

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 á 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.

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