the sidewalk beside Bitsy's mail box.

Gordon looks at the letters and then up at the postman who marches away, muttering to himself.

Gordon reaches down and snags an envelope.

It is addressed to: *Viola Usher, East Devon, Vermont.*

He lifts another.

And another.

And another.

Scooping up the pile, envelopes slipping from his grasp as he walks up the short pathway, Gordon kicks at the front door.

After a few seconds he kicks again and Bitsy, cell phone pressed to her ear, opens the door.

"I'm talking to Jane," she says, then she stares at the envelopes. "What's all that?"

"Fan mail," Gordon says, dumping the envelopes on the living room carpet.

"Here's Gordon," Bitsy says and hands him the phone.

"Hello, Jane," he says.

"Gordon, are you sitting down?" Jane asks.

"Why?"

"We've just concluded the auction."

"And?"

"Ivy has gone to Argyle Press for eight million."

"Dollars?" he asks.

"No, Gordon, Vietnamese Dong. Of course *dollars*."

A sudden dizziness has Gordon sitting, staring up at Bitsy who paces the living room, looking fretful.

"Gordon, are you there?" Jane says.

"Yes. That's an impressive sum."

"An understatement."

"So, what happens now?"

"Bitsy needs to give us the nod and we'll conclude the deal."

"She's nodding like her heads on a spring, Jane."

"Good, then it's done. I'll be in touch with the paperwork. Congratulations all round."

"And to you, Jane. You must be very pleased."

"I'm ready to leapfrog the Chrysler building."

Gordon laughs.

"I wish I was there to see it."

There's a pause that neither of them seems able to fill, then Jane says, "Well, we'll speak soon. Goodbye, Gordon."

"Goodbye," he says and sets Bitsy's phone down on the coffee table.

He scratches his head.

"We're rich, Bitsy."

"I know," she says. "It's terrifying."

"We'll get used to it."

She sits opposite him, still with her snazzily styled hair but back in her frumpy clothes with no make-up on her face.

"What are you going to do now, Gordon?"

"I don't know. I'll move out, of course."

"Where to?"

He shrugs.

"Maybe Manhattan."

"What will you do there?"

"The same as I'd do if I stayed here in East Devon: lots of nothing."

"Aren't you going to write another book?"

"No, I'm done with that lark."

"What about another Suzie Ballinger novel?"

"I fear my muse has deserted me, Bitsy."

Before his sister can reply they are startled by an amplified voice bellowing from outside: “And this, folks, is where the author of *Ivy* lives. Viola Usher, aka Lizzie Rushworth, wrote the book in this *very* house.”

Gordon dashes to the window and stares out.

A bus idles in the narrow street, belching diesel smoke and a squad of women brandishing cell phones spill out onto the sidewalk, looking right at him, their cameras clicking.

Gordon draws the drapes and turns to sister.

“What have you done, Gordon?” Bitsy asks.

He can find no answer.

It's 9:00 P.M. and to celebrate the day of extraordinary success Jane lies on her couch dressed in her most comfortable sweats, drinking Heineken, eating Chinese take-out and binge-watching Netflix.

She refuses to acknowledge the realization that there's something sad about being alone tonight.

What the hell, she's on top of the world.

Jonas called the office when the auction was concluded and blew kisses at her through his *mobi* and sang (seriously!) "*Bo-bo-bo-bo-bonus time!*" to the tune of "Barbara Ann."

She floated out of the Blunt Agency on a cloud of French champagne (Jonas sent a bottle of Cristal along with a bunch of blood red roses) and watched night fall on Manhattan from the back of the cab taking her to her apartment.

An apartment that was sprucer than it had ever been thanks to the crew of cleaners organized by her assistant Belinda while Jane finalized the *Ivy* auction.

There's no sign that her home was searched by the cops.

And, best of all, the cleaning solvents used by the housekeepers have erased any lingering traces of Tom Bennett's aftershave and hair gel.

Realizing that she's about to slide down a mental rat hole that'll lead her into a world of anger and hurt, Jane purges Tom from her mind and, the antics on the TV screen not holding her attention, finds herself thinking of crusty old Gordon Rushworth.

Crusty, yes.

But not really *old*.

For all his affectations, Gordon can't be more than thirty-five and once you looked past the slightly disheveled exterior there was something oddly attractive about him.

And (despite all his protestations to the contrary) he had written those pretty hot sex scenes.

Jane finds herself wondering if he merely has a very good imagination, or whether he was drawing on personal experience.

Whether he had been a campus lothario.

This train of thought leads her toward another area of discomfort: does she seriously expect the truth of *Ivy's* authorship will be kept secret?

A nasty stab of anxiety has Jane hopping up from the couch and hurrying through to the kitchen for a fresh beer, popping the cap and taking a hefty slug.

Before she can stop herself she sits down at the table and calls home, pleased when she hears her father's voice.

She cares for her mother, but he's the person she needs to talk to right now.

"Daddy," she says.

"Sweet pea," he says. "How are you?"

"Doing great. Made a big deal today."

She tells him about the auction.

"Hey, that makes your old dad real proud, sugar."

"How are you doing?" she asks.

"Ah, never better. Your mother's got me on some low fat diet and I take my pills like a good boy. When are we going to see you?"

"Soon, Daddy," she says. "Very soon."

"What am I hearing, sugar? What's got you blue?"

"Nothing, Dad."

"Don't kid a kidder. What's up with you and that Tom character?"

"That's over."

"Awww, baby. I'm sorry."

"Hey, what can you do?"

"Get back on the horse is what you do."

She laughs.

"Yeah, in a while maybe I'll take the old pony for a canter."

"Why don't you come home and drink beer with your dad? I just got me some classic Steve Martin recordings that are cracking me up."

"I'll come, Dad, I promise. Just let me get through all this work stuff."

"Okay, sweet pea. Love you."

"Love you too, Daddy."

Jane rings off before she surrenders to little self-pitying sniffles.

She wanders through to the bedroom, falls face down on the bed and with the TV still blaring in living room, sobs herself to sleep.

As her Volvo rattles over the cattle grid at the entrance to the Quant Foundation, Bitsy's eye is drawn to her purse wobbling on the passenger seat.

The purse that she has been unable to stop sneaking glances at all of the twenty minutes it has taken her to drive from East Devon.

Because there's a check in the purse.

A check with a dizzying number of zeroes.

Gordon, true to his word, deposited a terrifying sum of money into her bank account yesterday.

Merely fifty percent of the first of the ebook royalties on *Ivy*, he told her.

And there was a vast amount of money to come.

So, leaving just enough in the account to pay her meager expenses, Bitsy wrote out the check to the Quant Foundation, her hand shaking as she signed it.

Her hands are still a little shaky and she grips the wheel of the Volvo to still the tremor as she sees Daniel Quant's house through the Fall leaves.

She checks her watch: 10:00 A.M.

She is precisely on time for her audience with Daniel, set up in a telephone call with his assistant Carlos last night.

As she nears the house Bitsy sees a small knot of people emerge and stand outside the front door, almost as if they're posing for a group photograph.

Bitsy searches in vain for the photographer, then a mad thought strikes her: *they're waiting for you, Bitsy.*

Don't be silly, she tells herself.

But as the Volvo creaks and splutters to a halt outside the house and she stands up out of the car she hears clapping and sees that these radiant, youthful, beautiful people are applauding *her*.

Led by Daniel Quant himself, who stands in the doorway, showing his very white teeth in a smile.

He walks down and grasps her by the shoulders and stares into her eyes.

"Bitsy," he says. "How proud we are of you."

Then he takes her by the arm and leads her into the house.

"Una," he says to the gorgeous giantess, "some tea upstairs, if you would

be so kind?”

If Bitsy hears Una mutter something like “little hack writer” it does nothing to dim the pleasure she feels as Daniel leads her up the stairs to his private sanctum.

They settle themselves on the cushions and Daniel fixes those laser-like blue eyes on her.

“So,” he says, “quite an adventure?”

“Oh yes. More than a little terrifying.”

“You look very different.”

She blushes.

“Oh, they did things to my hair . . .”

She wags a manicured hand near her head.

“Yes, the external changes are delightful of course,” he chuckles when her blush deepens, “but I sense something new in you. Some new *purpose*.”

“Well,” she says, “perhaps it’s not yet apparent to *me*. This whole business makes me want to cover my head with my comforter and hide from the world.”

“Bitsy, ask yourself a simple question.”

“What question is that, Daniel?”

“Do you want to be a prisoner of your past or a pioneer of your future?”

She sighs.

“I’m still trying to come to terms with it all. And I still battle with the dishonesty.”

“May I offer you an example from my own life?”

“Of course, Daniel.”

Before he can continue, Una, like a beautiful giraffe, appears carrying a silver tray with the herbal tea Daniel favors.

She bends at the waist, all long limbs and flowing tresses, and deposits the tray on the wooden floor in front of them.

“Thank you, Una,” Daniel says.

The girl inclines her head, gives Bitsy a cool look through her waterfall of hair, then slinks back down the stairs.

Daniel pours tea and hands Bitsy a cup.

“Thank you,” she says, battling not to grimace when she tastes the bitter brew.

“So, as I was saying,” Daniel says, sipping at his tea, “many years ago I was a student by day, a waiter by night and a member of a circus troupe on

the weekends.”

He sees her face and laughs.

“I was an acrobat,” he says, “and a juggler.”

As if this is all planned, he reaches across to a bowl of fruit and picks out four red apples.

Effortlessly he juggles the apples and then catches them and puts them back in the bowl.

“You’re very good,” Bitsy says.

“It’s like riding a bicycle. Once learned . . .” He shrugs. “Anyway, my point is this: who was I? Student? Waiter? Performer?”

He looks at her.

“Uh, all three?”

“Exactly. To my college professor I was a student, to a diner I was a waiter and to a kid in the audience I was a performer.” He sips his tea. “I was all of those. And yet I was none of them.” He stares at her, unblinking. “You understand?”

“I think so. Uh, you’re saying those . . . *labels* were all just superficial? That the real you was something else?”

He sets down his cup and claps his hands.

“Bravo, Bitsy,” he says. “Now that you have appreciated that simple but profound truth, I think you’ll find it much easier to continue on your path. Remember, all of these external trappings,” he waves a hand around the room, “are mere illusion. Artifice. Stage craft, if you will. So does your harmless bit of play acting, seem much less conflicting now?”

She smiles.

“It does. It really does.”

He spreads his hands.

“Then we are pleased.”

Bitsy reaches for her purse and withdraws an envelope containing the check.

She holds it out to Daniel Quant.

“Daniel, here is my first contribution toward the Foundation. There will be more.”

He takes the envelope and lays it on the tray without opening it.

“We thank you,” he says, pressing his palms together.

He rises and holds a hand out to Bitsy, helping her to her feet.

Leading her toward the stairs he says, “I know that great demands are

being made on your time right now Bitsy, but when the storm has passed I would like you to know that we would be delighted if you were to spend more time here at the Foundation, giving us the benefit of your talents.”

She laughs.

“Oh, I don’t have any talents.”

“Nonsense. All you have to do is identify the thing that you can do better than anyone else in the whole world and then you will find a matching need. It would be our privilege to help you with that.”

“Thank you, Daniel,” she says and floats down the stairs, pleasantly aware of his gaze as he stands watching her from the landing.

How exciting, she thinks.

To be welcomed into the Foundation.

And welcomed into the world of Daniel Quant.

How long will it be, she dares to think, before she is welcomed into his arms?

Blushing furiously she hurries out to her Volvo.

Still fighting her raging emotions Bitsy stalls the car a few times before she finally gets it started and, spewing grit and dust, rattles off home.

Jonas Blunt sits with his tan Cordovans on his vast desk, fingers steeped beneath his fine nose, staring out over Central Park.

Jane, who hasn't been invited to sit, hovers, marveling at how fresh and crisp Jonas looks, even with his punishing schedule of cross country trips, gallery openings and Broadway shows.

"You're aware, of course, that I have no issue?" Jonas says.

"No issue with what?"

He barks a laugh and swivels his chair, looking up at Jane.

"Issue as in *offspring*, Janey. No little snotty nosed brats. No son and heir."

"Yes, I know that," Jane says, thrown by this conversation.

He blinks at her.

"Good God, Janey, sit. Sit. Sit."

She sits.

"You're thinking: why the devil is Jonas sharing this with me? Correct?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm building an empire, Jane. Blunt is no longer merely the pre-eminent literary agency in this increasingly illiterate and benighted land, it is branching out into the world of *entertainment*. I am not going to be one of those myopic bookworms bemoaning the dumbing down of America—I can not only see the writing on the wall, I have damn well grabbed a spray can and added my tag to the peeling brickwork."

He stares at her.

"Why are you doing an impersonation of a goldfish feeding, Janey?"

Jane closes her gaping mouth.

Then opens it to say, "I'm a little confused, Jonas."

He throws his long arms wide.

"Then let me be plain: books are so *yesterday*. Boo hoo. We have to look to the future. Therefore, our role as production partner in *Ivy* the motion picture is now cemented. And it is just the beginning."

"Congratulations."

"Indeed! Indeed!" He rubs his hands together. "What it means, Jane, is

that I will be spending the lion's share of my time in Los Angeles. I have already taken an apartment in Pacific Palisades and soon there will be a West Coast office, staffed—no doubt—by teenagers with tans and belly rings. Kiddies who speak the *lingua franca* of the all-powerful 18 to 30 demographic. For it is with them that our future—and our fortune—lies.”

“What will happen to Blunt Literary?” Jane asks, terrified that his answer will be that it is to be closed.

That she will be out on the street.

“Blunt Literary is going to undergo a metamorphosis.”

He smiles at her, his vampiric canines gleaming.

“Hence my waxing lyrical about my lack of progeny. I may have no biological child, but—and I kiss your smooth little cheeks, *mwah, mwah*—I have you.”

“You do? I mean: you do.”

He narrows his eyes.

“How does *Blunt Cooper* sound to you?”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“What I’m *saying*, Janey, is that you have outstripped all my expectations on this *Ivy* deal and I’m going to let you have a great deal more responsibility. Of course the training wheels will be on for a tad longer but I see the day, Jane, in the not-to-distant future, when your name will join mine on the door.”

“Jonas, this is all a little too much to digest.”

“Well, chew on it, Janey. There’s time. We’re talking a period of transition, not a *fait accompli*. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now onto matters most pressing. Raynebeau Jones is jetting up from L.A. with Yul Egorov.”

He sees her blank expression.

“*Frat Party 1* through 5?”

Still blank.

“*Campus Booty Call? Freshman Yo?*”

She shakes her head.

“I presume those are movies?”

“Not just movies, Janey. Mega blockbusters. Reviled by the critics and consumed with an almost carnal voracity by youth from Boston to Bangkok. And Yul Egorov scripted and helmed them all. To call him *hot* is a bit like

calling the sun *warmish*. He's on *fire*. And he's Raynebeau Jones's current love interest."

"So he's going to be directing *Ivy*?"

Jonas snaps his fingers.

"Bingo. And he's adapting the book. They're coming up to visit the little burg where *Ivy* is set. Eastwick or whatever it's called."

"East Devon."

"East Devon. They're going to visit, soak up the ambience and Raynebeau will converse at length with Lizzie Rushworth, drawing from her everything she can to bring Suzie Ballinger to life on the screen. A camera crew will be sticking to them like limpets and I believe MTV has already signed off on a reality show called *So Raynebeau*."

"Unbelievable."

"Isn't it just? A tremendous buzz-generator for the movie. Anyway, their helicopter will be leaving East 34th Street Heliport at noon, to zoom them up to . . ."

He clicks his fingers again.

"East Devon," Jane says.

"Yes. And you'll go with them. Lubricate their interaction with Lizzie Rushworth."

"If that's what you want."

"That's what I want."

"They're going to stay over in East Devon?"

"Yes. For the night. Tomorrow they'll shoot Raynebeau taking in the town and then in dialogue with Lizzie before they decamp for a whirlwind tour of the Harvard campus."

Jane says, "I must warn you, the accommodation in East Devon is pretty nasty."

Jonas laughs.

"We're talking Hollywood royalty here, Janey. A crew of flunkies has already invaded the hamlet. By the time the chopper lands magic will have been wrought. Don't worry about a thing."

"That's a relief."

"What you need to do is to make sure that the face-to-face between Raynebeau and Lizzie is a true meeting of minds. Remember that Raynebeau is a product of the San Fernando Valley and her references are a little, shall we say, *limited*. She and Lizzie may, in the broadest definition, share a

mother tongue but they will be as unlike as a Swede and a Swahili. You'll be the interpreter. The *facilitator*. Is that clear?"

"It is. I'll do my best."

He beams at her.

"Oh, I know you will, darling Janey. You have my complete confidence."

He wags a languid hand.

"Now run along and pack a toothbrush or whatever. Showbiz awaits."

His nose is in his iPad by the time Jane, more than a little shell-shocked, leaves his office.

Gordon, driving Bitsy's Volvo down to the store to buy provisions, thinks that he's hallucinating.

That the last mad weeks have left him bereft of his senses.

For, as he reaches the end of their street, he sees a house floating by.

Gordon closes his eyes and opens them slowly, one at a time.

The house is still there.

And it's still floating.

Then, through a break in the trees, he sees the cab of a semi and realizes that he is watching a mobile home being transported, the flatbed hidden by the hedgerows.

On impulse Gordon follows the semi to a field on the outskirts of town.

In Gordon's youth the field had belonged to a crusty old Yankee named Ebenezer Yates and you risked a butt-load of buckshot if you cut through his land to the pond.

Now the land lies fallow and Gordon sees a litter of shiny trucks and SUVs parked where once Yates had farmed apples.

The semi wheezes to a halt and a crew of men surrounds it.

The mobile home on the flatbed is like none Gordon has ever seen: it has a pillared porch and at least six rooms, its glossy wooden exterior painted in a pale yellow, with a roof of teal colored tiles.

Gordon winds down his window and speaks to a large man in jeans and a check shirt.

"What's going on?"

"Hollywood's comin' to town," the man says before walking away.

On cue Gordon's cell phone rings.

Jane Cooper.

"Hi Jane," he says. "I hear we're about to be invaded by Tinsel Town?"

"How do you know?" she says.

"I've just seen a mobile home floating through the fields."

She laughs.

"A little surreal, isn't it?"

"To say the least."

“Yes, Raynebeau Jones and some director named Yul Egorov are coming in by helicopter this afternoon. I’ll be accompanying them.”

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

“Gordon, this is going to be pretty intense. A camera crew will be following Raynebeau wherever she goes and I’m told that she is really high maintenance. Will you try and prepare Bitsy as best you can?”

Gordon turns the Volvo back toward town, the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear.

“She’s not going to relish this, Jane.”

“I know, but it’s unavoidable. Is it okay if I come over this evening and talk things through with Bitsy?”

“Of course. I’ll do my best to get her into Lizzie mode.”

“Thanks, Gordon.”

She’s gone and as Gordon rattles into town he is overtaken by the tour bus that besieged their house yesterday, hearing again the amplified voice of the tour guide, waxing lyrical about Viola Usher and Suzie Ballinger.

Gordon parks the Volvo outside the liquor store.

The best thing to do, he decides, is to get quietly but thoroughly hammered.

As Jane approaches the helicopter crouched on the pad at the East 34th Street Heliport a guy with a video camera on his shoulder appears before her, walking backward, the lens in danger of bruising her nose.

Embarrassed, she tries not to look at the camera.

She hears a voice bellowing from behind her: “She’s nobody! She’s nobody!”

Jane turns and sees a jockey-sized man with a bald head and a pencil mustache, dressed in a pinstripe suit and red T-shirt, his body festooned with so much bling that she fears the helicopter will plunge into the East River when it tries to ascend.

Yul Egorov, she presumes.

The director, his braying voice a cross between Minneapolis and Minsk, says: “You shoot only me and Raynebeau! Raynebeau and me! You hearing me?”

Jane is relieved when the camera swings from her and settles on the woman who totters after Egorov, a woman hobbled by high heeled boots, her famously enhanced breasts threatening the stitching of a tight scarlet blouse, her face obscured by a mane of blonde hair.

All Jane can see are giant sunglasses and a pair of lips frozen in a balloon-like pout.

Raynebeau Jones.

When Jane tries to introduce herself, Yul Egorov says, “Yeah, yeah, Bookgirl, get in the damn chopper, will ya?”

Jane ducks under the rotors and clambers aboard, finding herself strapped in opposite the vile couple.

The cameraman follows them on board, his lens consuming Raynebeau until she waves him away with a taloned hand.

With a scream of jets the helicopter lifts off and soars into the air, leaving Jane’s stomach somewhere on the FDR Drive.

Jane closes her eyes and tries to quell her queasiness.

She feels somebody shaking her knee.

Jane blinks and sees Egorov crouched over her leg like a terrier about to

mount it.

“Hey, hey Bookgirl! Raynebeau’s talkin’ to ya!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Jones,” Jane says. “Could you repeat that, please?”

“This book. This *Ivy*. You read it, right?” the actress asks.

“Well, yes, I’m the editor.”

“Okay. So is it, like, a biography?”

Yul Egorov says, “Auto.”

Raynebeau stares at him, chewing gum.

“Huh?”

“Autobiography.”

“Whatever. Is it?”

Jane composes herself.

“Well, in my experience, you get two kinds of writers: those like F. Scott Fitzgerald—”

“Who?”

Egorov says, “The *Gatsby* guy.”

“Okay. Cool.”

Jane says, “Those like Fitzgerald who use their own lives as material for their books, and those like Lizzie Rushworth who’re observers.”

Raynebeau stares at her, chewing.

“So she, like, didn’t do any of this sex stuff?”

“No,” Jane says.

“Bummer.”

“But she observed.”

“So she was, like, a . . . a *voyager*?”

Jane blinks in confusion.

“Voyeur,” Egorov says.

“Oh, right,” Jane says. “Well, in a manner of speaking. I think she reported what she saw.”

“Okay. So this girl, what’s her name . . . ?”

“Suzie. Suzie Ballinger.”

“Right, Suzie. Suzie. Suzie.” Raynebeau turns to the director. “I’m not lovin’ that name, Yul.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not feeling very, you know, *Suzie*.”

“Hearing you, babe. Hearing you.”

“But *Ballinger*. Now I’m liking *Ballinger*. Sounds kinda like *balling*.”

Which is what she's all about, right?

"Well, for part of the book," Jane says. "But towards the end—"

Raynebeau halts Jane with a series of frantic zip-it gestures in the vicinity of her swollen mouth

"Hey, whoa, no spoilers!"

Jane stares at her.

"You haven't finished *Ivy*?"

Raynebeau drops her sunglasses and raises her eyebrows.

"Hello, it's, like, a *book*."

Jane looks at her blankly.

"It's, like, *reading*."

Jane is still blank.

"It's, like, *time*."

Egorov says, "I've read it, though. Almost twice."

"And what are your feelings," Jane asks.

He wobbles his hand dismissively.

"Meh." He shrugs. "Anyways, when I adapt I use the book only as a kinda trampoline to bounce off of."

"I see," Jane says.

"I've got to *own* that bitch," Egorov says, underscoring his words with rapper-like arm movements. "Make it mine. Tear out its guts and hold them in my hand and then shove them back and stitch it up and do what I do the way I do it. You understand?"

Jane understands very little of this but she says, "Of course. You have your creative process."

"Yul's a genius," Raynebeau says and kisses his bald head. "He's the most, like, creative person I have *ever* met. Ev—*uh*!"

"Wonderful," Jane says.

"No, seriously. He is."

Jane nods like a doggy in the back of a car.

Feels that if she stops nodding she'll scream.

Raynebeau says, "I have never met anybody more in touch with the, like, hidden artist within."

Yul shrugs, taking this as no less than his due, his beringed hand delving into Raynebeau's groin.

Jane looks away, down at the countryside, willing this flight to end.

Two hours later the helicopter lands in a field near an incongruously suburban-looking house. The mobile home Gordon told her about.

Jane follows Raynebeau and Yul out of the helicopter, the ever-present cameraman crouching and bobbing.

A retinue of flunkies appears, waiting to do their bidding.

Raynebeau looks at the woods surrounding them, the trees wearing their radiant plumage.

“What’s with that, like, *color*?” she asks.

“It’s Fall,” Jane says.

Raynebeau stares at her, shaking her head.

“The leaves are turning,” Jane says.

“Turning into what?”

“They’re dying, baby, they’re dying,” Yul says.

“*Eew*. Gross.”

“We’re gonna have to go digital with that,” Yul says, “since we’re shooting in spring. And we’ll be workin’ in New Mexico.”

“New Mexico?” Jane says.

“Yeah. Getting a wack of New Mexican money.”

“Isn’t New Mexico a little, well, *dry*?”

“I’m God,” he says.

Jane waits for the punch line.

It doesn’t come.

Yul just repeats: “I. Am. God.”

Then he grabs Raynebeau by the haunch and walks her into the mobile home.

Jane gets the keys to a rental car from one of the minions and drives off toward town and the Rushworths who will seem entirely sane and normal after this bizarre Hollywood power couple.

By the time the doorbell rings Gordon has been drinking solidly for hours but as he rises from an armchair and carefully negotiates his way across Bitsy's living room, he convinces himself that he feels pleasantly relaxed rather than drunk.

He opens the door to reveal Jane Cooper, the setting sun forming a halo around her dark hair.

Without thinking, he dips forward and kisses Jane on both cheeks.

She laughs and looks up at him quizzically.

"How continental of you, Gordon."

"*Oui, oui*," he says. "*Entrer*."

"I didn't know you spoke French."

"I don't, I speak Clouseau."

"Oh, come on, don't tell me an intellectual fellow like you has ever watched those movies?"

"The Blake Edwards-Peter Sellers collaborations were brilliant. My friend Suzie and I'd pig out on popcorn and hold our own VCR marathons. I still watch them again every year or so."

"I'd do something similar with my dad. My mom, sadly, never got the joke."

Gordon crosses to the sideboard.

"A glass of wine, Jane?"

"God, yes. I need one desperately."

She sits.

"Where's Bitsy?"

Handing Jane a glass, Gordon says, "Meditating. If you listen carefully, you'll hear the clang of chakras aligning."

Jane says in a whisper, "She's really into all that stuff?"

He sits opposite her, leaning in close and talking softly.

"She has been for years, ever since she got dumped. Lately she's fallen under the spell of some self-styled guru who peddles his Aquarian snake oil on a farm outside town."

Jane gulps her wine.

“Well, I envy her, if it helps her to find peace.”

“Peace?” Gordon sniggers nastily. “She’s got a schoolgirl crush on this charlatan. It’s all just hormones tied up in a New Agey bow.”

Bitsy enters from her bedroom.

“Hello, Jane. Why are you two whispering?”

Gordon says, “We didn’t want to interrupt your levitating.”

Bitsy shakes her head.

“Gordon, I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about. Are you drunk?”

“Not at all. Merely expansive.”

Bitsy sits on the couch.

“How are you, Jane?”

“I’m well, Bitsy. Sorry to have to worry you with more publicity.”

“Oh well, it comes with the territory, I guess.”

Gordon says, “Jane, you’ve been with our showbiz friends?”

Jane empties her wine glass, nodding.

“I have, I’m afraid.”

She holds out her glass, allowing Gordon to top it up.

“What are they like?” Gordon asks. “And don’t be polite.”

“They’re vile. He’s a poison dwarf who has elevated the small man complex to an art form and she is the Valley Girl from hell.”

Gordon laughs but he sees the apprehension on Bitsy’s face.

“Oh come on, Bits,” he says. “Just think of it all as a joke.”

“Easy for you to say, Gordon. You’re not in the firing line.”

Jane reaches over and takes Bitsy’s hand.

“Look, by way of reassurance, I think they’re going to need very little time with you. They’re both egomaniacs and will want to hog the camera. I don’t anticipate that you’ll have to spend more than an hour with them tomorrow.”

“That’s a relief,” Bitsy says. “Does she have any particular take on the book?”

“She hasn’t even finished reading it.”

“You’re kidding?” Gordon says.

Jane shakes her head.

“I wish I were. Clearly reading a book is a little beyond her attention span. She’s obsessed with Suzie’s sexual exploits, though.”

“Oh dear,” Bitsy says.

“Don’t worry, just trot out your best deadpan, Bitsy,” Jane says. “That’s when you’re lethal. She’ll just bounce right off you.”

“Well, I’ll try.”

Bitsy looks distressed and Jane takes her hand again.

“You’ll be great, Bitsy.”

“I don’t know, Jane. It was one thing doing that publicity in New York City—it had the quality of a dream and I could just pretend that I was somebody else. But doing it here in my home? In the town where I’ve lived my whole life? I’m not sure I can pull it off.”

“Oh, come on Bitsy,” Gordon says, “you’re being silly.”

Jane shoots him a warning look and he shuts up, taking a slug of wine.

The agent gets up and sits next to Bitsy on the couch.

“I understand your apprehension.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I know you’re a very private person and this must seem very, well, *intrusive*.”

“It does. It feels like an invasion. And I feel very small town and out-gunned.”

“Do you know where I’m from, Bitsy?”

“New York?”

“No. Hicksville, Indiana. I’m not kidding: the town I grew up in really is called Hicksville.”

“That must look great on your resume,” Gordon says, laughing.

“Shut up, Gordy,” Bitsy says and Gordon shuts up.

Jane says, “When I arrived in New York from Indiana I suffered terribly from anxiety attacks. I found the city completely overwhelming, and was hopelessly intimidated by the publishing world. Everybody seemed so sophisticated and tough. Then another agent, an older woman who has now retired, took me aside and said, ‘Everybody’s from Hicksville.’ It took me a while to understand that she was telling me that everybody gets scared. Everybody is intimidated, especially when they’re starting out. And when I went into my next meeting I wasn’t nearly as nervous. Yul Egorov and Raynebeau Jones are like spoiled kids playing in a sandbox. They’re nothing to worry about.”

Bitsy smiles.

“Maybe I *am* being a bit of a coward.”

“No, you’re reacting like a normal person. This media stuff *is* tough to

deal with. But it's fueling your success, Bitsy. It's an opportunity. See it that way."

Bitsy nods.

"I'll do my best. I promise."

"Good," Jane says, "Now why don't I take the two of you out to dinner and we can talk strategy?"

Bitsy shakes her head.

"Will you think me terribly rude if I beg off? I want to compose myself for tomorrow. Why don't you and Gordon go and he can brief me in the morning?"

Jane raises her eyebrows at Gordon.

"Are you up to having a meal with me?"

"I think I could just about stomach that."

They stand.

"I'd better drive," Jane says. "You look three sheets to the wind."

"How quaintly nautical," he says, as he heads for the door. "You have a nice night, Bitsy. Don't get yourself into a knot about tomorrow."

She waves him away and as he and Jane exit the door he sees his sister standing staring out into the gloom and for a moment—it must be the wine—Gordon feels the urge to go to her and embrace her.

Of course he does no such thing, just follows Jane to her sporty little rental car, a hint of her scent hanging in the air as he clips himself into the passenger seat.

He sees her hands on the wheel and the stick shift.

Quite lovely, slender hands he can't help but notice, with long, neatly painted nails.

When he imagines those nails digging into the flesh of his back he has to look away, out at the fading light.

"Where are you taking me, Gordon?" Jane asks, watching the country road twist in the headlights, the town ten minutes behind them.

"It's a surprise," he says.

"I'm expecting the Headless Horseman to come galloping across the road."

Gordon laughs and says, "Turn here," pointing to a track that leads into the woods.

Jane does as he says, bumping along the gravel road that winds through the trees.

“My God,” she says, “*we are* in Sleepy Hollow!”

And it’s true.

There’s even a sign that says so: SLEEPY HOLLOW COUNTRY HOUSE.

An 18th century double story, light blazing from the windows, appears through the trees.

Gordon says, “This place is run by a couple of refugees from Manhattan. You’ll like them. They serve pretty decent food and there’s a lot less wildlife than at the Sugar Maple Inn. I took the liberty of booking you in here. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Jane says, parking outside the house. “It looks kinda charming.”

Jane gets her overnight bag out of the trunk and they stroll into the lobby of the house where they’re met by a couple in their sixties. She has wild white hair gathered into a ponytail and he has a shaggy beard.

Jane has seen people exactly like them at book launches in Manhattan, guzzling wine and asking endless questions.

The woman says, “Welcome. I’m Fran and this is Ed. He cooks and I do pretty much everything else.”

“And never stops telling everybody about it,” Ed says, grinning at his wife.

“Just get in your butt into the kitchen and rattle those pots and pans, Chef Ramsay,” Fran says, “while I make our guests feel at home.”

Ed disappears and Fran shows them to a table, then she takes Jane’s bag.

“I’ll put this in your room while you two look at the menus.”

Gordon and Jane are alone in the small restaurant that looks like it was transported in a time machine from the 18th century.

Jane leans in close to Gordon.

“How do they make a living out here?”

“They are open only by appointment. They don’t need the money, it’s a hobby. I hear they made a fortune when they both worked on Madison Avenue.”

Gordon looks up and smiles as Fran approaches with their appetizers.

When the woman leaves, Gordon says, “So what’s the latest on Patrick Bateman?”

Jane, forking asparagus into her mouth, is blank for a moment then she

says, "Oh, Tommy?"

"Yes."

She takes a sip of wine.

"Well, there's been a development."

"Nothing violent, I hope?"

"No, but I had a squad of cops searching my apartment a few days ago."

"Good God, are you serious?"

Jane leans in closer, speaking softly.

"Apparently Tommy had a little after hours gig going, supplying cocaine to his yuppie buddies."

Gordon stares at her, shaking his head.

"It's true, Gordon. I can't believe I was such a dummy, allowing myself to be taken in by that guy."

"You were his victim, Jane. That's the only way to see it."

"I know, but I can't help feeling that I was somehow complicit . . ."

"How could you have been?"

"I arrived in Manhattan with a to-do list. Get a job in publishing. Meet and, hopefully, marry a handsome and sophisticated professional guy. Tommy was a perfect fit. Or so I allowed myself to believe. In my eagerness to leap from *Little House on the Prairie* to *Sex in the City* I may have worn blinders. Nice little designer blinders."

When Gordon lifts the bottle to top up her wine, Jane tries to put a hand over her glass but he gently nudges it away and pours.

"Gordon," she says, "you're getting me drunk. And I'm running off at the mouth."

"Nonsense," he says, "you're relaxing."

Jane takes a very small sip of her drink.

"Anyway enough about me. Let's hear about you."

He shrugs.

"You know all there is to know: a failed writer and academic who sleeps on his sister's couch."

She shakes her head.

"Don't be disingenuous, Gordon. What about love? Relationships? You haven't been in a coma since you were thirteen."

"Haven't I?"

"Come on, Gordo, spill. Dish some dirt."

He laughs.

“There’s very little dirt to dish, sadly. I all too successfully pursued the life of the mind.”

“What is that anyway? Sounds like a denial of everything south of the neck?”

“Pretty much.”

“Why would you want to do that to yourself?”

“I, like you, had my shopping list. Rise up in the ranks of academia. Write my novel. Grapple with the serious questions of life.”

“While you cut yourself off from it?”

“Sometimes detachment is necessary to gain a perspective, otherwise all is chaos.”

“There’s detachment and there’s denial.”

Gordon smiles, nodding.

“And sometimes you can’t slip a cigarette paper between the two.”

“So no hot undergraduates coming to you for one-on-one counseling? No horny faculty wives plying you with eggnog while their husbands were out of town?”

“Don’t confuse my life with my sister’s book.”

“We both know whose book it really is.”

“You’ve lost me, Jane.”

The wine emboldens her.

“You wanted to come clean about *Ivy* back in New York, Gordon, didn’t you? And out of cowardice I shut you up.”

He stares at her and seems about to speak when Fran arrives with their main course.

“*Bon appétit*,” she says.

Jane watches as Gordon slices into his steak and takes a bite.

“Delicious,” he says.

“Gordon, maybe we should get all this out in the open?”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Jane.”

“Are you sure Bitsy isn’t going to crack up on us?”

He shakes his head.

“She’ll be fine. She’s a woman with a mission.”

“What mission?”

“That charlatan I told you about? He heads up some dubious foundation. A scam, I’m certain. Anyway, Bitsy has committed her earnings from *Ivy* to this character in return for who knows what. Acceptance? Love?” He shakes

his head. "She'll play her part, don't worry. Now let's forget that."

Jane allows him to shift the conversation away from the book and (to distract her, no doubt) he admits to having had a relationship with fellow academic at a remote college somewhere in the West.

"Her name really was Ludmilla?" Jane asks.

"Yes. Her father was a professor obsessed with all things Russian although the closest he got to the USSR was a teaching post in Sitka, Alaska."

"And if your contract had been renewed would there have been a future for the two of you?"

"Terrifyingly, I think there would have been. Out of sheer habit and boredom I fear we would have ended up as one of those awful couples in their forties who detest each other, waging an endless war at dinner parties, slinging insults disguised as witty repartee." He shudders. "Even Bitsy's couch seems like heaven by comparison."

Jane, more than a little tipsy, sees Fran dozing behind the cash register.

"I think we should go, Gordon," she says, softly.

He stands, nearly upsetting his chair and Jane has to smother a giggle.

"I'll take your car home," Gordon says. "Tell me what time to collect you in the morning."

"I can't let you drive, Gordon. You're drunk."

"I am not."

"Oh come on, you're totally hammered."

"Well, maybe just a little."

"I'll drive you home."

"Out of the question. You've also had too much to drink and you'd never find your way back here."

"Then why don't you take a room for the night?" Jane asks.

"They only have one room. Yours."

Jane looks at him.

"Well, you're a man used to sleeping on couches. Come on up," she says leading him to the stairs.

"What if there is no couch?" he asks as they climb the creaking staircase.

Jane doesn't answer, just opens the door to the room which is lit by a carriage lamp and sports a giant bed with an embroidered comforter.

The only other items of furniture are a small vanity table and a shaker chair.

"Let me take your car," Gordon says.

“No way. We’re adults. Colleagues, if you like. We can share the bed.”

Suddenly awkward, they stand looking at one another.

“I’m going to brush my teeth,” Jane says.

“Okay.”

She takes her bag and goes into the bathroom, flosses and brushes, washes her face and changes into sweatpants and a T-shirt.

When she returns to the room the lamp has been extinguished and she has to feel her way to the bed.

She lifts the comforter and slides beneath and when her hand touches a very warm and very naked male body she tries to escape the bed.

Gordon takes her wrist.

“Jane?”

“Gordon?”

“Get into bed.”

“But you’re naked.”

“Yes.”

She’ll never be sure whether he removes her clothes or she does but suddenly they’re gone and she’s in his arms and all thoughts of Tom Bennett and Ivy and Raynebeau Jones and Yul Egorov are erased.

But Jonas Blunt—for a fraction of a second—manages to worm his way into her consciousness saying, “What are you doing, Jane?”

And she replies, “I don’t know.”

And then she can speak no more because Gordon’s mouth is on hers and they’re kissing.

And kissing.

And kissing.

Bitsy wakes in a panic, her newly-colored hair plastered to her skull by sweat.

Her dreams were filled with cameras and bright lights and people firing questions at her.

Questions that she could only answer with lies.

She gets up from her bed and opens the curtains, hoping the morning sun will wash away her anxiety.

But she finds herself staring at a group of rubberneckers, camera phones clicking, as yet another tour bus disgorges Ivy pilgrims outside her house, an amplified female voice braying on about Viola Usher.

Bitsy yanks the drapes closed and hurries through to the living room.

“Gordon?” she says.

But the couch is empty and there’s no sign of her brother’s blanket and pillow.

“Gordy?”

The bathroom door stands open and her brother isn’t in the kitchen.

Bitsy rushes back into the bedroom and finds her cell phone.

With a shaking finger she speed-dials Gordon’s number.

She gets his surly voice mail.

When she calls Jane Cooper she is greeted by the agent’s pleasantly impersonal message.

Bitsy goes through to the bathroom and splashes her face with water.

She closes her eyes and tries to slow her breath, using one of the techniques Daniel Quant taught at his summer workshops.

Daniel.

Bitsy’s eyes open and she feels a little calmer.

She needs to see Daniel Quant.

He will help her to center herself and find the strength to deal with the media ordeal scheduled for this afternoon.

She has plenty of time (it’s barely nine and she’s been told the Hollywood horrors rise only after noon) to bathe and dress and drive out to the farm and return for her meeting.

And didn't Daniel tell her to consider herself part of the Quant Foundation's inner circle?

As she runs water into the bathtub, Bitsy finds herself humming, feeling a delicious thrill at seeing Daniel Quant again.

Gordon stretches his long legs, expecting the coarse weave of Bitsy's blanket on his bare toes.

Instead he feels a silken sheet and a vivid memory jabs through the fog of stale booze that befuddles his head.

A memory of kissing Jane Cooper.

In a bed at The Sleepy Hollow Guest House.

And this memory blasts open a door and a whole lot more even steamier recollections come tumbling out.

A succession of overheated images of hungry mouths and sweaty flesh.

Gordon keeps his eyes closed and feigns sleep, listening intently.

He hears birds outside the guest house.

He hears the distant rumble of a tractor.

He hears the clatter of crockery down in the kitchen.

But of Jane Cooper he hears nothing, so—still with his eyes closed—he sends out an exploratory hand, fingers probing the bed bedside him.

He sighs with relief when he finds it still warm to his touch, but empty.

She's gone, he thinks.

Too embarrassed to face him.

So he opens his eyes and finds himself looking into those of Jane, who sits on the edge of the bed wrapped in a robe, staring down at him.

"Jane," he says in a voice he barely recognizes as his own.

"Gordon."

"How are you?"

"About last night . . ." she says.

"Yes?"

"It was a terrible mistake."

"Of course it was."

"We have a professional relationship."

"Of course we do."

"We can never let that happen again."

"Of course we can't."

But as Jane speaks she leans in closer and closer and her robe gapes on her

perfect breasts and Gordon's hands have a life and a mind of their own as they reach for her.

And, of course, Gordon and Jane do *it* again.

And again.

As Bitsy's Volvo rattles past the Quant Foundation sign at the farm gate her earlier resolve evaporates.

She has never come here unannounced.

Won't Daniel see this as an intrusion?

She slows the car, pulls over and sits looking across a field to where a stand of trees hides the Foundation buildings.

Reaching for her purse, Bitsy fumbles inside for her cell phone.

Then she remembers that in her haste to flee her house (in the lull between tour groups) she left her phone lying on the counter in the kitchen.

So what is she to do?

She can't face the idea of roaring up to Daniel Quant's sanctum (a haven of stillness and contemplation) in her rusted old car on this quiet morning.

No.

She'll walk.

She'll cut through the field and make her way toward the house.

And when she gets nearer she'll be able to observe what Daniel and his team are up to and whether it is appropriate for her to make an appearance.

Anyway, it's a glorious day.

One of those freakish Fall days that come all too rarely, as warm as late July.

So Bitsy finds her old straw hat on the rear seat (she leaves it there to wear when browsing fairs and markets, no sunblock strong enough to protect her pale skin) and takes off across the field, the perfection of the morning filling her with joy.

As she follows a pathway through the trees she hears the chuckle of a stream feeding into a pond, the sunlight dappling the water.

What an idyllic scene, she thinks.

Straight out of Thoreau.

Standing in the shade of a tree, drinking in the peaceful tableaux, Bitsy hears a splash and sees the head of a man rising from beneath the surface of the pond.

Drawing back into the shadows, Bitsy watches as Daniel Quant wipes

water from his eyes and wades to the side.

She has never seen Daniel in anything other than the white shirts and baggy trousers he favors and she can't but be amazed at his broad shoulders and muscular torso.

And when Daniel, his flesh beaded with water, steps nude from the pond, Bitsy has to shut her eyes, so overwhelmed is she at the sight of his masculine glory.

She opens one eye and sees him standing on the bank, the sun flaring off his wet hair.

God, she thinks, he is gorgeous.

Bitsy tries her best to replace these lustful thoughts with more spiritual ones, but she loses the battle.

She wants him.

She *aches* for him.

She needs Daniel Quant to take her in those strong arms and crush her against that powerful body.

Bitsy feels a sudden boldness and is about to step out of the shadows and reveal herself and let happen what must happen when she hears a giggle.

A very feminine giggle.

And Bitsy sees that Daniel Quant is not alone.

That the inhumanly tall and beautiful Una is rising from the pond, naked as Eve.

And it is Una not Bitsy—oh no, it is never to be poor, frumpy Bitsy—who is enveloped in Daniel's powerful arms.

Bitsy has to bite on her fist to mute a wail of anguish as she turns and runs through the trees, not even noticing when her hat is whipped from her head by a low branch.

Runs for the old Volvo that will take her back to her small and miserable life.

Where she belongs.

Jane is left sitting in patchy shade on the porch of the absurd mobile home—a bit of suburbia transplanted to a Vermont apple orchard—on this unseasonably hot day, while minions carry lobster, champagne (Krug she can't help but notice) massage oils and—why she never finds out—a giant fluffy pink bear into the house where Raynebeau Jones and Yul Egorov hold court like pharaohs of old.

That the setting is surreal fits perfectly with Jane's mood.

She feels that in the last week she has stepped outside her life and is living that of another: a life in which every sensation is heightened.

Where the stakes are higher and so are the risks.

But, she has to admit as she sips on a can of Coke cadged from a harried flunky, so are the pleasures.

She has a corner office and the promise of a partnership.

She has a voice mailbox full of messages from predatory agencies trying to poach her now that she's hot, hot, *hot*.

And, thrillingly, she has a love bite.

A wine colored oval the size of a quarter just where her neck meets her clavicle, low enough, fortunately, to be almost hidden by the collar of her shirt.

But the knowledge that it's there fills her with a girlish excitement.

The hours of torrid sex with Gordon Rushworth had been a revelation.

Jane had never dreamed that she was capable of receiving such pleasure.

And that it should come at the hands and mouth and . . . (propriety demands that she draw a veil here) of stodgy Gordy, was one of the great and happy surprises of this new life of hers.

Gordon.

Jane finds herself wondering where he is.

She left him standing on a street corner in East Devon, looking a little disheveled and lost, with a goofy smile on his face, while she hurried over here to begin her day with the Hollywood hellions.

When Jane's phone rings she reaches for it, smiling, expecting it to be Gordon.

But it's not.

It's Jonas Blunt.

She composes herself and says, "Jonas?"

"Janey," he says. "How are things up there in wherever?"

"Everything's going according to plan, Jonas. Thank you."

"Good, good. Just to let you know that *Ivy* is generating more heat than a supernova. The publishers are already talking of it in hushed terms as one of those books that change the face of publishing. In other words, their jobs are safe for the next couple of years."

"Exciting."

"Very. Have you pressed Lizzie about the sequel?"

"She's still a little overwhelmed by everything that's happening."

"Understandably, but we need the next book out within six months. I don't care if you have to move up there to Eastwick—"

"East Devon"

"—and write the damned thing with her."

"I'm on it, Jonas."

"Good. Well, I'm off to L.A. again, to firm up the production deal. Stay in touch."

"Of course."

Jane ends the call and is contemplating whether to call Gordon when the door of the house opens and Raynebeau Jones totters out on a pair of heels as high as stilts.

The absurdly diminutive Yul Egorov, dressed in an honest-to-goodness orange prison jumpsuit and cowboy boots follows in her wake.

"What you waiting for, Bookgirl?" he says to Jane in his grating voice. "Let's go shake up this hick town."

The giraffe-like star tilts her huge sunglasses from her rhynoplastied nose and stares down at Jane.

"Talking of hick, is that like a *hickey* on your neck?"

Jane hastily pulls up her collar.

"Just a bruise," she says, feeling herself coloring.

"Wow, soooooo trailer trash."

She turns to one of the minions who circle her like moths.

"Let Honey Boo Boo ride in another car, okay? I'm feeling like really *spiritual* today and I don't want her messing with my aura."

And with that the power couple slide into an SUV the size of an armored car, leaving Jane to rattle after them in a tiny rental driven by a kid with acne

and a nerve jangling post-nasal drip.
Showbiz.

Gordon spends the day hiding.

Hiding from the madness in the town, a madness that he has instigated with his absurd little book.

Hiding from his sister—afraid that she'll somehow divine that he and Jane slept together and feel betrayed.

But mostly hiding from himself and his feelings.

Not since Suzie Baldwin died more than twenty years ago has he felt things so keenly.

He can't get Jane Cooper out of his mind and he finds himself wandering the Fall fields as lovesick as a teenager.

Most unbecoming in a man in early middle-age.

He sits down on a rock, shrugging off his jacket, looking down at the little town beneath him.

The church.

The fire station.

His sister's house.

Even from up here he can hear the tinny bray of one of the tour guides.

What have you wrought, Gordon?

Written chick-lit.

Perpetuated a lie.

And fallen in love.

He leaps to his feet, eager to escape that realization.

For it's true.

He *is* in love.

In love with Jane Cooper.

And as he hurries down the hill, suddenly desperate to see her again, he's sure he hears Suzie's voice saying, "You go, Gordy. You *go*!"

Bitsy is no longer nervous.

In fact, she feels very little now.

A numbness has settled over her that leaves her detached and anesthetized.

When she hears the rumble of a caravan of vehicles coming to a halt outside her house she walks calmly to the front door and opens it.

Jane Cooper is on her porch.

“Bitsy, hi. How are you holding up?”

“Oh, just fine, Jane.”

She looks over the agent’s shoulder at the outlandish couple stepping down from a huge black car.

“That must be them?”

“Yes,” Jane says. “We’ve just spent a weird couple of hours wandering through East Devon. Raynebeau seems to think that the town is a set built especially for her no matter how Yul tries to convince her otherwise.”

“Well, let everybody come in. I guess we’ll be shooting in the living room?”

Bitsy watches as a man with a video camera walks backward, videoing Raynebeau Jones as she totters down the little pathway, as ungainly as a foal on her preposterous heels.

Bitsy is blindsided by a flashback of another too-tall, too-beautiful woman, rising naked from a pond.

Then she pushes this away and lets the numbness cover her again like a blanket.

When Gordon gets to Bitsy's house and sees the clot of vehicles and bevy of harried flunkies he's tempted to carry on walking down the road and get a drink at the dingy little bar near the highway that's frequented by local blue-collar workers, the only place in East Devon safe from the *Ivy* pilgrims.

But before he can escape he spies Jane on the porch looking straight at him, and—feeling like a hapless teenager—he goes over to her.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi, Gordon."

"How are you?"

"I'm good," she says. Then she laughs. "This is awkward, isn't it?"

"Yes. I feel like I'm about to invite you to the prom."

"Well, the answer would have been yes."

"Really?" he says.

"Cross my heart."

He steps in close.

"Any chance of you staying over for the night?"

"I'd love to. Flying back to New York in a chopper with those two"—she jerks her head in the direction of a freakish duo standing in Bitsy's living room—"is something I would do anything to avoid."

"Anything?" he asks.

"Anything," she says.

For a crazy moment he's about to kiss her, right there on his sister's porch, in full view of the film crew, when a voice booms out from inside.

The very powerful voice of Yul Egorov, at odds with his tiny body.

"Okay, we're gonna shoot now, so non-essentials get your butts outta here."

As minions file out Jane takes Gordon's hand and leads him inside.

"Is this your way of telling me I'm essential?" he asks.

"Mnnnn, keep up those tricks of last night and you'll rapidly become that."

Gordon, floating along on a silly little cloud, follows Jane into his sister's living room.

Bitsy, looking remarkably composed, sits on a chair staring into space.

When Gordon waves at her, she merely nods.

Raynebeau Jones and Yul Egorov take the couch facing Bitsy and two cameras record the action.

“Okay, roll cameras,” Egorov says, looking into the lens of the camera that is trained on him and the star. “Okay, we just gonna rap a little with the author of *Ivy*, the book that we’re gonna be adapting into a mega blockbuster, starring my lady here, Raynebeau Jones.”

Bitsy holds up a hand.

“There’s just something I’d like to say before we go any further.”

Egorov is not a man used to being interrupted.

“Yeah, what?”

“I never wrote *Ivy*.”

Gordon tells himself that Bitsy is just falling back on the same shtick she used in New York.

The “my alter-ego just took over” business.

“That right?” Egorov says.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Then who the hell wrote the piece of crap?”

Bitsy points at Gordon, who tries vainly to disappear behind a light stand.

“He did. My brother Gordon Rushworth wrote it.”

Gordon stares across at Jane whose face is as horrified as he imagines his must be, then he can’t see her because a blinding light is panned onto him and he can just make out both cameras swiveling his way, pointing at him like the guns of a firing squad.

Gordon clears his throat, shakes his head and then he bumps crew and gear from his path as he sprints out the front door and down the street, ignoring the yells that follow him.

He jumps a fence and hurtles across a field and doesn’t stop running until he’s left the town far behind.

Jane lies in her bed listening to the rumble of early morning traffic. She hasn't slept, has lain in a state of terror since she got back by train late last night.

Things had moved very quickly after Bitsy unleashed her bombshell and Gordon had bolted like a frightened kid.

Yul Egorov screamed, "Bookgirl!" and Jane was grilled by the poisonous shrimp—what she imagined being been interrogated by the KGB must have been like.

Jane, stuttering and stumbling, swore that she had known nothing of all this.

"We can fix it," she said. "I'm sure this can all work out."

"I'm gonna break you, Bookgirl. You and your pantywaist boss. You know what my time is worth? And Raynebeau's? We're talking millions here. Millions. I want dollars and I want justice! And I want *blood*!"

The little man grabbed the hand of his towering concubine and they left, trailing nervously whispering minions in their wake, leaving Jane alone with Bitsy Rushworth.

"Bitsy," Jane said, "what have you done?"

"I'm sorry, Jane," Bitsy said. "I couldn't keep up the pretence any longer."

"Wow," Jane said. "This is a total disaster."

"At least the truth is out."

"The truth! God, who cares about the damned truth? My career is down the toilet!"

Jane realized she was alone in the room.

Then Bitsy clattered back, wheeling a suitcase.

"I'm afraid I must leave now, Jane. I have to get to Raleigh to fly to Detroit where I'm catching a flight to Costa Rica."

"Costa Rica?"

"Yes, I'm going on a one month silent retreat in the jungle."

"Hell, what a pity you didn't go silent just a few hours earlier."

Bitsy shrugged.

"I'm sorry Jane, but there it is."

Bitsy left and Jane sank down onto the couch listening to her own rapid heartbeat and Yul and Raynebeau's helicopter roaring overhead on its way to Manhattan.

Without her.

By the time Jane got to the Brattleboro train station Yul Egorov and Raynebeau Jones had sent a video feed of Bitsy's statement to all the entertainment channels and blogs across the country and the response was immediate and deafening.

As she was about to board the train her phone rang.

Jonas Blunt.

She didn't have the courage to answer it.

A few seconds later a light blinked telling her she had a text message.

With shaking hands she opened it: *My office tomorrow. 8:00 A.M.*

The train journey took forever and a question looped itself through her mind: *why did you fall in with Gordon's plans?*

You knew.

You knew all along.

And as hard as she tried to persuade herself that Gordon hadn't actually *said* in as many words that he'd written *Ivy*, Jane knew she'd let greed and ambition cause her to be party to an unforgivable lie.

On the train she'd tried to call Gordon.

Why she wasn't sure.

Was she calling him as an irate agent or as a lover?

Unsurprisingly he didn't answer his phone and by the time she arrived in Manhattan all she wanted was to sleep and lose herself in a few hours of unconsciousness.

Which she'd been unable to do.

Jane gets up and showers and dresses in funereal black, which seems fitting.

She gets a cab to Midtown.

As she enters the lobby of the building she has worked in for five years, she knows very well this will be the last time she'll come here, ever.

She expects no mercy from Jonas Blunt.

What she doesn't expect though, as she walks through the deserted reception area, knocks on his office door and pushes it open, is to see Tom Bennett sitting in a chair facing Jonas, sipping from a Starbucks foam cup, looking all crisp and Brooks Brothers.

Tom sets his cup down and gives her his famous boyish grin.

"Jane," he says. "Nice to see you, circumstances notwithstanding."

"What the hell's he doing here?" she asks her boss.

"He's my legal counsel," Jonas says, his voice arctic.

"But the cops were after him on a drugs charge?"

Tommy's grin broadens.

"All just a misunderstanding, Janey. The commissioner wrote me a personal letter of apology and a couple of detectives are back pounding the beat."

Jonas points to a vacant chair.

"Sit, Jane. We're here to discuss *Ivy*, not Tom."

She sits.

"How much did you know?" Jonas asks.

"I had some initial suspicions but Gordon Rushworth denied them and was adamant that his sister wrote the book."

"And you never thought to share those suspicions with me?"

"They seemed groundless."

He tugs at his lower lip.

"I see. You're aware, of course, of the fallout resulting from Bitsy Rushworth's revelations?"

"I imagine the publishers are unhappy."

"You could say that," Jonas says quietly.

Then he rises and bellows: "They're also busy suing my ass!"

She has never heard him use profanity and never seen him anything other than unflappable.

"I'm sorry, Jonas."

He settles down in his chair and works hard to calm his breathing.

"Oh, you will be. You will be."

"I take full responsibility."

"Words, Jane. Words. You're a minion. A flunky. A nobody. This is where the buck makes it final stop."

He hammers a fist down on his desk top.

"I have already sunk a vast amount of money into the movie development and it's doubtful whether I will see any of it again. Coupled with legal fees, you could say that I'm ruined."

He holds up a hand.

"Please, please don't speak. You've ruined me and now I'll ruin you. Tom

will dot the i's and cross the t's."

Jonas stands and walks to the door.

"I never want to see you again, is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Should we, as unlikely as that is, run into one another in the street, or—God forbid—socially we will behave as strangers. Understood?"

"Yes."

And with that he's gone, his designer aftershave not quite disguising the sourness of his sweat.

Tommy shrugs.

"Well, what can I say, Janey? You've well and truly screwed the little poochie."

"Stop gloating and lay it out for me, Tom."

He taps a sheaf of documents that lie on the desk.

"Your employment with the Blunt Agency is terminated immediately. You are to clear your desk and leave the premises."

She expected nothing less.

"Okay."

"And you're aware, of course, that your contract has a bullet-proof non-compete clause? For five years you are legally forbidden to seek employment in the publishing industry, no matter what the capacity."

She stares at him.

"You're not serious?"

"Oh, but I am, Janey." He taps the paperwork. "It's right here in the small-print. Small print you perhaps neglected to read in your unseemly haste to start scaling the ladder of success?"

He smirks.

"Anyway, I think it's a mere formality. After what you've done Jonas is going to make pee-pee in the well. No publisher will touch you."

She stands.

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. There's something else you should know."

"What?"

"You're the most dreary, libido-numbing drudge I've ever had the misfortune to have sex with."

She gapes at him.

"Really? You're telling me this *now*?"

“Well, I’ll probably never see you again.”

“Then why did you want to marry me, Tom?”

“You ticked the right boxes. You looked innocuously pretty on my arm when I went to dinner with the partners. You were unthreatening and would have given me cute babies, which would have been a career-booster. I was prepared to snooze my way through a marriage with my little Stepford Wifey and find my sports elsewhere.”

Before she can stop herself Jane grabs Tom’s attaché case from the floor and swings it at his head.

It connects with a satisfying smack and she sees blood sprouting from his nose.

She turns on her heel and leaves the office, heading for the elevators.

There’s nothing she wants to take with her anyway.

When the elevator reaches the lobby and the doors slide open, Jane is confronted by her assistant—make that *ex*-assistant—Belinda.

“You bitch,” Belinda says.

“I beg your pardon?” Jane says.

“Jonas just called and told me to come in and get my things. Because of you I’ve lost my job.”

“I’m sorry, Belinda,” Jane says, but the woman bumps past her to get into the elevator.

The last Jane sees of her, as the doors close, is a painted middle finger raised in a salute.

“Hell,” Jane says to herself, “can this day get any worse?”

Then her phone rings and, seeing HOME on the screen, she answers.

And when her mother sobs and says, “Oh, Janey,” her day gets way, way worse.

When the skyline of Manhattan rears up through the windshield of Gordon's rental car, he realizes that the last hundred miles (and most of Connecticut) have passed in a daze.

"You shouldn't be driving, Gordon," he says out loud.

Another sign that he's unraveling.

Gordon sneaks a glance at himself in the rearview and the man staring back at him looks as if he spent the night sleeping in a field.

Which he did.

After he'd run himself to the point of exhaustion Gordon fell to the ground in a wheat field.

The last thing he remembered before sleep claimed him were the rays of the dying sun painting the sky mauve.

It was dawn when he awoke.

He was filthy, unshaven and his clothes were a mess.

He searched his pockets and found that he'd lost his cell phone during his mad cross-country sprint. But his wallet containing his credit cards was still in the pocket of his pants.

He had no idea where he was, but let the distant rumble of traffic guide him toward a highway.

He emerged from the field near a gas station, found a payphone and called Bitsy's house.

No reply.

He'd never bothered to memorize her cell number so for a moment he was at a loss as to what he should do.

Try to find out where he was and then hitch a ride back to East Devon?

Then he saw a young woman in a skirt and blazer unlocking the door to the car rental office adjacent to the gas station and he went into the men's room and did his best to make himself look presentable.

Washed his face and smoothed his hair down with a wet palm.

Pulled his jacket and shirt as straight as he could and dusted off as much of the grime.

There was a shoe buffer in the corner and Gordon fed in a coin and let it

add some shine to his brogans.

Putting a little swagger into his walk he tried his best to breeze into the rental office.

“Good morning,” he said.

The young woman was tidying the counter.

“Good morning, sir.”

“I’d like to rent a car please.”

She stared at him and for a moment he thought she was going to refuse him, then she smiled and said, “Of course. I’ll need your driver’s license and a credit card.”

Gordon handed these over and within fifteen minutes he was on his way to New York City.

For that was where he had decided to go.

What point was there returning to East Devon, and the inevitable media barrage that would await him?

There was one person he wanted to make things right with: Jane Cooper.

Gordon drove for an hour and just after 9 A.M. he pulled into a roadside diner.

He ordered breakfast and while it was being prepared he used the pay phone to track down the telephone number of the Blunt Agency in New York.

The call was answered by a woman with an almost British accent.

“Jonas Blunt Agency, how may I help you?”

“Jane Cooper, please.”

There was a slight pause, then the woman said, “I’m afraid Ms. Cooper is no longer with the Blunt Agency.”

Gordon felt a stab of guilt.

He’d cost Jane her job.

“Do you perhaps have her cell number?”

“I’m not at liberty to make that available, sir.”

“Look, it’s very urgent that I reach Ms. Cooper.”

“Is this call business related? If so I will connect you with one of our other agents.”

“No,” he said. “I need to speak to Jane. Please, help me out here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, sir. That would be in violation of agency policy.”

“For God’s sake you’re not the damned CIA,” he said to a dead line.

Gordon hung up the phone and went back to his table where he picked at

his toast and eggs. He forced himself to drink two cups of bitter coffee and then got back on the road.

And now it's after lunch and he's on the streets of Manhattan, desperately trying to remember where Jane's apartment is.

He knows it's in the Meat Packing District, but he has no idea of the street.

After negotiating a nightmare of gridlocked one-ways, Gordon finally finds himself on Manhattan's Lower West Side, not far from the Hudson.

For an hour he crawls the streets, incurring the wrath of cab drivers and buff bike messengers who pound on his car roof before a cop car gets in behind him and an amplified voice yells at him to keep moving.

Gordon, accepting the reality that he will never find Jane, is accelerating away when he spots the lobby where he grappled with Jane's crazy ex-fiancé.

Parking illegally at a hydrant, Gordon hurries into the building.

A chunky guy in soiled overalls is busy mopping the lobby.

"Excuse me," Gordon says. "Do you know Jane Cooper?"

The man shakes his head, not looking up from his mop work.

Gordon sighs and takes a five dollar bill from his wallet.

"Does this jog your memory?"

The man glances at the bill, then shakes his head again.

Gordon adds a ten.

"And now?"

The guy snags the notes and they disappear into his overall.

"Yeah, I know her."

"Can you tell me her apartment number?"

"57b. Fifth floor."

Gordon is making his way to the elevator when the janitor says: "Ain't no use goin' up there."

"Why not?"

"Ms. Cooper left here in a real hurry about twenty minutes ago. Got me to flag her down a cab."

"Where was she going?"

The man stares at him, then shakes his head.

"Can't say I recall."

Feeling like an ATM Gordon fishes another ten from his wallet and hands it over.

"LaGuardia. Terminal C," the janitor says.

Gordon sprints for the door and barrels down the sidewalk.

He finds his rental car gone and looks up in time to see a tow truck dragging it around a corner.

Gordon spots a cab and dashes for it, cutting in front of an old woman with a Zimmer frame.

“LaGuardia,” Gordon says to the driver who is wearing a fez and some kind of shawl. “There’s fifty bucks in it for you if haul ass.”

To the sound of Arabic rap the cab takes off with such velocity that Gordon is flung back against his seat and when the car nearly collides with a bus he closes his eyes and mutters a prayer.

Since her mother's call Jane has been on autopilot.

She can barely remember getting back to her apartment, booking a flight to Indianapolis on-line and throwing clothes and toiletries into her wheely suitcase.

She hasn't allowed herself to think, to confront the enormity of what has happened, deliberately losing herself in preparations for the trip home.

But now, in the cab to the airport, reality hits her and all the events of the past days (the end of her engagement to Tom Bennett, the whole *Ivy* fiasco and the loss of her job) is swamped under a wave of grief.

What cracks her armor is a memory of little Jane, maybe five or six years old, with her father, performing Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" sketch in the living room of their house for a bunch of her dad's cronies, who were smoking cigars and drinking beer and laughing their asses off.

Her father was doing Bud Abbott's straight man lines, feeding them to Jane who was getting all the laughs with Lou Costello's crazy replies.

The memory is so intense, so heartbreakingly vivid, that Jane can't stop the tears as she rests her face against the cool glass of the cab's window, watching Manhattan blur by.

And, finally, Jane allows herself to feel the devastation of the loss of the man who was her mentor, her greatest supporter and best friend throughout her life, his, good, brave heart giving out on him last night while he slept.

Gordon, in the cab hurtling through Queens, thinks: *it's not enough that you've written a trashy piece of chick-lit, now you're a character in a rom-com.*

In the first weeks after he slunk back to East Devon, depressed and defeated—reduced to accepting his sister's charity and her couch—he'd sat beside Bitsy night after night while she giggled and sniffled through a succession of romantic comedies on DVD.

All of them seemed to climax with Hugh Grant—an actor Gordon despised—in a taxi, chasing after some woman who was on her way to the airport to fly out of his life forever.

How life imitates kitsch, Gordon thinks as a jet thunders into the sky from the nearby LaGuardia.

He should come to his senses, tell the lunatic driver to slow down, do a U-turn and take him back to the city.

Abandon this fool's errand.

But he doesn't, he sits gripping the upholstery of the seat as the driver swerves around a semi and somehow manages to carve across three lanes of traffic and onto the airport exit.

The taxi squeals to a halt outside Terminal C and Gordon hands over a wad of money before he sprints into the airport building.

He has a suspicion that Jane Cooper is en route to Hicksville, Indiana.

Isn't that what a small town girl (for, despite her Manhattan veneer of sophistication, that's what Jane is) will do when her life falls apart?

Dash home to the solace of kith and kin?

Back to mom and her proverbial apple pie?

Hadn't he done something similar when academia booted him in the backside?

So, Gordon trots into the massive terminal, filled with harried looking travelers, finds an information board and checks it for flights to Indianapolis.

There is only one and it's boarding right now.

Gordon takes off at speed toward a gate that seems as distant as Timbuktu.

Jane, having passed through the metal detector at the security checkpoint,

gathers her belongings and, as she reclaims her shoes, watch and cell phone she feels a crazy urge to call Gordon Rushworth.

Wow, she thinks to herself, *what's this about?*

That guy was the instrument of your destruction . . .

Stepping into her pumps she decides that perhaps that's not quite fair.

That she isn't without her share of blame.

After all, sins of omission are just as grievous as sins of commission.

This realization gets her thumbing the speed-dial on her phone.

Hearing his voice would be weirdly comforting right now.

She hears his voice okay, but only on his voice mail.

Jane doesn't leave a message and hurries toward the boarding gate.

Gordon, breathless, is about to sprint past the security checkpoint when he sees Jane on the other side of the glass.

She stands with her cell phone to her ear.

He bangs on the glass, shouting her name, oblivious to the stares of the people around him.

But she doesn't hear or see him, just holsters her phone, grabs the handle of her wheely and disappears through a departure gate.

Gordon sinks down on a bench and puts his head in his hands.

What a loser.

Hell, even that chinless British wimp Hugh Grant ended up *getting* the girl.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .”

The minister, standing at Jane’s father’s graveside, a chilly Fall wind knifing in across the prairie, has the prematurely gray hair and blandly handsome face of a young Steve Martin and Jane imagines him in a white suit, with fluffy bunny ears on his head, going into full wild and crazy guy mode, ala 70s Steve.

The Steve her father, Jack Cooper, had loved.

By the time she was six Jane and her dad had pranced through the house—to the annoyance of her mother and the bemusement of her younger brother—like Steve Martin and Danny Aykroyd, doing a word-perfect rendition of their *Saturday Night Live* Czech Brothers sketch.

Jane realizes that she has laughed out loud and is brought back to the present by a none-too-gentle squeeze on her upper arm.

Her mother, Myra, hisses at her, “What is *wrong* with you?”

Jane manages to project a more conventional graveside manner during the rest of the eulogy and joins her mother in shaking the hands of the small group of people who have gathered at the Hicksville cemetery.

Her brother Jimmy, squeezed into an egg yolk yellow sweat suit—the only clothes that fit his massively obese frame—waddles off and hides behind the trees near the line of parked cars, waiting for his mother and sister to join him.

When Jimmy heaves himself into the rear of the undertaker’s limo the car groans and sinks low on its springs and as they drive through the sad little town—storefronts boarded up, empty houses with unkempt gardens—Jane prays that the car will get them home.

It does and Jimmy disappears into his bedroom, to his computers and his gaming consoles.

Jane knows what an ordeal this has been for him: the first time he has left the house in years.

Jane and her mother set out snacks and tea and coffee for the handful of family friends who arrive to talk fondly of Jack Cooper.

It’s dark by the time the last of them has left and Jane sits at the kitchen

table while Myra opens the refrigerator.

“Beer?” Myra asks.

“Why not?”

Jane is surprised when her mother, a lifelong teetotaler, pops the caps of two longnecks.

“You’re drinking, Mom?”

“By way of a send off.”

She grimaces as she drinks the beer.

“What are you going to do now?” Jane asks.

Her mother shrugs.

“Keep on living here with Jimmy.”

“That’s kinda sad.”

“What else am I meant to do?”

“Put him in care, sell the house and go live in the sun somewhere.”

“You know I could never do that. He’s still my baby.”

“I guess.”

They sit in silence for a minute, a little uncomfortable with one another without the soothing presence of Jack.

There has never been the ease, the banter, that Jane shared with her father.

“How are you doing, Janey?”

“I’m okay.”

“How are things in New York?”

“Good. Really busy.”

Her mother reaches across and takes her hand.

Something she hasn’t done since Jane was a toddler.

“I live in Hicksville not on planet Mars.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I know about this whole book thing and this Mr. Love guy.’

“Mr. Love?”

“That’s what everybody is calling him on the Internet.”

“I haven’t been on-line for a while.”

“He must be a real piece of work to have lied to you like that?”

Jane shakes her head.

“I knew he wrote that book.”

Her mother stares at her.

“And you went along with his lie?”

“He never told me. Not exactly. Even though I think he wanted to. But I

just *knew*, somehow, and I pretended I didn't. I was greedy and I was ambitious."

"So you've lost your job?"

"Yes."

"You'll get another."

"No. I'm done with that."

"Then why don't you stay here for a while? Get a little perspective on things?"

Before Jane can answer the telephone rings and her mother leaves the kitchen to answer it.

After a minute she stands in the doorway.

"Talk of the devil."

"Huh?"

"It's him?"

"Who?"

"Your Mr. Love."

After missing Jane, Gordon had slumped on a bench at LaGuardia until hunger dragged him back into the day.

He'd found a Starbucks, bought a coffee and a chicken BLT and sat at one of the tables, staring blankly at a wall-mounted TV screen as he ate.

Suddenly he realized he was staring at himself: video of the moment he'd been outed by his sister as the author of *Ivy*.

He looked pale, callow and gormless, making the superimposed caption "Mr. Love" seem even more ironic.

A braying female voice asked: "Just who is Gordon Rushworth? And, more importantly, where has he gone?"

Gordon, his appetite gone too, fled the airport and found a taxi back to the city.

When the driver asked him his destination he said, "The Pierre," without thinking.

Why not?

God knew he had the money.

When a luggage-free, bedraggled looking Gordon presented himself at the desk of the hotel he expected the clerk to turn him away, but the man smiled and said, "Welcome back, Mr. Rushworth. Would you like the same room as your previous visit?"

Gordon nodded his agreement and within minutes was installed in the room where he'd had his last conversation with Suzie.

It was only a few days ago but it felt like years.

After Gordon showered there was nothing for it but to dress again in his grubby clothes.

He left the room and headed for Saks on Fifth Avenue where he burned plastic buying a range of men's wear.

After arranging for his purchases—and a new suitcase—to be delivered to The Pierre he quit Saks wearing a new outfit: gray pants, a blue shirt under a blue wool blazer, his freshly-stockinged feet inside black leather loafers.

Next he visited an electronic store and bought a new smart phone and a turbo-charged laptop.

Taking the phone and the computer he walked the city block to the hotel, booted up the laptop and did a Google search for Cooper, Hicksville, Indiana.

What he found surprised him and he felt even worse for Jane Cooper.

The Hicksville Gazette had run a page one obituary for its sportswriter, Jack Cooper.

The obituary saying that he was survived by his wife Myra, daughter Jane and son James.

Gordon called directory enquiries and found there was only one John Cooper listed for Hicksville.

Then he sat for a long while on the bed, dredging up the courage to call.

At last he did and when the telephone was answered by an older-sounding woman he'd asked for Jane.

"May I ask who is calling?" the woman said.

Fighting the impulse to kill the call, Gordon told her his name and sat and waited for an eternity.

Now he hears the sound of footsteps and the scrape of the receiver being lifted.

"Gordon?" Jane says. "How did you find me?"

"The number was listed." A pause. "Jane, I'm so sorry."

"Forget about the book, Gordon. What's done is done."

"I'm sorry about your father, Jane. I just found out about his death on-line."

He hears her swallow a sob and when she speaks again he can hear how hard she is trying to maintain her composure.

"Thank you," she says.

"I just want you to know that if there's anything I can do . . ."

"That's very kind of you, Gordon, but I'm fine, thank you."

"I'm sorry, too, about the whole *Ivy* fiasco. I should never have lied to you."

"I think there were two dancing that little tango, Gordon."

There's a pause, then she says, "I have to go."

"Of course."

"Goodbye, Gordon."

"Goodbye, Jane."

And he's left listening to nothing but all the words he wishes he'd had the courage to say.

Jane, lying in the bed of her childhood, can't sleep.

She's left insomniac not only by the almost unbearable loss of her father, she also feels dislocated, as if the life she has carefully built over the last ten years—college, making a career in the world of books—is dead, too.

How can she go back to Manhattan, with no job and no money?

The pariah of New York City publishing?

But the thought of staying here with her distant mother and her tragic brother, taking some meaningless job in a town that's withering away, is so terrifying that she finds herself breathless.

Suddenly powerfully thirsty she pulls on a robe and sets off down the corridor to get a glass of water in the kitchen.

The door to her mother's room is closed and she sees no light beneath it.

Jane wonders how her mother is dealing with this night alone in her bed, in the knowledge that an infinity of such nights lie ahead of her?

There is a light under her brother's door, spilling out onto the carpet and she can hear the soft drumming of his fingers on a computer keyboard.

An impulse that she can't quite identify has Jane stopping and she almost knocks but she shakes her head and walks on to the kitchen, filling a glass at the sink.

She drinks it down in two gulps and pours another to take back with her to bed.

The same impulse causes her to halt outside Jimmy's door again and this time she taps lightly.

The typing stops but he says nothing and she is already walking away when she hears him say, "Mom?"

Turning and putting her face close to the door Jane says, "No, it's me."

Silence.

"Can I come in?"

A pause, then he says, "Okay."

Jane opens the door and steps inside.

She hasn't been in this room in ten years—on her infrequent visits Jimmy had wheezed his way into the kitchen or living room for brief, monosyllabic

exchanges.

The room is dimly lit by a single desk lamp but she can see enough to take in the stacks of comic books, computer carcasses, Xboxes and Playstations of every vintage and a bank of flat screen monitors, some tuned to obscure sci-fi and horror movies, others filled with a cascade of what she assumes is raw computer code.

Her massive brother wallows on his bed, a laptop almost invisible in the vast pudding that is his belly.

“Wassup, Janey?”

“I can’t sleep,” she says.

“Yeah, me either. But, hey, nothing new there.”

He wags a huge hand.

“Take a seat, Sis.”

Jane moves a half-eaten plate of food and a stack of horror comics from a chair and sits.

“How are you doing, Jimmy?”

“Is that like a real question that requires a real answer?”

She laughs.

“No, not really.”

“Glad to hear it.”

They sit for a while without speaking, the hum of electronics filling the silence, then her brother’s stomach rumbles like a cement mixer.

He slaps his rolls of fat.

“Gotta feed the beast soon.”

She stands.

“I should go.”

“Nah, sit.”

She hesitates.

“Please.”

She sits.

“I guess you know that he was real proud of you? Dad? Of you movin’ to New York and workin’ with writers and all?”

“Yes,” she says.

“What may surprise you is that mom kinda got a kick out of it, too. Especially the last while with this Ivy thing.”

“She did?”

“For real. She even kept a scrapbook.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“I’m not. I caught her clipping bits out of *The New York Times*—Dad still subscribed—that mentioned you. Mom’s part of that generation where things are only real if they’re printed on dead trees.” He wags a hand at the monitors. “None of this counts.”

Jane says, “I’m astonished really, I always felt she thought that I believed I was better than the rest of you because I moved to Manhattan.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Come on. Look around you . . .”

She can only shrug.

“Real bummer what that Mr. Love asshole did to you.”

“It’s more complicated than you think, Jimmy.”

“Yeah? Looks pretty damn simple to me.”

He taps at his keyboard.

“He’s staying at The Pierre Hotel in New York City, by the way. Room 506.”

“How do you know that?”

“I checked his credit card transactions.”

“How?”

“Out here in the so-called real world I’m Dumbo, but in there”—gesturing at the monitors filled with code—“I’m nimble as Nijinsky. I have some sweet skills.”

She laughs.

“I bet you do.”

“So, if you want revenge on this dude just let me know. I can make his life hell.”

Jane shakes her head.

“I don’t want revenge.”

They’re quiet for a while then Jimmy says, “What’s your favorite daytime talk show?”

“Why?”

“Just answer the question.”

“The *Sarah Snowdon Show*, I guess. I sometimes watched for work, because she’s got that book club.”

He taps the keyboard.

“It’s the highest rated show, too. Nearly four million viewers tuning in per

day. Gotta believe most of those are women, right?”

“I guess.”

“Women between twenty-five and forty? The readers of *Ivy*?”

“Yes. Where are you going with this, Jimmy?”

He finishes typing and laughs.

“I just told the producer of the show that Gordon Rushworth is hiding out at The Pierre.”

“Hell, Jimmy, what are you doing?”

“Little Mr. Love shouldn’t be allowed to just fade away, Jane. He should be forced to get out there and explain why he did what he did.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Hell yes, I’m right.”

He grunts as he heaves himself toward the edge of the bed.

“Okay, I need a bathroom break. I’d advise you to vacate the premises, it’s not gonna be pretty.”

Jane needs no second warning and she quits her brother’s room, closing the door after her.

Back in her bed, as she feels sleep coming to claim her, she decides that her brother is right.

Gordon Rushworth *does* need to explain himself.

Though she doubts that he’ll man up and do it.

“Mr. Rushworth?”

Gordon, crossing the lobby of The Pierre, turns, expecting one of the uniformed hotel employees.

Instead he sees a fashionably dressed woman in her mid-twenties with a sharp haircut.

A look that screams *media* at him.

Gordon hurries out onto a busy sidewalk washed with Fall morning sunlight.

The young woman is at his side.

“Mr. Rushworth, I’m Alexis Banks, assistant to the producer of the *Sarah Snowdon Show*.”

Gordon veers away from her, jaywalking across Fifth Avenue, and nearly gets crushed by a taxi, the driver bellowing at him.

Alexis Banks grabs his arm.

“Easy, there. This in New York not Vermont.”

Gordon, finding the refuge of the opposite sidewalk, is tempted to tell her that he is no hick, that he is a sophisticate with knowledge of many of the world’s great cities.

But why bother?

She’s nothing to him.

He walks on and the woman stays glued to his side, continuing her patter.

“Sarah would *love* to have you on the show. She’s a big fan.”

He stays mute.

“Mr. Rushworth, you must know you’re the focus of a media feeding frenzy? Appearing on our show, where Sarah will treat you with sympathy and respect, will do a lot to end that frenzy. The rest of the media, having been scooped, will move on to the next daily drama.”

He knows she’s right, but still he refuses to speak.

“Don’t you think you owe it to your readers? To explain your deception?”

This stops him and he looks down at her.

He doesn’t give a damn about his readers—despite the unseemly amount of money they are pouring into his bank account—but he does still owe

somebody an explanation.

And a real apology.

Jane Cooper.

He needs to say all the things that he was unable to say to her on the phone last night.

And if he says them before an audience of millions, so be it.

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll do it.”

“Excellent.”

Alexis Banks has an iPhone in her hand.

“I’ll call my producer right now and schedule you for sometime this week.”

“Today,” he says.

“Huh?”

“I’ll do it if I can appear on today’s show.”

She shakes her head.

“That’s impossible, Mr. Rushworth. We’re on air in less than six hours. There’s already a confirmed line-up with guests flying in from around the country.”

Gordon is walking again.

“We do it today or I’ll find a show that will.”

She chases him down, grabbing at his arm.

“Okay, okay, Gordon. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Good,” he says, turning into a coffee shop. “Now buy me an espresso, make your calls and fill me in on everything I need to know.”

It’s just gone 4:00 P.M. and Gordon is alone, pacing what Alexis Banks referred to as “the green room” when she left him here after he was done getting made up.

The room is not painted green: the walls are off-white and the couches are an oatmeal color.

The color scheme, in fact, of the *Sarah Snowdon Show* opening titles that twirl on the giant wall mounted TV, to the strains of some elevator-muzaky strings.

Gordon, dressed in one of his spanking new Saks outfits, glugs from a bottle of water, watching the monitor as Sarah Snowdon, with the unlined face of a woman who is on intimate terms with cosmetic surgery, wafts from the wings dressed in her trademark whites and beiges.

She is skinny at the moment—every fluctuation in her weight the stuff of gossip columns—and bends with the ease of a Pilates junkie as she takes a little bow in acknowledgement of the enthusiastic applause of the studio audience.

Gordon, after months of being exposed to this show—Bitsy is an ardent follower—feels that he knows Sarah Snowdon, although he has not yet met her.

That dubious pleasure awaits him in mere seconds.

The door opens and Alexis Banks beckons him.

“It’s time, Gordon.”

He dumps his water and follows her into the studio, waiting in darkness in the wings of the set amidst a tangle of cables and whispering technicians.

He watches Sarah Snowdon standing glowing in the lights.

She grins, stills the applause and says, “Welcome to today’s show. A *verrrrry* interesting show. We have Gwyneth Paltrow here to talk about her latest cookbook.” Applause. “Don’t you just *loooove* Gwyneth? And Kate Hudson is here to give us the lowdown on her new Broadway show.”

More applause, then Sarah holds up a finger.

“But, first a *huuuuuge* scoop. We have with us the author of the blockbuster book, *Ivy*.”

Squeals of delight and thunderous applause as the camera finds the entirely female audience.

My readers, Gordon thinks, his gut cramping with fear.

“Now,” Sarah says, “who of you have read *Ivy*?”

It seems every hand is raised.

“Okay. Who *hasn’t* read it?”

Maybe three hands go up, slowly.

“Where have you *beeeeen*, ladies? Wow! Okay, it’s a blockbuster of a book and also the center of a media storm since the revelation that Viola Usher, the author, is in fact a man, Gordon Rushworth, who is joining us in a few seconds.”

Sarah pauses, staring into the audience.

“Who believes that *Ivy* could have been written by a man?”

No hands are raised.

“Anybody want to tell us why?”

A huge show of hands.

Sarah picks a woman a few rows from the front.

“Tell us.”

The woman, who looks like everybody’s next-door-neighbor, stands and says, “No man—and I’ve been married three times so I know what I’m talking about—is able to *get* women like that. To understand our emotions. Our feelings. Never mind our libidos!”

There are roars of approval and agreement.

“Well, ladies, no matter what you think, Gordon Rushworth *is* the author of this book. So let’s get him out here. Please welcome Mr. Love himself, *Gorrrrrrdon Rushworrrrrrrth!*”

Gordon feels a nudge in his back and he steps out into the glare.

Sarah Snowdon takes his hand in both of hers and leads him toward the famous couch where she grills her guests.

“So, Gordon, let me leap right in. *Did* you write *Ivy*.”

“Yes, I did.”

“So you’re Viola Usher?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re not lying?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you did lie before? Passing the book off as your sister’s?”

“Yes, I lied. And I coerced my poor sister into being party to a hoax.”

“Why? Why did you do that?”

Gordon pauses.

Then he shrugs.

“I’m an assistant professor of English Literature. I’m steeped in the classics, the great novels. I believed a book like *Ivy* fell into a somewhat lesser genre.”

“Chick-lit?”

“If you will.”

There are grumbles of disapproval from the audience and Sarah holds up a delicate hand.

“Ladies, I’ll be debating the literary merits of the book with Gordon very shortly. But first, let’s get the heart of what has been mystifying me. How does a man, an academic at that, get to write a book like *Ivy*?”

“When I was twelve I fell in love for the first time with a wonderful girl named Suzie. While all the other guys were playing sport or getting into the kind of trouble that pubescent boys get into, I hung out with her. We were inseparable. Suzie was unique, a force of nature, and I learned, I believe, to

see and understand the world through her eyes.”

“What happened then?” Sarah asks.

Gordon hesitates, then he plunges on.

“Suzie died. In her thirteenth year she lost the battle to leukemia. I watched her waste away and I couldn’t understand the brutality of it. The unfairness of it all.”

Gordon stops, choking up, and he realizes he’s behaving in the manner that had so revolted him when he sat with Bitsy watching this show: he’s airing his emotional laundry before millions.

Sarah takes his hand and, on the giant monitors that flank the set, he sees close-ups of women in the audience dabbing at tears.

“So how did this loss, this pain, affect you, Gordon?”

“I guess I performed an emotional lobotomy on myself. I became all about the intellect. I went to Harvard, I joined the world of academia and lived the life of the mind. I also wrote a novel inspired by Suzie.”

“Ivy?”

“No, no. This was a *serious* novel. A huge, weighty tome that grappled with the important and ultimately unanswerable questions: why we are born and why we die. I sweated over this book for more than a decade.”

“Will we get to read it?”

“Heaven forbid.”

“Why?”

“It stinks. It’s trite, humorless, hackneyed.”

He makes a dismissive gesture.

“When I finished that book, I started hearing Suzie’s voice talking to me for the first time in years. When I couldn’t ignore it any longer I surrendered and wrote *Ivy*.”

“So Suzie Ballinger is based on your first love?”

“Suzie Ballinger is pure fiction: but her spirit, her feistiness, her scorn of convention is what I had so admired about the young girl I was in love with.”

“That’s so beautiful, Gordon.”

Sarah turns to the audience.

“Do we believe him, ladies? Do we believe this guy wrote that book?”

Roars of yes.

Sarah turns back to him.

“So what happened? Why did you retreat from the book? Why were you ashamed of it?”

Gordon knows that the moment has come where he can try for redemption, try to undo some of the damage he is done.

But as he is about to bare his soul Sarah holds up a hand and says, “Gordon Rushworth, *Mr. Love*, you’ll get to answer that question right after the break.”

Jane, back from a walk through the sad streets of Hicksville, opens the front door of her mother's house and hears Gordon Rushworth's voice.

Hears him saying *her* name.

Hurrying through to the living room she sees her mother sitting watching *The Sarah Snowdon Show*.

"Jane, your Mr. Love is on," Myra Cooper says, "and he's talking about you!"

Jane sits on the edge of a chair, eyes on the screen, as Sarah Snowdon says, "The person you're talking about, Jane Cooper, was the literary agent representing *Ivy*, is that right?"

"Yes. She still represents the book."

Sarah raises a plucked eyebrow.

"Really? I thought she was fired?"

Gordon shrugs.

"What does that matter? She's my agent, that's all that counts. But what I was saying is that Jane was a victim here. She knew nothing of the lies and represented my sister in good faith."

"I understand you want to apologize, Gordon, but what does this have to do with you denying authorship of *Ivy*?"

"I was ashamed of *Ivy*, true. I thought it just another example of a genre I despised: the bleeding heart, ten-tissue weepy kind of stuff about love affairs and failed marriages. So I distanced myself from it. Then Jane Cooper, whom I met when she was representing my sister, challenged my dismissive attitude toward women's fiction. She asked me a question that has stayed with me."

Gordon looks into the camera and it's as if he's looking straight at Jane.

"Jane, maybe you're out there somewhere watching this, so I'm doing my best to reproduce your question. Forgive me if I don't do it justice, but here goes."

He looks back at Sarah.

"She asked me why supposedly lightweight *feminine* themes like divorce, adultery and family life suddenly become *important* when tackled by male novelists like Updike, Eugenides or Franzen?"

“A good question.”

“Yes, a *very* good question.”

“And what was your reply?”

“Oh, I fobbed her off saying something about those men elevating them beyond chick-lit.”

“Do you believe that now?”

“No, I don’t. Jane told me that she found *Ivy* honest and moving, and even profound. I would like to believe that she is right.”

Sarah turns to the audience.

“What do we think?”

Roars of approval.

Jane hears her cell phone trilling from down the corridor where she has left it in her old bedroom.

She hurries into the room and sees the phone going crazy.

Missed calls.

Texts.

All from New York publishing houses.

She mutes the phone, throws it in a drawer which she slams shut before she bolts from the house.

Escaping the deluge unleashed upon her by the insufferable Gordon Rushworth.

Jane is in Hicksville's only surviving bar, a gloomy place down near the Greyhound station.

Aside from her, the patrons are exclusively male and over the age of fifty.

Nobody bothers Jane and the bartender, a giant with a wall eye and a badly set broken nose, seems to have no use for conversation.

Her requests for more beer are met with a solemn nod of the head and a wheezing breath as he reaches into the cooler below the counter, emerges with a longneck, pops the cap and sets the bottle down before her.

She has long made it clear that she has no need of a glass.

Some hours into her solitary bender—long enough for the hard edges of the room to lose focus and melt like a Dali painting—a man heaves himself onto the stool beside her.

"Janey?" he says. "Janey Cooper?"

Jane closes one eye in an effort to bring him into focus.

He is maybe forty-five, big—though not as huge as the barkeep—and bald, with a smile that may have been charming a few thousand cigarettes ago.

She doesn't recognize him.

Maybe an acquaintance of her father's?

"Do I know you?" Jane says, slurring only a little.

He laughs.

"Richie," he says. "Richie Packer."

She stares at him blankly.

"We were in high school together. I was captain of the football team."

With great effort she finds remnants of the smug young jock of more than a decade ago hidden inside the oaf who has fallen victim to premature middle-age.

"Okay," she says, turning back to her beer.

"So I heard about your father, Janey. That's too bad."

"Yeah."

"Get you a beer?"

"I'm okay," she says, but he ignores her and orders two bottles from the

bartender.

“You’re looking real good, Janey,” Richie says with a leer that is meant to be suave.

“You too.”

He laughs around the neck of his beer.

“So I hear you’re up in New York City?”

“That’s right.”

“Doin’ what?”

“Publishing.”

“Publishing?” he says as if this is something suspiciously un-American.

“The big time, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” she says. “Huge.”

She drinks.

“And you, Robbie—”

“Richie.”

“Richie! What do you do?”

“I’m in waste management.”

She giggles.

“Like Tony Soprano?”

He stares at her blankly.

“Who’s he?”

Things go downhill from there.

Richie leans in close, his breath smelling of stale beer and cigarettes and she has to keep shifting on her stool as he paws at her like a horny Labrador while he tells her—in excruciating detail—of his failed marriage.

After what seems like hours he heaves himself from his seat, saying, “I’m gonna drain the main vein, then whaddaya say we get outta this place? Find somewhere more intimate?”

Jane says nothing, all her concentration on her beer.

A while later she sees Richie emerge from the washroom.

Somehow the giant bartender has left his station without her noticing and stands waiting for Richie.

A few words are exchanged, drowned by the jukebox that’s stocked exclusively with eighties hits, and then the barkeep uses his massive hands to speed the romantically inclined Richie out of the door and into the night.

More time passes.

More beer is consumed.

The place is nearly empty when, again, Jane senses a man sitting down beside her.

“Jane?”

She turns, the room and this guy a blur.

Even the trick of closing one eye does little to bring him into focus.

“Hey,” she says, “you look like some asshole I used to know.”

“Jane,” he says, “I think it’s time to go.”

“You look like that miserable excuse for a man, Gordy Rushworth.”

“It is me, Jane,” he says. “It’s Gordon.”

She leans in close to examine his face, saying, “Gordy, Gordy, Gordy?” as she tips forward off the stool and falls headlong into blackness.

A road crew, led by a very enthusiastic jackhammer operator, are hard at work inside Jane's head.

She opens an eye and groans, the small shaft of sunlight that penetrates the curtains of her childhood bedroom like a laser to her eye.

She lies a while and takes stock.

Remembers drinking a vast amount of beer.

Remembers some guy from school—Robbie? Richie?—trying to hit on her and then not much else after that.

She sits up and has to wait until the room stops spinning before she levers herself slowly to her feet, noticing that she wears a pair of paisley PJs that can only belong to her mother.

Jane finds a robe and manages to shrug it on, the pounding in her head almost felling her.

Dragging herself down the corridor toward the kitchen in search of Tylenol, she remembers something else through the fog of booze.

Another guy sitting beside her in that bar.

A guy who had looked weirdly like Gordon Rushworth.

Jane shuffles into the kitchen, her eyes on the floor, and when a voice says, "Jane?" she screams and has to grab hold of the door to stop herself falling.

"Jane, are you okay?" Gordon says, standing up from the kitchen table.

She gapes at him.

"Gordon?"

"Yes," he says.

"You were in that bar last night?"

"Yes, I was."

He takes her by the elbow.

"Come, sit down.'

She slumps into a seat at the table.

"You brought me home?"

"Yes. It took all my powers of persuasion to convince the bartender that my intentions were honorable."

“Are they?”

“What?”

“Honorable?”

He smiles.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” he asks.

“No, water. And Tylenol. They’re in the closet by the fridge.”

Gordon finds the container and fills a glass with water.

Jane slugs back the pills and stares at Gordon.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“About being my agent. About representing *Ivy*.”

“That ship has sailed, Gordon. Or sunk, rather.”

“Not at all. I don’t know if you heard but I was on *The Sarah Snowdon Show* yesterday?”

She is not about to give him the satisfaction of telling him that she saw him on the show, so she shakes her head.

An action she immediately regrets.

She groans.

“Are you okay?”

“Will you stop fussing over me, Gordon? Where’s my mother?”

“She went to the store.”

“Where did you stay last night?”

“Your mother kindly allowed me use of her sleeper couch.”

Jane drags her mouth down in something like a smile.

“You’re a real couch guy aren’t you, Gordon?”

He raises his hands as if surrendering.

“Jane, please let me make amends. Interest in *Ivy* has never been higher.”

“Bully for you, *Gordo*.”

She stares at him.

“I did catch a bit of that show yesterday. Heard you mouthing all of my arguments in favor of women’s fiction.”

“I did give you credit.”

“I’m not buying this sudden conversion of yours, Gordon, from the literary snob to the champion of chick-lit. I think you’re—in the words of my dear departed old dad—blowing smoke up my butt.”

He shrugs.

“Okay, let me be honest—”

“Why don’t you try that? You may enjoy the novelty.”

“Jane, I will admit that I still revere great writing but I am adjusting my frame of reference sufficiently to see the virtues of popular fiction.”

“How damned *egalitarian* of you, Gordo.”

“I’ve claimed *Ivy* as my own.”

“Only after Bitsy outed you.”

“Be that as it may, I have claimed authorship and I’m prepared to concede that as a piece of writing *Ivy* is far more successful than *Too Long the Night*.”

“Well, hallelujah for that.”

“And I have you to thank for opening my eyes.”

She stares at him.

“What do you want, Gordon? Just showing up like this?”

“I want you, Jane.”

“Really? What’s the turn on, my lion’s breath or my mother’s PJs?”

He has the good grace to blush.

“Well, of course, I would hope that our personal relationship would blossom along with our professional one.”

“Hell, Gordon, which century are you living in? Can’t you speak American for God’s sake?”

“Jane let’s stop sniping at one another and keep our eyes on the prize. There, is that *American* enough for you?”

“Keep going.”

“All the things you negotiated for *Ivy* when you were with Blunt are still on the table: the paperback sale, the movie deal.”

“Gordon, I was fired.”

“I know that. So you’re, so-to-speak, a free agent?”

“If you mean unemployed and unemployable, yes.”

“Then I’m here to sign with JCA.”

“What’s JCA?”

“The Jane Cooper Agency.”

“There is no Jane Cooper Agency.”

“There is now.”

She stares at him.

“I’m broke, living in my mother’s house in Hicksville.”

He places two airplane tickets on the table.

“There’s a flight to New York City leaving Indianapolis in three hours. If

you hurry we can make it.”

“You’re serious about all this?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What happens when we get to New York?”

“You talk to the publishers. You talk to Hollywood.”

“I don’t even have an office.”

“Right now all you need is a cell phone and an iPad.”

He smiles.

“And me.”

She's balked and bolted, Gordon decides as he pushes aside his untouched poached egg, staring, as he has for the past hour, at the doorway to La Caprice restaurant at The Pierre.

He last saw Jane Cooper just before midnight, when he dropped her off at her apartment after the cab ride from LaGuardia.

"Do you want me to come up?" he'd asked. "Just to see you're okay?"

Pretending chivalry, but—why hide it?—he felt the pleasurable stirrings of lust beneath his just-too-tight Saks leather belt.

Jane had said, "Thanks, Gordon, but no. I'm exhausted. I'm going to hit the shower and then my bed and I'll meet you for breakfast at The Pierre at eight."

It's now after nine and she's a no-show.

And when he tries her call her—as he has countless times over the last hour—he goes straight to voice mail.

What had he been thinking?

Jetting off to the Midwest.

Coercing her to return with him to Manhattan.

That's what you get when you take Hugh Grant as a role model, he tells himself.

He's busy trying to attract the attention of a waiter when Jane appears and drops into the chair opposite him.

"God, I'm sorry, Gordon. I overslept."

"That's okay," he says. "I tried calling."

"I switched my phone off. All these calls are terrifying me."

"Good. You're keeping their appetites whetted."

"I've also had a barrage of emails. I haven't opened them all, but it seems the Big Five are hunting me down. One I did open was from Argyle, the publisher who bought the book when Bitsy was posing as the author. Amazingly, they're still keen. They're speaking of adjusting their offer northward."

"That's excellent."

"And I got a message from Bree Danforth's agent."

He stares at her blankly.

“Gordon, which planet are you visiting us from?”

Jane shakes her head.

“The gorgeous young actress who famously put her career on hold while she went off to get a first class degree at Yale?”

“I may have heard of her . . .” Gordon says.

Jane snorts.

“I suppose you’re genetically programmed to watch only movies with subtitles?”

“Very funny.”

“Anyway, Bree Danforth has decided that she wants to make her comeback playing Suzie.”

“She sounds perfect.”

“She is. As different from Raynebeau Jones as anybody could be.”

“I somehow never saw Suzie played by an airhead with a PhD in Valley Girl.”

Jane tries a smile that doesn’t take.

“What’s wrong, Jane?” Gordon asks. “Everything is sounding great? All these offers?”

“Great for you, Gordon, but there’s no place for me.”

He reaches across the table and takes her hand.

“What are you talking about, Jane? I told you, you’ll represent me.”

She shakes her head.

“It’s impossible. Yesterday I was so lost in booze and grief and general messed-upness I forget one vital detail.”

“Which is?”

“I signed a non-compete clause with Blunt. For five years I’m legally bound not to work in the publishing industry, in any capacity.” She shrugs. “I wanted to tell you this to your face, Gordon.”

She stands.

“Sit, Jane.”

“Why?”

“That non-compete clause is meaningless.”

“Why?”

“Please, sit down.”

She sits.

He opens the copy of *The Wall Street Journal* that lies beside his

untouched breakfast, finds the report headlined CHAPTER 11 FOR PUBLISHING MAVERICK and slides it across to her.

“The Blunt Agency is no more. Jonas Blunt declared bankruptcy yesterday.”

She reads for a few seconds then looks up at him.

“My God. The *Ivy* thing took him down. I feel terrible.”

“Don’t. Jonas has been overextending himself in every direction for years. *Ivy* was merely the pin that burst the bubble.”

He takes her hand again.

“So, I see no problem here. I’m not trying to tell you your job, but I suspect you need to announce another auction of *Ivy*.”

Jane shakes her head.

“I feel as though I’m on a rollercoaster.”

“Would a Bloody Mary steady your nerves?”

“No!”

She closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose.

Then she blinks and looks at him with wide eyes.

“You’re asking me to swing one of the biggest publishing deals of the last decade from the bedroom of my apartment?”

“No, I’m not.”

She stares at him blankly.

Gordon stands.

“Come with me. We’re going for a walk.”

“Where to?”

“Don’t ask questions. It’s a lovely Fall morning. Let’s enjoy it.”

He makes for the door and Jane has no choice but to follow him.

“Mr. Rushworth? I’m Ann Bascomb.”

The woman in the dark business suit stands up from a seat near the elevator of a Midtown office tower.

“Pleased to meet you,” Gordon says, shaking her hand. “This is my agent, Jane Cooper.”

The two women shake hands and Ann Bascomb presses for an elevator.

As they step inside she smiles up at Gordon.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but I’m a huge fan.”

“Thank you,” he says as they ascend.

“I just wish you could sign my Kindle.”

He laughs as the elevator chimes and they walk out into a corridor on the tenth floor.

The property broker unlocks a door and Gordon watches Jane's face as they enter a suite of offices with views over the city.

"Well, what do you think?" he asks.

"It's beautiful," Jane says. "But I can't. No. This is crazy."

Gordon turns to Ann Bascomb.

"Would you give us a moment, please?"

He takes Jane's arm and walks her over to window that offers a spectacular vista of Central Park.

"You can do this, Jane."

"I'm broke."

"You won't be for long. You do know that over the next few months your commissions on *Ivy* will total at least seven figures?"

She nods.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Gordon asks.

Jane shakes her head.

"I don't know what to say."

"Just say yes, Jane."

Gordon takes her hand.

"Just say yes."

“Yes,” Jane says. “Yes, yes, yes!”

She slams the phone down and swivels her chair to look out over the park, a view that always calms her.

The door to her office opens and her assistant, Belinda, sticks her head in.

“Everything okay?”

“It’s just those damned press people from the studio in L.A. wanting to know if Gordon will be available for interviews before the premiere on Friday. I’ve given them his schedule at least ten times.”

“Why don’t you go home?” Belinda asks.

Jane shakes her head.

“There’s too much for me to do. The perils of being bicoastal.”

“Nothing that won’t keep until tomorrow. I’ve got it. Scram.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You’re an angel, Belinda.”

“Yeah, yeah,” her assistant says, and as the girl exits the office to attend to a ringing telephone Jane has a flash of her with her middle finger raised as the elevator doors closed on her in the lobby of the building where the Blunt Agency had once had its offices.

How things have changed in the last eighteen months.

Sometimes Jane still feels she needs to pinch herself to make sure it’s all real.

She gets her purse and blows Belinda a kiss as she passes her desk, her assistant blithely lying that Jane is in a meeting for the rest of the day.

She exits the office and closes the door, still getting a kick when she sees the neatly lettered sign: THE JANE COOPER AGENCY.

She takes the elevator down to the lobby and steps out in the beauty of a New York spring sunset, the first time she hasn’t worked late into the night in weeks.

Her good mood isn’t at all dampened when she hails a cab and hears the lush intro of “Dream a Little Dream of Me” coming from the driver’s radio.

Whatever power the song once had is long gone.

And, for just a moment, when she thinks of what happened with her ex-fiancé, it is with relief, not regret.

Tom Bennett, finally stumbling in his frantic tap dance, has swapped his button-down Brooks Brothers for an orange jumpsuit—doing five years in Upstate New York for dealing cocaine.

Then all thoughts of the past are washed away by the glorious light and the pleasurable expectation of arriving home.

Home which is no longer in the Meat Packing District but on the Upper East Side.

In an apartment paid for by *Ivy*.

Jane tips the cab driver and walks into the lobby, the doorman holding the door open for her.

“Evening, Mrs. Rushworth.”

“Evening, Tony,” she says, heading for the elevator.

She has slipped easily into this happily schizophrenic state: Ms. Cooper at work, Mrs. Rushworth at home.

Dare she say it?

The best of both worlds . . .

Jane lets herself into the apartment and pauses to let the elegance of the rooms and the spectacular view wash over her.

She hears her father’s voice: *It’s a long way from Hicksville, baby.*

“Sure is Daddy,” she says out loud. “Sure is.”

“Jane?”

Gordon calls to her and she crosses the living room, walks a little way down the corridor and pushes open the door to his office.

He looks up at her from his computer.

“You’re early.”

“Perks of being the boss.”

She bends to give him a kiss.

“How are you doing?”

“Steady as she goes,” he says.

Gordon is woefully late on delivering the third episode of the Suzie Ballinger saga.

The sequel to *Ivy*—*Hometown*—was a massive success when it was released six months ago and the publishers were keen to coincide the release of the third book with the premiere of the movie.

That is not to be.

Not that anybody is going to risk upsetting their cash cow by being overly judgmental or demanding.

“Come on, Gordy,” Jane says, “be honest. You haven’t written a thing today have you?”

“Well . . .”

“You’ve been yakking endlessly with Suzie. Admit it.”

“She has been *particularly* verbal today.”

He stands, laughing, and takes Jane’s hand, leading her down the corridor into the gaily decorated nursery where their six-month-old daughter, Suzie Jane Cooper Rushworth, sits in her playpen, under the watchful gaze of her nanny.

“Hi, Mariel. How has she been?”

“Oh, gorgeous of course, Jane.”

As she lifts her daughter from her playpen a shaft of golden light from the sinking sun sets fire to her soft curls and Jane is left breathless at the sheer beauty of their child.

Standing at the window holding Suzie she looks up into Gordon’s eyes.

“Happy?” he asks.

“Egregiously. Excessively. Ludicrously.”

He laughs and bends and kisses her as the light fades behind the skyscrapers and the moon, full and ripe with promise, rises over the Manhattan skyline.

THE END

Also by Sally Mason

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