

## 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 a 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.

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