

Sight / Bites

Dorothy Linick

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Introduction

It has long been my ambition to share with others some of the written work by my late wife, Dorothy. She began to devote much time to the writing in fiction in the mid-90's and at the time of her death, in 2007, she had compiled an impressive dossier. I hesitate to use the verb "completed" because Dorothy never seemed to be totally satisfied with any of her efforts and she was constantly undertaking tasks of revision. The job of preparing editions of her work, even for this website, was immensely complicated by this habit – but there were other problems as well.

I would have to say that Dorothy was never completely comfortable with computer technology and she never adopted a coherent system of handling her many projects and their revision. When she died there were four files on her desktop, 62 on her hard drive, 183 in her documents folder – and that was only the beginning. I discovered a total of 79 storage disks, mostly in the old three and a half inch square floppy format, but also including some zip disks and some CD's. Of these 19 belonged to the world of work, her role as special projects coordinator at the American School in London, and four (with literary titles) were by now blank. Of the remaining 56 disks, some nine were in word processing formats so ancient they could not be read by modern machines and I had to have these professionally recovered. Even those that could be read could often be opened only in a text edit format and required further manipulation to make them at all useful. In all, there were over 1600 files containing materials of a literary import!

Of course many of the files were merely copies or duplicates of earlier work – though there were true revisions as well. Indeed, one of the chief tasks undertaken by her sister Naomi, who has had a major hand in editing this manuscript, was attempting to discover which draft represented Dorothy's most complete (I won't say final) intention.

Chapter 1

The little blue bow on the card gave the game away – Rosie Farquhar and Gerald Marcus were the proud parents of a baby boy, William Harry Nathaniel, born the First of August of this year, weight seven pounds, nine ounces. By return mail I sent a turd weighing two ounces, deposited by my Miniature Schnauzer, Otto, born the Eighteenth of June, 1993. I had no grievance against William Harry, but I wasn't best pleased with his parents, to be perfectly honest. Gerald was still my husband – whether he wanted to be or not – and Rosie was the poacher who had bagged my property.

I'm Miriam Marcus, Mimi ever since I can remember. Yes, the American. I write about television for anyone who'll pay me. A pundit, if you'll excuse the expression. Appeared on *The Late Show* recently. Now you place me, right? I've written two books, the most successful being a retrospective on the decline of television standards in America – *Mickey Mouse Club* come back! All Is forgiven. Dark red hair, medium height, good bone structure, dress well, could lose five pounds (mostly water weight, of course). Condemned to single status, that's Miriam Marcus.

Gerry and I were together for nineteen years, three months and four days in total. For the last two years, three months and two days of these years we lived here in England because Gerald had opted for a transfer to the London office of his law firm, Bernstein, Fine, Youngstein and Marcus (us). Neither one of us having lived anywhere else but L.A., this would be our last chance at 'adventure, Gerry persuaded me, that if you count moving from one supremely successful law practice and life in an expensive suburb to another successful law practice, etc., this can count as an adventure. Not like fleeing the Cossacks with one blanket and a beat-up cooking pot, but you play the hand you're dealt.

Gerry is an Anglophile, a paid-up member of that pathetic species who actually get off on the condescension meted out by the British to such mutants. He bought into the whole schmear, persisting in seeing this weird country as a theme park designed by Ralph Lauren.

I have never made my peace with the plumbing, the risible heating system, the weather or the lousy service. "Give an American a problem," the

wife of one of Gerry's colleagues whined, "and they'll tell you ten ways they can solve it, but give that same problem to the English and they'll tell you ten ways they can't."

On the other hand, the British make a point of not being "positive," an attitude valued far beyond its worth in the land of my birth. I may have been born to a society that believes a smile and a gun can get you anything, but, like Al Capone, I recognize the hypocrisy for what it is.

Life was bumpy from the start. Gerry wanted us to live in Chelsea, but the toney neighborhood was too ur-goy; I feel most comfortable surrounded by enough Jews to huddle together in case of trouble, but *landsmen* are not easy to find in England and just about impossible to unearth in Chelsea, trust me. I mean, if you figure there are less than half a million known Jews in the whole of Great Britain, how can they possibly be in the national face the way they are in America? They're not keen on making an impact of any kind actually and either go the assimilated route, Anglicizing their names and their attitudes, or opt for the polar opposite by hiding out in the grimmest ghettos north of Warsaw, all with one giant kosher butcher shop and a Volvo dealership.

I needed to establish a base camp somewhere between these two extremes, to find a community of my co-religionists (as Jews are often known here) with my priorities. I needed a decent deli, a good patisserie, a first-rate hairdresser, and a convenient temple so the walk on the High Holy Days would not be a drag. A neighborhood where cleaning women were easy to import.

"You want Saint John's Wood," I was told by the maven at the relocation company. Besides, she went on, there was an American school which would be useful. When I told her we had no children, she was embarrassed – as people usually were by such a domestic lapse. I am not, but more of that later.

Wealthy Victorians kept their mistresses in St John's Wood, now wealthy Jewish, Japanese, and American expat businessmen installed their wives and children in the overpriced residences. There are enough gentiles around to keep the place respectable, so you don't expect the Gestapo to drop by in the middle of the night. "Not too Jewish," as my new friend Marlene Greene told me, which is the way Jews here talk about themselves.

Gerry was not happy. Being north of Regent's Park did nothing for him; he wanted to be in Chelsea, well south of the only park that mattered, Hyde Park. He wanted to be in strolling distance of restaurants so smart and expensive that paying the bill felt like being mugged by a bunch of crackheads in the Bronx. He wanted to meet the kind of people he'd seen in *Four Weddings and A Funeral*. That was his idea of England, honestly.

I spent a fortune on the house in St. John's Wood, of course. "I want the English country house look, and don't spare the expense," Gerry instructed,

and who was I to argue? He made a fortune and we hardly had to save for the dog's college education. Besides, I spend money well.

I set about chintzing and festooning us to death. When Thomas Goode came up with some crap excuse about why our ginger-jar-based-lamps were not delivered on time, I told them: "By five this afternoon or forget it." They arrived. My cleaner. Mrs. O'Farrell, who insisted on being music hall Irish to satisfy what she took to be a universal American sympathy for her compatriots, said with relish: "You surely know how to get the bloody English to pull their finger out, Mrs. Marcus."

Otto was an acquisition frowned on at first by Gerry, but when Harrods promised the dog would be housetrained prior to arrival and thus no threat to our new apricot-colored carpets, he thawed out. Our dog in L.A. – Karl, also a schnauzer – had died a year before the move and truth was, Gerry missed him. In theory Gerry fancied owning something big, slaving and vaguely countryish, but after the neighbors' Labrador slobbered all over his Tommy Nutter cavalry twill trousers, he changed his mind. After a check by Harrods to determine we were the kind of people judged appropriate for the onerous duties of pet ownership – Gerry sweating that one out, I'll tell you! – Otto arrived and Gerry was fine.

Priorities properly in place, I found a hairdresser, Paco, on the high-street, which is what they called the main drag in England. Paco had long, grubby blond extensions and a fake tan, but he knew his way around a pair of scissors and a blow dryer, and my lowlights had never looked better. Which brings me back to Marlene Greene.

We sat next to each other in the "color pit" and started a conversation that has gone on ever since. Marlene was in her late forties, as I am – but exactly where, as she put it, could "only be found out at the point of a gun, darling." Marl is a large woman, emphatically brunette with great tits, two ex-husbands and a teenage son, Isaac, who had body parts pierced fore and aft. Isaac was in the midst of his GCSE's, she told me, part of the arcane and convoluted British exam system about which I don't care enough to fathom. She owns a house to kill for, a lot of important jewelry and has very well looked-after teeth. As a bonus of our friendship I came by the name of a good dentist, an asset as rare as goodwill in this country. Vindra Patel, "A gonif on Harley Street, but up to American standards," she swore. Marl's high maintenance – and not ashamed of it. A girl after my own heart.

Unfortunately, the same could said by Gerry of Rosie Farquhar. Smitten from the first by the *goyishe* princess of his fantasies, Gerry sat next to her at a dinner party in Fulham (a drab former working class neighborhood of cramped

terrace houses crowded by Chelsea wannabees), one given by an obnoxious client, Mungo Jacks, and his dopey wife, Caroline.

“Hello! You must be that nice American Caroline told me about,” Rosie fluttered, and he fell. Suckered by a twenty-something gnat brain, swinging a lot of blonde hair about, chattering on about “the country” and “the season,” hinting about hanging out with “the Royals.” She reeked of overdrafts at Coutts and social connections – the latter being the Achilles tendon of the heel I married. It was the voice that did it most of all: swallowed consonants and flattened vowels fumed by centuries of breeding, reducing that dope Gerry to a series of lustful “Uh huhs” in response.

“She roped him in like a steer,” I told Marlene later. “She grabbed him by the balls and his heart and mind followed.”

“Just make sure you get the house,” Marlene shrugged.

It was in my name for tax purposes, anyway.

Chapter 2

Let's cut to the chase. Three months after meeting Rosie Gerry told me that he was "totally in love," that he "couldn't help it," that he "felt like a kid again" and that wanted to know what I "wanted to do about it?" I told him I wanted to cut his nuts off, preserve them like lemons, wrap them in *prosciutto* and serve them up to his lady-love on a nest of lettuce – but I would settle for a profitable divorce. In short, I threw him out. News of that baby came later, which was just as well for all of us.

Counselor Marcus was in *shtuck*, divorce-wise. Greedy had put a lot of stuff in my name and, as I was in no mood to return very much of it, he had to sweeten the pot. Six months later, with the coming event as leverage, I had the house, of course, healthy bank account(s), custody of Otto (Gerry got generous visitation rights - why should the dog suffer?), and the family Gold Card. Gerry still didn't have a divorce, but as I told him in my lawyer's office, some things are worth waiting for.

I still had a 'kinda' career, Marlene, and Paco the hairdresser – but no friends to speak of because most of them owed an oath of fealty to Gerry, What I didn't have was a regular supply of sex, especially good sex and, to be honest, I was used to getting it on, then getting off, if you know what I mean.

To the last, Gerry and I liked being in bed together. We didn't like each other a whole lot of the time, but good sex is a powerful bonding agent and from our first date – which ended up lasting a weekend – we fucked like bunnies. He even told me about Rosie after a quickie (oh yes!) – just before going to the theatre: like Mrs. Lincoln, I don't remember much about the performance.

I discussed this gap in my life with Marl.

"Well, darling you're in the wrong country to get much action."

"You must know some guys," I begged.

"Yes sweetie, but they're either married or gay and more often than not, both." Marlene laughed fit to bust, then went on, "Anyway, the ones who would be interested in us are so ancient, they never go anywhere without a resuscitator."

I must have looked crushed, because she tried to cheer me up: “Maybe you’d have better luck in L.A.?”

I shut the door on that idea. “I’d have better luck in a tank full of sharks, besides there’s all that political correctness shit and I can’t face that right now. Anyway, if I go back home right now, Beverly will drive me crazy.”

Beyond crazy, berserk. Beverly Fine, my younger sister, still burst into tears over my shady status every time we talked on the phone. She and my brother-in-law Hershel, an accountant who could bore for the U.S. in the Olympics, couldn’t get over “that *schmuck* Gerry.” I should “come back home, get away from the chance of running into embarrassing situations,” as Beverly delicately described the optimum humiliation in her eyes, that of my tripping over my ex and the lovely Rosie proudly *schlepping* their offspring around Harrods. I could always stay with Beverly and Hershel while I got over “it,” an option that appealed as much as moving in with Newt Gingrich. No, I was better toughing it out where I was for the meantime, the threat of running into the happy couple notwithstanding.

Actually, I’m being a little hard on Bev and Herschel. Sure, part of their outrage was genuine, but there were elements of *schadenfreude* as well: in Beverly’s overheated imagination, I had done better than her in life. Since she is – ditto in her overheated imagination – a more worthy person than I am and has two kids whose futures were her responsibility, this is not fair. My shattered marriage demonstrated to that harpy that there *is* universal justice, but Beverly has never had the courage of her convictions about anything – so if I’d gone to L.A. I’d have been smothered by her guilt in the form of bogus sympathy. You can see why I preferred to stay out of the Southland for a while, even if it meant blowing my chance to bewitch Clint Eastwood.

Which brings me back to sex. One gray November afternoon, icy drizzle doing little for Paco’s handiwork, I needed something to take my mind off my own troubles and went to Leicester Square to see the current Quentin Tarantino bloodfest.

Still trembling and looking over my shoulder, I headed home on the tube at Piccadilly Circus; then remembered my offer of supper to Marlene and Isaac. I doubled back to Lina’s Italian deli on Brewer Street. I already had sun-dried tomatoes and plenty of salad at home, so I picked up a jar of olive paste, a packet of mozzarella, fresh basil and a loaf of *ciabatta*. On reflection, I picked up a second loaf, remembering Isaac and Otto.

Heading along Brewer, I came to a branch of Ann Summers. The chain of sex shops, windows cluttered with red nylon nighties and dubious leather gear, roused my curiosity. What the fuck? I thought appropriately, and went in for the first time in my life. The shop was big, well-lit and there was a large

crowd of jolly, quite unembarrassed shoppers browsing among the displays of crotch-less panties and flavored condoms. More party joke than S and M. Then I reached a display of vibrators in different shapes and sizes, kind of like the prototype but as someone once said, “The best ideas are the simple ones.”

I was attracted to a large black one – once a liberal, always a liberal – but settled on one with proportions similar to Gerry’s: better the devil you know.

I checked out my cash supply, I didn’t feel like lingering over a charge, but it was fine. I was a bit embarrassed. to be honest – whether over buying such a thing, or needing it, I’m not sure which. Anyway, I waited until up the female clerk at the cash desk was freed up and then made my move. Everything was going fine, that is to say in silence, without eye contact, when we hit a snag.

“You don’t want to use this without lubricant. It’s for sale over there,” she said, pointing to a display to the left of the desk, with powers of projection well up to Royal Shakespeare Company standard.

“It’s for a friend, I’m sure she already has some,” I whispered, experiencing what I took to be my very first hot flash. She shrugged, put the vibrator in a gaudy plastic bag and handed it to me. I buried it deep among the deli and lit out of there. I couldn’t wait to tell Marlene.

I had a go later, using enough KY jelly to lubricate one of those legendary orgies hosted by Catherine the Great. But you know? This sexual self-sufficiency business is just a load of crap, really. Next time it was on offer I decided to take the real thing, regardless of size, creed, color, or age. I could always rent a resuscitator.

Chapter 3

Marlene and I were having our lowlights done when this grand old dame with attitude swept into Paco's and the joint came to life.

"Who's that?"

"Nina Wolfe," Marlene told me.

"Do you know her?"

Paco was prancing around her with his hip-hop version of a courtly flourish. He chattered on obsequiously, cooing "Mrs. Wolfe" this and "Mrs. Wolfe" that, running his hands through her short, thick white hair as if it was a cache of doubloons.

"I know who she is, but how would I know someone like Nina Wolfe?" Marlene shook her head at my apparent naiveté.

"Well, I'm just a little girl from the country, fill me in."

"Nina Wolfe used to have an arts program on television years ago, when I was a kid. You know, where creative types sit around talking about their latest book or film? Can't remember the name of it, but believe me, everyone used to watch it on a Saturday night."

I tried to imagine the American public spending Saturday night curled up in front of the box to watch a bunch of talking heads, but failed. "She must have made some impression."

"God, yes. Everyone wanted to look like her, wear her clothes. Did she ever have charm ..." Marlene shook her head just at the memory of the devastating Nina in full flow, then went on, "She was married to some famous journalist or other, I can't remember his name . . ."

"Mr Wolfe?"

Marlene rolled her eyes. "Anyway, her son is on television as well and, as if that isn't enough, she writes detective novels and there's a TV series based on them with a character . . ."

"Whose name you can't remember?"

"Daphne something," Marlene shrugged. "Anyway, the program stars her grand-daughter, something or other Wolfe."

“Hedy Wolfe,” I filled in, “the show is *Daphne Steele*, by the way.” Naturally I knew the program: television is my field of expertise, as they say. Granddaughter Hedy was a star in the making with a fashionably long, thin body, a signature braid of waist-length dark hair, and a husky voice. And the apple didn’t fall far from the tree: Hedy didn’t appear to be short on attitude, either.

“Who’s the son?”

“Hedy’s father, Daniel Wolfe.” *His* name she remembered, but then again who wouldn’t? A tall, dark dish, fiftyish, host of the long-running arts magazine, ‘*See/Hear*’ on Channel Four. The program was prestigious as well as popular; quite a hat trick for a medium spewing mostly junk, I tell you. I would then have sacrificed Gerald’s first born (okay, okay! easy enough for me) to appear on “*See/Hear*”.

“She’s something isn’t she?” I meant Nina Wolfe of course. I couldn’t hear what she was saying, but the vocal quality was the vintage version of her granddaughter’s - a laugh-y, sexy voice. The bones were still there, and the slim build. Not bad for someone who had to be rising eighty and I didn’t think she was holding in her stomach, either. “Does she live around here?”

“Next to you ... uh ...”

“Acacia Road?” We – I – was on Acacia Circle.

“Yes, of course.”

I hoped Marlene’s aphasia was temporary. I made up my mind to introduce myself (Yes, Jewish and American, so I’m not afraid to be pushy), but Drusilla, Paco’s starveling junior, dragged herself over to give me a strand test, pronouncing me “Ready.” By the time she’d finished removing the aluminum doodahs in slow motion, then shampooed the evil smelling gunk out my hair with just as much enthusiasm, Mrs. Wolfe was breezing out, thick white hair looking mighty stylish, yelling back at Paco that as much as she hated to rush there was “a crowd coming for tea,” and she had promised someone called “Ilona” to “pick up something wicked with chocolate” at Richoux next door and she was late already.

All of which would have blown my first chance to meet the departing Nina Wolfe, but fortunately there was Otto.

Almost a week later, five days and three hours to be exact, I was watching a taped episode of *Geraldo* – with panelists who looked and behaved as if they had been born with tattoos. The doorbell rang and God proved his/her indisputable existence.

My visitor was Daniel Wolfe. He had the manners to introduce himself as if he wasn’t a nationally known media celebrity, then he spoiled it by

threatening to bring a paternity suit against Otto. The culprit gazed up, looking as innocent as anyone could with bushy eyebrows and a beard trimmed like his namesake, the father of the modern German state.

Acting as though I was used to celebrities knocking at my door and accusing my dog of sating his appetites illicitly, I invited him in. I had not changed the Nicole Farhi suit worn earlier in the day while grazing at Harvey Nichols with Marlene and I was aware that Mr. Wolfe had noticed how smart I looked. Otto bustled around us, saying nothing.

I led “Mr. Wolfe” – I was trying to sound English – into the sensory deprivation tank of chintz and repro that gave the television room its cozy ambiance. I offered him a drink, having to assume the sun to be well over the yardarm, since there had been little sighting of it in several days. He declined in that wintry way the English have as if you’ve insulted them by such an offer at such a time. He also refused the invitation to sit, preferring to station himself by the fireplace, hands behind his back. He looked the perfect prat in a Ralph Lauren, tweedy sort of a way. I put the VCR on hold, arranged myself prettily in the corner of the sofa and cut to the chase

“What is this about, Mr. Wolfe?”

“Impregnated Tilly.”

“A close member of your family, I take it?”

His lips stretched, indicating a sense of humor, but nothing you could count on. “My mother’s dog. She lives on Acacia Road.”

I knew that, but didn’t let on. Anyway, I had no reason to be nervous. “What sort of dog is Tillie?”

“A West Highland, actually. Three years old. Pedigree of course, and you know how breeders feel about this sort of thing.”

Miscegenation! Thank God this hadn’t happened in Mississippi. “When did the uh ... uh ... take place?”

He studied his Gucci loafers. “She was in season three weeks ago.”

“What makes you come to me?” This was going to be fun. This already was fun. A good lawyer always knows the answer to questions before asking – I hadn’t been married to one of the best without learning something.

He performed a funny, twisting thing with his mouth, fair indication of how uncomfortable he was feeling by this time. I could tell Daniel Wolfe regretted this visit and deserved to, in my opinion. I mean, come on! What kind of middle-aged man calls on a perfect stranger about this kind of crap because his *mother* tells him to? The kind of man that I was dying to meet, so I put the critique on hold.

“Well, Ilona” – I assumed he was talking about the Ilona of the Richoux errand, I mean no one outside of Budapest knows more than one – “mother’s housekeeper, thought she saw a Schnauzer hovering around the garden in the back.”

“Not this one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, I sure am.”

“How can you be so sure?” My confidence was making Mr. Wolfe testy, which looked good on him.

I crossed one leg over the other, swinging an ankle, calling attention to my sheer black stockings and high heels. It worked.

“Because Otto’s been neutered.” Otto looked up on cue with murder in his eyes – as if to confirm the truth of what I said.

Daniel Wolfe stared back at me for a long moment then laughed, as much from relief as anything else, I suspected.

“Very clever. What a barrister you would make, Mrs. Marcus.”

“How do you know I’m not one?”

Again he laughed. “I give in, I can’t apologize enough. That hag Ilona always gets it wrong.”

I shrugged my willingness to accept his dumping on the hired help the responsibility for making him a fool. “There are other Schnauzers around the neighborhood; she could have seen one of them . . .”

“Do you know any of *their* owners?” He was all eagerness, Wolfe of Scotland Yard.

“Not well enough to ask about their sex lives.”

He took the hint and smiled. “If that drink is still on offer ...?” His eyes were dark blue, very nice against the greying hair. I wondered about Hedy’s mother.

I gave him a Scarlett O’Hara “Fie on you, sir!” smirk and sashayed over to the pretentious Georgian silver drinks tray bought at Asprey’s by Gerry in his “Marcus of the Manor” phase. “Good. You look like a whisky man to me.”

“Why, yes! I am, as a matter of fact.” He looked amazed by my cleverness, adding, “And it’s Daniel, please.”

I poured a generous measure of scotch and held up the glass. “No ice?”

“No thanks, just ‘straight up’ as you Americans say.” We both had a good chuckle over the quaintness of foreigners.

I was just debating whether or not I wanted to join him in downing warm booze, when he asked: “Didn’t I see you on the *Late Show*, talking about the latest spate of dreary American sitcoms that seem to be all over the box here?”

I paused, decided to play it straight instead of bruising him up a little over his English condescending shit about all things “American.” “Yes, that’s me.”

“God, how odd that we should meet like this.” He shook his head.

“Why?” My antennae almost burst through my blow-dry.

“Well, as you may know, I host and produce an arts show on television ...?”

“Uh, huh.” God, would he ever to get to the point?

“Well,” he was all enthusiasm now and it was becoming. “We’ve scheduled a program for this season about American situation comedy in the nineties and your name has come up. Tell me Mrs. Marcus, would you be interested in sharing an idea or two?”

I zapped off Geraldo with one hand, handing Daniel his drink with the other. “Call me Mimi ...”

Daniel left an hour later, having secured my promise to have dinner with him so that we could discuss our business further, no definite date on offer. I planned to ask Paco, who knew and told all at the mildest of provocations, what he knew about Daniel Wolfe.

For instance, what was the story on Mrs. Wolfe junior?

Chapter 4

The phone rang while I was working on an article for *The Independent* on post-modernist elements in British, Australian and American soap opera. It was my sister Beverly putting the pressure on me to attend my nephew Aaron's forthcoming *bar mitzvah* in Los Angeles. Saying I would do just that is how Rupert Thornton came back in my life.

Not that he had been in it for long. I forgot to mention that while Rosie was first putting the ring through my husband's nose, right under mine so to speak, I was not lonely. I was seated next to a bozo introduced by Caroline, during the pre-dinner drinks scrum, as Rupert Thornton. He was fleshy in that attractive way that some Englishman have, fortyish, and in serious need of a barber to trim the extravagance of hair in flight from his brow.

We shot the breeze for a few minutes, general dinner party stuff. "Where do you live?" he wanted to know, which is the English way of finding out who you are. Before I got the chance to answer, however, he roller-coastered on, saying he lived in Holland Park, a rarefied hemisphere of London. Gerry would endure having his foreskin being sewn back on without anesthetic to live in Holland Park – which is just about what it would take for that to happen if the rumors of low ethnic body count in that regal west London area are true.

Rupert babbled on about "getting away to my wife Shona's family place near Dumfries," waving his napkin at the unkempt number with terminally dry skin across the table and doing her duty by a strange little dude with a squint sitting to her right. She looked up, her glance as sharp as the tip of her nose.

I unfurled my own napkin to the intelligence that he was an "Old Etonian." The preening tone indicating that in his mind at least, this was achievement enough for any one lifetime. I felt it my egalitarian duty to let a little of the air out.

"And what did you do after you finished high school?" I asked, trying to keep an eye on my husband whose tongue was hovering in the region of Rosie's mean cleavage. Of course, Rupert's eyes were not far from the dip between the lapels of my Calvin Klein dinner suit, either.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" he roared and I mean roared. Marlene confirmed later that the sub-species to which Rupert Thornton belonged was

known as “Hooray Henrys” – upper class yobs convinced that any space is all the better for being overwhelmed by their presence and, God, was this guy out to prove it. He finally calmed down enough to splutter, “You Americans are so droll.”

“Well, they’d be flattered to hear that I’m sure, not that most Americans know what droll means, and only half those who do could use it in a sentence.”

“Christ!” His face was scarlet, hopefully from mirth as much as from the large amount of whisky he’d downed during the interminable wait to be seated for dinner. “I think American women are marvelous! Funny and beautiful! What a bloody wonderful country!”

I warned to him, but even that rise in temperature only added to what was happening across the table between Gerry and Rosie and this put all of us in danger of meltdown. Time for a new subject to cool things off.

“You know the U.S. well ... eh . . . ?”

“Go there on business, all the time and it’s Rupert,” he supplied tactfully.

“Rupert, of course.” I fluttered my eyelashes over the rim of my wine glass as apology. “What do you do?”

“Own a gallery on Bond Street, actually. I’m the sole agent for”

He named a sculptor and two painters of such status that my regard went up a notch or two – we were talking big bucks: MOMA, the Guggenheim, Jack Nicholson. I was just thinking Rupert was less of a clown than he looked and sounded when he spoiled it.

“Beat out all of those Jewish Johnnys in New York, you know. They were all after him and there was a lot of weeping around the deli that day! That lot hate to be outwitted, you know.”

I knocked my wine glass into his lap. Gerry was distracted from Rosie long enough to hiss something at me as we all watched the Cabernet spread over Rupert’s pinstriped lap. From across the table, Shona shrieked at him for being so careless. Throwing his napkin on the table, he glared at me, jumped up and went off with his hostess to be tidied up.

Rupert’s big ugly mouth gone, if not forgotten, I took up with the dullard to my left who needed nothing but grunts to punctuate his wrong-headed ruminations on the European Union. I pretended not to mind the sight of my husband returning to his devotions. Rosie started posturing about being lucky – or wonderful – enough to get into some aggressively fashionable restaurant without a reservation. Gerry blushed to say he had never been there.

“Oh you must go!” Rosie shrilled.

“Lunch, maybe,” Gerry murmured, not even bothering to sneak a peek to see whether or not Dumbelina had caught the invite.

I knew it was a done deed even then, Gerry and Rosie. I don't know how wives know, but they do. Oh, he'd messed around before and I've lived out the odd fantasy away from home, but this was the end of the line and don't ask how I knew, I just did. Maybe because nobody knew Gerry the way I did – probably still do – so I knew. I sat staring at them, my marriage gurgling down the drain. History. Dust motes. For a minute or two I felt like a victim, but victims have to go on twelve-step programs toward recovery and that's not for me – I like short-term solutions and in this case the more Draconian the raid on Gerry's wallet, the better.

Anyway, Beverly swore that my failure to attend the *bar mitzvah* “would have killed mommy and daddy!” so I gave in. I booked into first class on BA as usual – no way can I travel for twelve hours in a seat so small you'd tell the secrets of your country to escape after the first five hours.

The really difficult part was not being able to stay at my own house. We had rented it to a 20-something couple who did something or other “in the industry.” He had the charm of a python, but less dress sense; she had a butt like two handballs in an elastic sack and Rodeo Drive hair. They shared an overweening sense of self-regard that begged for three witches to fuck everything up with bad advice.

I refused to stay at Beverly and Herschel's in Sherman Oaks, a pretentious section of the San Fernando Valley full of West Los Angeles wannabees. Not surprised, Beverly suggested I stay at the Century City Hotel, where the bar mitzvah boy's assumption of the responsibilities of manhood was to be celebrated lavishly by 200 of his parent's closest friends. I consoled myself that, for the few days I was to be in L.A., I could at least catch up on old friends. Anyway, I liked Aaron, even if I could live without his bitch-in-training of a sister, Melissa.

Otto – sulking – went to Marlene and Isaac's. I called Gerry to tell him about my trip, mostly so that he would know where Otto was. I had not actually spoken to him since the turd episode so let sleeping dogs lie so to speak, leaving a message with his secretary.

Finally allowed to board my noon flight, I had almost forgotten the actual business at hand it had been so long since my arrival at the airport. I ate too many nibbles in the VIP lounge, drank two expensive and almost unrecognizable martinis and flirted with a suit who dumped me for the ding! ding! signaling the latest reading of the Dow on CNN. I bought some hand-dipped, Belgian chocolates at duty free to piss off Beverly, a high-ranking member of the food police.

We were squeezed into the plane and the usual flurry took place as hand luggage was maneuvered under seats and the odd Harrods shopping bag

stowed up above. I checked my black satin packet of goodies, given to all first class travelers as compensation for the extortionate cost of our passage, discovering a razor, a miniature jar of moisturizer suitable for a sixteen-year-old complexion, a tiny nail file, a shoe horn, surprisingly substantial eyeshades and other bits and pieces doomed for the wastebasket after several months of gathering dust at the back of a bathroom cupboard. I had stowed the freebie in my Prada bag, buckled up, opened the current copy of *Vanity Fair*, Hollywood's newest *nebbish* gracing its aggressively glossy cover, when - wham!

"I think this is my seat," a voice boomed to a steward who probably didn't care and Rupert Thornton flung himself down next to me. "Oh," he said, when he saw his companion for the next twelve hours.

"You can always change your seat."

"Why in the bloody hell should I?"

"Stay then."

"You could move."

"I could also pretend you're not here, which might work if you were very, very quiet."

He put this idea to the test for a nanosecond. "Look here," he turned toward me as well as he could within the confines of his seatbelt. "Why did you spill your wine all over me, for Christ sake? And don't bother telling me it was an accident, either"

"It wasn't and I wouldn't."

"Well bloody strange behavior, I have to say."

We were interrupted by the usual video demonstrating the correct protocol for saving your life while trapped in a plummeting fireball. The trick was in securing the lifebelt with a neat double knot, as you struggled simultaneously to place an oxygen mask over your face. If you still had a face, that is.

"No, really?" Rupert persisted.

Oh, what the hell, I thought. "Maybe you should be more careful what you say about Jews."

The bastard looked genuinely puzzled. "What are you talking about? I don't have anything against Jews ..."

"In fact, some of your best friends are Jews, I bet."

Rupert shook his head. "No, I wouldn't say that."

How to get through to this thicket? "I was being sarcastic."

"Why?"

“Because ...” I paused as the steward, identified by his British Airways name tag as Rodney Jones, turned up and languidly checked out seatbelts. I returned to educating Rupert. “You’re anti-Semitic and I’m Jewish.”

“Oh ...” Rupert slowly put the two ideas together, looking increasingly shocked. But not embarrassed, that would be a step too far. He turned and looked me up and down.

“And don’t say I don’t look Jewish.” I anticipated.

“No, no, I wasn’t going to actually,” he assured me. We set off on our dash down the runway. His face was screwed up in a parody of thoughtfulness, so I assumed some intellectual process was going on. “I suppose I just say the sort of things I hear other people saying. Know what I mean? I don’t think you should take it personally, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, because it doesn’t mean anything to us”

“Us?” My stomach jumped as BA893 hit the skies with enthusiasm.

“The English, of course. And the Scots and the Welsh for all I know. God knows what the Irish think about anything.”

“Well, it’s offensive to us.” I insisted. “And let me remind you that when my people were writing a set of laws, yours were painting themselves blue.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake!” He unbuckled his seatbelt and said, “Anyway, I apologize, is that good enough for you? I didn’t think, but I bloody will from now on that’s for fucking certain!”

He hardly looked replete with rue, nevertheless his apology seemed sincere enough. Anyway, there was something about his expression, part sheepish, part pissed off, that I found ingratiating. Altitude often gives me the emotional bends.

“Okay, I accept your apology.”

“Thank God,” he muttered.

It was time to make nice-nice. “Well?” I demanded. “Who does a girl have to fuck to get a drink around here? How’s that for droll, Rupert?”

He loved it, gasping out grunts of appreciation, helpless with hilarity – God, what an audience. He swept a hand through fair hair still in need of a trim and roared for Rodney.

“Sir?”

“Champagne?” Rupert managed through his wheezes, turning to me. “You all right with that?”

“Sure.” Who cared if I arrived in Los Angeles with a crap headache?

Rodney took the order, managing a tiny smile.

“So Mimi,” Rupert turned back to me. “Why are you going to Los Angeles, then?”

“My nephew’s *bar mitzvah* - no honestly!” I protested, laughing at the look on his face. “It’s not a setup, it’s the truth!”

“I believe you, the timing’s too exquisite not to be.” Rupert smiled, showing off good upper-class teeth in need of a flossing. “Ah good,” he murmured happily as the bubbly arrived, served with efficiency, if not enthusiasm, by Rodney.

“Why are you going to Los Angeles?” I took a first sip.

“Actually, I’m on my way to San Francisco – business. The direct flight was full.” He looked at me, rather nice brown eyes, speculative. “Will you get up to San Francisco?”

I shook my head. “No reason to.”

“Well, you could meet me there.”

“Why?” Who cared?

“Well ...?” Rupert smiled. “You did ask who a girl had to fuck around here to get a drink, didn’t you?”

Chapter 5

Dr. Kildare smiled adorably, but Dr. Gillespie looked troubled – which alerted me to problems. I asked if anything was wrong and they exchanged significant glances, so you can imagine how I felt. Then Dr. K, blond hair shimmering, opened his gorgeous mouth to explain – but the phone rang. Dr. G answered, said it was for me.

The caller was Beverly, who wanted to check on my safe arrival. “I woke you! I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry, I was watching a bunch of interior decorators on *Oprah* work miracles on twenty bucks and I nodded off.” Sitting up, I rearranged the pile of pillows behind my back. “So, *nu?* Everything ready for tomorrow?”

“Oy! Don’t ask!” Beverly moaned and went on to tell me anyway. After keening over the apparent intention of the hotel catering staff to sabotage the meal: “Crap!” and decrying the hired band’s “totally pathetic” repertoire, she got down to the heavy stuff.

“The guy who’s supposed to do the ice sculpture may be delayed in San Francisco because of some fancy wedding.”

“So hire someone else.”

“Oh, you think any Tom, Dick or Harry can sculpt the Ten Commandments out of ice?”

“Didn’t Moses do something like that in stone, how much different could it be?”

“He’s in New York; he doesn’t work the Coast.”

I thanked God Beverly hadn’t lost her sense of humor, but wasted my prayers apparently.

“Now Aaron is panicking. Melissa wants to wear what Hershel says looks like half a dress to the dinner and they had a fight.” Beverly paused and I’ve known her for long enough that I know when she’s about say something that will irritate me.

“I’m being selfish, just talking about *our* problems. How are things with you? How are you, you know, adjusting?” See what I mean?

“Relax, I’ll talk sense to Melissa.” I stonewalled, enjoying the disappointed intake of breath on the other end of the line at my tactic. What I planned was a bribe, remembering how well that worked on her mother at the same age. “And as for Aaron, so he forgets,” – there was a strangled cry, so I hurried on – “The rabbi will put him back on track.”

“I guess.” Beverly didn’t sound convinced. She tried once more to butt into my affairs. “How does it feel to be here for the first time without Gerry?”

I left her hanging, choosing to bore her with the details of my twelve-and-a-half-hour plane trip. I included my meeting with Rupert, omitting his proposition. I told her Otto was “fine,” although I left out the turd business, knowing I’d have my face rubbed in it (metaphorically, of course) forever. I brought her up to date on the doings of Marlene, whom Beverly had taken to on a recent visit to London – one which was intended to console me but had achieved almost exactly the opposite.

“So, *nu*, what are you wearing to the dinner?” I finished.

“Don’t ask,” Beverly answered and told me, of course. “My outfit looks like shit. God why did I buy it? Gray, for Christ’s sake.”

“Oh, you can’t wear gray,” I confirmed.

“I know, I know,” she whined. “It doesn’t look right for the *bar mitzvah* boy’s mother, does it?”

“But it’s perfect for the little guy’s aunt.”

“What?”

“I’m wearing my new gray Armani and we aren’t going to look like twinsies.”

“What? Are you telling me I can’t wear gray because you are?”

“What’s the problem? I thought you didn’t want to, anyway?” I was puzzled. Really.

“Because you’re the aunt and I’m the mother! What I want to wear takes precedence.”

“But you don’t want to wear gray,” I got off the bed and started pacing, getting irritated, “and I don’t have anything else! Shit, you have a closet stuffed with clothes.”

“That’s not the point!” Upset to start with, Beverly started hyperventilating – which I took as a sympathy ploy. “I should get first choice on what to wear.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my day.”

“It’s Aaron’s day.”

“Shut up!” Beverly screamed as she had done since our first childhood argument, when outwitted by logic. “Wear the fucking Armani, then! To hell with me ...”

We hammered on, working through the quarrel as Beverly and I always have when we need to clear the air. What we said over the next few minutes had nothing to do with clothes, with the *bar mitzvah* boy’s nerves, nor with recalcitrant daughters. Rather it was our way of working around tensions that could never be resolved: in this case, our differing view of how I should feel about the end of my marriage. I didn’t feel sorry enough for myself, and this left Beverly doing double time – which was hard on her.

We finally drew breath and I relented. “Tell you what. We’ll go shopping this afternoon and find you something. My treat,” I added, prodigal as ever with Gerry’s gold card.

“Why don’t we buy *you* something, then?”

She had me there, so I opted for guilt leavened by truth. “Because, one, I’ve just got off a plane after a twelve-hour flight and, two, I don’t want to.”

“Jesus Christ,” Beverly muttered. “You never change, do you?”

“Sure I do, I just don’t change in ways you like.”

“You got that one right.” I could sense her eyes rolling, as she gave in. “We’ll go to Saks and I don’t want that fuck Gerry paying for anything for me!”

“Neither does he – all the more reason.”

“Mimi you are so bad,” Beverly preached, but she was only paying lip service.

“That’s why you love me,” I told her.

“Who says?” Beverly laughed. There was a pause. “Mimi?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s time.”

“Yes, I know,” I agreed. “So don’t make me regret it by spending my visit sitting *shiva* for my dead marriage, okay?”

“I don’t even know what you mean,” Beverly sniffed, but she did.

Chapter 6

From his position of honor at the head table, the *bar mitzvah* boy stood and started his speech. It was nothing new: “Now I am a man ...”

Aaron had performed wonderfully during the morning practice. “There’s nothing to worry about, Aunt Mimi, I’m just a little nervous. Anyway,” he added, patting my arm, “if there’s any problem the rabbi will help, that’s why he’s there, right?”

Melissa was reconciled to the prospect of attending a family party in the disguise of a normal teenager by my offer of the Azzedine Alaia of her choice. This evening she elected to wear a bottle green taffeta number from Laura Ashley, a retailer still taken seriously in the U.S. Apart from the venal expression on her face, she looked quite pretty.

Her mother lit up the room – literally – in a heavily sequined number in eye-popping crimson. Beverly and her friends went in for the *piñata* effect and tonight was no exception. My own failure to glitter - we were after all in Los Angeles where even the sidewalk sparkles – did not go without comment.

“Mimi! Sweetheart! I love your dress it’s so ...so ...” I assumed Marilyn Rose, Beverly’s best friend, was searching out a euphemism for “drab” from her limited vocabulary. She was leaning across Herschel as we took our places at the head table, her surgically-lifted face moving slightly, indication she’d come up with something. “It’s so European to dress down, isn’t it?”

“Oh I don’t know.” I smiled sweetly. “I just don’t have the courage of my convictions in taking a chance on being overdressed. I wish I was as brave as you, Marilyn”

Her turquoise plumage quivered, but she took it like a champ. “Nice to see you back in town,” Marilyn had said and probably meant it, short term memory loss being an asset in this case. She turned her charms on an uncertain Herschel.

Actually, the tact quotient was high amongst my family and friends that entire day, all things considered. They dodged the subject of my new status as one avoids noticing the residual stumps on the proffered hand of a leper – greeting me cheerfully without reference to Gerry’s absence. That is, if you

excluded the elders of the clan, Aunts Rose, Veda and Celia, my late mother's distant cousins of cousins by marriage, the *mishpocheh*.

Hecate and her minions cornered me in the vestibule of the temple well before the *bar mitzvah* ceremony was scheduled to begin. Permed, corseted, traces of carmine lipstick seeping into the cracks surrounding their wizened, ever-open mouths, they gave me the benefit of their non-existent experience – Monday morning quarterbacks confident they knew how to shut the barn door.

“I told her.”

“So did I.”

“Was I ever that crazy for him?”

“You should have given him a baby.”

“All men want a son.”

“Don't I always say that?”

“You're still young.”

“You'll meet someone.”

“You expect her to believe that?”

“Rose, Vida, Celia! That's enough! Go inside and sit down.” Beverly had appeared – smart wide-brimmed hat, stunning navy pinstripe suit – to rescue me. They vanished, leaving a scent of drugstore perfume and decay. “You all right?” she wanted to know, adjusting the collar of my silk shirt to a more correct angle against the lapels of my black jacket.

“Christ, what a pain in the ass they are,” I complained. The *bar mitzvah* boy and his sullen sister entered, Herschel in tow, tugging nervously at his *yarmulke*.

Beverly linked her arm through mine, grabbed her son's navy serge sleeve, commanding: “Okay everybody, let's get this show on the road!” We marched into the temple toward a stern rabbi and grinning cantor with Rose, Vida and Celia muttering between themselves as we passed. I gave them the finger behind my back and I heard a collective intake of breath and a curse spat out in a spray of *Yiddish*.

They gave me filthy looks in triplicate as I walked past their table in the back of the room before dinner, but kept their counsel –except for Rose telling me that it was a good job considering the catastrophe to my marriage “that your parents are dead *ave shalom*.”

Now, as my thirteen-year-old nephew earnestly told us of his plans for perfecting the world, having reached the august status of know-it-all conferred on all Jewish men who complete the ancient initiation rite, I watched Celia inspecting the contents of her doggie bag – a terrific skinless lime chicken, the

ubiquitous steamed broccoli – already delivered to the table by a contemptuous waiter. Vida and Rose, meanwhile, made noisy joint claim to the flower arrangement in the middle of the table, oblivious to Beverly’s furious gesturing for them to stop. The other unfortunates assigned to their table looked mortified, as well they might.

Aaron finally spoke my favorite word of any speech, “Finally,” and got on with it, thanking his parents and his sister, pausing for a round of applause for the little people who had made everything possible. He thanked Rabbi Abrahams: “I couldn’t have got through without him” – more applause and a rabbinical smirk, “he was a real help.”

Then came the *boffo* finish. “I want to thank all my friends and family for coming today, but I really want to thank my Aunt Miriam for coming all the way from London, England, to be with us on this, one of the most important days of my life.” Aaron leaned forward slightly to make eye contact with me. “Thank you, Aunt Miriam,” he added gravely. Thunderous applause rewarded this tribute, accompanied by a delighted “Oy! What a little man!” from Uncle Sidney at Table 2.

The first chords of *Hava 'nagila* set to the sexy beat of the *lambada* (Beverly had a point about the band) boomed through the room and the party was really on. My sister leaned over and gave me a hug. “I didn’t tell him to say that, you know. He must have thought of it all on his own.”

I didn’t really believe that, but what the hell, I was still glad I’d come. And I looked the business in the Armani, I’ll tell you.

Chapter 7

The parking attendant, assessing me correctly as someone without importance in showbiz, wasted little effort in *schmoozing* me, or in coddling the brakes of my rental BMW. I stood for a second before entering Le Dome, removed my sunglasses and went temporarily sunblind; this was a forgotten pleasure. My armpits felt sticky for the first time in ages – after being in temperatures where the mercury often just swooped above freezing. I stumbled into the restaurant and Maureen Flynn rushed up, hugged me, pushed me away, looked me up and down, hugged me again, and then offered her brand of comfort.

“He’s scum, honey, you’re better off without him. Don’t worry about being lonely, you’ll get used to it and if you’re lucky, you’ll get laid occasionally. At least you will for a few more years, anyway; nobody will touch you after you turn fifty.”

Maureen and I usually met for lunch at Le Dome, the Westside joint full of charter members of the Hollywood A-list. Most of the women were ageing less than gracefully, and had fought for their skinny bodies with a regime of starvation assisted by the skillful application of the scalpel by the gods of L.A., the plastic surgeons who clogged the medical suites lining Wilshire Boulevard. The men were too tanned and had mean eyes. We loved it and always chowed down here so that we could ogle and, in Maureen’s case, do a little business.

Maureen Flynn and I had been good friends from the moment she hit me on the head with her pink plastic purse on the first ever day of school. I had refused to give up the desk she had staked out, so she tried bullying me into cooperating. I bit her leg as I went down and she knew she’d met her match.

Maureen was a grown-up bully now, useful when you run a production company supplying slick, forgettable TV movies starring slick, forgettable actors on hiatus from slick, forgettable prime-time series. She was divorced from the drunk from hell, Harold Dwybwa and had two teenage sons, Tom and Pat, both redheaded like their mother. Both also had vile tempers like hers.

Maureen had a mind as narrow as a gnat’s dick, possessed a wickedly funny tongue, was competent in a ferocious way, and had the loyalty of a wolf. I loved her - a challenge at times, let me tell you.

She refused to attend the *bar mitzvah* festivities, claiming “a problem” with “religious stuff.” Cataloguing Maureen’s “problems with stuff” was a favorite after-dinner game for her friends. Her information on most issues was gleaned from the various scabrous tabloids decorating supermarket checkout counters, which she read as voraciously as Luther read his Bible. As a rule, Maureen’s preoccupations were parochial (actors’ inflated salaries, the cancer-causing threat of sugar-free soft drinks to her digestive system) but today greater issues drew her enlightened analysis.

“Asshole calls himself a President. Shit!” she had muttered of our incumbent national leader as we were being seated. “Goddamn lazy bastards living off social security and he does diddly squat.”

“He could call out the National Guard and have all of them shot.” I gestured to the horrified waiter – a flamboyant beauty and, no doubt, an out-of-work actor – that he should return for our order. He took off like a rocket and who could blame him?

“Oh pul-eeze,” Maureen elongated the word, rolling her well-made-up eyes for emphasis. “Don’t try liberal sarcasm with me. You know I’m right.”

“Right about what?”

“About a bunch of deadbeats who sponge off people like me.”

“They aren’t all deadbeats”

“No. but they’re mostly ethnic.” The waiter approached, but hearing this, turned tail.

“Don’t start that,” I warned, but when it came to expressing her prejudices she wasn’t to be stopped.

“I don’t get it, I just don’t get it.” Maureen shook her head in pained wonder.

“What is it you don’t get?”

“Why don’t they give up on behaving the way they do?”

Jet lag made me reckless. “Does it ever occur to you that much of their antisocial behavior is symptomatic of their conflicted feelings over ethnic pride and the need to imitate the white man?” Jet lag also makes me pompous.

“That’s crazy! Why wouldn’t they want to be more like us?”

She sounded puzzled.

“Why wouldn’t they? Why wouldn’t anyone want to be more like you?”

Maureen stared at me, shrugged and waved impatiently for the waiter. “Beats the shit out of me.”

See what I mean? Anyway, tact had no place on her agenda, We ordered a celebratory bottle of California Chardonnay, decided on the grilled chicken

– after Maureen’s applying similar grilling methods on our waiter in order to determine the fat levels of everything on the menu. Maureen watched the waiter’s delicious ass cruise away.

“What a babe.”

“Isn’t he a little young for you?”

She grinned. “I can do a lot for out-of-work actors, narrows the age gap. Know what I mean?”

We caught up on gossip - friends, enemies and Maureen’s clients battling age, disease, flagging careers – punctuated by Maureen’s critical commentary on various diners around us. “Will you look at Dinah Holmes? Talk about a facelift that didn’t work! Guess she’s not ready for her close-up, Mr. DeMille.”

“They’re gay, marriage is a cover-up,” she whispered behind her hand of two famous faces, snuggling up to one another.

“Kid over there,” she indicated with her head that I should look at a stunning young man walking through the restaurant with a desiccated older man oozing influence, “Gives the best blowjob in town.”

I didn’t bother asking how she knew. Maureen avoided what she referred to in a television talk show sort of way as “committed relationships,” preferring to bribe handsome young hopefuls like our waiter into acting as her current squeeze.

The wine arrived accompanied by a meager basket of therapeutic-looking dark bread. Our waiter, ears flapping to hear Maureen’s latest revelation, poured generous portions of the Chardonnay and, in turn, we made the appropriate, lip smacking noises. He rushed off to satisfy the needs of a snake of a man waving angrily for attention. I took a slice of granary bread, my knife poised to attack a sliver of unsalted butter. Maureen shook her head. “You know how many fat grams there are in that?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

She did so, sitting back with a disapproving look on her face. I risked arterial sclerosis, a heart attack, or worse (!) cellulite, all for the sake of instant gratification and I didn’t care.

“We have to start being careful at our age. Everything’s a risk”

“Even sex?”

Maureen grinned. “Okay, okay! Let’s change the subject.” She took a sip of wine. “So *nu*? When do think you’ll be able to come back here to live?”

This was a common question, as if I’d been sent into exile. “I think I’ll stay in the UK for a while, actually.”

“You sure? You don’t need me to come stay for a while?” This offer was the supreme sacrifice: Maureen’s one trip to London, soon after our taking up residence there, had not gone well. She had liked little about the weather, shopping, food or the natives. Maureen had a problem with England.

“No.” I shook my head. “Anyway, things are looking up.” I went on to tell her (as well as the wide-eyed waiter serving our chicken) about Daniel and Rupert.

“So this Daniel guy, he could help you get a real foothold?” News of any career contact got her juices flowing. She was astonished by Rupert’s San Francisco offer. “He actually propositioned you? An Englishman actually seemed interested in sex with a grown woman? What did you say?”

“I said no.”

A forkful of salsa clattered back on Maureen’s plate. “Don’t just throw him back! At our age the sea isn’t as full as it used to be.”

“What’s this sudden preoccupation with our age?”

“Look around you,” was the answer.

I did. I looked at the toned bodies, the unlined faces, the great teeth, the smooth skin. I was in Los Angeles, where you were your looks. I said nothing, not needing to. “Well, you still seem to look just fine,” I said.

“Liposuction.”

“When?” I was shocked.

“Last month.” Maureen sat back. “Thighs and stomach. Had an eye job, too.” She thrust forward her newly tightened eyelids for me to admire, then looked me over carefully. “I could introduce you to my man.”

“What?” I had until that moment thought I looked fine and told her so.

“Okay, okay, don’t get huffy.” She shrugged. “Actually, you hair looks better than it did before you went to London and you do have a sort of different look, sort of ...”

“European?” I helped her out, pleased by the dubious compliment.

“Right, right,” she nodded. “Course, it might be nice if they designed clothes in a few real colors - don’t you get sick of monochrome?”

“No, motley was never to my taste.”

“Well, you look like an extra in an Ingmar Bergman film.” Maureen was moved to laughter by her own insults, oblivious to my covert attack on the orange and lime green patterned suit she had chosen to wear today. We’re old friends.

I divided the rest of the wine between us. “Well, anyway, I know what I’m going to do with this tired old body as soon as possible.”

“What?”

“I’m going to fuck Rupert Thornton as soon as I get back to London.”

Maureen grinned and clinked her glass with mine. “And why not?”

Chapter 8

I arrived back in London, mid-morning, to gray skies and matching faces. The meter on the black cab ticked away the family fortune while I dashed into Marlene's to deliver thank-you gifts for her dog-sitting chores, and to pick up an aloof Otto – taking him home for some quality time with his coming-home present, a low sodium, vegetarian chewy. I got the electric kettle going for a cup of instant coffee, then checked the answering machine to discover that I was the hottest ticket in town.

Daniel Wolfe had left three messages over a period of as many days. First, he needed to know if I would dine with him next week on the evening of my choice. He would call back the next day for my answer.

His encore asked that I contact him at his office ASAP to discuss my contribution to a projected program. The number was rattled off at speed, of course; the English are miserly with even the most banal information, so deciphering a phone number in this country is as challenging as checking into the President's financial affairs in the USA.

The final call expressed anxiety at my silence, then he asked if I could come to his mother's for tea, so that she could apologize for her "idiotic" suspicions over Otto.

Rupert's message was short, but marzipan-sweet to my ears. What about "noshing down" for lunch at the Savoy, then taking it from there? I was to call back (another jumble of digits), "right sharpish," because he'd been giving me a lot of thought. Wow!

Gerry's message had to do with Otto's pickup time for the following weekend, and he hoped the *bar mitzvah* had gone well – he had sent a check to Aaron, was that alright? He didn't mention anything about turds, which showed restraint. I was touched by his sending the check and liked him for this, but not long enough to make a difference.

"Well, Otto? Things are looking up and I have you to thank for some of that." Otto looked up at the sound of his name, beard decorated by gobs of chewy, then got on with the business at hand – as did his mistress.

Taking a sip of coffee, I called Daniel first, responsibly putting business before ego strokes. It took me several replays of Daniel's messages to break

the code, but finally I managed and dialed what I was reasonably sure was his office number. A bossy-boots answered after the obligatory fifty rings necessary to attract attention in Jolly Olde, then tried to put me off, also obligatory. Her poorly developed native-trained telephonic skills stood no chance against epic American techniques and with little grace she caved in. I was getting older just from the wait when Daniel got on the line, expressing delight at my resurfacing.

I explained my failure to return his calls, figuring an intimate connection with a *bar mitzvah* was a useful signal to anyone called Daniel Wolfe – takes one to know one, you know. Being English he didn't acknowledge the connection, but instead dithered on about this, that, and the state of the nation. Just as I was snoozing off, he got to the point.

“So do we combine business with pleasure? Dinner on Monday evening, next? I have lots of ideas to discuss with you.”

“Me, too, let me get my diary.” I put the phone down on the kitchen counter as if to do just that, but actually punched the air in a triumphant “Yes! Yes!” instead. I counted to three then murmured: “Hmm, looks good. Let's make that a definite.” As in you can engrave that in stone, Danny boy.

“Now about mummy's (*mummy's?*) invitation. She always has a crowd in on Sunday afternoons, sort of a hangover from all the years she and my father held court. Why don't we look for you this weekend?”

“Lovely,” I agreed. The English use that word a lot instead of “great.”

Daniel excused himself then, critical matters awaiting his attention. He would see me at Nina's ... an improvement on “at mummy's” that was for sure “... three thirty for four.” The fabulous Nina was looking forward to meeting me and I might even get to meet the just as fabulous daughter, Hedy, good fortune prevailing, of course.

He ran the address by me, we did the goodbye routine and hung up. I was too tired to look for my Buck Rogers decoding ring to decipher Rupert's telephone number, so called information instead. I asked for the number at the gallery, dialed and eventually a plummy voiced, child-woman answered, swanning off without protest to get Rupert: breeding tells. He was on the line in three beat's time.

“Hello old girl!” That took a little of the gloss off, but it's a fairly standard national form of salutation, so not to be taken personally.

“I'm returning your call. Is there a problem?”

“Oh, aren't we prim and proper? You know perfectly well why I'm calling so let's not bother about that rubbish.”

My affections for Rupert needed a kick-start, so I hung up and started counting. The phone rang on five and I picked it up, satisfied.

“What the hell was that for?”

“The same reason you called back.”

“Whatever that means,” he grumbled, but went on. “Anyway, what about lunch?”

“Cut to the chase, don’t we?”

“Yes. How about it?” Patience wasn’t a virtue in Thornton land, apparently.

How could I resist? “Is this the kind of courtship routine you learned at Eton?”

“Yes or no?” he insisted. Boy, was this guy goal-oriented.

“Yes. When?”

“Thank God, at last! I don’t have time to waste today, I’m too busy trying to make some dosh out of the Pacific Rim to waste time on chat-up lines.” I hoped his sales technique was better than his seduction routine but kept my mouth shut – after all, a girl doesn’t get invited to the Savoy every day by a semi-eligible man, right? My silence spurred him on to demand further commitment to our joint project. “This Friday at one? I’ll book the River Room.”

“Good.” I was already planning what to wear, layer by layer, from top to bottom with special attention to the bottom. I wasn’t born yesterday – his suggestion of a hotel restaurant was probably neither as coincidental nor as casual as it appeared, so best be prepared. I opened my mouth to say something pretty and encouraging, but Rupert was not one for faffing on during business hours apparently.

“Have to run, big day here. Japanese invasion. Bye for now, sweetie,” he told me and hung up.

I did the same, drained my coffee and gave matters a little thought. Did I really want to sleep with Rupert Thornton, or was I leading with my bruised ego – more flattered than lustful? Did it matter? Horny is as horny does, satisfaction an end in itself for the new woman. Was this the first day of the rest of my life? Did I really think the meaning of my life could be reduced to a Sixties junk aphorism inked in calligraphy on coffee mugs?

Sure, why not?

Chapter 9

Rupert lay back among the Savoy's linen-sheets-to-die-for, well pleased with himself, as he had every right to be. "God!" he groaned, "give me enough bangers and mash and a decent Cabernet Sauvignon and I'm up for anything and a lot of it."

He wouldn't get any argument from me about that. If this was what overpriced nursery food did for him I was beginning to see the point in that national predilection for overcooked meat and spotted dick.

When I had told Marlene about Rupert's coming on to me, she wasn't all that surprised. "Englishmen either have the finesse of a rugby player, or they're so elliptical neither one of you can be sure what he wants."

"I thought the English were more reticent. You know, more shy about sex."

"Darling, don't be silly," she scoffed. "Englishmen of Rupert Thornton's background think of women as nanny, wife or bonk. You're the latter so you don't need to be courted, just grabbed."

"Yes, but he's taking me out to a nice place for lunch; that's courtship in my book."

"Where do you want him to eat his lunch, MacDonald's?" Marlene cut in with impatience. "The Savoy's for him, not you." Listen to twice-divorced women about men. They know."

We had no sooner been seated at our table than Rupert started demanding service from personnel apparently used to his imperious ways. He seemed to know at least half the occupants of the River Room that day and did not hesitate to introduce me to each and every one as we made the royal progress to our table. I asked if he wasn't worried about being seen so publicly with a woman who wasn't his wife.

"None of their fucking business."

I know for a fact that American men are not as impervious to public censure in such circumstances. Cowering puritans, they went in for places where anonymity was ensured by poor location or lousy quality. I shared this intelligence with Rupert.

“Not enough confidence, that’s their problem.”

“I think that’s an attitude people label as ‘arrogant’ in the English, rather than ‘confident.’”

He shrugged his indifference to the opinion of others, proving a point that I, in turn, wasn’t confident enough to push. I picked up the menu and took a recee of the goodies on offer.

“Bangers and mash for me.” Rupert bothered neither looking at the menu, nor at the waiter taking his order. “Same for you?” he suggested, adding his desire for the smoked salmon as starter.

“Why not?” I sensed my arteries straining in anticipation, but comforted myself with the thought that I had little option other than to go native since the menu offered dubious opportunities for the cholesterol-conscious tourist in this fat-saturated hell. I also knew how highly the English rate a good sport and was out to make points.

“A bottle of my Cabernet,” Rupert instructed the hovering wine steward who dashed off to the cellar to crack open a case marked Thornton.

I was impressed. Gerry would have eaten his heart out over this kind of suck at the Savoy and I’d find the right moment to rub his nose in what swell new friends I hung out with – after laundering the circumstances, of course.

Rupert rambled on, talking about nothing – which is something the English do well – while I looked around. My surroundings impressed without being overbearing; another thing the English do well. Great flower arrangements, lots of heavy silverware and boisterous braying from men with pink faces and good tailoring, relaxing with one another. Dotted around the room was the self-regarding business-type woman, dressed to impress, but with a just a whiff of sex to undercut the implied threat of their presence. I was wearing a Donna Karan dress in charcoal cashmere, chunky pewter earrings and cerise La Perla undies for a touch of color – so I fit right in. A chap strutted through the room whom I thought might be Jeffrey Archer, but it was just somebody else who looked as if his face had been shaped by a duck press. I shared my mistake with Rupert.

“Writer chap?” I nodded at the well-informed graduate of one of England’s best educational institutions. “I read one of his books on a plane, once. Not bad, good story. Don’t remember it though.”

I opened my mouth to add a little bile to flavor this critique but the wine arrived. Nectar. Then the ambrosia was served and I’m here to tell you that Nate and Al’s in Beverly Hills would kill for salmon like that. The bangers and mash that followed was good, if you go for sausages and potatoes cooked to lethal effect. The sweet trolley rumbled along and, pledging an hour of

swimming at Swiss Cottage as penance, I ordered chocolate mousse, served in a cauldron-sized dish.

I didn't have to wait an hour for exercise, nor did I have to go as far or as plebeian as the baths at Swiss Cottage. What we did was go upstairs to a room my thoughtful escort had booked, then bonk our brains out for the next couple of hours. A country boy at heart, Rupert took his pleasures straight and with staying power. No whips, chains or weird positions, just a long fuck with plenty of laughs and excitement at the right moments – and plenty of those, as well.

“So?” Rupert asked. “Some other time, huh?”

I've had more daintily phrased offers, but beggars can't be choosers. Slithering out of bed, careful to show off my best angles, I headed for a shower in the green marble dream of a bathroom, calling out over my shoulder, “Sure thing. I'll give you a call.” I mean, when you have them by the balls, who gives a shit about their hearts or minds?

Chapter 10

The ancient standing in the doorway looked like the late Boris Karloff in drag, aubergine hair arranged in a scrolled pyramid of rigid curls. The look on her face was no welcome mat.

I wondered if I had the right house, then spotted Daniel waving at me from the end of the long, dark, crowded hall. He mouthed a welcome – not necessary really, for he could have whispered and still have been heard above the murmurings passing for spirited conversation from the cast of thousands milling and jostling around him: muted excitement in the English style.

The gale force wind (not unusual for this time of year) was battering at a Paco's blow dry – already fighting for freedom from the restraints of half a liter of hair spray. I maneuvered past Boris into the novelty of a properly heated house, patting at my hair as I elbowed my way toward my host and past a lot of people taking no notice of me at all.

“God, I’m glad you could make it.” Daniel took my hand, kissing a cheek still warm, metaphorically speaking, from Rupert’s more thorough attentions.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I looked around. “You didn’t tell me most of London was going to be here.”

Daniel laughed, a soothing rumble which complemented his dark, blue eyes. “Just a few of mummy’s dearest friends.” He led me through the crowd, my hand still in his.

I scanned the chattering rabble. “She must be popular, I couldn’t get this many people together if I was giving my house away.”

“She’s well-liked,” her son admitted in a manner as close as the English get to “Aw shucks.” “I doubt Mummy ever met anyone who didn’t become a friend. Hedy’s like that to some extent, at least.”

I was as curious about this qualification, as I was about Daniel’s actress daughter. “Is Hedy here?”

“Not yet, but she’ll show. Always does. Hedy would die rather than disappoint Nina.” I was pretty certain her father was just as devoted to his

old mum, but kept my suspicions to myself, snuffing an innocuous response instead.

We struggled through a large sitting room as stuffed with people as it was with heavily brocaded furniture and photographs of our hostess in chummy poses with most of the great and good of the galaxy. We were stopped repeatedly by guests clearly more interested in schmoozing my escort than acknowledging his introductions to me: “How lovely to meet you, er ... Now Daniel you did promise, do let’s get together at Groucho’s/Mezzo/Atlantic and work the idea/plan/project through.”

We reached the dining room which was hot enough to cultivate orchids. There was a table large enough to seat at least twenty with plenty of elbow room, its generous contours shrouded by a yellowing lace table cloth woven prior to at least two world wars and loaded with tea things: breathtaking china, enough silver to finance a cosmetic surgical makeover for a family of four, and the odd ton of fancy sandwiches and pastries drooling cream. Merchant Ivory territory with a whiff of Viennese *fin de siècle* excess.

Daniel gave a half-hearted “Hello again,” to a woman with a Paloma Picasso mouth, piled a plate with one billion calories and handed it to me. I nibbled on a cuke sarny, playing the culinary sport for the second time in a week by accepting his offer of a cup of lapsang souchong (no PG Tips here), knowing this smoky brew would constipate me clear into next week. I sipped away without enthusiasm, catching my breath – which I needed as my hostess cruised up with all the powerful purpose of Concorde landing.

“We know each other, don’t we?” Nina Wolfe asked in her husky voice, easily heard over the low hum of the freeloaders chowing down around her. I guessed she knew exactly who I was, and wondered how much the “knows all, tells all” queen of north London had already told her about me.

“We both go to Paco.” I answered, playing it straight.

“Of course!” She made a pass at a “silly me” *moue*, but neither of us took it seriously. Silently we admired one another’s outfits: I was in cream TKS cashmere slacks and a sweater set just purchased at Gerry’s expense for the occasion. Nina was wearing a beautifully cut gray gabardine dress, dark hose and white high heels. It worked. On her. Anyone else would have looked like Minnie Mouse on duty at a women’s prison.

Her son formally introduced us, and we chatted about my projected appearance on Daniel’s program, touching on Nina’s familiarity with the medium of my expertise. “I was a pioneer on the box, darling, I dread to think what a fool I must have made of myself in the early days!”

I didn’t protest because how the hell would I know? But the clutch of courtiers gathered about us made all the appropriate noise necessary.

“Nina you know you were splendid – ”

“Fabulous – ”

“Divine! – ”

“You were a dream darling, always, the prototype for a generation of wannabes!” a podgy chap managed through a mouthful of pastry. Nina laughed, delighted and why not?

“You know better, mummy,” Daniel added in a no-nonsense tone of voice, tinged nevertheless with adoration. He tactfully brought the conversation back to me, refreshing her memory over the canine mix-up that had brought me into her orbit in the first place. Nina smote her brow.

“I should have known that hag Ilona had it wrong!”

“Ilona?” I recognized the name, who wouldn’t?

“She fingered your Otto?” Daniel supplied, adding, “I’m afraid she can usually be counted on to get things cocked up.”

Then why had he and Nina listened to her in the first place? But then again, who was I to question the integrity of people who could do me some good? I kept *stumm*.

Nina returned to the business at hand. “My dear girl, to send over an emissary with such an accusation. If I could be embarrassed any more that I am already, I would be.”

Leaving that alone, I enquired after the well-being of the mother-to-be.

“Termination, darling ...” Nina paused to exchange a “*mwa mwa*” with a tall, imposing red-headed woman who looked like Dame Maggie Smith standing across the table, talking to a tiny, bald man with sequined pixie spectacles. She turned back to me. “My dear little Tilly is past it, I’m afraid. Some truths have to be faced, especially in view of the little mystery concerning paternity.”

“Best that way,” I nodded. “Avoids heartbreak later. Especially when you don’t even know who to sue for child support.”

While my audience split a gut over a cheap shot at a heartbroken little dog, I pondered the foot-wide umbilical cord linking this mother-son act. I know team spirit when I see it.

The captain of the hockey team linked her arm though mine instructing her deputy to go and chat with their guests. “I want to get to know the enchanting Mimi a little better.”

“Don’t blame you, so do I.” Daniel agreed which didn’t hurt, especially as I was still preening over all of this flattery –even if I had reservations about the sincerity quotient of the flatterers. He promised to be “Back in a flash,”

adding for my benefit, “If she gets on your nerves, just tell her to piss off.” Squeezing “mummy’s” shoulder to assure us he hadn’t meant what he had just said, he took his flat stomach and long legs off to work the room.

“Now my dear,” Nina’s blue eyes bored into mine, the Wolfe charm operating at full throttle. I was suckered, down for the count. “I want you to tell me everything about yourself ...”

Warmed by the Wolfe glow I babbled away, starting with my birth at Cedars of Lebanon and reaching the saga of family sacrifices necessary for the correction of my pre-adolescent overbite, when I was upstaged by, of course (!) another Wolfe.

Chapter 11

“Hello everyone!” Hedy Wolfe greeted the ranks of the mob – parting like the Red Sea at her approach. Looking divine in a clingy dark brown number, Annick Goutal Gardenia Passion filling the overheated room, she wrapped her long, lean body around her grandmother. “Told you I’d be here, darling.”

“Yes, but late as always!” Nina stroked the gleaming braid of hair hanging over Hedy’s spare shoulder to make sure we all understood how little ballast her scolding had.

“Can’t help it, truly,” Hedy pouted, picking up her cue.

“You’re still a naughty girl ...”

The divas chattered on giving their audience the benefit of the Nina-Hedy show and the gang ate it up.

“No honestly! The shooting schedule is frantic, sheer hell! I hardly had time to make the *Vogue* sitting on Friday!” Hedy complained.

“Poor darling, you must keep up your strength,” Nina cautioned this slave to stardom, who was checking the innards of a finger sandwich to make sure that the slivers of cucumber were not polluted by any fat-bearing medium. Satisfied, Hedy paid attention to another potential contaminant: me.

Dark blue Wolfe eyes were turned on me, full of suspicion; the faux-smile didn’t help. “We haven’t met yet, have we?”

“Darling this is our neighbor, Mimi Marcus ...” Nina was making a jolly job of the intro when Daniel zoomed back through the room. Father and daughter’s faces lit up like Rockefeller Center at Christmas. A tanned, Armani-ed youth with conspicuously healthy blonde hair and the regulation, wire-framed, designer spectacles followed behind Hedy’s doting dad.

“Hedy, darling!”

“Daddy!” Cucumber went flying as father and daughter went into a clinch. Blondie patiently watched the Wolfes admire one another, while loading a plate with enough sandwiches to feed an emergent African nation for a year. He nodded at me in greeting, but didn’t introduce himself so I, in turn, just grinned back without speaking.

Unravelling herself at last, Hedy looked at me, then back to her father, voice cool. “Daddy, Nins just introduced me to your ... American ... telly person.”

I could have done without the trace of distaste over my national origins. As for the “Nins,” I’m not keen on dopey family names either, come to that, and I worried whether time and acquaintance would earn *me* some sickly diminutive like “Mims.” Sure, it would be a marginal improvement over “telly person” perhaps, but not one I would warm to.

“Television is rather a tradition in our family,” Hedy patronized.

“Mine too,” I said, “We’ve been watching it for years.”

I appreciated the laugh that got from the gang – even if Hedy didn’t. We eyed each other like gladiators. Before tridents clashed, perhaps sensing trouble with that intuition for which men are famous, her papa did a potted “Who’s Who,” reassuring her I wasn’t just some icky makeup girl or props person.

On hearing my full name however, the healthy-haired blondie did a take. He waited impatiently for Daniel to draw breath, then the kid introduced himself as “Brandon Silver of William Morris.” I felt a wave of homesickness at the flat surfer tones of a native *Angeleno* as his hand shot forward, grabbing mine.

“Wow, this is exciting! I’m really glad to meet you, Mimi!”

I smiled, he was puppy-sweet, in a *Bay Watch* sort of a way. He turned to Hedy. “This lady knows more about television than anyone,” Brandon assured her. The fact that she clearly didn’t care sailed over his carefully groomed José Eberts head; he listed my achievements with as much enthusiasm as if I was paying him to do so. My companions looked as gob-smacked as I felt, which is probably why Brandon finished by telling us that his degree from UCLA (*moi, aussi*), had been in media studies and that my *New Yorker* article of some years before, *I Don’t Even Like Lucy*, is “a seminal work for anyone interested in television criticism.”

“Oh,” was the best Hedy could do by way of comment on my credentials, but from the faint furrow of the opaline brow, I guessed “seminal” was not one of her words, nor in all probability did she know which *Lucy* we were talking about. No doubt bored by hearing about me, Hedy took up a more gripping topic than ancient television – her own career prospects. “Brandon is from the William Morris Agency,” she repeated in case anyone present suffered from short-term memory loss.

“We’re talking about a lot of stuff, you know,” she added self-importantly.

“That’s nice,” I said. “Does your agent in the UK know that?”

Daniel opened his mouth but whether he had something to say or just wanted to tuck into a sandwich we never found out. Nina drew attention away from her son by smiting her brow with a dramatic cry. I wondered if repeated blows (twice in the last half hour) would bring up bruises.

“This is divine providence!” she whooped. We all stared back. “Mimi, I may call you Mimi? ...”

“No problem,” I said, feeling a “Mims” couldn’t be far off but resigned to it; besides as a star fucker from way back, I get off on being on being flattered by the famous.

“I’m writing my memoirs, you see.” A few of us standing around the table made the right noises at this announcement. Nina, looking pleased, went on. “Quite stuck about what to say about myself or about television to be honest. We just did it, if you know what I mean? I’m desperate for some expert help and according to this young man,” a general flap of the hand in Brandon’s direction brought a blush to his golden cheeks, “I could neither seek nor find better assistance.”

“Oh ... well, I ...” I looked from one to the other of the two Nina Wolfe experts at her elbow, but neither Daniel nor Hedy offered any input. Remembering the customs of the country, I cut back on showing too much enthusiasm, and, opting for a self-deprecating “dumb old me” smirk. I stumbled on.

“What I’m trying to say is that we have only just met and to be truthful, I don’t know much about anything that happened in British television before I started watching three years ago.” I gave the kind of titter that says “don’t believe me, I’m just being modest.”

So okay I was flattered (Again! Just how easy am I?), so I played into the ambivalence game like the sap I am. I had work of my own to do and sticking my snout in the overcrowded British trough would only add a whole new set of enemies to the already crowded pack. Still, Nina fascinated me and I could guess on which side of my bread it would be buttered when it came to Daniel. I’d give it a couple of days, say nice things and that would be that. Duck soup.

“Oh come on, say you will.” Daniel said, picking up his cue. Hedy just glowered, a reaction that was irresistible from where I was standing.

“I’d be delighted to help ... Nina?” She gave me a Queen Mother nod of approval at the familiarity.

“We’ll get together within the week,” Nina instructed right sharpish. The niceties were over now that she had what she wanted. Hedy didn’t look happy at our collaboration, but being shallow she probably took my self-professed ignorance of Brit-tel at face value. She let Brendon *schmooze* her into a better mood without resistance.

Daniel linked arms with me, a family trait apparently. He smelled of expensive soap, lemony and clean. “I hope this won’t interfere with our dinner plans for Monday?”

“No way,” I murmured sexily for the benefit of daddy’s girl.

Chapter 12

I was a bored five-year-old when my mother parked me in front of the mock ash console housing our brand new 17-inch Motorola to watch the first episode of the *Mickey Mouse Club* on October 3, 1955. I haven't looked away for any significant period of time since and I'm never bored as long as there's a remote control around. I don't have to do anything except watch, and if I don't like what's going on: zap. Great stuff. Simple. An improvement over real life, that's for sure.

As young Mr. Silver had confirmed, I am a player among media mavens and have the enemies to prove it. I've a reputation for trashing all those sacred cows of the Fifties and Sixties revered by my fellow pundits (pretentious Paddy Chayefsky dramas, strained variety shows with Borscht Belt comedians who sank like bloated matzoh balls after their ten minutes of fame), and, as far as I was concerned, *Father* knew fuck all. I don't have much time for all of those snappy, fresh-faced 20-something indulgences either and I've taken the heat on that one, too.

I was the first person to predict (to Jay Leno, who's jaw dropped, which is quite a sight when you consider the size of it) that the trial of O.J. Simpson would be the television event of the century: "Reality turned into show biz, the ultimate electronic experience, the medium as the message." And was I right? One of my colleagues sneered I was a post-modern careerist, and had no integrity as a critic: a little hard perhaps, but not without the spin of truth. So what if I've got a weather eye out for effect – that's what gets you where you want to be these days and at least I believe most of the crap I spout.

My area of expertise is a bit sloppy parameter-wise; I feel free to sniff around any genre, hence the ever-lengthening list of resentful *schmucks* who are proprietorial, to say the least, about the territory staked out for their snuffling around. The dissing of *Lucy* was inspired; throwing that gauntlet launched me into the big time and it was worth the flack I took from defenders of the faith – especially the telling off I got in the ladies room of Spago by some jealous harpy from *Los Angeles Magazine*.

Contacts got me into the *New Yorker* in the first place, of course. A client of Gerry's was sleeping with someone who knew someone else who was

related to someone who matters in Tina Brown's scheme of things - or did his or her hair, or did them, period. A not unusual paper trail.

I'd been a rather marginal player up until then, not taken seriously by the gang despite a couple of hot-selling books. Now it's only the best mags and broadsheets for me. My "Naked City to NYPD: Still Nine Million Stories on Those Mean Streets" in the *New York Times* was *boffo*, while my "I Could Lick Him All Over" profile of Steven Bochco in *Vanity Fair* last summer really set the cat among the pigeons, I'll tell you.

Truth is, my career really took off about the same time my marriage headed down the caca bowl.

"Not unusual," Daniel said of this last admission during dinner at Terence Conran's new place. "Happens a lot that way."

"Oh? You, too, huh?" I was fishing for some information about Mrs. Wolfe. Paco was vague about the whereabouts of Daniel's wife, Pandora, so of little help in my investigations.

"To some extent." Daniel leaned back, long fingers playing with the stem of his wineglass. God, he really was a dish. Better than Jeremy Paxman for sure. "After Pandora left -"

"Left?"

He smiled and I hate to use the word, but "ruefully" is the only way to describe his expression: bad sign. "Pandora needs her space."

"Where?" I wanted her as far away as possible.

"Tanzania."

"That's space alright."

"Oh yes," Daniel laughed, nodding his head. Other diners were pretending not to look at us; they recognized him, *natch*, but the English don't like to let on about such stuff because that would be rude. They have a bad attitude toward success, anyway, so ignoring celebrities shows they aren't impressed by fame and money. That would be Too American.

"Why Tanzania? Is she an archeologist? A buyer for the Body Shop, what?"

"She found God."

"Oh, really ..." He'd got me there. I don't understand God, the whole business, never did. Oh I went through Hebrew school and talked a good game, but the idea of a presence lurking about who runs the show in such a whimsical way as this world seems to be run is beyond me. I'm curious about sudden conversions, though - other than those brought about by seven or eight gigantic guys in trainers and baseball caps gathering around you on a

dark street: any port in a storm under such conditions. I didn't think that was Pandora Wolfe's problem, however. "Did she have a vision or something?"

"Oh in a New Age sort of a way – rather than anything messianic ..."

Whew, that was alright, then. She wasn't crazy, just ridiculous. He went on to tell me about the restless Pandora's search for meaning in her life. Being beautiful was not enough for her (oh dear): a career as one of the top models in the late Sixties was fun, but she was deeper, needed more. Pandora had always been highly spiritual and indeed, he continued, Hedy had such a side to her, albeit carefully concealed from any but her intimates. Hearing this, I wondered how so ethereal a personality as Pandora's could have been drawn to the metaphysically wafer-thin fashion world; wondered even harder how her sensitive daughter tackled the cut-and-thrust of show-biz. When you think of it though, beautiful people are so often victims of their own physiognomy and a gal's gotta do what a gal *can* do.

Experimentation with drugs had provided no answers. After the detox clinic, Pandora tried writing, but while her prose had style, an inability think up a plot line, credible or otherwise, ended in frustration. Daniel swallowed the remaining Sauvignon in his glass. "I think she was overwhelmed by the family. We don't hide our light under a bushel and her nerves were too delicate. She expected too much of herself, never gave herself credit, you know."

"Credit for what?" With Pandora's case history so far, what was left?

"Pandora had great style in decorative areas – our house was wonderful and God knows, she knew how to dress, always in *Tatler*; *Queen* – but she felt that sort of thing was too lightweight. She craved making her mark in a deeper way."

So like many lightweights Pandora looked for meaning in the big guy. "How exactly did her ... you know ... change come about?"

"What?"

"You know ... God?" These things are so hard to talk about without sounding solemn, which smacks of insincerity to any but the most gullible. Fortunately, I seemed to have lucked out there.

"He spoke to her," Daniel said, straight as straight could be.

"I see."

"No you don't. You think she's a nutter." I hung my head. "That's alright, everyone does, until they know the facts."

I continued piling crumbs into a pile on the tablecloth, saying nothing, waiting for the facts, like a good girl, tongue curled around my back teeth to keep it in its place.

“God told her she was needed in Africa, to help indigenous agrarian communities determine the demands of the market. They need to be shown methods to assure maximum crop yield, how to distribute their product. To be economically self-sufficient, in other words. Pandora feels this is the only way we can compensate Africa for the ravages of imperialism.” Had the guy been brainwashed, or what?

“How did she learn how to do all of this?”

“She read, studied, then found a group of like-minded individuals, the Emissaries to the Third World.”

“Uh huh.” Did Daniel know how well out of this he was? “How long has she been ... doing God’s work?”

“Five years.”

“She’s been gone for five years?” Hadn’t he been laid in all that time?

“Oh she comes back and forth, but we never know her schedule.” Daniel looked uncomfortable about this. Me, too, and it turned out we weren’t the only ones at odds with this idea. “Mummy doesn’t like it at all. She’s quite unsympathetic toward Pandora in this matter, to be honest.”

Which explained why Paco didn’t know what was going on. I mean, would you tell your hairdresser that your idiot daughter-in-law, whose only talents were being a glamorous pain in the ass and rearranging the furniture, had finally shot her bolt and gone to the Third World, an area as much in need of her dubious attentions as it was of blight or genocide?

“How did Hedy take it?”

“Not badly, actually. Just said that Pandora was right to find herself and that *she* would look after me.”

I smiled, counted to five. “Well, she was an adult by that time.”

“Oh yes. Her career was well underway and I think there was a part of Pandora that rather resented Hedy’s success.” He looked guilty immediately about this unguarded observation and hurried to cover his tracks in the messy way men have. “Of course she was happy for Hedy, thrilled in fact – (*Yeah, right*) –but I suppose this highlighted her dilemma all the more.”

“Right,” I agreed, starting to lose interest in the topic, now that my curiosity was satisfied. For all intents and purposes Daniel Wolfe was on the market, and that was “all ye know, all ye needed to know.”

Came a lip-smacking salmon concoction served by a pert chap in a uniform that was a post-modern take on the Mao suit. After the requisite raves, as much a part of the restaurant experience these days as two veg on the side used to be, we got down to business, i.e., my participation in the television retrospective scheduled to close the current season of *See/Hear*. I would be on

camera between a series of linked segments – clips from American television series illustrating my main point: the continuity of television as a social force in the good old U.S. of A.

“Duck soup,” I assured my host. “I get to choose the clips?”

Daniel agreed, assuring me in turn that I would be assigned a researcher to do the dirty work. He leaned back and flashed the pearlies, appraising me with a professional eye. “You’re a natural for telly, I’m told. You’ll do very well.”

He had that right.

Chapter 13

Marlene and I swam five mornings a week at the Swiss Cottage Baths. It was 8:30 one Tuesday morning and we had managed five laps. Exhausted, we settled for floating on our stomachs, arms supported by the lip of the pool, and kicking our legs in the water as part of the ongoing effort to keep our thighs within acceptable limits. As we kicked, we watched one of the regulars wearing weighted fins, flashing back and forth through the water, as if a school of sharks was after her.

“Got to admit, she looks great,” I sulked.

“Too compulsive,” Marlene shook her head. “I bet she has a high-powered job and makes people eat shit all day like candy.”

This made both of us feel better. Marlene looked down through the water at her stomach encased in brown latex and said: “Anyway, I look just as good as she does without all that work.”

“Under a foot of water maybe.”

We watched without breathing, not missing a trick as Wonder Woman hauled herself out of the pool, toned muscles rippling. She bent down to take off the weighted fins, flicked her bathing suit down over an ass of iron, then padded by us on her way to the dressing rooms. Marlene kicked furiously.

“How old do you think she is?”

“Our age.” I answered, conscientiously doing my ankle exercises.

“Her complexion’s not so hot.”

“Sun damage, a lot of Americans have that, especially California sun bunnies.”

“How do you know she’s American, never mind from California?”

I shrugged. “Cut of her jib, all that confidence. Anyway, I heard her talking to the attendant and I’d know those surfer vowels anywhere. Michelle Pfeiffer-ish.”

“Oh well,” Marlene grinned, easing back into the water to continue swimming, “if she’s married, her husband is probably fucking someone about a thousand years younger.”

That's Marlene for you. If *she* didn't exist I'd have to import Maureen.

While I waited for the dribble of change from a twenty at Panzer's Deli off St. John's Wood High Street, the well-dressed woman standing next to me smiled in recognition.

"Don't you swim at Swiss Cottage?"

"Yeah?" I took in the beautifully cut dark hair, and the equally well-tailored, tan suit. She had good legs, which looked even better in high heels and sheer hose, but her complexion wouldn't grace an Estée Lauder ad, – Marlene was right about that. "Of course," I laughed. "Sorry, I didn't recognize you with dry hair."

We both laughed too much, not sure what to say next to one another. Then she got the ball rolling the way Americans do, introduced herself as Lesley Harris, asked me to go for coffee at Richoux next door and within five minutes of being served our cappuccinos we knew just about everything but each other's bra size. It turned out that Lesley was a thoracic surgeon specializing in infant procedures, on loan to Great Ormond Street Hospital from the UCLA Medical Center: so much for being a major shit-giver. Go *figger*, as they say. She liked London a lot, but as a native of L.A. (see?), she missed the sunshine, and while comfortable in a spacious sublet in a mansion block on Abbey Road ("Just near where the Beatles recorded most of their stuff. Wow!"), she preferred her house in Brentwood.

"*We* lived in Brentwood," I was delighted. "We still own the house – or one of us will if there's any justice." I filled Lesley in on my circumstances, as we ordered a second cappuccino.

But Lesley was a TV addict, had placed me as soon as she heard my name and wondered why *I* lived in London. Now she knew. "I'm in a profession with a serious mortality rate in marriages, so I can sympathize," she said.

"You married. Ever?"

Lesley put her cup down, looked me in the eye. "No, never."

"How come? That's kind of unusual."

"I'm gay."

"Oh, well, maybe not, then. Really?" Okay, I admit it, I was surprised. Okay, okay, I was shocked and tried badly not to show it. "Oh? I see."

"See what?"

I came clean. "How should I know? I mean I know gay people but I don't know ... well ..."

Lesley laughed, helping me get my Bruno Magli out of my mouth. “Don’t know many middle-aged Jewish lesbian princesses who graduated from Beverly Hills High, huh?”

That was for sure – most of the women I know don’t have the imagination to question whether they’re straight or not. Sex is not so much a matter of identity, as a means to an end. Anyway, gay is as *treif* as you can get when the parameters of your world are defined by driving the staff at Saks crazy, planning *bar mitzvahs*, and hiring and firing interior decorators. Husbands are accessories in such a world and you fuck them because that’s part of the deal.

More to the point, here we are at the end of the twentieth century and I think I’m cool, but when a new girlfriend (you know what I mean) tells me she’s ... different ... I behave like a sitcom teen queen, circa 1956. Alright, not that bad, but still.

“Why did you tell me?” I offered lamely.

“Why shouldn’t I? At least you won’t try to fix me up, huh?”

“No, but if on the other hand you happen to know a nice doctor for *me...*”

Which broke the ice.

Chapter 14

I took one look at the engraved invitation, with its giveaway Smythson's watermark, and made a final decision on the winner of my annual *chutzpah* award. Rupert Thornton had brass balls, I'd give him that.

The Thorntons requested that I join them at dinner in celebration of Rupert's fortieth birthday – which explained one or two things, not all, by any means, about his behavior patterns – three weeks hence, if you please. Eight thirty for nine, RSVP to a name and address I didn't recognize; some swank party planner, no doubt. I wondered how Rupert had conned his Shona into inviting me – then wondered if she even knew I'd been invited.

I assumed this was not to be any old barbecue in the back yard if they had gone to the trouble and expense of bringing Smythson's into the picture. In a large and bossy hand, Rupert had scrawled across the bottom of the card: "Bring someone, but you'd better be thinking of me."

Just what do they teach them at Eton in the way of *politesse*, anyway?

I flirted (for about two seconds) with refusing, flashed on showing up dressed to kill, kitted out with all the right accessories – like Daniel Wolfe on my arm, for instance – and dashed off a reply on my equally grand note cards from Harrods.

I didn't respond *on* Rupert's *billet doux*, as it seemed bad manners to rub Shona's spear-like *schnoz* in her adulterous husband's lack of class.

I called Daniel's office to invite him to the do, got through on the fortieth ring and endured the insolence of the same silly bitch as before. Daniel and I did a little media chitchat, then flirted about what a swell time we'd had at dinner the previous Monday, lots of "so-did-I-ing" and "we must do it again soon" kind of stuff. Then I got down to business.

"Sounds wonderful, let me check my book." I actually heard pages ruffling and a grunt indicating a rude awakening to some obligation or other (What? What!). I held my breath ever so slightly, then he gave me the answer I wanted to hear.

"Good," I exhaled. "Let me give you the details."

"Why don't you tell me over lunch tomorrow?"

“Fine.” Mighty fine in fact. The man couldn’t wait to be with me: eat your heart out, Pandora. I rubbed my hands, metaphorically of course.

“Shall we meet here, a business lunch?”

Not very romantic, but needs must. I stopped rubbing my hands but I had to admit that chowing down over work was a good idea. I’d done nothing about preparing for his show and needed some sort of deadline to panic me into focus. Never mind the hormones; if my career was to charge onward and upward, it was my brain that needed the kick start, not the area down south.

“Excellent,” I agreed, pitching my voice at a businesslike level. “One?”

“Marvelous,” Daniel sounded as on track as I did. He gave me directions on how to find the Channel 4 building (duh), and told he would have his “girl get us something in for lunch.” I pictured the harpy on the phone spitting into my salad, sighed, but said nothing.

We said our goodbyes prettily. I dialed Marl immediately and we burned up the wires going through my wardrobe A-list for something to wear to the Thornton do.

“Do you want to borrow something?”

“Your stuff doesn’t fit me really.”

“You could wear something you already have, the silver lamé Calvin?”

“Too old.”

“The navy blue Jean Muir?”

“I hate myself in blue without a tan.”

“Something new?”

“Now you’re talking.”

We arranged to meet the next morning. I’d pick Marl up in a cab, and when we’d finished shopping she could bring my stuff back to her house if there was anything to bring back (Does corn grow in Kansas?). I would then just go on to my business lunch.

“I think I’ll wear the Betsy Jackson trouser suit, what do you reckon?”

“Yeah, that’ll do, why not?”

I mean, who cares what you wear to visit Channel Four?

Chapter 15

I was bowled over. Shona Thornton may not have had a clue on how to find an effective moisturizer, but, boy (!), could she throw a party. Enough flowers for a state funeral, family silver almost too heavy to lift, a string quartet during dinner, and the salmon had been “flown in from Shona’s place in Scotland.” Wow.

I was told about the salmon by an overblown tart rumored to have more than once captured the attention of our dear Prince of Wales. She was certainly his type, although it was doubtful she had used a tampon in at least a decade, if you know what I mean. Actually, she was pretty much the prototype of the fifty or so guests enjoying the Thornton hospitality – you know, those inbred lads and lassies who make those dreary party pages in *Hello!* and *Tatler*? On the other hand, there were quite a few well-turned-out folk with the gloss that comes from having serious fuck-you money. I assumed the latter to be clients of Rupert’s, and the former Shona’s intimates: definitely a “his and hers” guest list.

Daniel and I looked the full business. He wore a grey Armani number and looked as media as you can get. I had starved for a day or two and battled my way into a Jil Sander chocolate brown dinner suit with a very short skirt that brought the odd – and I mean odd – look my way. A body tan treatment from Harvey Nichols hadn’t hurt the general effect and Paco had almost OD’d on the effort he put into my hair. I flashed the solitaire Gerry had bought for me when he’d made senior partner; a five-carat wonder that he could whistle *Nessum Dorma* through his asshole ever to get back – and not even then.

Our hostess, whom I noticed had gained a kilo or two since the night we met, wore a tartan taffeta number that had seen several seasons in the Highlands, her hair arranged à la Braveheart. Her jewelry was fabulous, but needed a clean. Ditto her teeth.

We had no sooner entered the grand foyer and insinuated our way past a butler with delusions of grandeur when Shona swished up. She looked surprised to see us (which confirmed one of my suspicions and left a bad taste), but she covered up well, delivering the series of whoops and shrieks that pass for greeting by well-born gels, simultaneously summoning drinks

and other guests to amuse us. I don't think I really registered with anyone as anyone, but Daniel caused a blip.

"Isn't that the Jewish chap from television?" I heard someone with a clubby voice murmur behind us.

"Hum," someone of the same ilk agreed.

"Mother used to be on the box, good-looking but a bit flashy, foreign. To be expected, I suppose."

See what I mean?

I turned around to say something that would certainly give them a reason to dislike Jews, but club major and minor trundled off to slander one or another of the many ethnic groups which, in lieu of a competent indigenous gene pool, kept their little island afloat.

Speaking of the indigenous gene pool, Rupert put on a show that said little for the future of the upper classes. I wasn't too worried over what Daniel thought; he was a grown man, so probably put Rupert's adolescent pawing and slobbering down to some misconceived idea on the part of his host as to how one treated female guests. I was embarrassed for Shona, but she was probably used to Rupert's behavior and, anyway, no woman lets herself go as she had done unless she knows her man doesn't care, or she has so much money she doesn't have to. I mean, we are talking about a girl with her own salmon farm, aren't we?

"You look marvelous tonight," Rupert told me soon after I arrived, his face red, hair awry, breath heavy with the scent of expensive wine. "Who's the chap you're with, by the way? Haven't I seen him somewhere?"

I explained the provenance of my escort to an accompanying "hrmph," of recognition from my host, then removed the sweaty palm massaging my expensively covered *tuchas*, an acceptable foot or so up my spine. It wasn't unpleasant you understand, just tacky; this guy was supposed to be a class act and I'd seen better behavior in a gorilla cage. "He might even know more about art than you do, Rupert," I finished, with a dainty glaze of spite.

I had forgotten the arrogance that turned even an insult into a straight line. "As much darling, but not more. Not about the price, anyway," he said – which could have been true for all I knew or cared. Then, for the first time in what was to become the mantra for the evening, Rupert nuzzled my hair (was the man a freak for hair spray?) and suggested we "get together soon."

And why not? Better an eager bird in the hand than a shy one in the bush, which characterized my relationship so far with Daniel Wolfe. For one thing, there can't be much hanky-panky in a crowd and I mean crowd. Other than our first meeting, and God knows accusations of canine sexual abuse

hardly made for an intimate exchange, Daniel and I had never been alone. For example:

During the meeting in his office we discussed the format for my upcoming blockbuster appearance on *See/Hear* – with his assistant as *duenna*. Everything had been boringly on the up and up when we went to the opening of the new Chabrol a few nights later – okay, okay, it would take a deviant to be turned on by a Chabrol film – still, the fact remained that Daniel showed no indication of wanting to jump my bones, anytime, anyplace, like my other swain. We'd notched up a respectable number of outings together ever since our first dinner date, but always safely surrounded by others: Groucho's for dinner, the Damien Hirst opening, lunch at 192 after browsing through Portobello, drinks with Diana Rigg at her place – same old same old media-type stuff.

Marlene and Lesley had been as curious as I was about this chaste element in an otherwise okay relationship.

"Maybe he just needs the right moment," Lesley suggested as we all dried off after our showers at the gym. We had taken to coming to the gym together because Marl and Lesley had hit it off, thank God. Marl had been a bit nervous, at first, but Lesley assured her that like so many Jewish *men* she wasn't turned on by Jewish *women*, so things went okay after that.

"Maybe he's impotent," Marl offered. "Slip him some Viagra and see if that gets you anywhere." She turned to Lesley. "You can get some of that, can't you doc?"

"Why not?" Lesley replied, but I didn't believe her.

"He's a bit of a mommy's boy," I admitted. "Maybe he's waiting for the go-ahead from Nina. Maybe he won't put out until I've helped Nina with her book.

Neither one of them could raise much more than a snicker at this idea, so I put another into play.

"Maybe he feels disloyal to the idiot wife."

Marlene disagreed.

"No. My money's on his being afraid of how Hedy's going to take his hanging out with someone else."

"Isn't she a little old for that?" Lesley laughed.

Marlene was applying a layer of moisturizer to her face with the care of an embalmer. "They're never too old to get their fangs out of daddy, believe me."

And I should have listened, because as I said before, no one knows men like a woman who's divorced two of them.

Anyway, Shona had seated us at tables for six spread through two rooms. Daniel was as far away from my table as it was possible to be without being in Notting Hill – I suspected this was Rupert’s influence. I was breaking bread and several other rules of healthy eating with my host to my right, and, to my left, Guillermo, a handsome Italian physicist with charm to spare. He more than made up for the frosty number from north of the border across the table – who was dropping names the way Hansel and Gretel dropped breadcrumbs. I picked up that she was also an old school chum of Shona’s, which meant Rupert behaved himself – above the table at least. Making up the rest of our group was an ancient Canadian who own about ten zillion acres of snow – so felt no obligation to light up the room – and a rumped, but handsome, woman with Iris Murdoch hair who did something or other in the sciences at Oxford; she was bright and funny.

Daniel sat at the same table as Mungo and Caroline Jacks, who had given me a nervous greeting earlier, then kept out of my way. Whether their hostess put them next to Daniel out of absent-mindedness, or from that fabled sense of British mischief that gets a giggle out of embarrassing people, I don’t know.

Dinner was finally over, and we all trooped upstairs for coffee and port. The sitting room was gargantuan – Georgian, done up similarly to mine but without the pretensions. The condition of most of the furnishings harked back to their purchase several generations before my shopping spree and had a grandeur that probably featured in the wet dreams of all those *nancy* American interior decorators who bully their customers into the busy-shabby English town house look. Not a square inch of wall was left uncovered by paintings, none of the upholstery looked younger than Barbara Cartland, and convents of Irish nuns must have gone blind weaving the swathes of lace at the immense windows. Gerry would have rolled on the threadbare ocean of Persian rugs like Otto as a pup. A huddle of family photos featuring a study of our hosts in wedding togs (Rupert looking pretty much the same but slimmer, Shona radiant but almost unrecognizable, proving that if you’re married to shit for long enough you risk looking like it) dominated the top of a rosewood Steinway old enough to have had its ivories tickled by Liszt.

Rupert and his chums discussed the esoterica of decanting port – an activity valued by Englishmen of a certain class over fucking. The odd eyebrow was raised when I prettily refused, but as an American I was allowed to be a bit weird.

I soon grew restless and excusing myself to Daniel, sneaked out to take a pee. I figured I might as well have a poke around at the same time; do the old Nancy Drew.

I hit the second floor, tried a couple of doors and discovered the usual crap-fest associated with adolescent boudoirs. I remembered being told at some point during dinner that the erstwhile occupants were away at school. Eton and another toney upper class juvenile detention center had been mentioned. I didn't like hearing about Rupert's children, Piers and something or other, because listening to him babble on about their exploits on and off the playing fields fleshed them out as people and that made me feel uneasy. Don't ask.

I slunk on my way and tried a third door that turned out to be the loo so I was able to get on with the necessary. I then put my heart into snooping, climbing another flight of stairs, hitting pay dirt with a vengeance.

What got to me about Rupert and Shona's bedroom wasn't the oak armoire the size of New Zealand, nor the carved four-poster that had to have been slept in by someone *very* important. What grabbed me by the short and curlies was the length of yellowing fly-paper, thick with dead insects hanging over the embroidery-anglaise connubial pillows: I know a metaphor when I see one.

I didn't even check what books were on the night tables, what crap was in the medicine chest in their baronial mahogany trimmed bathroom – I'd seen everything I needed to see. Now I had a focus for my doubts about Rupert; these people did something that attracted bugs! What? More to the point, was I doomed to find out firsthand? I figured I knew the Thorntons as well as I needed to and pissed off back to the party.

As we drove home, I asked Daniel what he had thought about the evening.

"The usual, good food, excellent wine. Company not bad if you worked at it."

I was silent. We stopped for a red light and Daniel turned, looking at me. "Something wrong? Didn't you have a good time?"

"Yes," I said, then told him of my walkabout and my discovering the flypaper.

"Ah," Daniel drove into my driveway, turned off the ignition. "I don't know if I see that as sinister, but it's a bit bizarre." He was about to get out of the car, hand resting on the door handle, when a thought struck him. "By the way, how do you know the Thorntons? You never did tell me."

I decided the truth might be fun. "We met at a dinner party and Rupert made a pass at me. Still trying, I guess."

Daniel grinned.

"Will he succeed?"

“Not my type,” I lied, smiling.

“What is your type?”

He had to ask? Oy! Did we have a way to go!

Chapter 16

I'd like to tell you that I batted my expensively-dyed eyelashes and that Daniel got the point, but he didn't. We went in the house and instead of falling into the sack, we had more coffee and discussed my progress on the *See/Hear* segment due to be taped within the month – for its airing in the new season. The title of the program we decided should be “American Sitcom Keeps to the Plot.” Was the man without any sense of irony?

I'd decided to take the easily-proved position that American television had cracked the formula for sitcoms, one that works to the max: dream up a wacky situation; invent a group of pretty people with great hair and nothing more substantial in their lives than micro-worries; make these air-brains offbeat, without being spooky. The audiences shouldn't need to work to enjoy themselves, they just need to follow a plot with at least two strands of necessarily benign conflict, played out by actors whose personalities and/or idiosyncrasies substitute for character development.

The trick is in developing a flexible enough situation that can stand the scrutiny of several seasons, and in coming up with the one-liners that plug the gaps in facile storylines, ones through which ratings can escape. None of this has to do with satire, an uncomfortable genre because it brings reality to mind – which is bad. Having come up with a theory (I use that term in the most latitudinous sense), all I needed to do was add my own revisionist spin - a mix of wit, bile, and bullshit – a sort of a *chutzpah* salad.

The linkage for this fifty minutes or so of nonsense would be clips from former and current examples of the genre. I had Daniel helpless with laughter as I slagged off poor Lucy, sent up Saint Mary Tyler Moore, gnawed on the bones of little Beaver Cleaver and took on the heavy artillery of Mrs. Seinfeld's tiresome little boy – as well as those six musketeers with the greatest hair since Samson. As to the necessary film clips, I would compile a list of cannon fodder to be searched out and Daniel assured me that his office would “get right on it.”

Knowing the slack attitude the English have to getting “right on” to anything, I decided on backup. As the time drew nigh, so to speak, a call to Maureen to instruct some serf in *her* office to round up the usual suspects

wouldn't hurt. Truth to tell, I had a feeling about doing this program for Daniel, that it might change my life – you know the way getting a new job, or buying a new lipstick can.

Or getting on with the Nina project.

“I'll call your mother tomorrow, see when she wants to meet up about her book,” I said, walking Daniel to the door. Otto hovered, glad to rid of our visitor and anxious for his routine evening stroll.

“She'll be delighted.”

As well she should be, I felt like saying, but settled for thanking him for escorting me to the Thornton do.

“A pleasure, believe me. Good night.” He leaned down and kissed me on the lips, but it was like being embraced by a monk. I could almost hear the strains of the Gregorian chant.

I went into the TV room, Otto at my heels, to check on whether my favorite soaps, *EastEnders* and *Brookside*, had been recorded during my absence. He growled with anticipation as I secured his lead, the center of attention at last.

“Otto, what has my life come to that the highpoint of my evening is watching *Brookside*?” I wanted to know. “Is this all there is?”

Otto didn't seem to care one way or another, so I was dependent on self-pity. Well, why not? At least it's sincere.

Chapter 17

Nina Wolfe looked mighty handsome in a suede coat-dress the color of Godiva bittersweet chocolate, with mock-croc high heels to match. I wore an outfit I *thought* was special until I saw Nina's. Nor was I on top of the main offering on the menu, having not yet read one syllable of the Nina Wolfe saga. Instead, I was forced to listen to a long, *long* monologue on the fatuous comings and goings of Hedy. I was ready either to cut bait or someone's throat when Nina at last drew breath.

I jumped in. "Do you want me to look at the manuscript here, or shall I take it home?"

My collaborator stroked and fussed over Tilly, who lay on the sofa beside her – looking miserable in that snooty way the well-bred have. Then she (Nina, not Tilly) gave me the Princess Diana downward glance with the eyes; a girly bit of business found ingratiating by many, but not by me.

"We need to get on with this; Daniel said your publisher is keen on a summer publication," I said. We were wading toward the end of October and, considering the current weather conditions, "wading" was spot-on usage.

Nina's smile was fueled to give maximum heat, but hardly worth wasting on me unless there was trouble ahead. My hunch was that we were up caca creek.

Nina strolled over to the piano. I assumed the reason she was using her dainty hanky to polish a silver framed snap of guess who was to buy a little time, to find the right approach in tackling me. After a moment or two of suspense, she decided on a note of condescending exasperation; you know, the one you use to a shop assistant who wants to know whether you're buying or browsing.

"Well, darling I've only been able to put resource materials together up to now, because quite honestly there are so many other things that take up my time ..."

And so it went on, the excuses straggling in. Nina was the world's busiest woman, so involved in other people's lives that even thinking about her

own life seemed *too* selfish. The demands on a grandmother by a motherless granddaughter ...

As one busy woman to another and fed up with the excuses, I indulged myself. "Surely not motherless. Pandora is just away doing her own thing and after all, Hedy is a grown woman?"

Hedy's *bubbe* stared back at me, not amused. Even Tilly looked pissed-off. "You know about Pandora?"

"Sure, Daniel told me" I said, "boldly going" like the starship Enterprise, where most people would have had the sense to shift into reverse. "She's in Africa; she isn't dead."

"Yes, indeed." There was a lot of frost there.

I began to wonder if Pandora's mission to the Third World was more a matter of exhaustion from sparring with her mother-in-law than an endorsement of the Lord's works, but who cared? Certainly not me: I was only too happy to have Daniel's estranged wife hacking her way through the *veldt* as long as she stayed far away from here. I stepped off Nina's toes.

"Well, I'm sure Hedy has found great comfort from your support especially with all the demands and stresses of her career." Nina looked more cheerful at this sucking up, so before she could open her mouth to continue her idiocies I got down to things. "You haven't written a word, have you?"

"Not really –."

"Not at all, huh?"

"No! Oh dear!" She tried to look ashamed, but never quite made it. "I'm so embarrassed. I never have trouble making up stories and characters for my *Daphne Steele* series, but real life has bits and pieces that evade one's ability to keep to the plot, don't you agree?"

I did, which is why I like television. You make your point in twenty-odd minutes, editing out the crap that gets in the way, then splice the bits you want back together – without any sign that you have done so. I wondered if Daniel Wolfe was worth the *tsuris* I was putting up with, but I put aside that heresy, bit down on the bullet and, knowing what I wanted, settled for what I could get.

"Well, the best thing is for you to show me what you have already, and I'll help you get started."

"Bless you," Nina smiled sweetly – this tender moment shattered by her imperious summoning of the housekeeper. "Ilona! Bring those boxes on my bed in here and we'll take some coffee as well!" The volume of this command was good enough to hail a cab in a thunderstorm in New York during rush hour.

My ears still rang as Ilona *schlepped* in, hauling two bulging ancient dress boxes labelled Madame Grés. I jumped up to help her, but the grizzled retainer resisted my efforts.

“Don’t worry, she’s strong as an ox and blindingly independent,” her employer assured me.

Breathing heavily, Ilona dropped the boxes on the sofa next to me. “The rest of dese I am bringing in after de coffee water boils.” She stared at me for a long moment, shaking her head.

“Your hair?” she pointed to Paco’s creation. “You are red all-over?”

“Sorry, what?” I touched my neck, checked my arms, worried now that the shock of Nina’s revelations had brought me out in a rash.

“Ilona is interested in knowing whether you are a natural redhead,” Nina interpreted.

“Yeah, well I was as a kid Oh, never mind. No,” I admitted.

Ilona patted her pile of cerise scrolls. “I am not having to go to the hairdressing, I am keeping my own born hair.”

“Who could doubt it,” Nina agreed smoothly.

Not me, that was for sure, because I knew a piece of work when I saw one. Anyway, boredom was overcoming resentment and I was ready to get on with it and obviously there was a lot of “it” – so things had to get moving.

The big picture began to emerge as we sorted photographs old and new of friends and family. There was a black-and-white wedding portrait of a Hedy-lookalike, actually Nina, dressed in a pale, drop-dead suit circa 1940, on the arm of a handsome guy wearing a well-tailored uniform – the happy couple looking mighty pleased with themselves, as well they might. Some wonderful photos of what turned out to be Nina’s family in Berlin prior to Hitler, more of Mr. Wolfe the elder getting more and more attractive with age (the apple doesn’t fall far, etc.), and staggering numbers chronicling every stage of Hedy’s, Daniel’s and Nina’s lives, together and separately. A tall, slim woman with an anxious expression and to-die-for cheekbones, whom I took to be Pandora, featured in a shadowy way with Hedy and Daniel every once in a while. My enquiries about whether or not I was right drew the admission that this *was* the prodigal, but in tones discouraging any further probing. The accompanying narration by Nina to this trawl through family history was witty and interesting enough to form an anecdotal text. I suggested as much.

“Marvelous idea!” Nina brightened a lot, then careened onward in thrall to my “marvelous idea.” “I’d feel so much better writing that sort of autobiography, instead of just some dull chronological thing. Perhaps we can

have a tape machine running and you can jot down what I say and sort of punch it up a little?”

Ghost writer I’m not, nor have I ever wanted to be. I let her down gently. “No.”

“No.” Nina savored the refusal as if hearing the word for the first time. “No?”

“I think your voice is too distinctive for anyone else to copy convincingly.” I smarmed.

She was charmed. “Darling, what rubbish, but I love it anyway. What was I thinking of when I know how much work you must have on your plate for Daniel’s show?”

I felt the way Stalin’s minions must have felt when the option was either pleasing the boss or getting to know Siberia better than anyone should have to. I got careless out of gratitude for a largesse that Nina Wolfe had no real claim to dispense.

“Oh, I didn’t mean I wouldn’t help you get organized ...”

And that is how *Nina Wolfe, A Life on Screen*, threatened to be “as told to Miriam Marcus,” in case you were wondering.

Chapter 18

I was struggling with a taped stream of consciousness from Nina, when Lesley called from the hospital and said she had two bits of business to discuss. I pulled the plug on rambling Wolfe – all ears.

The first: did I want to go to L.A. over Christmas, i.e., for *Chanukah* – airlines are on the Christian calendar, right? Lesley had a patient whose aunt's boyfriend's golf-partner was a bigwig at British Air and could get us two tickets on first class for the cattle car tariff – but she needed to know right away.

“Absolutely! Count me in,” I said, delighted. Anyone with any sense gets out of London over Christmas, a celebration where the atmosphere is more Orwell than Dickens; yellow-gray skies and dank air, a meteorological bag of tricks labelled anticyclonic gloom – which says it all. Paco is, of course, in despair because he can do nothing with his own or anyone else's, hair at such times. Any place worth keeping open is closed.

At Christmas dinner the English wear silly paper hats they get out of Christmas crackers, tubes of cardboard with fancy wrapping that explode in your hand. The traditional meal is heavy going even by the demanding national standard and once eaten, never forgotten. The day after Christmas is known as Boxing Day, a sort of fiesta for the living dead. Anyone with any sense gets out of harm's way, then comes back lying about how much they missed spending the holidays in London.

“We'll have fun.” Lesley sounded pleased. “Besides I'm dying to meet Maureen and Beverly – for all the wrong reasons, of course.”

I laughed. “Ditto on their behalf.”

“What will you do with Otto?” Lesley was fond of Otto, who in turn worshipped her.

“No problem, Otto can go to the country with Gerry and Rosie.”

“Better them than me,” Lesley shuddered. “So cold and damp.”

“And that's just inside the house,” I added. We had a good giggle contemplating the discomforts of a British weekend in the country, a social

minefield where you risk hypothermia, have to wear ugly clothes, and put up with the even uglier judgements of your fellow guests.

Lesley had more good news. The older brother of the mother's sister, etc., etc., of another patient could get us a deal at the Bel Air Hotel, a handy connection since both our L.A. houses were tenanted. Staying with relatives was out of the question. I knew why *I* preferred an anonymous, luxurious hotel room, but wondered about Lesley.

"Oh, my brother and his family will be in Hawaii and if I stay with my mother she goes through my stuff."

Enough said. "What was the other thing you wanted to talk about?"

"Hold on a second," Lesley said. "What's the problem?" she asked of someone who had obviously come into her office.

I phased out as bits and pieces of arcane medical shit were exchanged, hitting the remote control to see what was happening on Oprah. *She* was fawning over a *grande dame* of the screen who enjoyed a remarkable state of preservation and had recently stayed overnight at the White House. Plastic Jaw had lots of real insights into the controversial First Lady – whom she felt was brilliant and accomplished but "unfeminine" for having a career other than being a helpmate to the most important man in the universe. Oprah nodded her agreement, bringing her audience to their feet. I added my bit, yelling "Bullshit" – which puzzled Lesley, who had just come back on the line.

"What is?"

I told her and Lesley said, "How can you watch that crap?"

"It's a professional obligation," I protested.

"Ditto on the 'bullshit!'" she smirked over the phone. "Anyway I have important things to do with my time."

"So sorry, Dr. Quinn." I huffed. "Anyway, what was the second thing?"

Get this: she wanted us to throw a Thanksgiving do. We had three weeks to plan. "We need to get on with the guest list though ..."

I like to cook as much as I like to shop and to be honest, whipping up little treats for Otto hadn't filled the bill. I mean, knocking yourself out for someone whose only criteria are texture and quantity cramps the creative flow – so Lesley's suggestion registered a high on my culinary enthusiasm quotient.

Now, to the uninitiated, the Thanksgiving meal may not seem like that kind of a challenge. But once you consider the regional variations, plus the revisionist impact of foodie hysteria, there are as many ways to come to grips with sweet potatoes, or stuffing a turkey as there are states in the Union, or copies of gourmet magazines as stuffed as the aforementioned turkey with advice.

Then there's the presentation issue! Do you go traditional and haul out all the best china and crystal, spending hours on putting together a tasteful autumnal centerpiece featuring a Hallmark paper turkey or go trendy minimalist with chrysanthemums floating in a nice chunk of Kosta Boda? Wow, something to dream on.

“Who do we invite?”

“How many can you serve?”

“Sit down or buffet?”

“Sit down”.

I fantasized instantly about acres of snowy linen and fresh cheeked, handsome faces eager with anticipation as I entered with the silver tray bearing the crisp-skinned fowl ... “I can seat twelve.”

“Do we know ten other people? I mean people we want to eat with?”

“No problem.” I felt confident with this plan, ready to share a great tradition with new foreign friends, etc., etc. That's me, the last of the romantics, full of heightened expectations...

A balloon waiting for the pin.

Chapter 19

I was curled up watching the troglodytes on *Ricki Lake*, attending to my fantasy Thanksgiving guest list (as much an exercise in showing off as a way to pay off old grievances) when Rupert Thornton called. That's when I made a tactical error as dumb as Richard Nixon's when he let those no-brainers break into Watergate.

Rupert had conceived the idea of spending the night at my house, a suggestion I treated with the derision it deserved. The resulting funk was not pretty, testing to the max the already wonky foundation of what passed for our relationship.

"Why not?"

"Why?" Even over the phone, I could tell he was getting red in the face.

"Don't answer questions with questions!"

"I don't have to answer your questions at all, Rupert. I'm not your wife."

"Thank God for that!"

"You got that one right," I pirouetted in return, but the smart-ass routine was boring. To be honest, I was pissed off with him more because he had interrupted my Thanksgiving planning than anything else. To be even more honest, I was a wee bit skittish about letting a man spend the night in my connubial bower. Okay, so it's hardly eyebrow-raising behavior, especially if your hubby has swanned off with someone else, but call me old-fashioned. To be very honest, I didn't want to share my very own bed with Rupert Thornton because I was still brooding over that flypaper.

"Well, I suppose we can meet at a hotel again ..."

Rupert grumbled on, while I marveled at a genetically-challenged harridan telling an attentive Ricki of her firsthand conviction that "people come down too hard" on incest. We do not chose those with whom we fall in love, it's a matter of chemistry, it's surely not the responsibility of the lovers – even if they shared the same rubber toys as toddlers in the bathtub. Anyway, they're victims, right? And we shouldn't be judgmental.

My attention was dragged back to more pressing matters by the sounds of exasperated breathing on the other end of the phone.

“Let me think about it.” Actually I’d made up my mind: I’d gone off Rupert and not just because of the flypaper. Being in his home, seeing his life in a context resembling reality had spoiled things for me. Then I wondered if what works for the goose, might have the same effect on the gander. We could *segue* from being lovers to being people who exchange Christmas cards. And I owed him for that party, right?

“Rupert, I was wondering. You’ve heard of Thanksgiving, haven’t you? The last Thursday of next month? I’ll write to Shona about this, of course. Some of us will be getting together here for dinner”

Chapter 20

Playing stooge to Nina Wolfe's top banana (Hedy) was not my idea of a constructive activity. I was getting madder and madder as I reached a second hour of waiting for her to do whatever it was she was doing – while I took phone messages for the busiest *belle* of NW8.

Not that the morning had started promisingly. Lesley had called to talk about the menu and was pissed off when I told her that I had invited the Thorntons to Thanksgiving. I had previously “fessed up” to the bed-bashing at the Savoy and the doc had plenty to say.

“You’re playing with fire. It’s as dumb as your going to his house and taking Daniel, who didn’t know what was going on. Kid’s stuff –.”

“Hardly.”

“You’re playing head games, it’s a form of denial.”

I hate Cal-babble, especially when it’s true. “No, I just want to discourage him.”

“So try telling him to fuck-off. That should work.”

“I think it’s important for his family and for him to end the relationship without any bad feelings.”

“Bullshit!” Lesley laughed like crazy then – which I deserved and knew it. I always come up with off-the-wall crap when I’m wrong, a habit picked up during my marriage because it drove Gerry crazy: he was always a sucker for a counterpunch, and bad habits die as hard as bad marriages.

We wrangled on for a while, then got down to the business at hand. We had plenty to work on: planning the menu, a baroque affair based on thumbing through the *Silver Palate* cookbook; negotiating the guest list which looked promisingly Byzantine since Lesley had invited for me a colleague, Simon, from St Mary’s, a colleague whom she was “reasonably sure” was straight – he was certainly Jewish and definitely looking; and worrying about the Thorntons having to find some common ground in a room with more Jews than they had ever encountered in their entire lives up to that point. And God knows even Harrods needs lead time ...

Meanwhile, I performed the duties of receptionist for my patron. Nina's Sonia Rykiel was ready at Harvey Nichols, the alterations a triumph: delivery, or pickup? I opted for the former as having the most potential inconvenience.

Panzer's called with its estimate for catering a dinner party scheduled for the next week, one to which I realized I was not invited. I had a paranoid flash on: (a) whether or not Daniel would be there: and (b) was he bringing a date? Did I really care? I cared, telling Panzer's the price seemed right, but there was some doubt about the date and we'd get back to them.

Someone named Otto called and asked whether or not he could count on Nina to write a preface for his new book about Nazi influences on the media. Sensing competition and keen to keep the lady's attention on more immediate projects, I blew him off, telling him I had a dog called Otto. People take it personally when you tell them that your dog has the same name, as if in a moment of diabolical prescience you had planned this petty humiliation. I added the information that Nina was "up to her ears" with Hedy's problems and thus unable to help at this time. I didn't elaborate, letting him speculate.

I thought of volunteering to write the preface to this project myself, but that seemed altogether too nervy. More to the point, the origins of how I had fallen into such a gig were too traceable for comfort.

I was just starting to get the hang of fucking up Nina's life, albeit in petty ways, when the doorbell rang. I heard Ilona lumber to the door and checked my teeth for traces of lipstick in case it was Daniel, but Hedy whooshed in, fabulous in a cream jacquard number that would set off granny's chocolate dress to perfection. Did these two talk on the phone in the morning while still in their *gatkes* just to make sure they would tone and coordinate one another?

We concealed our mutual disappointment with effort.

"Oh hi, helping Nins out today?"

"Yeah, just call me Boswell." God, my hands itched to strangle her with her own braid.

"Why?"

"Dr. Johnson?" Talk about limited.

On a whim, in full knowledge of how shallow I was, I went into star fucker mode and asked her to join us for Thanksgiving dinner. She looked a bit blank, so I explained about Thanksgiving.

"Will Daniel and gran be there?"

"Of course."

"I'm a vegetarian."

I pretended to take her seriously. “Not a problem. Plenty of dishes fit for Gandhi.” Before she asked whether or not he was one of the other guests, I added, “Please bring a date.”

“I don’t think so,” she said and laughed, so I laughed with her, although I was damned if I knew what was so funny.

The divine Mrs. W rushed in, drawn by Hedy’s voice no doubt, since work today had proved no siren song. “Darling!”

Hedy leapt to her feet and much embracing and cooing went on. Finally, Nina howled for coffee, Hedy sat down again and brought gran up to date on one or two matters.

“Mimi has asked me to Thanksgiving dinner with you and Daniel, and Brendan called. I’m off to America to do some bits and pieces on the box, good exposure.”

I wasn’t fooled by this casually stated sense of priorities. The English like to make languid, but they’re just as desperate as everyone else in their own superior way. Anyway, all actors will have – and on more than one occasion – sold their bodies and what passes for their souls for the chance to get into the big time: i.e. “the industry,” as Hollywood is referred to by the cosmopolitan residents of that one-industry town. The wannabees always know exactly which project is going begging, how much money is involved, whom they need to beat out, whose *tush* and/or other bits and pieces of the anatomy need to be kissed – depending on the predilections of the kissee, of course.

In the first surprise of the day, Nina was no more taken in than I was, and scoffed out loud. “Hedy, admit you’re thrilled darling, no one will take points away from you if you do.”

Hedy came clean. “Well, it looks good Nins, and Brandon assures me the money is wonderful. I’ll be starring in a feature length pilot episode for Fox, with the option to do thirteen episodes if we’re picked up by prime time. It’s all fairly high-concept and I play a sort of Daphne character who’s a Cambridge graduate in America searching for her father who disappeared under mysterious circumstances when she was a baby. I meet up with a streetwise sidekick, an ethnic of some sort or other ...” Hedy babbled on, Nina hanging on her every word as if nightingales were flying out of her mouth.

She finally drew breath after listing the perks William Morris has screwed from the production company backing this project. Her former representation clearly wasn’t going to get a look in from this point career-wise, but I assumed we wouldn’t be sitting *shiva* over the end of the relationship. Such is showbiz: lots of regrets, but very few debts.

Nina clapped her hands, pleased with her little chip off the old block. “Hedy darling, what an adventure! Just wait until Daniel hears. He’ll be ecstatic for you!”

Not as ecstatic as I was at the thought of Hedy hitting the road for a while, but I kept that to myself. I was about to add my heartfelt congratulations when Ilona staggered in, balancing a lacquered tray loaded with cups and coffee makings. The cups alone were worth putting up with Nina’s shit (well, some of it); ornate structures memorializing a time when ladies who lunched, downed *kaffee mit schlag* without a thought to waistline, arteries, where their husbands were, who they were with, or whether these companions were over nineteen and had buns of steel.

“Ilona dearest, Tilly’s fainting for a pee. Walk her, will you?” Nina ordered. Ilona gave her the evil eye, but went off anyway. Clare Booth Luce reputedly worried that the single greatest human shortfall by the millennium would be a lack of servants. She’d rest easier knowing Ilona, wouldn’t she?

It was my turn to account for my time.

“I heard the phone ring several times while I was getting ready. Any messages?” Nina asked, handing me my coffee.

“Oh, was I supposed to be taking messages?”

Nina thought about it. “No, I don’t suppose you were.” I could tell she didn’t really believe that but, from what I would have assumed was plentiful experience, the lady knew when to back off.

“Gran, there’s something odd here.” Hedy held up an empty plate covered by a pristine napkin. “Where are the chocky bickies?”

Yes, baby talk passes for sexy in this country, so big girls talk like little girls. Nina and I knew what she was talking about though: we’d been cheated of our midmorning sugar fix – the chocolate biscuits were missing.

“Oh, Ilona forgot them, that’s all,” Nina explained. “She forgets lots of things lately.”

“Oh dear, what a bore,” Hedy sympathized.

“Not really, I mean I don’t keep on top of things the way I used to, either. We’re getting old, darling.”

I had to hand it to Nina - I mean, would Clare Booth Luce have been as tolerant of shitty service?

Hedy didn’t look entirely happy. “Well, it’s your business I suppose, Nins, but what if she forgets something serious? You know, leaving the gas on in the kitchen or something?”

“Don’t worry Hedy.” Nina laughed, but it was my turn not to feel entirely happy about this because I was no more convinced than Hedy. I decided to keep an eye on Ilona while I was around *chez* Wolfe.

Time for the second surprise of the day. Hedy gave me the full Wolfe wattage and told me she’d love to come to Thanksgiving! “It’ll be like a rehearsal for America proper,” she said prettily.

Things were shaping up, but for what, was anyone’s guess.

“God! You are such a star fucker,” Lesley told my reflection in the mirror at Paco the next day. I was sitting behind her, having my nails done by Drusilla – soon after an evening at the Barbican. Edward Scissorhands gave an accompanying snicker to Lesley’s insult as he flicked away at her split ends.

Lesley had been sulking about Hedy being invited to Thanksgiving ever since I’d told her the news the evening before.

“You could at least have asked me first. This is my party, too, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah and you’ll cry if you want to, obviously,” I had grumbled back.

“Well, it isn’t right, I don’t even know her, do I? And when it comes to that I don’t know the Thorntons or either one of the Wolfes. I mean whose going to be there that I do know?”

“There’s your doctor from St Mary’s and Marlene.”

“And Otto, of course, how could I forget?” Lesley went on in the same whiney-sarcastic mode for the rest of the evening, stopping only to let me know just how much she: (a) hated getting to the Barbican, where we had watched the longest *King Lear* ever produced; and (b) how she hated the food at the Barbican. Luckily for me the toilets had been working, so at least I was spared being made responsible for her not being able to take a pee.

So by the time she started giving me the business in Paco, I was sick of it. “What’s wrong with being a star fucker? Anyway, I scored points with Nina”

“And Daniel, no doubt?”

“Whatever,” I shrugged carefully, not wanting to disturb Drusilla at her devotions. “I think Hedy will be an addition to the group, I’m glad she’s coming to dinner”

“Oh my God!” Paco screeched. Leslie involuntarily covered her earlobes, worried no doubt by the thought of his losing control of the scissors. A surgeon would think like that, huh?

Drusilla jumped about a mile into the air, smudging my nails in the process. We both surveyed the scarlet mess on my digit finger. “Paco, look what you made me done,” she whimpered.

Paco ignored her. “Why is Hedy Wolfe coming to your house?”

“Thanksgiving dinner,” I answered without thinking. “Lesley and I ...”

Leslie’s warning expulsion of breath came too late.

“Oh a party?” Paco seemed calm, snipping sedately at Lesley’s split ends. “Celebrating the big holiday then?”

“What big holiday?” Drusilla wanted to know, dabbing acetone around my nail, in an attempt to stall what she knew was in fact a redo, not a fix-up.

“Thanksgiving. When Americans invite people in they really care about,” Paco told her in a pained voice. Leslie and I were silent. We were being manipulated by a virtuoso – a Jewish princess *manqué* – into feeling guilty. He continued, in a pained voice. “Americans celebrate every year by having the same dinner that the first people there ate with the Indians.”

More or less, but this wasn’t the time for a lecture on historical accuracy, so Lesley and I stayed quiet. Anyway I think she was trying to kill me with a look, but even the gorgon couldn’t do it with mirrors.

“Oh.” Drusilla gave in and wiped my nail clean. “What they eat then?”

“Turkey, among other things,” Lesley told her. I opened my mouth to enlarge on the menu, but a nasty look from the doc stopped me. For a split second of rebellion, I wanted to ask why she was allowed to join in the conversation and I wasn’t, but I reasoned I’d done my bit to an extreme that would discourage further participation.

Drusilla looked disapprovingly as she applied the first layer of Kill Me Red. “I’m a vegetarian, I don’t eat nothing with feathers.”

“Whew! One less at table to worry about, then,” I wisecracked. Then I caught sight of Lesley’s face and backtracked. “What I mean ...”

Too little, too late. I was finessed.

“Shall I take that as an invitation?” Paco said, straight-faced. He gave a flourish of the blow-dryer and Lesley’s hair stood on end both literally and figuratively in the gale force wind that erupted.

Drusilla stroked the finishing layer of clear top coat on my nail. “There we are then, all fixed up now.”

For sure.

Chapter 21

I'd arranged to meet Lesley later in the afternoon at Harrods to order our Thanksgiving fixings. Marl was supposed to tag along for *kibitzing* value, but unfortunately we had a few words after lunch and parted in pissed-off mode.

She'd wanted me to meet *her* new man. They'd met three weeks before (Marl was a little vague about the circumstances and I left it at that), and she was crazy about him. Marl admitted that Dore (pronounced "Dooree" – don't ask) was a year or so younger (I did a calculation in dog years, which turned out to be a shrewd guess), but they had hit it off in every department. I took that to mean they could have a good laugh together about the state of the nation, prior to sex, good enough to make them forget the nation.

Dore's office was in Mayfair so we agreed to meet at Harry's Bar, which was fine by me. Actually, his choice of restaurant was the first and last thing that did turn out to be fine for me about Dore Brewer, aka Isadore Blomberg in another life. From the moment Dore greeted us as we entered the restaurant, I decided he was the sort of guy who deserved to have the hair tweezed from his balls by someone decidedly unfriendly.

"Hi, babe," he crooned at Marl, proffering a machine-tanned cheek for her to kiss. Marlene giggled and blushed some. People in love don't care if they make fools of themselves, so why should anyone else? They did a bit of snuggling, then Dore smoothed the sparse, gingery fluff that passed for his hair and winked at me in greeting.

"And this must be the lovely Mimi, huh?"

"Oh, let's stick with Mrs. Marcus for the first few times we meet, okay?"
Lame I know, but my timing was shot to hell by the wink.

"Don't take any notice of Mimi, she's been dying to meet you, Dore."
Marl looked at me pleadingly, so I buttoned it. Dore however, seemed as resilient to insult as the late Richard Nixon.

He shook his head. "Hey! Not a problem, Anyway, I'll still take my chances with Mimi, 'cause I don't like to think any pretty lady belongs to some other Mr." We got the big laugh, head thrown back – not so flattering

an angle when you don't have much chin. I opened my mouth to nominate him for chauvinist shit of the decade, when he winked again, adding, "I love Americans, great sense of humor."

We'd reached our table by then, thank God. I let the two lovebirds sit across the table from me, because that was as close to Dore as I intended to be. He was solicitous in that mechanical way that made you feel as if he'd been boning up from a manual on techniques for softening up the client. However, while I felt as if I was being attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes on a hot, humid afternoon, Marl took being *schmoozed* to death like someone far, far into devil worship. I averted my eyes from the most pathetic display of sexual hysteria I'd seen since high school and examined the menu, waiting for something to happen that would stem the crud. It soon did.

A waiter approached and Dore switched to self-important mode with the corollary whap! whap! treatment reserved for those who serve.

"Hey! How long are we supposed to wait? I've got a meeting in" – we all registered the ostentatiously flashed Rolex – "an hour. I don't want to lose a 50K account just because of lousy service at lunch."

We all ordered the grilled chicken with salsa, Dore deciding on an accompanying Chardonnay without even a by-your-leave. We were allowed to order our own aperitif. His acolyte obediently went along with his choice of Perrier, but I needed a vodka martini.

"A double, straight up," I told our waiter. I'm sure he understood exactly why.

"Babe?" Dore addressed Marlene. A lot of noisy business took place with the cellular phone he produced from his breast pocket. "Hope you don't mind, but my girl at the office gets jumpy if I don't check in."

Marl looked appropriately thrilled to be with such a shaker and mover. I just nodded in gratitude at the waiter for the prompt service on my martini. Dore indulged in some chatter with someone called "sweetheart" and gave some instructions about what to do about a "kraut" deal of some sort or other that required his presence urgently, but not soon enough as far as I was concerned.

The phone was put away with any number of unnecessary flourishes. Dore and Marl looked at me expectantly, so I was forced to make conversation. I took a swig of the excellent martini and opted for the safest topic I could think of.

"Dore, Marlene tells me you're in advertising?"

"Right, doll. Account exec with ..." Dore ran an acronym by me associated with the international advertising world. I fluttered my dazzlement

– which pleased Marl. He bragged on, the man of the moment, the man of the hour. “I can sell anything, Mimi, anything. I could sell pedophilia as a board game if I had to.”

I would have responded in kind had he not taken my breath away. Our food arrived, so I was able to leave that one alone. We had a lot of silly crap about the first-rate wine judged only “fair” by Dore, and we all chowed down. Dore pronounced the chicken “excellent” (so the chef could sleep easy that night), but the salsa “flat” (whoops, guess there *was* going to be some tossing and turning, then). Conversation continued.

“Marl tells me you’re in TV?”

“Sort of – .”

“Well, you are or you aren’t. Which is it?” He grinned, obviously pleased with himself.

“I write about television, mostly.”

“And besides the mostly?”

Christ, what was going on here? “Actually, I discuss it, sometimes. Panels, talk shows – .”

“Like *See/Hear*?”

Was I ever going to be allowed to finish a sentence? “Marl told you?” Marl looked furtive, which in turn made me suspicious, but I went on. “I’m going to be taping a segment in a week or two”

“For airing in March? Talking about American sitcoms?”

“You know a lot about my business”

“Any reason I shouldn’t?”

“Plenty of them.” I was getting testy.

“Getting to you, am I Mimi?” Dore grinned and it wasn’t a pretty sight.

“Why would you want to, Dore?” As if I didn’t know.

Things were going badly and Marl looked as if she was about to wet herself, when something happened that I took as yet another glaring example of the failure of God to be where he/she was supposed to be.

“Mimi, how lovely to run into you. Marlene, how are you? You look as glamorous as always,” Daniel Wolfe said, standing in front of our table. Dore looked impressed that Marl actually knew Daniel Wolfe. Marlene picked up on his reaction with that radar enjoyed by the sexually bewitched, so beamed and simpered. I just felt sick to be caught in such company.

The weedy type with Daniel wore a suit in need of a clean, and an expression in equal need of attention. I was just relieved Daniel wasn’t with some babe.

Dore jumped to his feet and started grabbing hands, introducing himself. “We were just talking about you, Daniel. *See/Hear’s* a great show, wouldn’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Daniel packed a lot of skepticism into that one word, but irony was not Dore’s strong suit. Daniel and he took the measure of one another, each no doubt feeling superior to the other.

I hated for Daniel to think I was such a dope that I lunched with wankers on purpose. Fortunately, I remembered mentioning Marl’s new romantic interest when we were last together (a fancy do at a gallery on Cork Street, where the slimy proprietors never give a sucker an even break), so hoped Daniel would properly delegate the blame where it belonged. I stood up, accepted his kiss on the cheek and the squeeze around the waist – clocking Dore’s reaction with the first sliver of pleasure I’d experienced since walking into the restaurant. “Wonderful to see you, Daniel.”

The three of us were introduced to Daniel’s companion, Nigel Campion. He was a staff writer for *The Guardian*, which explained both the suit and the expression.

“Hmm, yeah, right,” he muttered on being introduced, probably figuring us unworthy of any further attention. God knows, the guy had a point.

The *maître d* crashed our little party. “Your table is ready, Mr. Wolfe.” His urgent manner, caramelized by deference, indicated that hordes were waiting for the same trough. It was time for obedient clients to make tracks.

“We’ll have lunch together soon!” Dore threatened, promising Daniel to have “my girl call your girl.”

Daniel and Nigel stonewalled Dore so completely that a lesser sleazeball would have been embarrassed. Daniel turned to me.

“Thank you again for asking Hedy to your Thanksgiving do. It’ll make it quite a family event for the Wolfes, won’t it?” He kissed me again. “Don’t forget we have the new Bertolucci on Tuesday evening and supper afterwards with Bernardo and Clare.” He was off then, chatting with Nigel, who appeared bored by life itself.

“Whew!” Dore did an unattractive imitation of a blowfish with his cheeks. “Some friends you have, babe.”

“Dore, don’t call me babe.” I emptied the wine bottle into my glass and waved at our waiter, miming our need for another bottle. Dore looked pissed off; I neither knew nor cared whether he was bent out of shape by my taking him to task for what he had assumed was his God-given right to condescend to women, or for usurping his male prerogative in deciding when, and if, we were

getting more wine. His pale blue eyes took on a pig-mean expression, which made an impression on at least one of us at the table.

Marlene's cheeks flushed slightly as she looked from lover to friend, sorting out her loyalties; hormones won. "What Mimi means –."

"What Mimi means is her name is Mimi, not babe, sweetie or doll," I said.

"Not a problem," Dore shrugged, grinned and turned to do the business with our waiter.

I was suspicious of his caving in without punishing Marl for losing control over her friend and I was right to be. Meanwhile, glasses were filled and we continued the business of eating and making nice.

We stuck to neutral subjects: the international economic climate, the current British government and its dealings with Northern Ireland, the decline of public trust in the media, who was fucking whom these days. The atmosphere warmed up some as Dore and I realized we shared several opinions and – more importantly – several prejudices.

Marl, no one's idea of an intellectual even with her wits about her, was gob-smacked. She played with a tendril of hair on sabbatical from a Paco tended mob-cap of big hair, glossy lips parted in adoration. I wasn't that smitten, but while I still figured Dore for a pain in the ass, I admitted to myself (and only to myself – I can keep a secret) that he was no dope. For one thing, he had a terrific memory: encyclopedic in the matter of names, dates and statistics. This memory business is a character trait I envy, because I forget just about everything but hair appointments and which surgeon did whose nose. A lot of men remember stuff now that I think of it; maybe it's in the genes, that testosterone-fed desire to dominate by intellectual intimidation, which, if Marl's reaction was any indication, gets them what they want without investing in jewelry.

Then, just when I thought it was safe to go back into the water, Jaws did the business.

Dore leaned across the table and winked, a gesture which had spelled trouble in our relationship so far. "So I guess Dan and his daughter are coming to the Thanksgiving do that Marl told me about, huh?"

It took me a second to cope with the "Dan" reference, another longer moment or two to think through the appropriate punishment for my loose-lipped friend, the Lady Marl – one that wouldn't end up with my being deported. Nothing came to mind, so I settled for a stall.

"I guess, and it's 'Daniel.'"

"Now that's the last Thursday in the month, right?"

I hated where this was going, but you can't go against the flow on a one-way street. "Right."

Marl's mouth formed an agonized "Please!" at me. Oh well, what are friends for?

"Could you join us, Dore – I'm sure Daniel would love to continue your conversation." Okay, okay, so sarcasm is the cheapest form of humor, but it can be mighty satisfying.

"Let me see if I can move a few things around" – Dore had the balls to pull an electronic diary out of his pocket and pretend to do just that. He looked up smiling, grabbed Marlene's hand. "No problem, Mimi. We'll be there."

Whether he meant he and Marl, or the Royal We, was anyone's guess and I was too demoralized by this point to start up with him. I just drank some more and made the odd noise while our outing came to its protracted conclusion.

Out on the street at last, Marl and I were put into a cab by Dore, who even managed to make this courtly gesture seem tacky and contrived. We had the blow-up I mentioned earlier, as we got stuck in traffic on the way to Harrods:

"I did not make you invite him"

"The fuck you didn't! It was a setup!"

"That's a load of crap – you invited him because he'd be a great addition to the party"

"Are you crazy?! How?"

"He's got a lot of charm."

"As if!" I slumped back in my seat, furious.

"You're just worried that he won't be good enough for your friend, the fancy Lesley," Marl muttered. She took her compact out of her bag and inspected her teeth for lipstick smears.

And there you have it. I *was* worried how Lesley would react, because I cared about pleasing her a lot and knew that Dore didn't have a hope of doing that. Marlene, for her part, sensed that in the not-to-far distant future I would be a good friend rather than her best friend and that she was helpless to do anything about it. Funny isn't it, no matter how old you get it still hurts. You never outgrow the playground passions about friendship.

And you never get to be honest about it, either. "Oh don't be stupid," I said, trashing her feelings as tradition demanded in such situations.

"Thanks a lot."

“Oh you know what I mean.” I was losing patience, my reaction to feeling guilty.

“What’s wrong with Dore, anyhow?”

She knew, and I knew she knew, so what was the point? “He’s fine, there’s nothing wrong with him.”

But she wouldn’t quit. “No come on. Why don’t you like him, really?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like Dore.” I concentrated on Apsley House as we rounded Hyde Park Corner, but my heart wasn’t in it.

“But you don’t think he’s up-market enough, not enough like Daniel Wolfe.”

“You got that one right,” I sneered.

“Or Rupert Thornton and that really is a joke.”

I’ve never learned how to deal with a sucker punch and always over-react.

“Okay Marl, you want to know? Dore’s on the make and he doesn’t even have the *nous* to keep it under wraps. He’s the *echt*-sleazeball”

I was sorry the instant I said it. Marl knew Dore was a *putz*, but that didn’t stop her from wanting to fuck him and how humiliating to know that about yourself, huh?

I tried to fix things but did a sloppy job. “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out right – it isn’t what I meant.”

Marl didn’t say a word. She tapped on the glass, told the cabby to drop her off outside Harvey Nicks (a pretty good sign she wasn’t feeling all that desperate, which gave me hope) and when we got there she jumped out, pausing only to give me the evil eye.

And who could blame her?

Chapter 22

Lesley wasn't so much pissed off in hearing about Dore coming to Thanksgiving as bemused.

"Christ, this dinner is sounding more and more like a pilot for a sitcom – it's got David E. Kelley written all over it. Offbeat types from hell get together for the holiday, and if the sample audience likes it, we go for multiple plot lines and ABC after the 9:00 p.m. watershed."

She waved her ticket at the man behind the poultry counter as our number came up. They had an earnest foodie exchange about the turkey we needed: size, provenance, the projected degree of crispness possible with a low fat glaze, the advantages of slow-cooking. Then Lesley delivered the *coup de grace*, her voice sly. "My stuffing will need dried Michigan cherries, can we find them here?"

Why, the cherries? From Michigan, no less? We'd been studying the *Silver Palate*, a sort of Talmud for the foodie set. I assumed that such an off-the-wall ingredient had to do with the co-writer's opting out of New York in order to live in Michigan: a dull state, but a bonanza for mosquitoes who enjoy serial pig-outs during the short, but torrid summers.

Anyway, back to those cherries. Folks say that if you can't find it at Harrods, it doesn't exist and you know what? The guy behind the poultry counter didn't even have to think.

"Yes, of course madam ..." He told us which counter to go to, and how to get there. He went off to process our turkey order after promising delivery of the freshest of freshest gobblers down to the second.

Lesley turned to me. "Why don't you look for the cherries while I finish up here? I'll catch up."

So I went off to the right as instructed, turned through the flower section and there were Gerry, Rosie and the baby!

They didn't see me, which was fine. I kept it that way by taking cover behind a ficus plant as big as Belgium – so that I could get a look-see worth getting.

Gerry was carrying the baby – who looked kind of cute, from a distance, anyway – in one of those canvas doohickeys on daddy’s chest. He’d been working out, had trimmed up some and looked good in his Ralph Lauren Polo duds. He had a new haircut, as did Rosie: the Jemima Khan tresses were gone and she had one of those short fashionable cuts with two pieces at the front that need tucking behind the ears every other minute. She looked good, but not great.

What all three looked was happy: not an easy observation for me to digest and I fought it, but my Jewish reflex for searching out the worm in every apple was undermined in the face of the pleasure these three seemed to be taking in each other. Gerry had never looked that way with me. We had the agony and the ecstasy, but we were never content in one another’s company, at least in the way that Gerry, Rosie and baby appeared to be.

I withdrew from the embrace of the ficus, bumping into Lesley on her way to join me. I grabbed her arm, ignoring her curiosity, and frog-marched her toward the deli section. I had no interest in the deli really, it was just a place to get away from the three musketeers. Then I saw the smoked salmon.

“Are you okay?” Lesley wanted to know.

I studied a large, dead fish that could have come from Shona Thornton’s fish farm for all I knew; just the faintest chance of serving Shona her own stuff tickled me, so I grabbed a ticket and waited to place my order.

I guess I looked as done-in as the fish because Lesley tried again. “I said, are you okay?”

“I saw Gerry and Rosie and the baby. In the flower section.”

She caught her breath. “Ah. And?”

And what? I wasn’t sure. “I don’t know.”

Lesley grinned. “Fuck him.”

But the funny thing was that for the first time in ages I didn’t want to. Seeing Gerry with his family made what happened a reality to me for the first time: here was a guy out with his wife and kid (even if his grey hair made him look old enough to be baby’s grandfather and Rosie’s dad) and they had nothing to do with me. Life for me was a matter of before and after Gerry now, and I’d have to get on with things. My dopey idea that Rosie and William would vaporize somehow and things would go on as before, that I could fix the script and he’d be back by the end of this episode, was just as much of a myth as my threat to shed the roll of lard around my middle. Truth was, I’d buy a Lycra bodysuit and suck it in, while he’d stay where he was because he was happy. It was a done deal, no negotiations. He belonged to someone else, roll the credits.

I knew now that I didn't want him any more than I wanted the guy behind the deli counter, or the man with hair sprouting out of his ears standing patiently beside me as I placed my order. I guess I'd had an epiphany of some sort, right here in the food halls in Harrods; just like poor Anne Bancroft in *The Pumpkin Eater*, wandering around in her suburban duds, wearing the ugliest hat since Celia Johnson's in *Brief Encounter*.

We placed our order for the salmon, then we continued our search for the dried fruit counter. "Can I ask you something; you don't have to answer," Lesley asked.

"Why didn't Gerry and I have kids?"

Lesley smiled. "Been asked that question in the same way enough times, huh?"

I nodded. "It wasn't on purpose, it just didn't happen."

But how true was that? I had time to think about that as a fresh-faced young woman behind the counter offered her assistance and Lesley launched into the complexity of the ingredients for her turkey stuffing.

Gerry and I never made the arduous medical efforts to encourage reproduction when the usual methods fell short of the target. No well-publicized series of humiliating tests to let friends and family know we had the right priorities; that like most baby-boomers, our faith in our own superiority made it a moral obligation to add to the gene pool. Not having a baby didn't seem to matter to our relationship. We were mutually infantile enough to take up the slack – until of course, someone else was having *his* kid and he was gone like a flash.

While I was wrestling with insights, Lesley's mind was on the real stuff of life; we set off in search of the makings for our pumpkin pies. A good idea, because I figured that wherever that were, it was sure to be the best place in Harrods to avoid the *famille* Marcus.

And as for me? I'd go and spend more of Gerry's money. It wouldn't make me as happy as he seemed to be, but it was a start.

Chapter 23

Meanwhile, back at Rancho Wolfe things had become too hot for comfort, literally. Ilona had left clues to her deteriorating mental condition over a period of time long enough for her betters to have added up two and two. She made a pile in the back garden of Wolfe family mementos memorializing several generations, then treated the neighborhood to a dawn bonfire of the vanities. Nearby residents alerted the police, but it was too late: everything was gone. Apparently, God had been telling Ilona for a long time that he wanted his secrets kept secret and her responsibility as his agent against the devil here on earth – oh, we’ve heard the rest of it a million times, what’s the point of going on?

Knowing none of this when I arrived a few hours later to screw the usual macro-portion of work out of Nina, I assumed all was not kosher when the door was answered by Hedy. Then Daniel poked his head out of the sitting room and shushed me with a finger as he hurried down the hall.

“Something terrible has happened,” he murmured, taking my arm. “Mummy is distraught.”

“It’s Ilona,” Hedy hissed.

“Dreadful business.” Daniel shook his head.

“What’s happened?” The hallway was – as usual – a mecca for draughts, so I edged my way toward the warmth of the sitting room, but both Daniel and Hedy steered me instead toward the dining room. By her grip, I deduced Hedy had been pumping iron. “What’s going on?” I demanded.

“Daddy’s right. It’s awful.” Hedy shuddered, but kept the gesture to the minimum, ensuring the maximum effect. It *might* even have been genuine – with an actress, go figure.

Daniel put his hands on my shoulders. “You’d better sit down, Mimi.”

“Daddy’s right you’d better be prepared, you’re in for a shock.” Hedy didn’t look all that distraught at the idea of dealing me a crushing blow, but who knows? We all march to our own drummer in a crisis, right?

I sat down at the dining table, Daniel and Hedy opposite me, Daniel's hands on mine. Hedy clocked this, forgetting Ilona for long enough to give me a displeased look.

"Where to begin?" he wondered.

"Start with the bucket of water last summer, Daddy," Hedy suggested, rearranging the olive green cowl collar of her sweater dress around a neck as long as that of the late, lamented Audrey Hepburn.

"Yes, but it goes back farther than that ..."

"But that's when it started to escalate though." Hedy sounded testy.

"I suppose so ..."

Running out of patience I interrupted. "What 'it' are we talking about here?"

"Ilona has been indulging in increasingly irrational behavior for several months now," Daniel began again. Hedy opened her mouth, but he held up his hand and she remained silent for the moment. He went on. "At first, we saw harmless bits and pieces, more an old woman's forgetfulness - ."

"Bedsprad pulled up, but the bed left unmade," Hedy jumped in, her nerves overriding Daniel's injunction to silence. "Teapots full of hot water without any tea, different color shoes, shutting gran out of the house, sudden rages at delivery men, an insistence on dyeing her hair that odd color, forgetting who people were, you know the sort of thing. Empty biscuit plates," she reminded me.

Daniel gave it another try. "Yes, even that paranoid business with putting the blame on Otto for Tilly's problem." I didn't remind him that *he* had been willing to come into the house of a stranger and make paranoid accusations based on the word of a person already under suspicion as gaga. I could see he was upset and besides, I still had high hopes. High-ish, anyway. I remained silent as he continued Monday morning quarterbacking. "The problem was that interspersed with the little things, bigger things began to happen. The nasty business with Claudia Cohen-Schlossberg next door, for example. Poor woman was just taking a bit of sun in the back garden, wearing a bikini, and Ilona turns a garden hose full blast on her - ."

"Calling her a slut and a defiler of God's laws," Hedy read the line well. "Gave her a terrible scare, to say nothing of the awful welts from the water."

"Thank God, she was reasonable about it. Something should have been done then, but mummy wouldn't hear of it." He shook his head and repeated, "We should have done something. Now that Ilona's gone - ."

"She's dead?" I gasped.

"No, just ill, very ill."

“What kind of ill? Physically, mentally?”

“You need to hear what happened.” He took a deep breath. “It involves Nina’s memoirs.”

“What’s happened?” I was getting fed up with this “it” crap.

The Wolfes exchanged glances. Daniel took my hand and told me of the events of earlier in the day – with minor prompting from Hedy. In addition to photographs, letters, baby shoes and just about anything else that would remind the world the Wolfes existed, Ilona had also burned the notes we had put together so far for Nina’s memoirs!

“Oh my God!” I was gob-smacked. “Is Nina okay?”

“She was magnificent, coped wonderfully. Mummy’s resting now, but I know she’ll want to see you,” Daniel assured me.

“And Ilona?”

Hedy took over the story. “Nins called an ambulance; Ilona was raving. We called our doctor and he’s going to bring in a consultant to see what can be done.”

“We’ll look after her, of course. See that she gets the care necessary to her recovery.” Daniel added.

“She’s in a bad way,” Hedy sighed.

We were all silent for a moment or two, mulling over gloomy scenarios involving recovery rates for geriatrics as far gone as this former retainer. Daniel returned to the subject that had launched the Ilona saga. “Anyway, she destroyed that splendid cache of photographs and letters amongst other things, so mummy can hardly go on with her memoirs, can she? I mean the photographs and letters were slotted to make up the bulk of text, weren’t they? A wonderful idea brought to naught by unforeseen circumstances, I fear.”

“Oh, right.” The pre-dawn darkness began to lift.

“I know how much you were enjoying working with mummy on this project – .”

“Oh, right.” The chill wind turned warmer.

“I’m afraid it’s all over.”

“Oh, right.” Talk about silver linings.

To be honest, as I saw it, Ilona had got me off the hook.

This could be seen as a bit on the self-interested side, I realized, but sometimes you can’t help your own nature, can you? Daniel and Hedy seemed to be waiting for something more than my thus far rather muted reaction. I decided to play it straight-ish.

“Well, I’m sorry about Nina’s book, but I have plenty of my own work to do and mostly for your show, as you know, Daniel. Maybe Nina needs to start another Daphne Steele, to get her mind off the disappointment.”

“Good thinking,” Daniel said, with as much admiration as if I had just discovered the wheel. “We’ll suggest that as soon as it seems appropriate.” He returned to looking glum as he continued. “The real problem is more immediate. Who’s going to look after mummy? She hasn’t taken it in about Ilona, really.”

“That’s because she’s afraid with Ilona gone, she’ll be next,” I said.

Both Wolfes stared at me as if I was not stating the obvious, which encouraged me to continue. “As long as Nina could kid herself that Ilona was okay, not getting old, then she was okay. In her own way, she protected Ilona and that made her feel in control of her life, but without Ilona she’s just another old woman whose family doesn’t know what to do with her.”

Father and daughter looked scandalized. Hedy jumped to her feet. “That isn’t true, we don’t feel that way at all.”

“God no!” Daniel protested. “Of course not!”

“I’m not talking about how you feel, I’m talking about how Nina thinks you feel.”

That shut them up, so I went on. “When my mother died, my sister and I tried to get my father to move in with one of us. He wouldn’t though, insisted on staying on in the old house. That way he was still Herman Rosen, not just Beverly and Mimi’s father, an old guy in the way.” The Wolfes stared at me. I sighed and explained. “Don’t you see, that isn’t the way *we* thought, that was the way – .”

“He thought you thought?” Hedy asked.

Daniel’s excuse for being obtuse was not so easily excused, but he redeemed himself slightly.

“Mummy could never be anything but a tower of strength to us all. We couldn’t bear to think of her as old or weak. We’re talking about Nina Wolfe, not someone ordinary.”

Whose mother is? I wanted to ask. The truth was that, like the rest of us, Daniel Wolfe didn’t want to cope with the untidy responsibilities attendant on the care and feeding (maybe even literally - oy!) of an aged parent. Face it, if there’s a set of circumstances that gives us a clue to our own mortality, these are the circumstances: watching your mom dribble lunch down her Mickey Mouse bib. And it doesn’t get better, either.

Common sense came from an unusual source. “I can’t see gran moving, can either of you? We need to find someone who will live with her, someone who will take Ilona’s place, someone she’s comfortable with.” Hedy told us.

Daniel sounded tired. “Yes, but who? She’s known Ilona most of her life, you can’t just create family retainers out of whole cloth.” You see, Clare Booth Luce was right, wasn’t she?

Hedy sat down again, putting her hands on his, after not so subtly removing mine. “Don’t worry daddy, we’ll manage. We have to pull together as a family.” I felt as if I was watching an episode of the *X Files*! An alien from the Planet Showbiz, incapable of thought or feelings as we know them, was transformed by adversity into a real person. She turned to me.

“What did you do? About your father, I mean?”

What indeed? Well there were several blazing family rows with lots of tears and for a few weeks daddy refused to speak to Beverly or me; he had never bothered much with Herschel and actively disliked Gerry, so they hadn’t been seriously affected except by the fraught domestic atmosphere of both households while things got sorted. Finally we found daddy a terrific housekeeper, a diminutive Bolivian, Juanita, whose surly silences suited Herman just fine. We signed him up soon after for the Friendship Group at Temple Beth El, where he met the divorcée from Hell, Mrs. Klein ... but that had nothing to do with the Wolfe problem. I spoke only of the wonders of the former, not the evil doings of the latter to Daniel and Hedy.

Father and daughter seemed eased by this happy ending and I was feeling like a regular Ann Landers when things got screwed up.

“I could move in while things got settled,” Hedy volunteered.

Daniel shook his head. “No, darling, have you forgotten? You’re off to America. I think it’s best I move in for a while. Mummy will like that.”

I didn’t, however. Hard to court a fellow when his mum is hanging around and God knows, Nina had been possessive enough up until now – but the leash would be tightened like crazy if sonny moved into his old room. She’d never let him go and Daniel needed to be warned, tactfully.

“Bad idea, really poor, Daniel. You’ll never get out of this house that way.”

Hedy smiled at me, looking happy for the first time since she had opened the door to me, ten minutes earlier. “Would that be so awful?” She turned to her father. “You could get a good housekeeper to look after you both.”

I mentally reneged on all the nice things I had been thinking about Hedy and wondered who I knew in Hollywood who could put the kibosh on her

career. I looked from father to daughter and tried again, even though I knew I was at least ninety yards from the end zone and facing a tight defense.

“Daniel, having you here will be an insurance policy for your mother. As long as you stay, Nina will know she doesn’t have to move from her home and be sent to one of those miserable residences for senior citizens – with monthly visits from relatives who don’t talk to her, but about her, to the nurses.”

Both looked horrified, but I wasn’t going to let this go easily. I had an investment here and so far the dividends had sucked, but I was optimistic enough to try for a salvage job. “I think we have to move fast. I’ll help you find just the right person,” I offered.

Hedy got to her feet. “We can find such a person on our own. After all, Nina’s our responsibility, don’t you think, Mimi?”

I did, but had little confidence in their mutual ability to cope sensibly with this crisis; being a busybody and a competent one at that, I felt compelled to stick my snout in. I needed to be politic however, because Hedy and Daniel were in shock; being called upon to extend yourself for someone else when character and experience made you a stranger to such demands was a rough deal. Anyway, I had a few tricks up my sleeve for Ms. Hedy.

“I just want to help, Hedy.” I drooled reproachfully, then turned to Daniel. “I’m very fond of Nina and I can imagine how shocked and frightened she must have been over Ilona’s breakdown.”

Daniel practically vaulted the dining table to comfort me.

“Oh Mimi! Don’t misunderstand Hedy, please.” I hadn’t, but let it go as a reward for his sincerity. “I know how fond you are of mummy and it’s mutual, believe me. Anyway, we need any help we can get in this crisis, don’t we darling?” he asked his sullen daughter.

“Um, yes. Right.”

Daniel stood. “Why don’t we take you to see mummy? You can tell her about your Daphne Steele idea and Hedy and I can tell her about plans for me to move in. That might help take her mind off poor Ilona, don’t you think?”

Yep, I certainly did. So long Ilona, don’t hurry back.

Chapter 24

Nina Wolfe looked as elegant as ever in a draped cashmere number in taupe, a shade suitable to the poignant, rather than the tragic dimensions of the collapse of her household. Stretched out on the sofa, one arm arranged over her head, the pale, grayish-yellow afternoon light of the approaching English winter hit just the right note. The voice, asking about any news we had of Ilona, was neither as smoky nor as resonant as usual, however: for the first time since we'd met, Nina sounded like the old woman she was. Without waiting for the answer, stroking an agitated Tilly, huddled next to her, Nina reminisced.

"Ilona came to my mother's house in Berlin, when she was sixteen. I was twelve. I don't remember the details, but one of our relatives in Budapest found her the position. She was a Catholic, of course, which made her coming with us such a loyal gesture when daddy moved us all to England in 1935." Nina sighed. "She had picked up German fairly well over the years, but English exhausted her and she never really got to grips with it. She never really got the hang of the way things were here, anyway."

"I know the feeling," I couldn't resist.

Nina paid my interruption as little attention as it deserved. "Her accent marked her as an outsider, which is the worst thing you can be with island people. It's impossible to be accepted by the English, anyway, foreign accent or not."

"Was it as difficult for you?" I asked.

Nina shook her head. "In some ways. Oh, I worked at it, but I still have a manner of sorts that tips them off to the fact that I'm not one of them. The thing is, you can live in England happily enough, but it can't feel like home unless you were born here. That gets tiresome."

I didn't actually care what the British thought of me – I spent so little time with any of them that it wasn't an issue. On the other hand, I had *chosen* to live in another country and was still welcome in my homeland (as long as there was a buck in my pocket, that is), and I didn't need to ingratiate myself as a refugee might.

Nina covered her eyes, the voice wobbly as she went on. "Ilona was the last link you know, I'm on my own now."

Glances flashed between Daniel and Hedy, while I tried not to look smug. They both made silly little noises, which I'm sure they meant to be soothing.

"Don't say that mummy, you have us," Daniel said, sitting across from her and leaning forward to take her hands.

"Yes gran, we're here to look after you," Hedy started pacing.

Nina opened her eyes, smiled. "I know darlings, but that's what I'm getting at. Ilona and I were two old women together, now I'm just one old woman on my own and you'll all start worrying about what is to be done about me."

I couldn't have said it better myself. The air of guilt in the room added to the general gloom as the English winter evening fell with its usual thud. Daniel and Hedy fussed around, flicking on lamps and chattering nervously – a poorly conceived and ill-executed cover-up for Nina's having struck pay dirt.

"Oh, sorry mummy, didn't mean to let it get this dark in here ..."

"Need more tea, gran ...?"

"Something stronger ...?"

"A snack? You must keep your strength up ..."

"Actually," Daniel began, with that clearing of the throat that precedes portentous announcements, "we have been talking a little about the future ..."

Nina had a short fuse for waffling apparently. "Darlings! Do stop, please! Yes, Daniel I do want something stronger. A whisky would be good and get something for poor Mimi."

Poor Mimi? Huh? Ooh, yes. It took me a second or two, but I realized Nina was commiserating with me over the lost text of her memoirs, now nothing more than a pile of ashes at the bottom of the garden. I made a miserable face, then ordered a double vodka on ice.

Daniel bustled around the drinks cupboard, sending Hedy to the kitchen in search for the atoms of frozen water that pass for ice in this country. Considering the looks Hedy was giving me, the little lady could have chipped an inch or two off her nose and saved herself the trip. I decided to perk things up some, but needed to make a few of the right noises first. "Yes, very disappointing," I agreed, adding "What a loss for us all." Then, I got down to cheering Nina up.

"You need a project, Nina. Something to take your mind off the memoirs. Back to Daphne Steele, what do you think?"

Hedy was back with the ice, all ears and mouth. “Yes Nins, why not?”

“Not a bad idea at all, Mummy,” Daniel encouraged. He was fussing with the ice and the booze as slowly as Penelope working on her tapestry. Not without a pang, I remembered how Gerry always pissed and moaned about how long it took to get a drink out of the English.

Nina sat up, flipping an indignant Tilly to the floor. “Oh I couldn’t possibly, not with poor Ilona so ill”

Picking up on a promising lack of conviction, I pressed my case as Daniel – at last – handed us our drinks.

“Wouldn’t Ilona want to think of you as busy, rather than just moping around?”

Nina took a swallow of whisky, then dubiously: “Yes, well, perhaps ...”

“What about all those Daphne Steele fans?” I wheedled. “You could have it ready for a summer publication when everyone is looking for something to take with them on holiday.”

“Yes, gran,” Hedy jumped in eagerly. “The new series of Daphne starts in early September so the book would come out at precisely the moment to whet people’s appetites. That would be such a help to me.”

Well, how could a granny could resist so selfless a blandishment?

Nina shrugged. “Oh all right. My heart wasn’t really in the memoirs anyway.” She smiled wistfully at me. “I’m sure you realized that?” I had, but let her make the point. Nina stood up slowly, waving away the assistance offered by her solicitous granddaughter. “Yes, I’ll think up a thumping good yarn and get on with it.” Sounding roughly a century younger, she grinned. “Let’s have another drink, a stiff one I think.”

The decision made, Daniel and Hedy breathed a little easier, but I almost stopped breathing altogether when Hedy said:

“Gran, there’s something you need to know. Daddy and I have been talking ...” I thought about putting my oar in, but anything I had to say, as John Nance Garner complained of his impact as Vice President of the United States, wasn’t worth a bucket of warm spit. I settled instead for putting the Rosen Sisters’ curse on Hedy: “May your thighs grow in direct proportion to your income.”

The princess of the airways introduced the plan that dared not speak its name, telling her grandmother of our solution to the Herman Rosen problem. I was given credit for sorting out “Daddy’s problem” in a throwaway a manner that successfully downsized the achievement.

Hedy reached the point, muddled syntax and all. As soon as she drew breath, Daniel stepped in for the big finish.

“So Mummy, what we thought was, that until we find someone who you feel is the right person to look after things, I’ll move in here to keep you company. Is that all right?”

Oh yeah, it was mighty fine.

Chapter 25

Marl agreed with me completely about the odds on my waving bye-bye to Daniel if he moved in with Nina. Yes, we were on speaking terms again after Lesley encouraged me to apologize for my snotty remarks about Dore. I had put up a fight.

“Lesley, when you first meet this guy you think he’s an idiot, but as you get to know him you’re sure he is.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think of him, the important thing is that he’s making her happy.”

“But with an asshole like Dore, for how long?”

“Who knows? Even assholes need someone for the long haul you know? Not every guy dancing at his fiftieth wedding anniversary is one of nature’s gentlemen. Anyway, as I’ve said before, it’s none of your business, is it? I mean, how would you like it if I told you that Daniel was so pussy-whipped by that mother of his, to say nothing of that bitch Hedy (Lesley hadn’t yet met daddy’s little girl, but was prepared to dislike her after my extensive whinging) that you were wasting your time?”

I came all over defensive. “Are you telling me that?”

“Of course not.”

I didn’t believe her, but decided “fuck it.” I agreed sullenly to call Marlene and did so immediately in spite of Otto’s agitating for his dinner. After offering a relatively nuanced evaluation of Dore, one that was taken as completely sincere, I was forgiven. The subject matter quickly segued to Ilona’s illness (which Marl had heard about from Paco, *naturellement*) – the fallout from such a personnel problem for Nina and, most importantly, how Daniel’s new living arrangements would affect my sex life – okay, my expectations for a sex life if we’re going to split hairs.

“Nina being around all the time will be bad enough, but Hedy will hang out there as well. Double doo-doo. You’ll never get him to yourself.”

“When do I ever, though?”

This was not unfamiliar ground, but to celebrate our reconciliation, Marl pondered the subject as if doing so for the first time. I could hear her tapping

the receiver with a long fingernail while she thought. “Hmm. Yes, not very good so far, right?”

“Not good at all, let’s face it.”

Marl was quiet for a moment, so I knew something was coming. “Don’t get upset about what I’m about to say. This isn’t about pay back for Dore, all right? Do you understand?”

I kind of did, but my “Yeah, sure” was wary.

“Don’t get pissed-off – .”

“I’m not going to get pissed off, for God’s sake!” Otto was standing on his hind legs in “appealing mode,” but I shooed him off. “I need some advice here.”

“Okay,” Marl said and I heard her take a deep breath before she went on. “I’m not convinced he wants anything more than just a friendship with you – ”

“What?”

“ – or anyone for that matter.” Marl rushed on. “I think the man is just so involved with his family.”

“That’s temporary, he just has to find someone to take over for Ilona,” I muttered. What a downer the truth can be. I mean, what about the way things are supposed to turn out: a tidy, close, simple solution, problem solved? What I needed was someone like Ann B. Davis to sort out the Wolfe family the way she’d run things for the Brady Bunch, then I could have Daniel back – that is, if I’d had him in the first place. “He’ll soon get tired of living with his mother and then you’ll see.”

“No.” I could sense Marl shaking her head. “He no more wants to find someone than Nina does. Ilona’s freaking out is the excuse, not the reason, for the family drawing together again. From what you’ve been telling me for weeks now, I don’t think that bunch can relate properly to anyone outside of their little gene pool. Look at Pandora.”

“Oh come on.” This was getting too deep for me. “She sounds like an idiot.”

“Perhaps. But was Pandora always an idiot, or did she turn into one by trying too hard to please the Wolfes?”

“Hey, wait a minute.” Otto’s usually fail-safe baring of his teeth got no reaction. Scowling, he slunk off. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m turning into an idiot?”

“You are if you keep on trying to snag someone who’s already snagged, and I mean trussed up like a capon.” Marlene laughed like mad and even I had to snicker.

“Okay, Okay.” I agreed. “Maybe I should just concentrate on getting ready for the show, at least that way I’ll get some use out of Daniel, huh?”

“Absolutely!” Marl sounded relieved. “At least, you’ve shaken loose the obligation to do that damned book with Nina and Hedy’s off to America, right?”

“Thank God.”

“You should care. Let the Wolfes get on with their lives and you get on with yours. It’s strictly business with Daniel from now on, right?”

I agreed. “It *was* a non-starter. Maybe things coming to a head like this isn’t all that bad. I didn’t want to get sucked into the Wolfe family anyway. Nina’s too tough and Hedy gets on my nerves. Daniel isn’t worth it.”

I waited for God to call out: “Don’t say that!” but she didn’t. That was that, I’d get on with things. I mean, if I could blow off twenty-odd years of a relationship with Gerry without losing it, then dumping someone who’d been in my life for a nanosecond was going to be duck soup, right? (And knowing something is bullshit doesn’t stop me from believing it.)

“Absolutely.” Marlene went on. “Anyway, you’ll have very little to do with any of them after doing Daniel’s show. When is the taping, by the way?”

“Second week in December.”

“Oh, then you will probably have the finishing touches to keep you busy?”

“That’s true.” No. I hadn’t even broken the back of the beginning touches never mind polished the finishing ones, but if you squint, having a goal and accomplishing it look pretty much the same.

“See? You get through Thanksgiving, tape *See/Hear* and that’s it for the Wolfes.”

“Right.” First, I would have to get through Thanksgiving.

Chapter 26

As work was now my priority it seemed an act of good faith to do some. A call to Daniel's assistant verified my suspicions about British sloth; they had done dick about getting the requested clips together for the taping. It was early morning in Los Angeles, so I immediately called Maureen to ask if *she* would send the clips, but she offered to go one better.

"Just fax me what you need, babe and I'll bring them myself."

What to say, considering Maureen's phobias about all things British? I didn't know whether to be choked up by such an unselfish gesture - or start searching for the hidden agenda. I've known her for a long, *loong* time.

"Are you okay? Can't you hear me?" She was getting testy. "Say something."

"Oh right, right." I took the plunge. "I'm just surprised, I mean I know what a problem you have with things here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," God, talk about tiptoeing on eggshells, "I didn't think you had that good a time when you were here."

"Oh, yeah?" Maureen sounded surprised. "I don't remember that. I wish the English didn't mumble, and the restaurants need to catch on about low fat, but otherwise it's okay."

You have to play the hand you're dealt. "I must be thinking of someone else."

"Yeah, Beverly probably." Maureen and Beverly suffered from the sister-best friend tug-of-love syndrome, so one or the other of them delegating blame was pretty much the drill. "Anyway ... what ...!"

Bur Maureen asked for "a second" to howl at someone in the office. I heard what sounded like choking sobs receding into the distance and the slam of a door. Maureen was back on the phone as if there had been no interruption. "So what do you say? To me coming over, I mean?"

I wasn't thrilled by the prospect. Maureen is high maintenance as a guest and I was not up to the care and feeding of such a *prima donna*, but what could I say? "When do you want to come?"

“Why don’t I come over for that Thanksgiving dinner you’ve been talking about? Sounds interesting.”

Now, I know people have turned their backs on God for any number of reasons that have more impact on the human spirit than a visit from a difficult houseguest at an inopportune time. At that moment in time, however, my spirit was sufficiently battered that I felt justified in repudiating a deity who had to get in that one kick too many. I was suspicious of Maureen’s motives into the bargain, knowing better than to be flattered. Cadging an invitation to turkey day was out of character, to say the least: her policy toward celebrating family-oriented holidays wasn’t what you’d call cuddly. Maureen had taken enough verbal dumps on the subject in the past not to leave any ambiguities there, no sirree.

Then the fog cleared.

I’d mentioned Hedy’s visit to the coast in an earlier conversation. It wasn’t hard to figure out the appeal to Maureen of signing an up-and-coming newcomer to play second lead in a prime time Dybwa opus – *before* said hick got wise to the ways of the world: demanding real money, wanting credits over the title. Maureen probably reasoned she could get in some primo sucking-up over the dinner table and beat the competition to the punch. Anyway, considering the guest list, I figured Maureen’s presence couldn’t make things any worse.

“Sounds great, can you stay over for my taping?”

“I’ll have to see. I can leave that *schmuck* Sidney in charge, he can’t fuck things up too much. The run up to Christmas looks fairly slow.” Sidney Wallenberg was the right hand who put up with Maureen’s bullying. I had no idea whether Sidney believed in God or not, but he certainly had little reason to do so. “Anyway, it’ll be fun to get a sighting of this Daniel guy. Is that going okay? Now that Rupert is lined up for the big-kiss-off you’re kind of needy, huh? Got him in the sack yet?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, right,” Maureen sneered as one old, old friend to another. “I take it that means you haven’t.”

There was nothing to do but tell her the whole story about Ilona and the new arrangement for keeping Ma Wolfe happy. Maureen kept up a running obscene commentary as I talked, but we got to the chase eventually.

“That’s the craziest fucking story I’ve ever heard! Just how lame is this guy, anyway?” Maureen wanted to know.

“Who cares? Fuck him.”

“Don’t you *wish*?” Maureen was wetting herself laughing.

“Fuck you, too.”

“That’s good. You’ve got to articulate that anger babe, that’s the first step toward constructive rage containment, otherwise there’s a jam up in your memory log and that’s bad.”

My self-humor quotient hit a world-class low at being handed the kind of idiot-think that passed for insight around the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

“Thanks, Dr. Dybwa, maybe you can go on *Geraldo* as a guest expert. His guests are terminally pissed-off and they could use your help. They don’t speak recognizable English either, so your gibberish would hit the spot.”

“See?” Maureen insisted, “how a good vent lubricates the channels of communication and gets you on the track toward clarity focus?”

I gave up. “Just let me know when to meet you.”

Maureen said she would, then hesitated. “Does this shit with Daniel mean the Wolfes won’t be coming to dinner?”

I thought about letting her sweat that out until the day, but that would have made me as self-serving and manipulative as she was being and two wrongs don’t make a right. I assured Maureen that Hedy would still be there.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong babe, I was just asking. Doesn’t really matter.”

Maureen’s bullshit usually acted as kick start for my sense of humor and sure enough, I began to feel like having a little fun.

“Hey, I know that. You just feel like flying six thousand miles for the fun of it so that you can celebrate a holiday which you don’t give a shit about, with someone you’ll be having dinner with in three weeks without travelling further than the drive from your office to Le Dome.”

That set both of us laughing for a couple of expensive transatlantic phone moments. Still snorting, Maureen managed to ask, “Have you seen Gerry and what’s-her-name, again?”

“It’s Rosie.” I’d told her about the sighting in Harrods and my feelings about it. “And no I haven’t. Anyway, I think I might as well call my lawyer. See what Gerry wants to do about getting divorced.” I gave myself a bit of a shock when I said that, to be honest. I mean it just sort fell off my tongue.

Maureen was pretty startled as well. “No shit? Are you sure you want to let him off the hook?”

“Yes, there’s no point in hanging on. It’s over.”

Maureen thought about that for a minute then warned, “Okay, okay, but don’t make it easy for the *schmuck*.”

“I wouldn’t know how, don’t worry.”

You can't let the side down, right? Maureen was still laughing as she hung up.

Chapter 27

The bad news was that Maureen had arrived with a wet, noisy cold and an even worse attitude.

“Christ! I’m paying an arm and a leg to travel in first class and they have it as cold as a meat locker! Those bastards at American Airlines are going to hear from me!”

Further bad news was that she condemned our Thanksgiving menu as fat-gram suicide and pretentious to boot. She gave us the benefit of what was, to my certain knowledge, her total inexperience in preparing such a meal.

“Give me a break! Just what’s wrong with Pepperidge Farms stuffing, I want to know? Sausage in the stuffing? No one does that anymore! Why don’t you just take a shortcut and inject all that saturated shit into our veins? And what’s with the Michigan dried cherries – what a load of fancy crap! Succotash with cream and port! Give me a break!”

Better news was her bonding with Lesley. The doc had pressed a grab bag of medical samples on the invalid, promising a sure cure for what had become Maureen’s self-prescribed “flu.”

“Wow, thanks a lot. And the best thing is I didn’t have to pay through the ass for a consultation, huh? I have problems with my respiratory system you know, I’m not as strong as I look, I get pneumonia (a cracking snap of the fingers emphasized her point) real easy.”

The best news was that she would be leaving on Saturday.

“Sorry to only stay for three days, but a production date got pushed forward, my so-called star is just out of detox and Sidney is too much of a wuss to handle that bitch.”

I handed Maureen a box of tissues across the kitchen table and replaced the half-full cup of Lemsip cooling by her elbow with a fresh brew into which I’d sneaked a generous dose of vodka. Lesley, watching over Maureen’s shoulder, grinned approval. Maureen took a sip of the hot drink, took a swallow and with a “Wow!” smacked her lips. “This stuff is great. Comes in a little packet and you just add hot water? Honey, lemon, what else? Any medication in this?”

“Paracetamol.” Lesley answered, filling her own glass from the bottle of Chardonnay between us on the table.

“Oh, oh!” Maureen was always alert to the possibilities of toxins. “What’s that?”

Lesley assured her that this was a generic substitute for aspirin, commonly used in England.

“Thank God for that. I’m allergic to aspirin, risk anaphylactic shock if I even sniff a grain.”

“Lucky for you then there isn’t any in Lemsip, isn’t it?” Lesley claimed never to waste bedside manner on anyone over twelve.

“What are these exactly?” I chewed without pleasure on a fat-free, low calorie, ochre-colored disk, an Orinocho according to the rustic packaging. They looked, and if memory served, tasted like something babies gnaw on while teething. Maureen assured us that Orinochos were the fashionable rave in our home town, endorsed by the food police as wholesome. She’d brought several packets, pressing them on her lucky hostess. I tried swallowing, but the goddamn thing was as dry as papyrus. Giving up, I handed it down to Otto, sitting at my feet. He sniffed, but turned away, proving Orinochos were not good enough for a dog. “These make rice cakes seem as tasty as nachos,” I complained.

“You’re full of shit, they’re delicious,” Maureen insisted. She drained the Lemsip. “Remind me to take some of this home. Will it help me sleep?”

Lesley gave a wise-physician nod. “I think the Lemsip combined with the medication I’ve given you will guarantee a good rest.” I wondered how the vodka fitted into this equation, but didn’t really care as long as Maureen didn’t die on me. I stood up.

“Why don’t you take a bath while I fix us a light supper? Take Otto with you for company. Otto, go with Auntie Maureen,” I instructed. Otto didn’t look thrilled, but he’d learned his manners at Harrods, so he knew what was expected of him. He jumped up and headed toward the hallway.

Maureen shrugged. “I’ve done worse, that’s for sure.”

I knew from the look on Lesley’s face that she didn’t doubt it for a second. We didn’t dare look at each other, so Lesley busied herself replacing the rest of the delicious crackers back into the package, while I examined the inside of the fridge.

“Chicken breasts and rocket salad okay?”

“Skinless ...?” Maureen asked through a cloud of Kleenex.

“Yes.” I looked over the top of the door at Sneezy. “Is it true that in L.A., they’re experimenting with growing chickens without feathers or skin?”

“Where have you been?” Maureen faked astonishment as well as anyone with a running nose can. “That’s a given. We’re working on boneless.”

Lesley sighed. “Why aren’t we laughing at that?”

“Because it’s a marketable idea and making a buck is no laughing matter, doc,” Maureen told Lesley, heading toward her bath. At the door she turned, looking anxiously at Lesley. “By the way, are there any calories in that stuff Mimi gave me?”

“No,” Lesley shook her head. “Only carcinogens.”

And that shut Maureen up – which was fine because the phone rang and we were all about to become charter members in the struck dumb club.

Chapter 28

“It’s Hedy Wolfe,” I mouthed for the benefit of Maureen, who reacted like Pavlov’s dog.

Hedy wasted no time in chit-chat. “Mummy’s home! She arrived this morning quite by surprise.”

I repeated what Hedy had just said for Lesley and Maureen and their mouths slid open. I asked:

“How *is* Pandora? Not worn out by the trip home?”

“Wonderful. She looks marvelous, tanned and quite radiant. Daddy is delighted, of course.” *Schadenfreude* can be understood and enjoyed by even the tiniest of minds. Hedy laid it on as thick as she dared. “Her work is going so well.”

“You think she’d hate to leave it then.”

“What?” Hedy was a sucker for a counterpunch – which gave me some satisfaction, but not much. “Yes, well. She needs to see to some things in England apparently.”

Like checking the state of the ring through her husband’s nose, but what was the point of saying so. “Where is she staying?”

“Nina’s of course.”

“At Nina’s? Really, I thought things were a little tense between your mother and Nina.” Maureen and Lesley gave me the thumbs up sign.

“Where did you get that idea?” Hedy sounded wary.

“Your father mentioned it.” Okay, okay, stretching a point, but I was long past the point of wanting to play fair with the Wolfes.

“Hmm, yes oh well ...”

“Is there something else, Hedy?”

It came out in a rush. “Mimi, I don’t know how you’d feel about this, but I know Daddy would love it if we could bring Pandora with us tomorrow.”

“You and Daniel would like to bring Pandora along to Thanksgiving dinner?” I wanted Lesley and Maureen to get the picture.

They got it. Lesley grabbed a knife from the rack, miming a castration with surgical precision. Maureen did a thumbs-up sign indicating her agreement. I counted to two-and-a-half, then answered.

“Why not? She’ll be quite welcome.” Okay, okay, but I didn’t give a shit by this time. I’ve shown zero-tolerance for humiliation in the past, but this had been a lousy year what with one thing and another and my emotional immune system was stalled big time.

We shot a little more polite shit about what time the Wolfes should make an appearance, could they “bring anything” – as if a bottle of wine could make up for the *chutzpah* of shoveling Pandora up my nose – how lovely it felt for the family to be together again.

That last bit irritated me enough to give Hedy the short goodbye and hang up just the right side of rude. Who gave a shit if she was a star? Guess.

“You didn’t piss her off, did you?” Maureen sniffled. “You practically hanging up on her! God, she *is* talking about her mother – .”

“Shut up!” Lesley and I howled, shaking our heads.

“What?” Maureen gives good fake indignation, I’ll give her that. “I’m just being considerate, you know.”

I picked up the wine bottle from the table, ready to smash off the neck and grind what was left into Maureen’s face, but just then Marlene poked her head in the back door. Her appearance lost some cosmetic maven in Beverly Hills a big fee and preserved a friendship.

“Hi.” She looked from one of us to the other. “Did I miss anything?”

I told her, helped by astringent coaching from Lesley and the odd sulky bit from Maureen. Marl took a glass from the cabinet, took the bottle from my hand and, sitting down, filled her glass.

“What a fucking nerve. And wouldn’t you know that chicken-shit Daniel doesn’t have the balls to ask you for himself, but puts the kid up to it?”

“We don’t know that,” I said.

“Oh please,” Lesley growled. “I still don’t know why you said yes.”

“I do.” Marl shook her head, took a drink. “How can you say no in such a situation without looking petty-minded?”

“That’s what I was trying to say,” Maureen sneezed for the sympathy vote, which was not forthcoming.

“Bullshit,” Lesley told her, but without malice. “You just want Hedy to be happy so she won’t shit on you from a great height when you suck up to her.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” Maureen asked.

But I'd had enough of Hedy Wolfe and wanted the subject changed, pronto. "Never mind the Hedy agenda, let's go over the guest list. It'll give us something else to think about."

We did just that and indeed it did.

"I've seen people standing at a bus stop with more in common." Lesley shook her head.

Maureen gave things her usual upbeat spin. "This could be the worst flop since *Heaven's Gate*."

"Oh come on, it isn't that bad," Marl tut-tutted. Beaming, she delivered the coup de grace: "At least Maureen and Lesley will get to meet Dore, that's something isn't it?"

Chapter 29

I expected Pandora to be the type who made you feel as if you were wearing too much jewelry and had lipstick on your teeth, but I hadn't dreamed she would look so much like the rest of the Wolfe pack. I mean, you put Nina, Pandora and Hedy together and they looked like one of those three generation ads so loved by skincare products. Throw Daniel into the mix (draped like an Armani suit around his purportedly estranged wife) and the effect was truly spooky.

I recovered a little by buying some time while Maureen barged up to kiss Hedy's ass. I was myself by the time Pandora said, "Nina and Hedy have told me so much about you, Mimi."

I suffered a setback trying to guess why my name had not passed the sculpted lips of her spouse, a reversal aggravated by Pandora's off-the-scales glam quotient.

Paco, also arrived, dragged himself away from Nina and Hedy, panting like a puppy, and said that Pandora "looked pretty good for someone who'd spent so much time out in the wilds."

"Who's been doing her hair?" he sulked about Pandora's ear-length, thick, dark bob. "I mean, does Nicky Clark belong to that sect she joined?"

"What I want to know," Lesley joined in, "is how someone *schlepping* around Africa looks as if she's been having regular facials at Georgette Klinger."

"And the dress," Marl whispered, referring to the austere drape of stone-colored linen that decorated a torso God-given, rather than the result of devotions to the Pilates program. "Where'd that come from? Calvin Klein has opened a branch in Tanzania?"

I didn't say anything because by that time my attention had been diverted from the glories of Pandora to the shape of things to come. By that I mean the girth of Shona Thornton's belly; I didn't need to be Dr. Spock to figure out that she was preggers and that the seed deed had taken place during the period of time that Rupert had been courting me. Christ! I was starting to

wonder about Englishwomen. Were they all so fertile, or fertile only with men who were sleeping with me as well?

While Shona did the “blah blahs” about how delighted they were to be invited: “One has heard so much about your wonderful American celebrations ...” I gave the unembarrassed Rupert a look hostile enough to lower the most enthusiastic sperm count.

“Delighted you could come. I hope there’s nothing too spicy on the menu?” Shona and Rupert both seemed puzzled, so I explained slowly and carefully. “In your condition, Shona? Something might disagree with you?”

“God no!” Shona laughed heartily enough to frighten the salmon on her fish farm in the Highlands.

“Hardly!” Rupert joined her. “Woman could’ve eaten nails with the first two and not noticed.” He gave her a rugby tackle around the shoulders, adding: “Right, darling?”

I was going to ask whether they wanted a girl or a boy, decided I didn’t give a shit, was trying to figure out what to say next because my mouth had gone a little dry in reaction to my rage when the winking wanker, Dore, slithered over and saved me. I trifled with the idea that I owed him one, then dismissed the notion as nothing more than an hysterical reflex and not to be honored anytime soon.

Grabbing as many hands as he could get a hold of, Dore introduced himself. “Hi there, I’m an old friend of Mimi’s.” I let that go, desperate to be shut of all of them, and headed for the kitchen, hoping the cooking smells would rid my mouth of the taste of gall and wormwood.

Actually, Lesley did the honors. She had seen me with the Thorntons, calculated the *deja vu* impact and followed me into the kitchen.

We busied ourselves taking the turkey out to breathe, arranging the smoked salmon and buttering slices of brown bread. After about five minutes, Lesley offered comfort. “That thing about lightning doesn’t strike twice is bullshit. I see it all the time, believe me.”

“I know. Doesn’t help much though.”

Lesley nodded, putting a dish of succotash with cream and port under the grill. “I’m starting to worry about this country and the way the men here treat women.”

“You got that one right.” Maureen joined us, having weighed old friendship against points earned by fawning over Hedy and having apparently given in to sentiment. Not a first perhaps, but you could count the other times without running out of fingers. “What about getting all the men together and

having an exorcism?" she went on, opening the oven door for Lesley who slid in two sweet potato pies to brown. "We could get Deepak Chopra?"

"As far as I'm concerned we should start from scratch with mass importation from another planet." I took a taste test of the cranberry sauce. "Lesley, hand me the kirsch, it's behind you."

"What?" Maureen sounded nervous. "You're putting booze in the cranberry sauce? For Christ's sake, what happened to a little sugar and water?"

"Most of the alcohol got cooked out, I'm just adding a little extra to perk things up. Complement the dried cherries in the stuffing."

"I'm afraid to ask what you added to the sweet potato pie."

"Just as well," Lesley said.

Maureen moaned, opening her mouth to whine some more, but Marl came in. She was with a man of a certain age as they say, who looked a little like William Devane, and would've looked more like William Devane if he'd found a better barber, lashed out on a Paul Smith suit, got a Jerry Garcia tie instead of a boring number with horizontal stripes, been three inches taller, bothered with a splash of Mouchoir de Monsieur, had a tan . . . God, you can take the girl out of L.A. but you can't take L.A. out of the girl, right?

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Traffic and a troublesome patient."

"Simon," Lesley kissed the air in his direction, then nodded in my direction "Your hostess, Mimi Marcus. Mimi this is Simon Freud, from the hospital."

Talk about names and destiny. "If you tell me you're a shrink . . ."

"It was that or paint," he smiled.

"Huh?" Maureen was puzzled.

"*Lucian* Freud, he's an artist," I explained.

"Never heard of him," Maureen said dismissively.

"His loss, I'm sure," Simon told her.

Maureen looked at him suspiciously, then got it. "God, a psychiatrist with a sense of humor." She shook his hand. "None of mine ever seemed to have much to laugh about."

"It's tough working on a relay team," Lesley suggested.

Simon softened the blow. "I think it helps being with children."

"Well then, you're working the right room here." Maureen told him.

I remembered my party manners. "Do you want a drink? There's time before dinner."

“Thank you. A scotch, double with ice.”

“I’ll get it,” Marl offered.

“Thanks.” Simon sniffed the cranberry sauce. “Is that kirsch? Smells wonderful.”

Maureen rolled her eyes. “Shit, it’s the invasion of the body snatchers.”

Chapter 30

Lesley and I did our Martha Stewart number to the point of pain and the table looked swell. The centerpiece of chrysanthemums and bronze-sprayed dried apples spilling out of a Pilgrim's hat, fashioned by Lesley, tickled Nina no end: "And they say Americans have no sense of irony!"

The doc had taken the trouble to fold the napkins so they looked like turkeys: a surgeon's hands can meet any challenge.

Even Maureen was impressed: "Christ! I expect them to gobble out the national anthem any second."

Shona took Lesley's ribbing about the smoked salmon with great style, insisting it was "far too delicious!" to have come from her farm.

Rupert showed less style when he imitated a Japanese client with a stutter: "I r-r-ike Roy R-r-richtenstein," but Dore laughed as explosively as The Joker.

Marl asked: "Who?" but thank God no one decided to do the Sir Kenneth Clark bit and tell her.

Paco cozied up to Pandora, but she was as indifferent to him as to the food in front of her. "I barely bother to eat anymore, I got out of the habit after doing relief work in Rwanda."

Paco didn't take the hint. "You want to be careful about split ends with all that heat in Africa ..."

I had put Daniel next to me, prompted by equal proportions of mischief and spite. He made some polite noises: "Sweet of you to ask Pandora, everything is delicious," but that was about it. He avoided looking directly at me, whether because he couldn't tear his eyes away from the Saint of Tanzania, or from guy-guilt over his having treated me badly was anyone's guess. My money was on the former – not that I cared, of course.

Hedy and Lesley, seated across from one another, were getting along famously.

Hedy was agog at Lesley's medical credentials. "How do you remember all those different illnesses? I played a doctor on *Peak District* once and my goodness! Just remembering my lines with all that technical stuff was so hard."

Lesley dismissed half a lifetime of training and experience with a shake of her head. “You get used to it. Anyway, I could never speak in front of a camera, so there you are.”

Actually, I’d never given Hedy credit for being particularly competent there either, but I didn’t have the time to trash Lesley’s illusions: it was time to serve the turkey.

I stood, making a pompous announcement to this effect and was rewarded by lots of chair scraping, plate chinking and offers of help. I graciously refused, bidding my acolytes clear the table and follow me into the kitchen.

“Why do we have to do this ourselves?” Maureen whined as we reached the kitchen. “Why don’t we have someone to help?”

“Because Mrs. O’Farrell let us down, that’s why,” I explained.

“Who the hell is Mrs. O’Farrell?” She started loading the dishwasher.

“Her cleaner – her back gave out,” Marl answered for me, lining up serving bowls on the table.

“There aren’t any other poor people around here who need the money?”

“Not so easy, it’s a bigger *schlepp* to get here from Guatemala, than it is to get to L.A.” Lesley took the sweet potato pies out of the oven.

I removed the foil keeping the turkey warm while it breathed, admiring the perfection of the golden brown skin, Michigan cherries and fragrant breadcrumbs spilling out of its ass. “Look at that! We’ve outdone ourselves!”

It was true. I spooned stuffing into a silver dish, and while Lesley drizzled Gerry’s twenty-year-old cognac into a gravy she was making from the turkey drippings, Marl attended to the vegetables.

Maureen flicked on the dishwasher and tidied up the counters and kitchen table. “I hope there’s plenty of white meat! I can’t eat dark, it gives me gas,” she warned us.

As far as I was concerned she could fart her way back across the Atlantic, I wouldn’t care and I doubted Lesley or Marl did either. We were on the high you experience when a great meal comes together, that rush of satisfaction at the way everything smells and looks.

Lesley strained the gravy and ladled it into an antique Rosenthal gravy boat. I sharpened the carving knife until it was sharp enough to trim nose hair and Maureen and Marl loaded serving dishes onto the heated trolley. We stepped back, checked everything, applied lip gloss, ran our tongues against our teeth, fluffed up our hair and collectively sucked in our bellies.

“Ladies,” I said, picking up the turkey platter. “Let’s do it!”

And we did.

Chapter 31

First the good news: dinner went over like the Academy Awards. Honest to God, I've never played a better room.

Shona ate so much she gasped that she had quite frightened herself. "God, I hope this doesn't bring on the baby."

"Not here darling!" Rupert guffawed, then proving himself the true template for a modern gentleman, added, "Wouldn't want to leave this marvelous Pouilly-Fuissé!"

Dore spouted some sick-making crap about Rupert's palate: "Wow! Do you know your way around the vineyard!"

No one gave me any credit for choosing the vino in the first place, not even my pal Marl, who just mewed, "Oh Dore!" at the suavity of these two buffoons in finding Pouilly-Fuissé a great wine.

Nina tucked in like a champ. "The turkey is superb and the cherries are such a clever idea."

Hedy told Lesley, "Oh I do wish I could cook, but there's always been someone else who did that sort of thing."

Lesley answered: "Well you just have more important things to do." She said this without sarcasm and I wondered if she'd been affected by the cognac fumes while making the gravy.

Maureen congratulated Lesley and me, but did her Greek chorus bit over the "out-of-sight cholesterol levels."

Maureen's soul sister from the food police, Pandora, hectored, "We must realize that 85.5 percent of all the fat content of food on earth is eaten by the developed world ..."

The rest of her lecture was drowned out by Paco. "Yeah, but you fuck up your hair without fat in your system! Look at the Italians, and the Spaniards, they have great hair because of all that olive oil ..."

Daniel just pulled a "ditto" of his earlier comments. He played with the food on his plate as if indifferent to pleasures of the palate and got a wan smile from Pandora for his efforts, or lack of them. I wanted to stuff him like a Strasbourg goose, then make him breathe on the silly bitch to see if she

fainted. I won't say my sense of rejection went deep, more like a paper cut really – it doesn't hurt for long, but it sure does smart some while it lasts.

I convened with my staff in order to prepare the pies for serving and to open a few more bottles of wine. Simon followed us carrying a pile of plates, Dore, surprisingly, right behind him. The mystery of his loyalty was soon solved.

"I told Rupert to relax, I'd decant the port," the pompous git announced. A "little lady" body language went on, but mercifully no more than that. Marl dithered around, thanking him as effusively as you would thank the Bank of America for lowering the interest by half on your thirty-year mortgage. "I need a cheesecloth for the sediment," he demanded, sending Marl into a tailspin.

"Shall I clear the dishwasher and start stacking the next load?" Simon wanted to know.

"If you cook as well, I'll marry you," Maureen threatened.

"Poor me, I'm afraid I don't," he said, smiling with teeth that were no stranger to floss. "My daughter Helen claims the dishwasher is my only skill in the kitchen."

"Every little bit helps," I told Simon. "My ex – okay a bit of a liberty, but I had a call in to my lawyer – "couldn't even manage that."

"Simon's divorced," Lesley told me over the whirring of the hand mixer as she whipped the cream topping for the pies. I gave her a look but the cream didn't curdle so I guessed I was losing my touch. To prove it, she added: "Just in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't," I said, hoping not to pull a Pinocchio.

"I've been divorced twice actually." Simon wanted one of us to know.

"Twice?" I raised an eyebrow.

"No murders involved." Simon meanwhile, had cleared the dishwasher, found out where to put the clean plates all by himself (a male first) and was stacking the dishwasher like a champ. God, the guy could talk and do something else at the same time! "I learned something though."

"What?" Dore asked, fussing about with the cheesecloth found under the sink by Marl, who appeared weak from relief at pleasing him.

"Hmm?" Simon clicked the machine into action without the usual querulous "How does this work ...?" routine. "Sorry?"

"Learned what from being married twice?" Dore reminded him.

"To think long and hard before doing it a third time."

"You'd do it a third time?" I shook my head. "What an optimist."

“Yes, actually I am,” Simon smiled, wiped his hands on a dishtowel, putting it back on the bar of the oven exactly where he’d found it.

Lesley watched him and grinned. “An anal optimist into the bargain,” She transferred the cream to a serving dish.

“Maybe that’s what frightened off the first two,” Simon told her.

“You’d never say that of me,” Dore boasted, dropping the sediment stained cheesecloth onto the counter. “I leave everything lying around, huh Marl?”

“Yes, but that’s so totally a chap thing, darling,” Marl congratulated him, wiping the counter after disposing of the cloth in the rubbish bin. “It’s just the way you are.”

“My oldest son’s sixteen and he’s a slob too, but I’m working on the problem” – Maureen told us this with such menace that we all fell silent, busying ourselves with our tasks. Simon being the new guy on the block, jumped in.

“I ask out of professional interest, considering your son’s age, but just how have you managed that?” he asked.

Maureen gave us her Draconian take on parenting skills.

“Ah yes, well.” Simon straightened his tie – the last time he would need to adjust that particular piece of neckwear if I had anything to do with it. Then he went on where thousands have feared to tread. “Yes, I suppose there are elements of behaviorist techniques to your approach.”

“Yeah? No kidding!” Maureen was pleased. Lucky for him. “You mean there’s a word for the way I bring up my kids?”

Simon wisely expanded the definition of “behaviorist” to include elements of conduct usually classified as psychotic, while the rest of us gathered up the dessert makings. Dore insisted on taking the port along to reassure Rupert: “Things are being done the right way around here.”

“Thank you Dore, what would I do without you to dot the ‘i’s” and cross the ‘t’s for me?” I told him.

“Not a problem, babe,” he beamed, proving himself as much a stranger to irony, as he was to chin.

“What a ridiculous man,” Simon whispered, taking a pile of dessert plates from the table and heading toward the dining room.

I decided right there and then that Simon might just be Mr. Right in a Mr. Okay sort of a way. Hey! Why push your luck asking for the moon, when the clouds have finally parted enough for a girl to see the stars?

Chapter 32

Simon and I agreed later that our strange little group had nothing in common. I brought them together to celebrate an occasion they didn't for the most part care about in the first place - well, you know how long *that* keeps things afloat. Simon felt adults should sing for their supper no matter how dull the band. He may be a shrink, but he isn't suckered into giving slack just because it's there to do.

Dessert was over, the port served and raved about, Dore taking the credit as if he'd personally stomped on the grapes. We trudged into the sitting room with lots of congrats to the cooks (who smirked prettily), groans from everyone on how stuffed they were (not Pandora), and jokes on how the ingenuity of Americans had been well and truly proved by our talent for breathing a little life into pumpkin.

My staff insisted I stay with my guests while they refreshed the coffee supply. I kept handing out the Godiva chocs (more groans, only one refusal) and checking to see that everyone had what they needed. Many women tell me this is the best part of the evening for them: when the hostess, freed at last of her responsibilities, gets to sparkle. I don't sparkle so well though; I tend to have a bit of an energy dip about then and would love it if everyone just left - you know, like they do at a restaurant. I want to clean up, pick at the leftovers and put on a video of the soaps I've recorded that evening. I was just starting to zone out altogether when Shona hoisted herself out of a chair and asked where she could find the nearest supply of Evian. I offered to fetch it for her, but she insisted on following me to the kitchen.

"Sorry to be such a bore."

I said it wasn't any trouble, and ushered her toward the kitchen.

"How nice this party has been." Shona hit just the right note of condescension, as if she was throwing potato peelings to the mob. I busied myself getting the water out of the fridge, finding a clean glass; Shona didn't strike me as a from-the-bottle type. She squeezed herself into a chair behind the kitchen table and, changing tack from faint-hearted endorsement of *my* hostess skills, fuffed on with much enthusiasm about the charms of my

thimble-sized repro of *her own* spread in Holland Park. Finally, after a sip of France's best she got to the point – and it was some point.

“Rupert told me everything about the two of you.” She sounded puzzled, whether by the actual indiscretion or his candor in the matter I couldn't guess. I was too shell-shocked to struggle with that for now.

“Oh, did he now?” I felt too embarrassed or ashamed to come up with any snappy patter. Just as well. This wasn't an audition for my big break as a featured lounge act in Vegas.

“You aren't going to ask me how I feel about it, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, I know.” And God knows I did.

“You aren't the first, you know.”

I'd figured that one out. No tears, no accusations, no curses. I'd got “just the facts ma'am,” as Detective Joe Friday, pride of the L.A.P.D. (in those far off days when we were still deluded enough to be proud of the L.A.P.D.), would have wanted.

“How do you stand it? If you know what Rupert is up to, how can you be so calm?” I asked. I really wanted to know; I was coming to respect Shona for some reason and I wanted to sort out why: it wasn't her dress sense, that was for sure. I knew class (literally and metaphorically) when it came my way and that had something to do with it.

Shona smiled. “His betrayals are petty. Oh, they hurt, but our life together isn't affected in the long term.”

I bristled a bit at the intimation I was nothing more than a slipped stitch in the tapestry of their life together, then I came to my senses. I would need to respect myself, as much as I did Shona, by the time my head hit the pillow that night. I bit down on the bullet.

“I'm sure you're right. You know your marriage better than I do.” I sighed, went on, “For what it's worth, I'm sorry. It stopped as soon as I met you.” Okay, okay – lame, but at least I was honest.

“Oh, I knew it would.”

“So you knew about me when I came to your house?” God I was feeling creepier and creepier about these two: the fly paper was becoming less of a mystery ...

“No, but he told me later that evening, he always does.” Shona shifted herself and stood. Her ankles were puffy and I felt even worse. “Rupert is so predictable,” she said. She sounded marginally pissed off by that fact and I was glad she moved slowly so that I could head her off at the knife drawer if I needed to.

Now, I'm sure there's a protocol for such situations, but I didn't have the book at hand and I'd winged it for as long as I could or wanted to. Shona seemed on top of things; I'd said what was expected of me and was sincere in my apologies. *Fin.* Wow, did I feel European – sophisticated, you know? I was Simone Signoret and Jeanne Moreau, smiling wisely behind a veil of un-PC cigarette smoke, putting memories aside after a moment of regret. Life goes on, *je ne regrette rien* ...

Je was a few respectful steps behind Shona as we headed back to join the others when she paused at the kitchen door and threw a curve ball that blew my Simone/Jeanne fantasy out of the ballpark.

"This isn't Rupert's baby, you know." Christ, what an arm the woman had. Breeding tells, huh?

"No, I didn't. Does he?"

"Oh yes. Oh yes indeed." Ah the "killer" gene. It takes as many centuries to develop as a great lawn. She laughed like a drain, the first human reaction she'd shown during our exchange, one of that even one of the lower orders could connect with – in a throat drying, stomach flopping kind of a way. "He just doesn't know who, of course."

I flashed on her having had it off with a contemporary equivalent of Mr. Brown up on the fish farm, but the image was gone before I could really play with it. I wondered at the suitor who had the persistence to see past Shona's minus zero allure quotient – but still lochs run deep.

After being hit by this chill drollery, I wasn't without a certain sympathy for Rupert. True, it was a relief to know that a woman I'd labelled as a doormat was anything but; still, playing so dirty – oh fuck it! Why not? Rupert needed that kind of relationship at some level, or he wouldn't stick around, and if the fish farm and the house in Holland Park had anything to do with his unwavering loyalties, then he really deserved to wade in shit with straws up his nose.

I sensed these two were caught up in a comedy of manners, perhaps more of a cultural difference type of thing than anything else and my life's too short to wonder about anthropological *dreck*. People just aren't the same everywhere that's all – trying to find the common denominator is like trying to make something out of the fact that "dog" spelt backwards is "God."

Shona linked her arm through mine. We were girlfriends now. Wow. I had a question, though – before we starting hanging out together.

"Why did you tell me about Rupert not knowing who the father is?"

“Because I knew *you’d* understand why I was telling you.” Shona stopped smiling and slid her arm away from mine. A dismissive gesture that let me know I was now a non-person in Shona-land.

I told you she had class.

Chapter 33

Feeling the size of Thumbelina in flatties after my chat with Shona, I slunk upstairs to do repair work on my face and my ego. However, since I seemed to be well on my way toward a straight flush in the weird confrontation sweepstakes, my walking in on some sexy thrashing around between two of my guests on my Ralph Lauren bedspread seemed just the trump card I needed to complete the hand I'd been dealt for this evening.

I'll say this: Hedy rumped and embarrassed was as gorgeous as Hedy sleek and ready for the kill. Lesley looked like a middle-aged lady doctor making a fool of herself over someone she knew to be as thick as clotted cream. On the other hand, she was clearly not interested in Hedy's grasp of Hegel.

No one knew what to do, of course. There was a lot of dithering, with me trying to get out of there the way I came, but getting my sleeve caught on the doorknob. Lesley made what are known primly as adjustments to her clothing, starting with what are known even more primly by Rigby and Peller (by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen, and there's a pun in there somewhere, but I refuse to touch it) as her underpinnings. Hedy just flung her braid over her shoulder and gave me a killer look as if I was the intruder in my own bedroom, if you please! God, the arrogance of the stupid.

"Sorry about this," I said, despising myself for letting Hedy get to me.

"No, no! Please!" Lesley sounded desperate.

"No, really, I shouldn't have come in without knocking."

Now I was being ridiculous, making an apology for walking into my own bedroom at a Thanksgiving dinner; why, even Hedy looked sorry (ish) for me.

She slid off the bed. "How were you to know? Don't feel too embarrassed, I'd hate you to feel too embarrassed," she said.

"Oh, fine." Can you credit such crap? I guess I was ready to swallow such *chutzpah* whole because my mother always told Beverly and me that a good hostess never commented on anything done or said by guests in her home. She was talking about spilling wine or the odd cigarette burn on the

carpet, but a lot has changed since *The Donna Reed Show* and you gotta roll with the punches, right?

Lesley messed about with her hair, making it look even worse. "I'm glad you're taking it so well – . We just came up here to talk and well ..."

"One thing led to another?"

"We couldn't help ourselves."

"It was just one of those things," Hedy told us, rounding out the cliché fest.

I was in shock, but still functioned at one or two levels.

"Lesley, go and put on some makeup, you know where it is."

She did, hurrying into the bathroom, shutting the door. I heard a lot of drawer slamming, indicating Lesley was nervous, but in control enough to seek out the right shade of blusher.

Hedy smiled. "Are you surprised?"

"By what?"

We both knew by what, but dummy looked uncertain because I hadn't given the answer she expected. God, what a shitty lawyer she would have made. "By my being gay," Ally McBeal explained. "Remember how I laughed when you asked if I wanted to bring Brandon tonight? Well I knew you thought I was having it off with him, but I'm not, of course."

"Thanks for explaining," I told her, then got to the interesting part. "Do Nina and Daniel know?"

She missed a beat before answering. "More or less."

Which meant they suspected something, but being in denial about everything else in life, they just kept on trucking in delusion-ville about Hedy's sex life. I didn't like any of the Wolfe family that evening, so decided to have some fun.

"Which is the more part, and which the less?"

Hedy sat on the edge of the bed, not answering. She shot anxious glances at the bathroom door, but her Lady Lancelota didn't appear to rescue her from the horrid dragon.

"Oh let me guess," I was blowing a little smoke out of my nose – metaphorically that is – just to scare her, which was fun and almost made up for her stealing my friend away. "The 'more' part is that Nina knows or has guessed, but you don't talk about it. The 'less' part is that Daniel doesn't know and you aren't sure how he'd take it."

"Who'd take what?" Lesley asked, coming out of the bathroom. She looked better, or at least neater. My Bobbi Brown Sand Pink blusher and

Brown lipstick didn't do it for her, but at least her poise seemed restored to the normal range. "What are we talking about?"

Hedy and I made a contract with our eyes. "We're talking about Paco – ."

"Get out of here!" Lesley swept aside my bullshit. "You're talking about Hedy and me and where this is going. You're wondering how the family is going to take it."

"More or less," Hedy repeated what seemed to be her mantra for the night, slithering over to Lesley and tucking an arm through the doc's. She didn't acknowledge the good intentions of my failed cover, but Hedy owed me one for the effort and I aimed to collect. "They'll be okay. They have to be," she added. "This is going to last a long time."

Lesley glowed. "Yes, it is."

They walked out of the room without even a "how's by you?" – jostling one another on their way downstairs, giggling and pawing body parts like a couple of deviant prom queens.

I went into the bathroom, took a wee, slapped on the old Bobbie Brown myself, looked up and discovered Simon standing in the doorway.

"Hello young lovers?" he said.

And we both laughed so hard it was a good job I'd just taken a pee, otherwise I would have pissed myself.

Chapter 34

Simon stuck around until the end, which came sooner than it should have done, but not a moment too soon for me. I was worn out by the subterranean goings on, I'll tell you, and not sorry to see the back of the whole bunch.

Lesley clearly wanted to get out of here; Hedy seemed more circumspect, but that was for Nina and Daniel's sake, no doubt. I had a passing thought for where Pandora might stand in the matter of her daughter's sexuality, but someone that self-absorbed probably wouldn't notice if her offspring opted for bestiality – so I lost interest. Hedy left first, making noises about studying her lines for something or other, and in about two pulse beats the lady doc was out out here with some crap about seeing a patient. Simon and I didn't dare look at each other as they floated this shit by us.

The rest of the Wolfe pack left together. They'd had "a wonderful time," I was told by Nina, who had loved meeting my "interesting friends." We promised vaguely to meet up in the future, but I didn't drag out my diary and neither did she. Looking at my feet, Daniel told me his assistant would call to let me know a taping time. Pandora gave me a disinterested "thank you, so kind," and herded the other two out of the house. I waited to see if Daniel looked back, but he didn't, so that was that.

Shona took Rupert home after he'd killed the rest of Gerry's cognac and any chance the rest of us had at making adult conversation. I wondered why I'd got into bed with the man in the first place, admitting to myself that it was his interest in me that got me over the hurdle of feeling shitty about Gerry, so I decided it was dumb to feel guilty about something I'd already done. Anyway, God knows the Thorntons could fucking well take care of themselves. We did the usual routine about getting together "soon," but all three of us knew we'd sooner eat ground glass and so another love of my life made his exit.

Paco wanted "to hang around" but his cats needed feeding. Truth was, Nina, Hedy and Pandora's indifference to him smarted and I guessed that what was left of the evening needed to be retrieved profitably by cruising his favorite gay bar. Who could blame him? We did a double-cheeked "mwa

mwa,” Paco absent-mindedly shaping my bangs with his fingers and he was gone, a stranger in the night.

Maureen made me promise to leave the dishes until the next morning (oh, right) when she felt well enough to help. She excused herself, exhausted from jet lag, her cold, eating too much fat and water retention brought on by not drinking enough water.

Marl and Dore offered to stay and help with the dishes more immediately. Well, one of them did, but the other was blowing in her ear and she didn't look or sound sincere to me.

“I'll stay and help,” Simon offered.

“Brilliant!” Dore gurgled, taking his tongue out of Marl's ear long enough to reply, “I don't think our little friend here will mind, right?”

He winked at me and I considered disemboweling him.

“Dore,” Marl muttered in warning.

“What?” Dore massaged her butt with his paws and winked at me – again! That was twice in as many minutes –grounds for murder in any court. “Chill out Marl,” he scolded. “Mimi knows I'm just taking the piss, it's between friends, right babe?”

He directed a third wink (!) in the direction of the babe in question. I opened my mouth to give Dore the skinny on my standards of friendship and his failure to meet any of them. Simon stepped in.

“Why don't you two get off now? We'll get on with this.”

“Thanks, Simon,” Marl said and grabbed Dore. They were halfway down the hall when she called something over her shoulder about “thanks for everything” and the Dore-ism of “catching me tomorrow.” We heard some obscene banter as they put on their coats by the front door, then with a slam of said door they were gone. I turned to Simon.

“Thanks for getting rid of Dore.”

“Not at all,” he smiled, adding “I'm used to dealing with difficult children.”

“Him or me?” I was curious.

“Both, but 75 percent of it was him. Your behavior was more a response to unique stimulæ than a manifestation of ongoing personality dysfunction.”

“That's a relief.” I meant it. I started unloading the dishwasher.

“Anyway, he won't be in her life for much longer, so I won't have to put up with him past about next Passover.”

“Why do you say that?” Simon was lining dirty glasses up like soldiers on the counter, ready for the reloading exercise.

I paused, a platter in hand. “You think he’s sincere?”

“Oh yes, very.” Simon looked at me. “He’s in love with her? Can’t you tell?”

I had such a weird feeling then. I don’t know how to describe it, just to say that it had to do with feeling sick on the one hand, and wanting to cry on the other. Honestly, tears welled up and I had to turn away.

“You’ve had a couple of shocks tonight haven’t you?”

“Three, as long as we’re counting,” I corrected him when I could speak again.

Simon put his arm around my shoulders. “Why don’t we walk the dog and you can tell me about it?”

So we did just that.

Chapter 35

Things settled down for me a lot after meeting Simon. He's an anal compulsive, so order is important to him and God knows (!) my life was as long overdue for a tidy-up as was my closet. Actually, it's great having a man around who knows what's going on with you and cares into the bargain. I mean, how many guys would rather talk about you, than listen to you talk about them? Yes, Simon has a brother, but don't bother taking a number because he's gay.

Simon explained a lot to me on our walk that first night, mostly about my feelings when I caught Lesley and Hedy having what the English refer to so romantically as a snog. While Otto got into a pissing contest with a tree, Simon told me it was clear I hadn't wanted to deal with Lesley's sexuality in the first place, so the shock of actually finding her with another woman was a double whammy.

"We're talking denial?"

Simon shrugged. "That's it, basically. Although I think we can leave the jargon out of it. You assigned her a place in *your* life, but you pushed aside the fact of her sexuality because you didn't want to deal with the reality of Lesley having a part of *her* life from which you are, by necessity, excluded."

"That's for sure," I brooded. Otto was in circling mode, then changed his mind about depositing his crap in the fiftieth tree well of the evening we'd passed by. We went in search of a more appropriate venue. "I feel as if I've lost a friend."

"Well, in a way you have."

"What?" I hate it when people agree with insights I'd rather not have had. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll have to adjust to her as part of a couple, just for a start," he added, "I think what's pissed you off to some degree is that she's fallen for Hedy, instead of someone you consider worthy of her. Happens though; lightweights have their attractions." He sounded a bit moody with that last bit. I figured there was an experience or two that rankled on a personal level for Simon Freud, but I wasn't about to go there. Yet.

“Yes, okay that has a lot to do with it,” I admitted. Otto finally gave St John’s Wood his gift for the night so we were able to turn around and head for home. “I’m not crazy for Hedy. Not only is she dumb and so self-absorbed that she wouldn’t know if war had broken out, she gave me a hard time about ...” I stopped, but Simon finished my sentence for me.

“Her father? I shouldn’t imagine that patronizing old cow of a mother was about to shout welcome to the family, either. As for that mad wife, she’ll never let go. You’re well out of that if I may say so.”

I was about to tell him he was full of shit, when I realized he’d summed up my phantom relationship with Daniel in four sentences. The guy knew his business, or mine – if we’re going to be exact. But how? Christ, I’d known him for five nanoseconds. “How do you know about the Wolfes?”

“Marlene and Dore told me.”

“Oh right.” And I might have guessed Marl shared my private business with her pet snake. “How did the subject come up, anyway?”

“I sensed a certain tension between you and Daniel and asked her about it. You’re obviously good friends, so I assumed she would know what’s going on. Anyway, I’m curious about you.”

“Oh.” That was okay then.

“Do you mind?”

“It depends on whether it’s a professional or a personal curiosity.” Twice bitten and a girl gets shy; if Simon was to be dumped, the sooner the better.

“Very personal.”

“Good.” Very good.

We reached my front door. Otto tugged on the end of his lead, impatient to claim his *après* walk biscuit. We went in and he rushed down the hall to the kitchen, head shaking impatiently in the direction of the Shapes basket on the counter. I gave him his treat and he was happy.

Then I remembered my scheduled trip with Lesley to the Ciudad de Los Angeles. “What am I going to do about Christmas?”

“You’re Jewish, you don’t have to do anything.”

I explained my plans.

“I don’t see why you can’t still go.”

“Because Hedy will be there, that’s why. She was already set to go anyway to make a TV thing.” I picked up an opened bottle of wine, found two reasonably clean glasses, and headed for the TV room, with Simon and Otto following me. Simon sat on the sofa next to me, Otto curled up on the floor.

“Want a drink?” I offered. Simon shook his head, so I drained what was left of the wine into a glass.

“You aren’t going just to be with Lesley. You’ll have Maureen and your family, surely?”

“Yes, but Hedy will be around.”

“She’ll be working, won’t she?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “Yes, that’s the idea...”

“That’s good, isn’t it? You’ll have time to talk things through with Lesley.”

I didn’t go for talking things through and said so.

Simon shook his head. “You should learn.”

“Why, it doesn’t get things back to the way they were.”

“Why should things get back to the way they were? You can’t win them all, you know. Talking straight to Lesley, exploring your feelings with the one person who can give you some honest feedback, will get your friendship back on track, even if the track is a different one. Shame to throw away what you have because you don’t want to look at things as they are or because they aren’t what you want them to be.”

“I don’t play the reality card very well.”

“You watch too much television.”

I wasn’t pleased. Trimming the fat is one thing, but he was cutting into the muscle. “I bet you say that to all your patients.”

“Only to very special children.”

I gave up. “Can’t I feel sorry for myself for just a little longer? I’ve lost a girlfriend, you know.”

“No,” Simon shook his head. “You’ve just reached another level in the relationship and you have to sort out how to get on with things.” God, the guy was relentless.

“Yes, but it’s that way with Marl, as well. Everything is changing, now that she’s met Dore,” I complained. “I don’t know where I am anymore, with anyone, even with my ex - .” I tried to bite back the last bit, remembering my porky of earlier in the evening – that Gerry and I were history, when as far as the law was concerned, we were still current affairs. Simon didn’t seem to care, though.

“Actually, Marl filled me in on your marital status – .” Oh, naturally, how could I have forgotten my unofficial biographer, “– and I can see you have a lot to deal with. You’ll have to change along with everyone else.”

I knew he was right, but I didn't like it. Why couldn't my life be like June Cleaver's? The only thing she ever changed about herself was that shirtwaist dress. Oh well, at least there was one constant in my life.

"Yes," Simon agreed. "I can't imagine Maureen changing ever, if that's any comfort. Every idea she's ever had is preserved in cement."

"Yeah," I smiled for the first time in quite a while. "Her mind must look like the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese." See, I've said it before that Maureen always cheers me up.

"Do you mind if I make myself a coffee?" I nodded and Simon got up, flipped on the electric kettle, searched through the cupboard for a mug, and then found the jar of instant coffee. No really, he did all of this on his own. He turned, leaning against the counter.

"What's with the two out of P.G. Wodehouse?"

"I take it you mean the Thorntons?" I stalled.

"I didn't know such types existed anymore. They'd be anomalies in any crowd. How do you know them?"

I opted for *non-sequitur* as the best defense, a British ploy and not a bad one at that. "You don't seem to like my friends very much."

He poured boiling water into his mug. "I like Marl and Lesley. Even Paco has his charms. The rest of them seemed to be people you know rather than real friends. That doesn't answer the question of how you know those two, though does it?"

"Around. A dinner party I think." I fed Otto some turkey from the carcass on the table and he was thrilled. I didn't want to get into the Thornton mess until I'd come to terms with it on my own, but Freud of Scotland Yard was on the case. "He's a bright man doing the upper class English buffoon act, and she's a piece of work."

I was interested. "How do you mean?"

Simon grinned. "Let's say that Pandora Wolfe is small beer compared to the lady laird."

Having been on the business end of the lady's fishhook I wasn't about to disagree. I still didn't want to pursue the subject. "Yeah well ..." was all I could manage.

"Our Rupert likes you."

I expected that. "Yeah, well ..."

"It's none of my business, is it?"

“No, not yet anyway.” I stood up and went over to him. “Are you staying or what?”

“Both,” he told me, which turned out to be okay.

Chapter 36

I'd never seen a pop-up wedding invitation before, but Simon thought the concept *could* catch on. Twin flaps opened (embossed with a riot of blue metallic wedding bells), then a champagne glass full of bubbles popped up with Marlene and Dore's grinning heads peeping over the brim. The glass rested on two, intertwined Stars of David with an invitation to join them at a celebration of their marriage on the 3rd of May at the Berkeley Hotel, seven for seven thirty. I assumed the card was stage-managed by Dore's agency, since Smythson of Bond Street would have closed their exclusive doors forever rather than have any truck whatsoever with a pop-up of any kind.

Smythson did have truck, however, with the events that marked the lives of the Thorntons. A plain card with pink trim had arrived in February to announce the birth of a daughter, Victoria Fiona Diana, weight 8 pounds 9 ounces, to my pals Shona and Rupert. I sent a silver picture frame from Asprey's engraved with the birth date and a note saying how pleased I was, how nice it must be to have a girl after two boys, blah, blah, blah. Shona isn't the only one with class around here.

Back to the wedding. Marl had opted for a private ceremony in the rabbi's chambers with only close family in attendance. Dore had agreed, but insisted on the splash-out at the Berkeley to celebrate their mutual good fortune, and who could blame him? In his own way, he was truly smitten with Marl and for that I could forgive him anything but making me dance with him at the reception. I told him so, but he just winked and said I'd change my mind.

I rsvp'd via the enclosed card, then started worrying about the two "whats" of any wedding: what to wear and what would be considered a suitable gift?

"I don't care, you don't have to get us anything," Marl told me over lunch at Harvey Nicks. She was swooningly happy. "I have stuff left over from the first two times I haven't even looked at."

"Even so ... "

"Don't be silly ... "

"I insist ..."

“You don’t have to...”

We played this game for a while then got down to business. There was something Dore wanted and I was the designated giver of: “whiskey tumblers of some sort.”

I was instructed, with efficiency belying the casual approach to the subject, on the manufacturer, the preferred pattern and where the objects of desire could be purchased. No price ceiling was discussed, but I wasn’t counting on a bargain.

Marlene wasn’t as fussy about what I wore. “Just don’t look better than me.”

I settled on a silk Calvin Klein sheath – in red, at Simon’s insistence – then had Harrods send a set of six Waterford crystal whiskey glasses at fifty quid a pop. Simon was under instructions to wear his new Cerruti navy blue, summer weight wool. I reminded him to book a session with his stylist, to make sure his hair looked right.

Maureen called to tell me she was coming for the big night and that led to recent news of Lesley: Hedy had dumped her for someone big, big, *big*, in the industry.

“Who?”

Maureen told me.

“No shit. I didn’t know she was gay.”

“She isn’t out, but everyone has known for years.”

“But she has a kid – .”

“Hello!” Maureen sneered. “You don’t need guys for that anymore. They take a turkey baster or something and that does the job. Come to think of it – ,” she gave a mirthless honk, “– I’ve known guys who were about as good at it as a turkey baster, so why not the other way around?”

“But I thought they were getting along so well, Hedy and Lesley I mean. They were like lovebirds when I was there over Christmas. I felt like the cuckoo in the nest.”

“Hold on. Mimi – ” I heard Sidney asking something about background music for the Dybwa opus in progress. “Christ!” she yelled right into my ear, “Can’t anyone but me do anything around here?” Sidney answered with more spirit than was usual for him, “I told you what I wanted to do yesterday and you called me a *yutz*.” “I always call you a *yutz*,” Maureen reminded him, “but it never stopped you before – .”

“Hey!” I called out. “Anyone remember me?”

“Yeah, right,” – Maureen told Sidney to get out, which he must have done because I heard the office door shut with a flounce.

“Where were we?”

“Lesley and Hedy ...?”

“Well, it’s a career move, isn’t it? Fucking gets you where you want to go in this town, don’t let anyone tell you different.”

No one ever had, or was likely to. “I take it the new squeeze can do her some good?”

“Not some. A lot.”

I sighed. I wondered why I hadn’t heard from Lesley. I’d been leaving messages for about a week now. When had this happened?

“About a week ago.” I could tell Maureen was losing interest. A stranger to tender feelings, the suffering of others could hold her only during the telling.

“She needs to talk about it. I’ll try and get her to come over here for the wedding reception. Cheer her up some.”

“Yeah, right. I’ll work on her, too.”

I considered Maureen’s short, not so sweet “get over it” approach to cradling people through crises. “Let’s not push it too hard. I’ll float the idea and see what happens.”

“Yeah, okay.” She paused. “You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“Well, what happened between Lesley and Hedy? I mean falling in love, then one dumping the other? Ordinary kind of stuff?”

“What about it?”

“Well”

“Tell me?”

“Makes you think ...”

She was driving me crazy. “Think about what?”

“Well, I guess I didn’t realize that lesbians acted like us. I mean, this emotional crap is just like the kind of stuff that happens between normal couples, huh?”

The doorbell rang, a godsend in fact as well as fiction. We said our goodbyes, I rushed to open the front door to find Daniel Wolfe on my doorstep.

Chapter 37

“I brought you a tape of the show. It’s very good indeed. One of the best programs we’ve ever done for *See/Hear*. You did wonderfully.” He handed me a bulky manila envelope.

“Thanks.” I felt awkward. “I mean for the compliment – as well as delivering the tape in person.”

“Nothing but the truth, and it was the least I could do.”

We stood there, neither of us knowing what to say. The taping *had* gone well and I was not surprised, after catching a glimpse or two of playback later, that we’d created good television. Daniel and I had a certain *rapport* on camera, even while being none too chummy off. I had a nice line of patter and looked good; he played straight man like the born host he was; the clips Maureen’s assistant had selected after many hours in the archives were spot on.

I invited him in without sincerity; he declined in the same vein. I would have closed the door, but curiosity got the better of me. “How’s Pandora?”

“She’s gone back to Tanzania for a while.” He shuffled around a bit, then came out with it. “Perhaps you and I could have dinner soon?”

Great, then you can mess my head around again. “No, I’m sorry. I’m involved with someone now.”

“Ah, a shame.” Daniel didn’t look all that disappointed but who can tell with people, right? I know I wanted him to feel like shit because as someone smarter than me once observed, revenge is a dish best eaten cold. Always.

“Yes. How is Hedy? Lot of changes in her life for you to get used to, huh?” Okay, below the belt but can you blame me?

“Ah ... yes ... well.” He looked at his feet. “She’s doing well on the career front. The pilot’s been picked up, there’s a film in the offing with that friend of yours, as I’m sure you know.”

I did. Brandon and Hedy must have been on drugs to agree to a three-picture deal on the terms offered by Dybwa Productions. The first of the trilogy was starting production even as I spoke to Hedy’s papa. Some muddled crap in which Hedy played a professor at some unspecified Oxford college who finds

herself the target of a hitman hired by what passed for the government of some hellhole in eastern Europe, with an equally unspecified grudge against her. The two successive scripts didn't sound much better, but Maureen didn't give a shit; the best plot here was the bottom line.

"Got her dirt cheap and it's written in stone. There's no way that little snotnose Brandon can negotiate his way out of this one!" Maureen had crowed. "She's bound to make it big within the first ten minutes of being seen by the troglodytes in head office when ABC airs her series in the fall season. I'll make a bomb!"

Hedy's dad didn't seem as jubilant over his daughter's prospects. "Her personal life isn't going as I expected, however." He looked at me helplessly and I softened toward him. The guy had so little practice at dealing with real life that coping with the emotional complexities shoved in his face by Hedy's sex life had him looking like a pinch-hitter facing a devious curve ball from a left-handed pitcher: dazed and confused. I guess it's true that there's no hurt like that suffered through your children, because this guy looked poleaxed.

"Hedy's a grown woman, she has to sort out her own life and she will. She'll be just fine, you know."

"One hopes," he said, but didn't sound sincere.

I was sick of the subject so leapfrogged to something in his life that interested me even less.

"Any word on Ilona?"

"Oh yes, well, Ilona's fine. She's out of hospital and at a terribly nice place where they look after her. We haven't found another housekeeper, but Pandora and Hedy thought it important I stay on at the house. Anyway, Nina's nurse is a great help –."

"Nina's nurse?" Had I heard him properly?

"Oh, yes." He looked surprised. "I assumed you knew?"

"About what?"

"Her stroke." Daniel scuffed a Gucci-ed foot on my doorstep.

Can you believe the man? He stands on the doorstep, chatting away about his miserable kid and finally – finally (!) gets around to telling me his mother had a stroke. Okay, so he looked upset around the edges when he told me, but talk about a fucked-up sense of priorities.

"How would I know? Oh ... right." I realized he meant Lesley via Hedy, but the doc and I didn't speak all that often anymore. Christmas in L.A. had gone okay, but there was no getting around the fact that we just weren't as close as we had once been. We tried, but we couldn't quite connect and I'm

only guessing, but I doubt our shadowy estrangement broke Hedy's heart. "When did it happen? How serious is it?"

"She collapsed about three weeks ago." He shook what I once thought of as his handsome head. I mean his head was still handsome, but my lust was gone. "She has no movement on her right side and she can't speak. Pretty serious, I'm afraid."

Daniel didn't sound afraid by my standards, so I nudged him in the right direction.

"Sounds more than pretty serious, it sounds just about as bad as it gets. Poor Nina, she must be terrified."

He actually took a second to think about that. "I'm sure you're right."

The guy had a gene missing. I told him to give Nina my love, promised to visit her within the week, then blew the schmuck off with the speed of sound. And let me tell you something for now and forever: I was never as relieved in my life to close the door on a man, as I was to slam it shut on Daniel Wolfe.

Chapter 38

Gerry, Rosie and the baby moved to L.A. in February. I couldn't believe it when I got a letter from Gerry asking if I would release my interest in the Brentwood House, in exchange for the London place – which is how I found out about the move in the first place because it would have taken someone with balls to give me that news in person.

I called Gerry immediately to ask what was going on, but it was nothing sinister, just the L.A. office needed him as one senior partner had retired and the other died. Rosie was a good sport about the move, he told me, she looked forward to having a swimming pool, although she thought the dark green tiles – my pride and joy lining the oval shaped basin – a little dull and considered a switch to turquoise. As soon as they knew of the move, they'd signed William up for future enrollment in a crack pre-nursery school with a great record of getting toddlers on the right track for the Ivy League. Gerry thanked me for being reasonable about the divorce. I assumed he referred to the speed of our negotiations – because he couldn't have any gratitude for the financial hunk of flesh exacted. He arranged a last weekend with Otto, expressing his regrets at being so far away from the little feller in the future. I thought it was quite fair that Gerry should suffer loss and I still thought the bastard was getting off easy.

His going back to LA depressed me though. I said as much to Simon when he came over that evening, bringing some wonderful deli from Villandry. I couldn't go there after getting into a fighting match with the sour Frenchman owner a few weeks before, but Villandry was close enough to the hospital that Simon didn't mind picking up my favorites. I'd recorded a segment of my favorite soap, *EastEnders*, the night before, so we ate in front of the TV, Otto hovering.

"It has to feel rather odd." Simon was full to the brim with empathy, as usual. "You came to London together for his career, now he leaves and you're left to put your life together on your own."

"I feel a bit left out. I mean she's going to be in my house for Christ sake; it's as if he's done an exchange and got confused."

"Oh that won't last for long, living in your house, I mean." Simon spread a bit of bread with brie and gave it to Otto who looked starry-eyed with

gratitude. “You can be sure she doesn’t like it any better that you do. They sell and buy something else in six months.”

That really pissed me off. “I love that house! I put a lot of time into it. The idiot doesn’t even like the dark tiles, everyone wants dark tiles these days – and that idiot plans to change to turquoise. It’ll look like a cheap motel.”

“What’s going on here?” Simon changed the subject and who could blame him? He referred, of course, to the brutish Grant Mitchell, flexing his muscles and scowling at an equally pissed-off young woman with a shrill voice across the bar from him in the Queen Vic pub, the Mitchell family fiefdom. Grant grabbed her wrist, eyes bugging out of his head, and she, in turn, wisely shut up. “I hope he’s a villain because he appears to be a psychopath.”

“No, he’s an antihero, sort of. He just has a bad temper.”

“I’ll say!” Grant had just shrugged off the restraining hands of a tiny blond creature dressed up like Barbie out on the town as she hurtled down the passageway behind the bar from the force of his rage. Simon pointed at her fast retreating figure. “My God, who was that?”

“Peggy, his mother,” I explained. “Anyway how do I know I won’t want to live in L.A. again? Where will I go?”

“Your life is here now, but if you went back to L.A. you could stay with your sister, couldn’t you?” I gave him a look, but he was too used to my fulminating to care. “And there’s me, of course. You wouldn’t want to leave me, would you?”

“There’s an ‘us’ for me to leave?”

Simon laughed, handed me a piece of *ciabatta* loaded with *prosciutto crudo*. “You know there is.”

I did, but didn’t want to be easy. It was a reflex action, my setting about creating some obstacle to our happiness, but Simon was absorbed once more by the TV.

“Aren’t there any policemen on this show to stop this sort of thing?” Grant continued bullying the unfortunate brunette in his grasp. She, meanwhile, regained her power of speech, demanding in nasal, BBC cockney that Grant get a life and stay out of hers. Simon shook his head. “I can’t understand what anyone is saying, anyway. Their accents are absurd, I’ve never heard anything like that in my life.”

“How do you know how they sound in the East End? You’ve never been east of ... east of ... the Barbican Centre to hear the LSO.” My sense of direction could best be described as challenged, so I wasn’t all that confident about my finish, but needs must. I was in a bad temper over Gerry, Rosie, the house, the pool, and I needed to vent.

Which Simon took in his stride. “I don’t have to camp out on the Isle of Dogs to know that most of the residents of the East End are Pakistani these days. The lot we’re watching here were thought up in nostalgia central at the BBC.”

“Oh yeah?” I sulked. Otto gazed at my *prosciutto*, eyes limpid with desire. “No more. It’s bad for your stomach, makes you sick,” I said spitefully. Otto, used to the winds of war, sighed and waited.

“Now what? Who are these two people?” Simon pointed at the screen. What’s she on about?” A red-headed shrew berated a sweet-faced simpleton, who was ill-equipped verbally or intellectually to stem the abuse streaming from his wife’s rosebud mouth. She marched out of the garage where he worked, shoulders bowed down from anxiety.

“Bianca,” I explained. “Ricky’s her husband, but he’s a fool.”

“With that rogue temper of hers she should get together with Grant.”

“She hates Grant, because of what he did to Tiffany.”

“Tiffany?”

I started to explain, but Simon shook his head, throwing his arms up in surrender.

“Never mind. I’ve never come across so many angry people. I haven’t seen a single character who wouldn’t benefit from intensive therapy.”

“Exactly,” I told him. “Most people are pissed off and miserable so this is a catharsis. If you took the poetry and royalty out of Greek tragedy and left in the *dreck*, you’d have soap opera. Dull and horrible lives elevated by crisis into drama.”

“So this crap is nothing more than an exercise in mass wish fulfillment,” Simon sighed.

“Sure. Why else would anyone watch crap like this?”

“You have a point. It’s an idiotic point but it’s a point.”

“It *is* for idiots, what other sort of point could I make?”

I had him there. Simon shut up and watched tiny Peggy give her son a smack across the face that left him looking livid. The first few drum rolls of the *EastEnders* theme music indicated we’d have to wait until the next evening to see which Mitchell might end up in Accident & Emergencies.

Chapter 39

Lesley arrived just after lunch, having circled Heathrow for hours. She and Maureen were on the same plane, so the doc dosed her up on board before a bug of any kind could take hold. They weren't alone though: sister Beverly was with them! Boy, was I pleased by that surprise. I got everyone settled in, they took naps, baths, snacked, borrowed my makeup and generally turned the house upside down before settling down in the kitchen in the early evening.

We drank wine, waiting for Maureen to join us. I'd booked a table at the Lanesborough for 8:00. At Simon's urging, as a concession to my newly independent state, I planned not to charge the whole thing to Gerry, but instead to have Maureen, Lesley and Beverly chip in. Gerry still chipped in if you want to think about it that way, just by agreeing to a generous settlement, so magnanimity was not the sacrifice it could have been. Simon insisted I cut up the platinum card, which sucked. I lied and said I had. There was no reason for him to know everything, right?

Beverly planned to wear the same gray dress, the aborted choice for the *bar mitzvah*, to the reception. She wanted to know, not without an edge to her voice, what I planned to wear? I told her and got a big take in astonishment mode.

"So you're wearing red? I'm shocked! How come?"

Maureen answered for me, why I don't know. "Simon likes her in red, that's why."

Beverly turned back to me. "So this Simon? A doctor, nice. When do I meet him?" Her tone of voice when she said "doctor" hinted at a budding envy quotient – which I wanted out of play as soon as possible.

"Tomorrow at the reception. Anyway, doctors here are not the big deal they are in the U.S. They aren't richer than God." There was a mew of protest from Lesley, but I ignored her, "and no one believes they are high priests, either."

"Sorry, I just wondered. I am your sister, after all." Still, Beverly looked relieved not to have to cope with being outdone in the status sweepstakes.

I'd avoided any mention of Hedy since their arrival, but we had time to kill. I refilled Lesley's glass and jumped in. "So, seen anything of Hedy?"

"Yeah, they ran into each other last week," Maureen answered, gnawing on an Orinoco from the package not cracked open since her last visit.

"How was it?" Lesley's lips moved, but the words came from another direction.

"Fine, they talked and Lesley didn't want to kill her."

"So tell me, Lesley," I tried again. "is she still with ...?"

"Sure!" Maureen interrupted, sweeping Orinoco dust from her lap. "Think she'd drop a contact like that?"

"I'm right here, Maureen!" Lesley was getting irritated. "I can answer for myself, you know."

"Who's stopping you?" The woman actually sounded astonished.

Lesley looked at Maureen for a long moment and I had high hopes for a faceoff, but Marl whirled in and spoiled the moment.

For Marlene there was lots of kissing, hugging and "*mazeltovs*." Maureen wanted to know where she and Dore were going for the honeymoon, soon adding, "The Seychelles – wow! Where's that?"

Marl explained, adding: "Just as well, we're exhausted from planning things."

"Always the way," Beverly nodded. "My *bar mitzvah* nearly killed me. How are they treating you at the hotel?"

Marl and Beverly went off on a tangent so boring I considered eating an Orinoco to stay awake. Lesley looked moody and hit the wine bottle again. Maureen, not having to observe the protocol between sisters as well as disliking Beverly in the first place, put a stop to the chatter about colorblind florists and vengeful musicians.

"Hey folks! Let's get this show on the road! How are we getting to the ..." She snapped her fingers. "Where are we going?"

"The Lanesborough. It's a hotel," I told her.

"We thought of the Lanesborough," Marl One Note told Beverly as we went out of the front door. "But Dore said ..."

"Christ!" Maureen was already in the street, looking for a taxi. "Don't they ever shut up?" she said to no one in particular.

I finally had a moment with Lesley. "How do you feel about things?"

"If you mean Hedy, I wish I was dead." Lesley said and I swear there were tears in her eyes.

“You’ll get over it,” I said, which is what people always say at moments like this.

Chapter 40

My appearance on *See/Hear*, which aired in April, was a success, resulting in really sexy payback. The closing credits had barely rolled by when the phone started ringing. The *Guardian* and *The Independent* sent A-list hacks to interview me, *Vanity Fair* and the *Sunday Times Magazine* offered me hot commissions, and there were other terrific offers I couldn't accept because I risked overextending myself. All of a sudden, it seemed the world couldn't get over me: what I wore, thought, said. It was wonderful! Things got better, though.

And speaking of Simon, by the way, things were going well in that department. We settled into a good arrangement, expecting so little that what we got seemed a bonus. Simon was so nice that I seemed nicer by association – not at all bad. Oh sure, there weren't many surprises, but so what? Anyway, I liked his daughter Helena, a trainee barrister, a lot. It was like having my own kid to go shopping with, and take to lunch, but I didn't need to worry about her the way real moms did. Her own mother, Simon's number one, was cool about all of this. Simon's number two had been strictly fast food, a union producing neither kids nor many memories as far as I could tell.

Not long after Marl and Dore's reception, Simon and I went to a dinner party given by the parents of one of his former patients. I was seated next to an unprepossessing guy, with beige hair and slippery eyes. He whispered his name, I asked him to speak up, and found out I was talking to Sir Darryl D'Arbo, the New Zealand media tycoon, the "Tabloid Emperor" as he'd been labeled by some broadsheet journalist. Well. Even more exciting, he had caught me on *See/Hear* and had been impressed. Well, well. Was I familiar, he wanted to know, with the satellite outlets under his control?

"Of course. I watch Channel Six all the time." That was the biggest of his concerns, a popular and much watched *mélange* of tabloid news, gossip, American comedy, drama shows, movies, and cartoons.

"Good, good." Sir Darryl, I learned, never raised his voice above a whisper, whether because he couldn't or wouldn't was something no one knew. "How about doing something for me?"

“Like what?” I was pleased, but cautious. He had a reputation for turning perfectly normal types into buffoons as fodder for the screen. “What kind of a format are we talking about?”

“Oh ...” he thought for a second, took a sip of his water and hit me with an idea that screamed my name. “Five-minute spots between shows, where you give a critique of what is coming next. Lots of one liners, sound bites.”

“Sight bites,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s good. That’s what we’ll call it. *Sight/Bites.*”

So *Sight/Bites* it was, and the concept took off like a rocket. It was cheap to produce (Sir Darryl D’Arbo was no DeMille), and the format suited an audience with the concentration span of a kindergartener high on sugar cubes. I was a star of sorts and it suited me.

Everything’s in the timing, isn’t it? Think of all those poor bastards out there, sending in CV’s and tapes, hoping for a spot on television and it turns out to be just being in the right place at the right time. Okay, so I earned my spurs but so do a lot of people; they just don’t get to sit next to media giants at dinner.

Of course, life is like that. No one expects it to be fair except the people who don’t get what they want. But is what you want what you *really* want? I thought I wanted my life with Gerry forever, then I wanted Daniel Wolfe; I didn’t get either – which wasn’t fair then. Now my former life doesn’t look all that great to me because I have what I want even though I didn’t know I wanted it then.

Say goodnight, Gracie.

About the Author



Dorothy Linick, né Dorothy Judith Goldstone, was born on October 16, 1940 in Bolton, Lancashire – the daughter of Hyman and Anne Goldstone, who had married in 1933. The family moved to a number of UK sites during the war as Hyman Goldstone followed various assignments related to his work for Rolls-Royce. Much of Dorothy’s early schooling was in Hastings – where she was the victim of a number of anti-Semitic incidents. A younger sister, Naomi, was born in 1947.

In 1953 the Goldstones, following the lead taken by other family members, emigrated to America, first to New York and then to the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles. Dorothy attended John Marshall High School and, after a stint at Los Angeles City College, moved on to UCLA in Westwood. She worked part-time in her mother’s beauty salon in Glendale and served as a page at the Democratic National Convention, the one that nominated JFK in the summer of 1960.

In 1964 she graduated from UCLA with a BA in History and in the same week married a graduate student in this department, Anthony Linick – who had earlier co-edited the avant-garde literary magazine, *Nomad*. The following year the Linicks moved to East Lansing, Michigan, where Anthony would now to take up a post as Assistant Professor of Humanities.

In 1967 the Linicks undertook a summer-long exploration of European sites, also visiting Anthony’s mother and stepfather, the composer and conductor

Ingolf Dahl, a professor at USC. Many additional summer trips to European sites followed, particularly ones to London.

In 1972 Dorothy began graduate work at Michigan State in Theater, eventually earning an MA here. Her interests in theater also included both acting and directing. She played such roles as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Mrs. Prentice in Joe Orton's *What The Butler Saw* and undertook the direction of a number of productions in local Lansing theater. Her work in the latter category earned her a Best Director award in 1979.

In 1979-1980 the Linicks enjoyed a sabbatical year in London, finding life here so congenial that after one more year in East Lansing they made a permanent move to England in 1981, settling in Maida Vale. They both served as substitute teachers at the nearby American School in London (in St. John's Wood), with Anthony joining the faculty on a permanent basis in 1984 and Dorothy undertaking the role of special projects coordinator for the high school – including work with the famous Alternatives program.

London provided a useful base for additional travel, with visits to Stockholm, Berlin, Rome, Florence, Bilbao, Sintra, Vienna (where the cover photo was taken in 2002), Prague, Budapest and, repeatedly, to Paris. There was also a period as kibbutz volunteers in Israel and, moving farther afield, trips to China, India, and Egypt. Many of these expeditions were taken in the company of Anthony's little magazine co-editor, Donald Factor, and the latter's wife, Anna.

In 1985 Dorothy began work as student activities coordinator at the American College in London, on the Marylebone High Street – where she also taught courses in theater and film. In 1992 she moved on to work in development for the St. Nicholas Montessori teacher training school in Princes Gate and after a year or so here she returned to the American School, resuming her role as special projects coordinator and teaching courses in film as well. She was responsible for the establishment of the school's distinguished speakers program and brought to ASL heroic hostage Terry Waite, U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins and American author Bill Bryson.

She retired in 2001, a year before Anthony, who had spent the last eight years of his tenure at ASL as chair of the high school English Department.

Dorothy had experimented with the writing of fiction while still in East Lansing but she returned to this activity in the '90's and, after retirement, she undertook many writing projects, of which *Sight/Bites* is the first to be made available in any form to the general reader. She was still at work on many projects when cancer ended her life on July 12, 2007. With her intelligence, wit and good heart Dorothy attracted the love and respect of many good friends throughout her life.