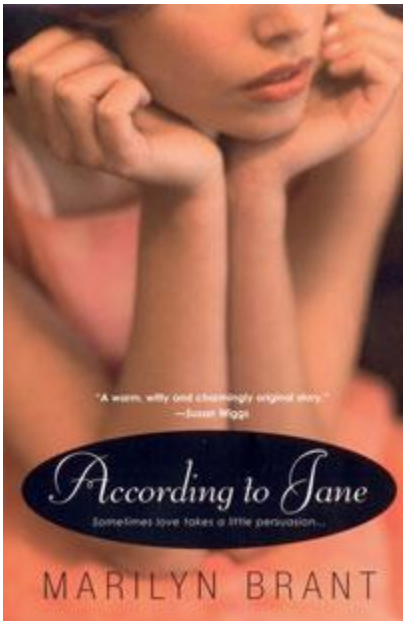
According to Jane



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"Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then."

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

"In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society."

—*Pride and Prejudice*

PROLOGUE

I always thought Homer painted his character Odysseus as a real slow learner with that whole twenty-year-journey thing. I mean, what kind of an idiot needs *two decades* to understand a simple lesson like "Don't be arrogant in the eyes of the gods"? Pretty basic, once you take out all the hard-to-pronounce Greek names, the weird epic-poem structure and everything that smacks of immortals playing with magic.

But who am I to talk? For so many years, I, too, *thought* I was clever. I, too, *thought* I was courageous. I, too, *thought* I'd figured out all my lessons but, as Jane would say, "I fear this is not so."

See, until this moment, at my wise old age of thirty-four, I had a long-held theory about my own personal power. An erroneous belief that I had more control over my destiny than I actually have.

But, to prove my point, I can't start explaining from where I am now. It wouldn't make sense.

Journeys begin where journeys begin...and mine began with big hair, legwarmers and the

musty smell of Mrs. Leverson's English class, way back in the mid-1980s when I was all of fifteen.

I was in sophomore lit then—midweek, early November, daydreaming of life after high school—when Sam Blaine made his first move and Jane Austen made her first comment.

"Ellieeee," the sinfully cute but annoying-as-hell Sam Blaine chanted softly from his seat behind me. "Elllieee." He walked two of his fingers up the imaginary ladder between my shoulder blades until I shivered.

"Stop it," I hissed. "You're going to get us in trouble."

I scooched forward, trying to focus on Mrs. Leverson's nasal-toned wrap-up lecture of the novel we'd just finished, *Childhood's End*. Although I was pretty sure my childhood had long ended, I resigned myself to acting polite and studious in class if it killed me. I had a reputation to uphold.

Sam, however, had no intention of allowing me to brush him off. Managing to keep his hand out of Mrs. Leverson's line of vision, he snagged my shirt and bra strap with a pinch grip and pulled me back toward him.

"C'mon, Ellie. You know you're as bored as I am." Sam skimmed his fingertips over the spot where my bra's back clasp bulged beneath the cotton fabric. "Tell me your fantasy."

As our teacher gestured with her chubby arms up in front of our suburban Chicago classroom and performed other antics to entice student participation, I thought of my fantasy: Surviving adolescence. Maybe kissing Sam someday. Being a totally cool, in control, woman of the world.

Yeah, right. But I was an optimist in the '80s.

I did not, however, divulge these imaginings to the precocious dark-haired boy who,

thanks to the eternal delights of alphabetical order, sat near me in five out of seven classes.

No.

I might lust after Sam. A lot. But I hadn't yet become self-destructive. I knew S-A-M was shorthand for D-A-N-G-E-R.

"In your fantasy, are you groping a guy in the dark, passionately, maybe under the bleachers?" Sam suggested, his voice low. His fingers massaged my spine, channeling toward me all the vigor of a testosterone-driven teen male.

I felt chills—equal parts anxiety and longing—at his touch. I tried to lean away from him again, but he drew me back with one swift motion.

"And are you feeling that guy's hands rubbing *your* body, too? First, over your clothes and, then—" he paused to stroke his thumb down my bare neck, "underneath them?"

"Cut it *out*, Sam," I whispered over my shoulder, finally breaking away despite my absurd desire for more. Since kindergarten he'd poked me in the back with his pencil tip and badgered me with pesky comments, but this was the first time he'd ever really touched my skin. I didn't know what to make of it.

See, with anyone else I might've thought some tiny crush thing was going on, but I wasn't dealing with a typical, gawky sixteen-year-old boy. This was Sam Blaine, a guy who exuded experience even then. A guy who'd morphed into a rare combination of good-looking, athletic, brainy and popular. Versus me, who was, well...just brainy. Or, at least, intelligent enough to know I wouldn't rate high on Mr. Cool's "To Date" list.

I sighed, wishing Sam's attentions were sincere, and watched as our teacher wrote the title of our new novel on the chalkboard. *Pride and Prejudice*. Then out came the big box of paperbacks, distributed to us like the slap of breaded chicken patties on our hot lunch trays.

I picked up my copy. A second later I felt Sam trace a pattern on my arm with his pinky, and I rolled my eyes. Guess he was more bored than usual. Just as I was about to tell him to knock it off yet again, I heard the first *tsk*.

In a panic of self-consciousness, I dropped the book back on my desk and glanced at our classmates. No one seemed to be paying any attention to us in the far-right row. Everyone looked lost in their own daydreams or make-out fantasies or whatever.

But I heard more tsking.

"Who said that?" I asked Sam, shooting a look behind me.

"Who said what?"

"The 'tsk, tsk' noises."

Sam's forehead crinkled. He motioned me closer and I bent back toward him, a mere three inches away from his mocking blue eyes and those ever-smirking lips. I tried hard to keep my view of him peripheral. Gazing head-on at Sam's striking features always made me sweat.

Another *tsk* came from somewhere in the room.

"That! Did you hear it?" I asked, swiveling around in my seat until I faced him. My eyes darted around in hopes of spotting the tsker.

But Sam didn't seem to have heard it. Instead he simply grinned, his hand nudging my left shoulder until I made full eye contact with him. "Must be your subconscious speaking. It's saying—" he tilted his head to the side and squinted as if in deep concentration, "'Ellie Barnett needs more sexual experience...or she'll die a virgin.'"

Then his hand slipped lower.

He covertly grazed the side of my left breast with his palm, his fingers daring to dance along the bra's underwire before breaking the connection between us.

I stifled a gasp and stared at him, my mouth agape. For a split second I thought, Did he mean to do that? Was he seriously making a move on me? Then common sense took over, and I knew this had to be one of his little jokes. Sam loved games.

He sent me a smug, defiant look. His hand, an inch away, was still poised for grasping.

Before he could try that trick again, I seized his wrist with my long, strong, meticulously polished fingernails, and I used them as pink claws to dig four crescent-shaped notches into his hairless inner arm. Deep, darkening imprints against that pale skin.

Sam grunted and pulled away. Unfortunately, his moan elicited the attention of our teacher.

"Miss *Barnett*. Mr. *Blaine*." She elongated her syllables with believable menace. "Please flirt on your own time."

The class snickered and my face burned, making me wish I could bolt out the door and hide in the girls' bathroom. I stole a glance at Sam. He didn't quite have the decency to blush, but he slunk down in his seat, obviously displeased at getting caught.

With her reprimand delivered, Mrs. Leverson busied herself locating the handouts for our next novel.

The second she turned her back, Sam hissed in my ear, "Shit, Ellie. Are you trying to scar me for life?" He pointed to the marks on his inner wrist and had the nerve to look indignant.

I fought for a retort that wouldn't get me in trouble. All I could come up with, though, was the really bitchy glare my sister had perfected on my parents, my brother and me.

"Leave me alone, Sam," I managed to say, attempting to replicate the glare. "I mean it."

Of course, I didn't mean it. And Sam knew this.

He was too bright not to have noticed the way I'd studied him all semester, how I

sparkled like a mirrored disco ball whenever he paid attention to me. Even getting to second base might've been okay if his interest in me were genuine. And if we were somewhere private.

But Sam did not exude earnestness of any kind, and his motives were nothing if not a complete mystery. He had what the adults called "an attitude," and he was copping it big time that day.

"You...don't...want me...to...touch you?" Sam said, his tone indicating disbelief. He knew I knew that virtually every other girl in our grade would've gladly agreed to be manhandled by him.

But I whispered, "No."

As if guessing the hypocrisy of my words, he narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth. I turned away before he could speak.

Why? Because even then I craved this silly romantic thing. Craved it despite knowing it was stupid. I wanted my first real boyfriend to write me love notes that I could hide in my pocket and reread later. Or hold my hand and dance with me to the latest Journey ballads. Or refuse to tell his friends the exciting things we might do in the back row of a dimly lit movie theater.

I didn't want some guy playing with my emotions for in-school entertainment, especially not the very guy I'd had a secret crush on for eons. No. I wanted pure romantic fantasy. And I got it.

But not from Sam Blaine.

"Our next novel is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," Mrs. Leverson informed us, waving her handouts in the air before plopping them on Tanya Hammersley's desk and motioning for her to distribute them. "While Tanya passes these out, take a moment to look at your new novel."

I picked up the book again, flipped to the back cover and scanned it doubtfully: *"The romantic clash of two opinionated young people in nineteenth-century England provides the sustaining theme of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE."*

Oh, ugh. This hardly sounded like high conflict, but I forced myself to keep reading: *"Vivacious Elizabeth Bennet is fascinated and repelled by the arrogant Mr. Darcy, whose condescending airs and acrid tongue have alienated the entire neighborhood."*

I imagined using the word "acrid" in a sentence. Like: Sam Blaine deserved to be locked up in a dank dungeon until his groping fingers and his *acrid* tongue disintegrated. Nice, huh?

The passage continued: *"Darcy and Elizabeth's spirited courtship is conducted against a background of assembly-ball flirtations and drawing-room intrigues..."* And blah, blah, blah.

I decided to go ahead, against all clichéd warnings, and judge a book by its cover. It was written too long ago to be any good, despite boasting a *vivacious* heroine who had a name similar to mine. And, anyway, between dealing with the rest of my schoolwork and just making it through the day, my attention span was limited.

Our teacher droned on about the setting and the political climate of Regency England and how dear old Jane spent her days confined to doing dull things like strolling in the park and writing letters because that was what fine women did back then.

I listened, more or less. But then Mrs. Leverson began telling us about the principal characters in Austen's novel, and the weirdest thing happened.

"Along with Darcy and Elizabeth, George Wickham is an important character to study," she said. "He's a militia officer and his regiment is stationed near the Bennets' family home. As you read your first assignment tonight, pay special attention to the way Austen introduces him and describes his actions."

I was seized by a curiosity I didn't understand about a character I'd never heard of before.

As Mrs. Leverson moved on to secondary players in the story, I flipped through the novel, reading random paragraphs until I saw the first mention of the Wickham guy on page 63. I skimmed the section, getting the flavor of this man who, since he didn't wind up with the heroine at the book's conclusion, couldn't really be as admirable as he seemed, when I heard a lady's voice in my ear.

Beware, Ellie, the voice said before following this up with a decided tsk or two. *Sam Blaine is your Mr. Wickham.*

Fear seized my throat and all-out panic gripped my stomach. Okay. Who said that?

I blinked then glanced wildly in every direction. Even Sam was keeping his distance, for once.

"What?" I said aloud to the unidentified voice. A few students nearby turned their heads to shoot me an odd look.

Sam, sounding sulky, muttered, "Don't look at me. I didn't do anything."

I squinted at him, suspicious.

You would do well to heed my advice, friend, said the voice, and I could've sworn I heard an ironic little laugh right along with an unmistakably British accent. *I am well acquainted with men of his ilk, and they are disinclined to be honorable. You had best keep your distance.*

Not that I doubted her words or anything—she'd nailed Sam's character in a sentence—but this whole hearing voices thing seriously freaked me out. I considered the possibilities:

Maybe I'd been whacked in the head one too many times with a volleyball that week. Gym class had been brutal.

Maybe my depraved sister had slipped some acid into my lunch. My turkey sandwich had tasted a little off.

Maybe I'd been studying too hard. After all, keeping up a 4.0 GPA was draining. Or, maybe—

You are neither ill nor suffering from head injuries, Ellie, the lady's voice said, her tone still amused.

I couldn't believe I was going to respond to this but, hey, it seemed my life wasn't weird enough already. Even if replying put me into the Potentially Insane category, I needed to know who this woman was and what she was doing in my head.

So I asked, in silence this time, *Who are you?*

I heard the twittery laughter again, but not one of my classmates had uttered a sound.

Why, I am Miss Austen, of course, the voice replied. *But you may call me Jane.*

***

As you can well imagine, Jane's manifestation in my life created some complications for me at school.

Since I was reasonably sure I'd be sent off to a psych ward if I didn't figure out what was going on, I ignored Mrs. Leverson's structured reading assignments and inhaled the whole novel in two days, snatching moments to polish off a chapter or two between classes, at lunch or late into the night. I was a girl obsessed.

Jane's voice in my head, instead of lessening, grew stronger with every page turned. While she insisted it was too early to explain why or how she'd chosen to inhabit my mind instead of, say, Sam's, Tanya's or Mrs. Leverson's, she sure was right about that Mr. Wickham character. What a prick he turned out to be.

And—fine, call me crazy—I went along with it all. I asked her endless questions, of course, about her sudden appearance in my previously silent mental world. I responded skeptically, sure, to her reticent but ever-proper replies that there was "a good reason" for her being with me (one I was frustratingly unable to pry out of her ghostly lips). But I was an egocentric teenager. I expected to be Special. I expected the Universe to have a Grand Plan for me. And I supposed this Jane thing was part of it.

Or, maybe, I was just really lonely.

Regardless, I got used to Jane being there, real fast. I rejoiced in the secretiveness of our conversations and started to enjoy the company. To count upon it.

As for Jane, she chatted, not constantly, but pointedly. She had her figurative index finger aimed in full accusation at human folly. According to her, there was plenty to criticize about her nineteenth-century era and homeland, and she didn't exactly spare me her sarcastic opinions of my time period.

Take gym class, for instance.

Young ladies engaged in sport with the gentlemen? Jane said that first day, her tone incredulous. *How barbaric.*

I stretched in my assigned spot, wishing I were anywhere else. *"Barbaric" is the word. It's downright gladiator-like. Gym is an endurance test to see how much humiliation you can tolerate before you die.*

I see, she replied, but I didn't think she had any idea. Gym was my daily nightmare. Having Jane with me, though, made those forty-two minutes of hell pass far more quickly.

On her second day, she turned her dry wit to the world of academia. And, more specifically, to my place in it.

Our history teacher asked, “Who can name the three-word motto the People of France chanted during the French Revolution?”

I’d read the chapter and could answer this, but I didn’t want to be the one to raise my hand. Sam, who was sitting across the aisle from me and knew the answers to everything, ignored the teacher completely and played with the Velcro on his Trapper Keeper. Our teacher, however, shot us pleading looks and, to me, it felt cruel to refuse to offer him some kind of lifeline. So, I made brief eye contact. Big mistake.

After another twenty seconds of silence, the teacher sighed and said, “Okay, Miss Barnett. Why don’t you tell us? We all know *you* know the answer.”

The class snickered as I murmured my now-obligatory *“liberté, égalité, fraternité,”* and some smart-jock buddy of Sam’s whispered, “She can remember *that*, but she can’t remember to ‘bump, set, spike’ in volleyball?”

Sam laughed loudly at that one, as did most of the class, and I vowed then and there never to bail out our history teacher again. But Jane, at least, came to my defense.

Do not be embarrassed, Ellie. Let them enjoy their amusement now. For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?

Her confidence grounded me and helped me remember not to take myself so seriously. It was a reminder I desperately needed throughout high school.

And then there was Stacy Daschell, the girl I despised most in our entire sophomore class. On day three, while changing back into our regular clothes after gym, an item Stacy wore beneath her red and gold cheerleader’s sweater snagged Jane’s attention.

Pray, what is that? Jane inquired, her voice horrified.

I didn’t own such an item myself, but I’d heard about Stacy’s purchase ad nauseam that

week. *It's a lavender Victoria's Secret demi bra. Heavily padded,* I answered silently.

The slender, pointy-nosed Stacy, who'd recently returned from a trip to San Francisco where she'd encountered the first of these soon-to-be-famous stores, swept a cascade of blond curls off her shoulder, giggled seductively at her mirror image across the room and showed off her orthodontically perfect incisors right along with her enhanced cleavage. "It's called the 'Emma,'" Stacy informed her friends. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Jane sniffed. *Strumpet.*

My good friend Terrie, in an independent assessment at her locker next to mine, used the modern American equivalent. "Slut."

I laughed at their comments and, consequently, was rewarded with an extra-nasty sneer from Stacy.

Then she, with her Victoria's Secret uplift and her cheerleader's outfit snugly back on, adjusted her legwarmers, slipped on her gold-glittered Nikes and blotted her hot-pink lipstick with a tissue as she tracked my far-less-fashionable footsteps down the hallway toward algebra.

Unfortunately, coming from the opposite direction strode my *other* worst nightmare.

A gaggle of senior girls materialized like a firewall, blocking our path. There were four of them—all big hair, big boobs, big attitude. The leader crossed her arms over a thin, low-cut sweater, which emphasized her abundant chest, and nudged one of the other girls to speak.

A leggy blonde—more specifically, Stacy's older sister—turned to Stacy. "Where do you think *you're* off to?"

"Math," Stacy said with a weary flip of her hair. She tossed a disgusted look in my direction. And, though she was failing algebra, she added, "Anything's better than gym class with losers."

The seniors cackled and broke the human wall open just wide enough to let Stacy pass through.

"Well?" another girl said, expecting me to defend myself.

I kept my mouth shut. There was no way to win these kinds of battles. I could only wait them out.

Their leader finally stepped forward, shaking her head so the long ash-brown strands brushed her shoulders. Her squinty eyes glittered with general malevolence, her expression pure scorn.

"Ellie, Ellie, Ellie Barnett," she said. "What exactly is your problem? How is it that you're so *competent* with classroom shit, so very *responsible* in your stupid little academic life, but such a fuck-up in everything else?"

Jane chose this inopportune moment to chime in. *This young woman hardly seems a paragon of virtue. What manner of conduct is this?*

I clutched my algebra notebook and pencil a little tighter, but I didn't answer either of their questions.

"You're becoming quite a legend at school," the leader said with her trademark mockery. She scanned me up and down, rolled her eyes and burst out laughing. "Just look at you! Scraggly hair. Dressed like a geek. No makeup. Digging yourself into a hole of permanent unpopularity. Sometimes I can't stand to be in the same hallway with you. Make an attempt to get with it or I'll make you sorry. You know I can."

Oh, yeah. I knew.

The two-minute bell rang and, with a taunting shove to my shoulder, an "accidental" treading upon my left toes and an intimidating parting glare, the leader and her gang finally let

me go. I hobbled the rest of the way down the hall.

How deplorable, Jane whispered, and I could envision her pursing her thin lips with disdain. *Who is this individual?*

Oh, she would be last year's Homecoming Queen and this year's titleholder for Most Likely to Get Laid on a First Date, I said. The leader had been away for two days on a college scouting trip and Jane hadn't yet encountered her. I envied Jane that, inhaled deeply and tried my hardest to laugh off the incident.

But, even this early on, Jane had developed an unnerving habit of persistence. *By what proper name is that young lady called?*

Ah, well, if you must know, most people call her Di, but her full name is Diana Lynn Barnett. I paused for dramatic effect. *Otherwise known as my big sister*.

Just then, I saw Sam on the other side of the hallway eyeing me strangely before breaking into one of his smirkiest grins. With his index and middle fingers, he made a "V" for "Victory," which he held above his head since his team had just annihilated mine in volleyball. Again. Then he switched the fingers around—index and thumb—to form an "L" for "Loser," which he directed at me.

God! Why did I still like that guy? He was too competitive, too arrogant, too intense for me, or so I tried to tell my bruised ego. He added too many distractions to my already complicated life but, stupidly, I couldn't quite let go of my fantasies about him.

At the same moment, this other guy, a hotshot basketball player named Jason Bertignoli, walked by, too. He'd been on my losing volleyball team, but he didn't blame me or mock me or ignore me. He turned around and said, "Don't worry about the game, Ellie. We'll get 'em next time."

I smiled. Jocky Jason was nice. Then again, he was new to the school and still being nice to everybody.

Sam saw Jason talking to me, and he sent us the evil eye, which did not go unnoticed by either Jason or by Jane.

Wickham, Jane said.

"Asshole," Jason muttered, glaring at Sam as he walked away.

As for me, I sent Sam the evil eye right back before he disappeared down the hall.

Little did I know, as my irrational heart trailed after him, that I'd just embarked on the Odyssey-like saga that would set the course of my romantic journey for the next two decades...

"There is meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable."

—*Pride and Prejudice*

CHAPTER ONE

Almost seven years after Jane first spoke to me, the August late-afternoon sun beat down on my head as I bolted from the Glen Forest Public Library. We'd been short staffed again, with two people out on vacation and one last-minute sick call. And, while I loved my summer job—well, most of the time—my day hadn't been the greatest, and I yearned for a calm, relaxing evening.

Dominic, my boyfriend of eight whole weeks, had other plans.

"Can we take your car tonight?" he asked when he came to pick me up. "I'm running kinda low on gas and—" he glared at his beat-up Pontiac, "I don't trust the transmission."

I shrugged. "Fine," I said, though it wasn't really fine. We were going into Chicago—*again*—because he just had to meet with his loud, pseudo-radical friends who liked to think of themselves as "mavericks."

"We'll only stay at the bar for an hour," he promised when I told him I had a massive headache and wanted a quiet night. "Then we'll grab a couple slices of pizza at the restaurant next door. Just you and me."

I wanted to believe him, but the reality was he couldn't get enough of his discussion

group. Once they started yakking, one hour had a way of turning into four. I wasn't in the mood this time.

Not that I wanted to deprive him of his friends and make him cling only to me. He'd explained that this group was his lifeline, particularly during the summer months, since he was away from his nonconformist college buddies. Unlike me, though, he'd get to see his university friends again in the fall. At nearly twenty-two, I'd just graduated. Dominic, already twenty-three, was on the five- or six-year plan.

"But what about the guys at work?" I'd asked him a month before when we were at my sister's wedding to her punk-rocker/bank-manager boyfriend Alex Evans (i.e., irrefutable proof that there was a psycho out there for everyone). "I thought you all got along really well, especially since your neighbor and his cousin got you the job. Don't you ever want to do things with them?"

"Nah. Besides, I quit on Tuesday."

My eyes flew open at this news. "You quit the deli?" He'd only been working there a few weeks, but his hourly salary had been higher than mine at the library. "I thought you liked it there."

"The work wasn't that challenging." He wrinkled his nose. "I'd rather do something where I can use my mind, not just slice up salami or provolone, you know? I'll get some other position in a week or two."

But he hadn't and, therefore, he claimed he especially needed the outlet of meeting his friends after a stressful day of dealing with his nagging parents at home and their demands that he "grow up."

So we went to Chicago.

"Can you spot me a five for a beer?" Dominic asked when we got to The Bitter Tap. "It doesn't look real sociable if I don't have one in my hand, too."

I sighed, but I bought him a beer and got myself a Long Island Iced Tea. Then I sat at the edge of the table, had a private conversation with Jane about the merits of combining multiple liquors in a single mixed drink and listened to snatches of Dominic's latest discussion. Something about the ethics of genetic engineering. One of the guys pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered them to us.

"No, thanks," I said, but Dominic reached for one and lit it expertly. He waved it as he made each point, his face aglow with that feverish excitement I'd found so intriguing when first I spotted him in my final college semester's Films & Lit class.

He'd always hop on his soapbox, saying things like: "We're privileged to be part of society's free thinkers. We need to help others shape their understanding of our world while keeping it a positive, affirmative kind of activism. And it's all here, you know. The change." He'd jab his thumb at his chest. "Here is where we need to make our decisions about the way we organize our culture. Not from pure intellect. Not from our pocketbook. Not from the restricted mores of our narrow-minded predecessors who call us 'radicals'—like it's a bad thing." He'd roll his eyes at the absurdity. "It's only through a continuous dialogue about our creative and cultural life that we can achieve the kind of human connection we all seek."

It was still mesmerizing to watch him get into a debate, like a televangelist preaching the Word of God.

He smoked five more cigarettes and mooched another beer off someone else before the first hour was up. I checked my watch and made polite conversation. An hour and fifteen minutes. An hour and a half. Still no sign of him wrapping things up. Time for a nudge.

"Dominic." I tapped my wrist.

He nodded at me, held up his index finger in the Just-One-More-Minute position and resumed talking. For another half hour.

Granted, I was tired, I was cranky and, now, I was hungry, too. I may not have been in the cheeriest of moods starting off, but that didn't mean he could worm out of a promise, so I said, "Dominic, it's been two hours."

"Okay, okay. Just five more minutes. Please. Let me finish this thought."

I picked up my purse, waved goodbye to the guys and walked out the door.

I heard a "Shit!" from inside the bar and, a moment later, Dominic was by my side looking furious.

"Dammit, Ellie, that was so fucking rude!"

"You said one hour. I waited twice that long. I've had enough now, and I'm going home. Come. Don't come." I shrugged. "It's your choice."

"I—" Dominic looked between me and the door to The Bitter Tap, clearly considering. "Look, sorry. I just...I just really love being in that environment, and I'm...surprised, I guess, that you don't, too." He gave me a hurt look. "Those guys are my best friends."

I nodded. "Well, perhaps one of them can give you a lift home." I turned and walked toward my car.

"Ellie. Wait." He ran up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder, caressing it with his fingertips. "Let's get a slice of pizza for the road. It's just right here." He pointed to the Italian carryout joint next door. "I know you've gotta be starving."

Not wanting to make a huge scene on the sidewalk, I agreed and, of course, I knew that also meant I had to spring for the food. It may have taken me almost two months of dating this

cretin, but I was starting to see a pattern here.

When I got home I watched the taillights of Dominic's Pontiac fade away into the distance, and I thought about our deteriorating relationship. Who I was. Who he was. Where we were going. Or not going. I'd almost broken up with him an hour before, but I'd held on. Why, why, why?

Perhaps it is because you feel lonely? Jane suggested.

Yeah.

And because you are about to embark on something unknown next month—your graduate studies at a new university—and you crave the familiar?

Yeah. That, too.

And, additionally, because you will be two-and-twenty next week and wish to celebrate it with someone dear to you?

I didn't speak, but I nodded. I should've known Jane would figure it out. She'd been my constant companion, my most secret friend for years. She knew me as no one else could...or wanted to.

All will turn out right, Ellie, she said softly. *Trust in yourself and in your instincts. You have a strong intuition about the honor and character of others. It is stronger, perhaps, than you realize, and it gains further strength with time and experience. Do not despair.*

Thanks, Jane, I whispered, fighting back the despair that curled in my stomach nevertheless.

So, a week later, when I found myself sitting at that same Chicago bar, after being promised a romantic birthday dinner we were already thirty minutes late for, I took a good long look around me:

I was in a place I didn't want to be, with people who talked about big change but did nothing.

I was dating a man who, while attractive and reasonably intelligent, didn't appreciate me, and who was also part leech.

I was exactly twenty-two (as of 8:28 that morning), unmarried, inhaling secondhand smoke, bored, frustrated and hungry.

The evening couldn't get any worse.

I grabbed my second white wine at the bar and took a turn about the room—sipping my drink, chitchatting idly with Jane, glancing at the framed autographs hanging crookedly on the walls and contemplating Dominic's untimely death.

The driving beat of a Def Leppard song came on, competing with the ambient noise, and I felt a gust of hot summer wind next to me as the front door swung open. The woman who walked through it was about my age and height, only really stunning. Her hair was a long, soft auburn that curled at the ends like some L'Oréal hair-color model. She seemed as gleeful walking into The Bitter Tap as I'd be if I could walk out of it. A tall, dark-haired man followed her inside, and I looked away.

Then I looked back.

Holy shit.

There'd been times since high school ended, times over the past four years—indeed, a great *many* times—when I'd wondered what I'd say or do if I ever ran into the loathsome Sam Blaine again.

I imagined myself holding my head high and carrying on with whatever I was doing without acknowledging his presence.

Or, I thought I might lift an elegant eyebrow in greeting and say with perfect indifference, “Is that you, Sam? I hardly recognized you. You look shorter.”

Or, maybe, I’d be in the midst of laughing over something hysterically funny when someone else would break in and introduce us. I’d shake his hand and pretend not to remember him until he insisted we’d gone to kindergarten and all twelve grades of school together. And that we’d spent one really memorable night in each other’s arms...a night that had inexorably shaped my view of love. Then I’d reply with an amused “Oh, yeah. *Sam*. That’s right. Sorry, your name slipped my mind.”

That night, in sad reality, I stood utterly still and gaped at him.

He moved toward me and, as recognition dawned, his handsome features contorted into a look of pure horror.

My God. I must’ve looked pitiful.

Turn away, Jane commanded. *You need not speak to him.*

But I couldn’t make myself turn away.

“Ellie?” he said.

“Sam.” His name came out of my open mouth with a veritable squeak.

He cleared his throat. “I’m surprised to see you. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

I laughed aloud, and Sam shot me an odd look. Yeah. Irony was a bitch.

“Same here,” I said, though we both knew better. I pointed to the auburn-haired chick, who’d been watching our exchange curiously. “Your girlfriend?”

He nodded and introduced me to “Camryn,” a fellow future med student with sharp, assessing, green eyes in addition to all that TV-commercial-worthy hair.

Dominic, of all people, chose this particular instant to stride up to us and lay his hand on

my shoulder. “Hey, darlin’,” he said to me, but he fixed his gaze on Sam and Camryn. “We’ll be outta here in just a couple of minutes. Mick’s trying to find an article for me in his bag.”

He pointed in his buddies’ direction where Mick alternately puffed on a cigarette and dug through a rumpled backpack. I knew this task would take another half hour at least.

“We’ve gotta get you to your birthday dinner,” Dominic continued, punctuating his bald-faced lie with a possessive squeeze.

I forced a grin at the jerk. “Take your time, um, sweetie.”

Dominic looked back at me, his eyes widening in surprise. “Uh, thanks.” He nodded to the couple in front of us. “Hi. I’m Dominic, Ellie’s boyfriend. You guys old friends?”

Camryn started to shake her head, but Sam said, “Yeah,” before she or I could reply. “Very old,” he added.

“Yep. Ancient-history old.” I smiled toothily at the other three and took a long swig of my wimpy wine. Crap. I wanted a margarita *now*, heavy on the Jose Cuervo Gold. If ever there was a time for strong drinks, this was it.

Do whatever you must, Jane said, with hot fury in her voice, *but get away from that despicable man.*

I wanted to listen to her. I really did. But my feet were rooted to the spot for the duration.

Camryn’s gaze ping-ponged between her boyfriend and me. Her green eyes narrowed. “Pleasure meeting you both,” she said to Dominic and me, her gritted teeth indicating her definitive lack of enthusiasm. “But I’ve been waiting all day for a daiquiri, so, we’ll see you later. Enjoy your birthday...Emmy.”

“It’s Ellie,” Sam said, beating me to it.

Camryn cast him a lethal look and began to walk away.

Hmm. So that was how it was.

Sam opened his mouth as if to comment again, but then closed it. He lifted his arm up in a half wave and followed his girlfriend to the bar.

Dominic squinted after them, turned back to me and shot me a puzzled look before rejoining his fellow mavericks.

Jane, who'd begun ranting with fervor since Sam appeared on the scene, scarcely paused for a breath between words. *That rake! That rogue! The nerve of him to cross your path again after what he did. How insupportable!*

I let her continue her tirade of antiquated English insults a while longer, but the combination of seeing Sam again and Jane's marked displeasure had given me the headache from hell. Swift action was required. With a sigh, I told Jane to *please* calm down and gulped the rest of my drink. It was going to take an act of God to stop me from getting one very necessary and immediate jumbo birthday margarita. For medicinal purposes.

I sized up the people sitting at the bar, scanning for a good spot to squeeze in. Sam and Camryn were up there, and they'd just ordered their drinks. I watched the bartender hand Camryn a pink daiquiri with a cutesy umbrella. He passed a foamy beer to Sam.

I hoped they'd sit down. At a dark table. Preferably in some other bar. Like one in downtown Pittsburgh. (Too close?) Then I could get a jigger of fortifying tequila in peace. But they seemed ensconced where they were, leaning up against the padded side of the bar, facing each other. And I was getting desperate.

I pushed the smoky air out of my lungs, edged up to the corner of the bar's counter and tried to blend in with the other patrons.

"What'll you have, Ellie?" the bartender boomed in a jovial voice.

I gave him my margarita order, attempting to concentrate only on the task at hand. I studied the bartender who, after a dozen of my visits, had spent more time talking to me at The Bitter Tap than my own boyfriend. He was a nice guy. About thirty. Slightly overweight. Smooth light-black skin. Always wore a gold chain around his neck and a warm smile. I worked hard to keep my attention focused on his friendly face.

But the ever-obsessed psycho in me wouldn't take the hint.

My gaze kept drifting to Sam's beer glass, the way he held it and brought it to his lips. I hadn't forgotten a single detail about Sam's mouth, his hands. My cheeks warmed at the memory of those inquisitive fingers touching my body that long-ago night, then they burned as I remembered the shame and hurt that followed.

I got my drink and licked the salt off half the rim before taking my first swallow. The sting of tequila short-circuited my senses for, maybe, thirteen seconds. Not long enough.

I glanced at Dominic, who'd returned to pontificating about some post-Cold War, Baltic-immigration policy that apparently had international significance, then over at Sam again, who was staring right at me, his jaw tense.

I looked away.

Can't say I was proud to admit this, but I was still really mad at Sam.

Well, no. That would be a prime example of my ability to utilize subtlety and massive understatement, which had proved helpful in my university lit courses. Long live English majors.

More accurately, I was insanely, unrelentingly furious over the way he'd let things end between us. I wasn't over it, like I should've been. I hadn't moved on, like a true adult would have.

In fact, four years after that particularly painful one-night stand, I'd go so far as to claim I

felt *more* pissed off there in the bar than I'd been back then. And that was saying something.

Clearly, these thoughts didn't reflect well upon my maturity level. I knew I should've grown up, walked away, traveled on, let it all go—or, at least, chosen to go into denial or therapy. But, see, a Zen-like acceptance of my fate just wasn't my reality.

As I watched Sam steal glances at me while lounging at the bar with Camryn, I had only one prevailing thought—I wanted to get bloody even with him. A few related thoughts followed:

I wanted to extract some serious revenge in return for the emotional damages I'd suffered that last week of senior year in high school.

I wanted him to endure, if only for one day, a fraction as much hurt as I'd felt.

I wanted to make his life such a living hell that night that he'd wake up in the morning clutching his ribs, feeling agonizing stabs of pain where his heart should've been.

I wanted his whole body to ache from the emotional torment. Just like mine had.

I was a really nice person, huh?

I shrugged to myself. Having come so close to loving Sam once, no degree of hatred seemed too extreme or even remotely unjustified.

However, before I could work out my best strategy for dismembering his life piece by piece, I decided I needed another gulp of my drink. When I lowered the glass from my lips, Camryn was standing right in front of me.

"Look," she said, her voice chilly. "Sam's in the bathroom. I've only got a minute, so I'll say this fast. He's taken." She paused, leveling those green eyes at me with utter gravity. "I saw the looks that passed between you two. I don't know your history with him but, whatever it was, it's over now and he's with me."

A granule of salt must've caught in my throat because I had to cough a few times before I

could laugh. “Camryn,” I said between cough-laugh spasms, “I am *so* not after him. He’s *all* yours, and I sincerely wish you the best of luck because, honey, you’re gonna need it.” I took another sip.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you say that?”

A glimmer of a strategy started to coagulate at the fringes of my mind. A devious one, true, but both drinking to excess and being around Sam had a way of bringing out the worst in me.

Again, I told Jane to calm down. (She wasn’t letting up on the ranting.) I assured her I was doing all right and had the situation under control. Really.

Then I smiled sweetly at Camryn. “You each got into med school, right?”

“Right,” Camryn said.

“The *same* med school?”

“No.”

“The same *city*, at least?”

She shook her head and the gorgeous dark-red tresses swayed like weeping willows. “But he’ll be in New York, and I’ll be in Philadelphia. They’re not that far apart. We may be busy, but we’ll see each other on some weekends and—”

“When do you leave?”

She pressed her lips together and her grip on her daiquiri tightened. “The end of the month. Why?”

“He’ll break things off before then,” I told her, my voice projecting a certainty I didn’t feel in truth, but I made sure I sounded believable.

She tried to shrug it off. “Just because you couldn’t hold onto him doesn’t mean I—”

"Has he told you he loves you?"

"I don't have to answer that," she shot back.

"Fine, don't answer. Just think. Has he made you any promises? Or, when you bring up the future, does he deflect your questions?" I stopped for a long swallow of margarita.

Camryn remained silent, a cloud of uncertainty darkening her eyes.

I pressed on. "How about this—does he hide his feelings behind a façade of arrogance and cleverness, so you never really know what he's thinking? Does he enjoy the sex, but always keep a barrier between you? I'm talking emotional not prophylactic," I clarified, although Camryn was, I gathered, a smart enough cookie to figure it out.

The slight pallor of her complexion let me know I'd hit a nerve. This should've made me feel guilty. But, guess what? It didn't.

"You seem like a very intelligent person," I told her with measured condescension, "but even clever girls make mistakes in judgment sometimes. No one would blame you if you got taken in by him. Temporarily. Although, knowing the truth, one has to wonder why you'd put up with it for—"

"What the hell *is* this?" a furious male voice demanded.

Sam.

Camryn and I swiveled toward him. "Back from the bathroom so soon?" I said.

Sam's eyes sparked with blue fire. Guess he'd overheard some of our conversation. Oops.

He speared me with a glare then turned to his girlfriend. "Seems Ellie has become a bitter, spiteful person who never forgets the stupid things that happened in the past, and she can't see beyond her own issues and biases. Oh, *and*—" he glowered at me again, "she has a history of lusting after loser guys like Jason Bertignoli, for God's sake, so her judgment is questionable."

Every syllable leaving his mouth jabbed me like a stiletto to the heart. He thought our night together was a "stupid thing." God damn him. But, yeah, he was right about my judgment being bad. After all, I'd practically fallen in love with him.

He returned his gaze to Camryn. "So, regardless of what she's told you, just because she and I had no way of working things out four fucking *years* ago—" he paused to frown at me, "it doesn't mean it'll be the same with us." He reached for Camryn's arm.

She snatched her arm away. "What went wrong?" she asked him.

"What?"

"'Four fucking *years* ago,' Sam. What went wrong? How did it end?"

"Yeah, Sam," I chimed in. "Tell her. Please. And, while you're at it, I'd appreciate an illuminated recap because I was kind of deprived of your high-level reasoning back then." I drained my drink, set the glass on the counter and crossed my arms to keep them from trembling. "Whenever you're ready."

Sam looked between us, an expression of incredulousness on his handsome face. "I can't believe this," he muttered. "I am *not* doing this. Here. Now. With either of you."

"So, she wasn't lying then," Camryn said, her voice turning several degrees colder. "You really did something to warrant her anger and total bitchiness."

Total bitchiness? "Hey," I said. "I'm not being—"

She pointed a well-manicured fingernail at me. "You shut up. You've caused enough trouble."

Then she scowled at Sam. "Were you planning to break up with me this month? Is that why, no matter how many times I asked you about Labor Day plans or whose house we'd meet at for Thanksgiving, you kept putting me off? Is that why you couldn't commit to going to my

brother's wedding in October? Why you kept saying, 'We'll see, Camryn,' every time I brought it up?"

Sam stared at her. So did I.

"Answer me, dammit!" she shrieked.

He exhaled long and hard. "Camryn, please. Let's go somewhere else and discuss this rationally. I don't want—"

"No! I want to know *now*. I don't want you trying to weasel out of it again."

Sam shrugged, but his shoulders looked so stiff I thought they'd crack from the motion.

"Okay, fine," he told her. "The thing is, I don't know about the wedding. I don't have a clue what our schedules are going to look like then. We'll both probably be up to our ears in work. You know as well as I do that's what med school is all about."

"We're talking about two national holidays, Sam, and one once-in-a-lifetime event. Three lousy days out of four months." She twisted her fingers together into a warped steeple. "I told my *family* all about you. They wanted to meet you. I told them you might be someone they'd be glad they got to know. Someone I might have in my life..." A few tears dropped from her eyes, making the green even brighter than before. She swiped them away viciously and bit her lower lip.

I took a step away from the two of them. I didn't belong in the middle of this and, I'll admit, I was beginning to feel a few pinches of remorse for my—how did Camryn put it? Oh, yes. My anger and total bitchiness.

I took another step back but, in a flash, I was pulled nose-to-nose with Sam.

"Don't. You. Dare. Leave," he said in a low, very dangerous voice, his clenched fist full of my pink light-knit shirt. "If we're having a public confession session, you're damn well going

to be a part of it, Ellie Barnett."

I swallowed and looked into his enraged face. He hadn't changed much, really, in the years since I'd last seen him this close up. His skin was a little tauter now, perhaps. His bone structure a bit more defined. His hair a fraction shorter. His muscles a tad firmer. His eyes were the same cool blue, though, with maybe a hint more malice.

Jane cried out, *Make him release you. Insufferable man!*

"Let go of my shirt, Sam," I managed to say in what I hoped was a composed and level voice.

Inside, though, every part of me quivered, and I couldn't figure out the reason. Fear? Shame? Anger? Jane's unaltered disdain? All of the above or something else entirely?

Sam released me, but his eyes didn't let me go. They trained on me with a wrath I hadn't been the recipient of since...well, since high school.

Camryn's response to this little scene bespoke a different reaction altogether. She no longer looked infuriated, just deflated. Disappointed. Sad and kind of hurt. "You don't love me, Sam. And you're not going to, are you?" She didn't wait for his answer. "I'll take a cab home."

"Aw, Camryn, c'mon." Sam tried to touch her again and, again, she pulled away.

"No," she said.

"Can't we at least talk? Can I call you tonight? Tomorrow?"

She gave a short, humorless laugh. "We'll see, Sam." She turned and marched out of the bar.

Sam stared after her in stunned silence.

I should've shut up, but I was slightly toasted. So, I said, "Well? Get going. Aren't you gonna run after her? Aren't you gonna tell her you love her and that you really *do* want to go

with her to her brother's stupid wedding?"

My hands shook. To stop them, I squeezed my fists so hard my fingernails dug deep into my palms. I looked at them and saw those familiar crescent-shaped welts. Visible signs of a habit I'd never broken.

"I don't love her."

"What?" I glanced up from my hands to study Sam's face, now shuttered against all emotion.

"I'm not going to run after her because I don't love her. But—" he gave me a frozen glare, "I really did *like* her. She's bright, funny, a little high-maintenance, maybe, but a good person underneath the cool exterior. And you had no business at all doing what you did. That was heartless, Ellie."

My breath caught in my esophagus. "*I'm* heartless? Me? Screw you, Sam—"

He raised a brow. "So, your relationship with that Dominic dude is real wonderful, eh?" he said, implying with a tilt of his head that he didn't think so. "You two have got it all together? You're *happy*?"

"It—it's pretty good," I lied.

His eyes traveled down my body and then back up again. "How good?"

Intolerable rudeness, Jane muttered along with a few other choice phrases.

I mentally tuned down the volume on her complaints and swallowed. "Don't be an ass," I said to Sam.

"Don't sidestep the question," Sam shot back.

"It's better than it was with you," I retorted before I lost my nerve. No doubt I'd burn in hell for all the lies I'd been telling, but I couldn't let Sam know the truth. He already had too

much dirt on the real me.

Sam pressed his lips together until they were nearly colorless. He then focused the intensity of his gaze on Dominic, who we spotted chugging the last of his beer and bumming a smoke off of Mick.

"Hey, Dominic!" Mick called out, too loudly because he was, as usual, thoroughly smashed. "Maybe you can score some more cash off your girlfriend and get us another coupla beers." He blindly looked around. "Where is Miss Moneybags anyway? She didn't take off on you again, did she?"

I sucked in some air and hoped, no, prayed that Dominic would take offence at Mick's words. That he'd say, even if only for appearances' sake, that he appreciated lots of qualities in me, not just my willingness to share my paycheck.

But Dominic said, also too loudly, "By the bar, I think. I'll go ask her in a sec."

As their voices floated back to Sam and me, I closed my eyes. I had to block out Sam's steady gaze. I didn't want to see that look of his, be it retribution or pity.

"So, that's how it is," Sam whispered, not unkindly, just very matter-of-fact.

My injured pride made me want to lash out at someone. At Sam. At Dominic. At anyone who crossed my path. Being that Sam was my only choice at present, I started with him.

"You know," I said in the iciest tone I could produce, "it's amazingly hypocritical of you, doing the medicine thing. I mean, I always thought doctors had to take an oath—'First, do no harm,' or something like that." I shook my head. "That's gonna be a tough one for you, considering your tremendous skill in hurting people."

I glanced at him once to see if I'd hit my target. I had. His face colored red and his jaw turned even more rigid. At first I thought he merely looked angry, but then I looked again. The

expression in his blue eyes exposed as much worry as it did offense. I guessed I'd found a way to blister one of his insecurities while meting out my revenge.

Unfortunately, it didn't make me feel any better.

"When did you turn into this, this...person, Ellie?" he asked softly. "You're not who I remember. God, this can't all be because of me or what happened between us. Because I'd hurt you once, can it?"

I forced myself to stand up straighter. "Hey, you were the one who called what happened between us a 'stupid thing' from the past. What makes you think it'd affect me or that I'd care about it now?"

"Jesus, Ellie." His expression turned to one of pure pain. "I meant my idiotic reaction in school *after* what happened. *That* was the stupid thing you wouldn't forget..."

Sam's words still dangled in the air between us as Dominic jogged up ten seconds later. "Hey, darlin'," he said. "Seeing as how you're having a deep discussion of your own right now, maybe we could hang out here a little longer?"

My mind, reeling from Sam's revelation and the consequent reinterpretation of those end-of-high-school memories, couldn't shift gears so quickly. I knew Dominic wanted something, as usual, but I was in no mood to offer a light, agreeable response. I just stared at him.

Dominic glanced between Sam and me, but received only silence back from us. "Hmm. Are you getting hungry?" He studied his watch. "We've kinda missed our dinner reservation, but I'll order us up some nachos at the bar. Maybe a few beers, too."

"Thanks," I said flatly. After all these weeks he still didn't remember that I detested beer.

"But, uh—"

"Yeah?" I wanted to hear him ask for it this time. I wasn't just going to hand him another

twenty.

Dominic turned to Sam. “Could you excuse us a minute? I need to talk to Ellie privately.”

Sam raised both eyebrows and folded his arms across his broad chest. He didn’t budge from his spot.

I silently blessed him for this, and even Jane, to my shock, murmured, *Correctly done, Mr. Blaine. For once.*

Dominic squinted at him and said, “Okaaaay” under his breath. Then he tugged on my arm. “Can we go over there for a sec—”

“I don’t think so,” I told him.

Dominic looked confused. “What? You don’t think you can talk to me alone for a minute?”

“That’s right.” I sighed. It was crash-and-burn time for Type #4 (yes, I had categories for the men I dated), but a woman had to know when she couldn’t fake it anymore. Since Sam had already guessed the truth, I’d been defeated on all fronts. No use pretending.

Dominic sputtered out a few incoherent syllables, but he finally managed to say, “What the hell?”

I let out a long, slow breath—one I’d been holding for about four years. “I’m sorry, Sam,” I said.

Sam’s eyes met mine. He half nodded and whispered, “Me, too. Really.”

I then returned my attention to Dominic, who was staring at me like I’d just sprouted horns and was brandishing a sharp-n-shiny pitchfork.

“I’m not your chauffeur, your mommy or your meal ticket,” I told him. “Get yourself a job and buy your own damn beer. And, in case there’s any doubt, no, I’m not driving you home

and, yes, this is goodbye. Have a nice life."

"Wait! Is this because I didn't buy you a birthday gift?" Dominic demanded. "Ellie, I told you I'd take you out to dinner. We were just running a little late tonight. It's not like we won't go sometime soon—"

I lifted my hand in a parting wave to Sam, who returned it. Then I gave Dominic the finger.

"Happy birthday to me," I said to myself as the bar doors swung shut behind me. I inhaled the warm Chicago night air and escaped into my car, planning to drive only a block or two so Dominic couldn't find me. I needed to sit somewhere for an hour and let everything wear off.

Happy birthday, Ellie, Jane's voice echoed in my mind. *And good for you. Your life is just beginning.*

Yes, it was. Finally.

I blinked back a tear, hummed a few bars of Boston's "Don't Look Back" and hit the gas pedal.

"There is nothing like dancing after all...one of the first refinements of polished societies."

—*Pride and Prejudice*

CHAPTER TWO

To know what, exactly, I *wasn't* looking back on and to understand the intricacies of my relationships with my sister Diana, my brother Gregory and my cousin Angelique, you'd need a detailed chronicle of our family dynamics. I don't have the patience (or the lifespan) to be that comprehensive.

Let's just say, though, that while Jane's appearance added a new zing to my home/school existence and bestowed upon me an amazing best friend, it made life instantly tougher for me, too.

The weekend after Jane's arrival, I was awakened early by a jostling—or, more accurately, a violent shaking—of my ribcage.

"Get up, geek," Di said, moving away from my body to flick up the window shade and flood my room with unwelcome sunlight. "Aunt Candice, Uncle Craig and our freak-show cousins are coming, remember? Get your butt outta bed."

I groaned. Yes, because Di's method of rousing lacked finesse, but also because any amount of time spent with our Indiana cousins was, and always had been, a trial of the highest order.

I tossed on some clean sweats and stumbled into the family room. My mother, already coiffed and lipsticked, raced between the kitchen and every other room in the house issuing commands. “Girls, get rid of this clutter on the kitchen table. Now! Throw that garbage out. And, for God’s sake, Gregory, put away that stupid Rubik’s Cube! They’re going to be here in twenty minutes.”

We, thus, began a frantic attempt at picking up our stuff. As we worked, my brother warbled a version of *The Music Man’s* “Gary, Indiana” under his breath followed by a few choruses of “Pick A Little, Talk A Little.” The former was a depiction of my aunt’s hometown, the latter, her conversational style.

Di countered his thirteen-year-old notion of musical coolness with her own seventeen-year-old version: Madonna’s “Like a Virgin.” Normally, I would’ve tried to zone out, but Jane’s newfound residence inside my head made that an impossibility.

Jane, ever the witty conversationalist, remarked, *Transcendent talent is not so rare as was once believed. Apparently, everyone these days has been blessed by the muses.*

Yeah, I’m feeling real inspired right now, I said to her.

She laughed. *Oh, do not judge them too harshly, Ellie. They would have been great proficients...*

...if ever they’d learnt, we finished together in a sentence reminiscent of one of Jane’s more obnoxious book characters.

I giggled aloud. Unfortunately, I was within Di’s earshot.

She elbowed me. “Don’t laugh at me, geek.”

“Diana, try not to call your sister names,” our mom bellowed from the kitchen.

“But she *is* a geek,” Gregory offered. “She’s so damn boring, no guys like her.”

"Gregory, honey, it's not polite to swear."

Need I mention that in both instances of sibling abuse Mom neglected to demand an apology on my behalf or discount the Geek label? Didn't think so. Being the middle child (most ignored, least liked) was chockfull of touching family moments like these.

"Your sister's not a geek," Dad broke in, stuffing a box of snow hats and gloves into the closet and safely out of sight.

Ah, thank goodness for dear old Dad.

"She's just an intellectual," he added. "It takes a while, sometimes years, for guys to learn to like that in a girl."

Terrific.

Such stunning words in your defense, Jane mused, *the likes of which I have heard but rarely.*

Well, they're commonplace enough around here, I told her.

"'Course, she's nothing like Angelique," Mom said.

"No one's like Angelique," Dad admitted.

My cousin, Angelique Lawson, is a "Genius," I explained to Jane. *And my Dad's posh sister, Aunt Candice, never tires of telling us so.*

How delightful, Jane said. *There is nothing like geniuses when a party is in want of enlivening.*

Angelique's sixteen but already a junior because she skipped a grade. And very musical. She takes her cello with her everywhere and will probably play it for us today, I added. *And she'll never pass up an opportunity to speak French.*

Ah, 'très bien.' I consider myself well warned, Jane countered.

Mere seconds later, the Lawsons' distinctive canary-yellow Cadillac pulled into our driveway. Angelique breezed cheerily into our house. On her heels was her mother, who swept inside like an empress inspecting the servant quarters.

"Bonjour!" Angelique declared at the earliest possible moment. She flicked her long tawny-blond ponytail behind her and beamed a pretty grin at us so bright I had to squeeze my eyes shut.

"Oh, fuck," Di murmured next to me.

"I'm so *glad* to see you all," our cousin exclaimed. "We have so much *news*!"

"Aw, crap," Gregory whispered.

Di and I actually laughed at the same time to the same thing.

"Be nice," Mom hissed. So I clenched my jaw and steeled myself for all the fun I knew was coming. "Where's Craig? And Aaron and Andy?" Mom asked Aunt Candice, referring to our uncle and the five-year-old Twin Terrors.

"The flu claimed them," our aunt replied. She sniffed to indicate poor health was something she considered an inexcusable offense. "Angelique and I are on our own today."

"But they're on the mend, so please don't worry," Angelique hastened to assure us in that sweet, mature voice our Genius Cousin was known for.

Di rolled her eyes, and I, admittedly, was grateful not to have to deal with the little demons. Aunt Candice presented work enough just by herself and Angelique, well, she was sweet but...draining.

"Let's sit down," Mom offered, ushering us all into the now clutter-free family room and serving lemonades all around.

I perched at the edge of the sofa with my drink and tried to blend into the décor. But,

despite my best attempt at camouflage, Angelique chose me to cozy up to. My aunt scanned me speculatively but not with anything resembling loving kinship. It was, I guess, too much to hope I'd be ignored by these relatives, too.

"Our news is so *magnifique*!" Angelique exclaimed, seemingly unable to contain her enthusiasm. "We're moving."

Mom's eyebrows shot up in alarm. "Where?" She and my aunt had a strange but undeniable form of friendship.

Our aunt displayed her razor-sharp teeth. "To Illinois and—"

Her genius daughter burst in, "And it's so near you! We'll only be about twenty minutes away instead of three hours. *C'est absolutment excellent, n'est-ce pas?* I mean—" she glanced between me, Di and Gregory, "just think of the things we can all do together!"

Oh, *nooooo*.

Mom clasped her hands together in unadulterated delight. Dad blanched. Di and Gregory appeared to be beyond speech.

"Wow," I managed. "That's unexpected...isn't it?"

"No, not really," Angelique said. "I've been accepted at Pierson's Academy. I was on their waiting list, but someone flunked out this semester, so I got in. *Un jour joyeux!* So, I'll start there right after winter break."

"You're going to a private girls' prep school?" Di asked.

"Well, um, yeah. I'll be able to study there for a year and a half before I start college, which should really help me—"

"Get into Harvard, Yale or Princeton," Aunt Candice interjected. "Stanford at the very least."

"Maybe you'd be able to show me around the area a bit after we move?" Angelique asked, biting her lip and gazing at us hopefully.

Gregory downed his drink in one long chug and left the room.

"Um, yeah, sure, we could probably do that...sometime," I said to our cousin. Di maintained a death silence.

"Diana, sweetie," Mom said, "maybe you could take Angelique to a few socials at the high school."

"Socials?" Di said, choking on the word. "We don't have socials. Just a few lame dances and pep rallies. I think, though," she shot me a demonic look, "Ellie really gets into crap—I mean, school events like that. She and Angelique could have an *awesome* time."

Mom, ignoring Di's wicked expression and my pleading one, said, "That's great. When's the next one?"

"This coming Friday." Di grinned. "Big school dance after the basketball game. I won't be going of course, but Ellie will, won't you?" She didn't call me a geek aloud, but it was implied.

"We're coming up here again to house hunt next week," Aunt Candice stated. "We'll make sure to drop off Angelique by seven or seven-thirty."

"Oh, make it six," our mother said. "Then she can have a nice dinner with us. Maybe pizza?"

Angelique looked thrilled, Di victorious.

Jane whispered, *'Une tragédie, n'est-ce pas?'*

I sighed. *You're not kidding.*

"Angelique, play us something on your cello," Aunt Candice commanded. "Mozart or

Beethoven or one of those dead Viennese guys."

'Une idée terrible,' Jane commented.

Enough already with the French, I said.

My cousin retrieved her instrument from the car, readied it and glowed her warmest grin at us. "Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik.* 'A Little Night Music,'" she translated primly. "In G Major."

Her fingers flew impressively across the neck of the cello. Her bow danced. For me, painful memories intruded.

I thought of the flute I'd failed miserably to master in seventh-grade band. The piano lessons I didn't have the aptitude for, even at fifteen. The time I broke two strings on Terrie's guitar when she tried to show me how to tune it. Despite my passionate love of music, my playing was horrible enough to deafen the ears of small animals.

So, I envied Angelique her musical gift, resented her for having her life together, but mostly I was ticked off because I couldn't hate her. She might be on the intense side and, yeah, more than a little annoying, but she was so damned nice to me.

I sighed.

Why was it that I couldn't be loved despite my flaws? Why couldn't I be "quirky" in a "cute" way? Why couldn't I excel at anything? Okay, correction: Why couldn't I excel at anything anyone *valued*?

No one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with, Jane remarked. *Your cousin, though, is rather accomplished,* she added, which only made me feel worse.

Yeah, I know.

Of course, your abilities are equally...well, perhaps even more desirable.

I saw my dad squinting at a black, Rorschach-like smudge on the otherwise pristine family-room wall. It looked like a frantic butterfly, trapped in its 2-D prison. I longed to set it free. *Sure they are, Jane.*

Pray, do I detect disbelief?

Now you're thinking, Sherlock.

There was a long moment of silence. Then she asked, *Who?*

Never mind, I said as Angelique continued onto the second movement. *Just tell me what you mean. How could my abilities, such as they are, be considered desirable? And before you say it, getting good grades doesn't count. No one cares.*

Without an instant of hesitation, Jane answered, *You are more imaginative than any of them. Your cousin. Your siblings. Even your schoolmates. They have talents, to be sure, but beyond an intelligent mind there must be a creative spirit. It is not enough to absorb mere facts. True invention is in the application of vision. This you have in grand measure, far beyond your years and experience.*

I don't know what came over me. Tears sprung to my eyes at her kind words. My aunt, misinterpreting as always, whispered proudly to my mother, "See how touched Ellie is by Angelique's performance. My daughter is a musical prodigy."

Mom bestowed a sage nod upon her. "It's as we always say, Angelique is a genius."

Jane said, *Ignore them, Ellie. Your turn will come. They will all appreciate you someday.*

I seriously doubted this, but hope was a powerful thing. For a moment, it trumped skepticism, and it buoyed my spirits in spite of myself. And I loved that Jane could do that for me. I loved that her wisdom, so evident in her most famous novel, seemed to shine through and

illuminate the character of each person I met and, most impressively, of the people I knew best.

She single-handedly made me feel less like a loner. She made me believe it was okay that I was nothing like my Bad Girl Sister, my Dismissive Brother or my Genius Cousin. With Jane in my head and in my life, I could just be *me,* and this gift helped me deal with the worst of my adolescent high school existence.

The day of the game, however, I stood at my open locker, counting down the seconds until Angelique arrived and the solidification of my total lack of coolness was complete. I jammed my books into my straining backpack while, two lockers to my right, Jason Bertignoli stuffed his backpack with similar items.

Barnett.

Bertignoli.

Which left—guess who?

Blaine.

Three lockers down from Jason stood Sam of course. (And can I tell you how much I HATED alphabetical order?) He leaned against the gray metal and sent me an indecipherable look. He seemed about to speak, but then Jason waved and said a jovial "Hi, Ellie!"

I said "Hi" back.

Sam's neutral glance turned to one of exasperation. I figured this was because he and Jason had just finished the last day of their villainous volleyball rivalry and Sam, who did not take defeat graciously, lost in the final match.

I expected him to walk away, but he didn't. He just stood there, arms crossed, watching us.

Jason, proudly wearing his basketball jersey and looking very hot in it, said to me, "So,

are you going to the game tonight?"

I nodded.

He grinned. "That's totally rad. I'll be starting."

I returned the grin. I already knew this. "Are you? Well, good luck. I'll be cheering for you."

"Cool."

Jason, whose back was still to Sam, didn't see the gagging motions Sam made behind him.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tonight then," I said to Jason.

"Yeah. You going to the dance?"

"Yep."

"Will you save one for me?" he asked.

I shot him a sharp look to see if he was kidding. He wasn't.

I nodded, my heart thudding at a frantic pace. Oh, my God! Jason Bertignoli asked *me* to save him a *dance*! Then, just in case he missed my meaning, I shrugged and said, "Sure."

"Great." Jason shut his locker. "I hope the music doesn't suck."

Sam's jaw dropped and he flipped Jason the bird behind his back. Ever the music lover, Sam led the student council committee that chose the tunes the DJ would spin at the dance. I knew this. Jason, evidently, did not. He'd unknowingly made an enemy for life.

I laughed. "We'll see, I guess." Then I waved Jason goodbye as he walked away, oblivious to Sam's fury.

"That new guy is an asshole," Sam spit out the minute Jason rounded the corner.

"Funny, he said the same thing about you." I paused, pretending to think. "Hmm. Who

should I believe?"

"Screw you, Ellie."

"Not in your wildest dreams, Sam."

I don't know why I said this exactly, other than that it was the standard teen reply. I didn't consider it a particularly nasty retort nor did I suspect blatant foreshadowing.

But Jane said, *You are being unpardonably coquettish.*

And Sam looked taken aback, almost hurt.

For a long moment he and I scowled at each other, our eyes locked in a stare down. The latest in our battle of wills. One I presumed was indicative of why I needed to avoid him, despite my hormones telling me otherwise. He'd fight me on this, or on anything, not because I mattered to him, but just to win. Sam seemed to like me best as an opponent.

Finally, he stalked off. And I left. Three hours later, Angelique arrived on my doorstep and, after dinner, Di dropped us off at the gym entrance for the basketball game and dance.

"Hope the *social* is fun," Di said with feigned sweetness.

"Thanks," our cousin said brightly.

Di rolled her eyes at me. "I'll pick you both up at eleven. Don't do anything stupid, geek."

The tires screeched as she zipped out of the parking lot and went to do whatever High School Bad Girls did on Friday nights in November. Angelique and I walked into the school, and she eyed the two thousand students in the stands with amazement. *"C'est formidable,"* she murmured behind me.

I swiveled around and stopped her right then and there. "Listen," I told her in my most patient voice. "Your French is great. Really. But here, in this gym, it's not a good idea to use it

interchangeably with English. Okay?"

"Why not?"

"Well..." There were so many reasons, I didn't know where to begin. Because it was annoying? Because I already had enough problems? Because French was such a freaking pretentious language? Take your pick. But I said, "Because the goal of this evening is to be social, right?"

"Right."

"So, people can't socialize with you if they have *no clue* what you're saying."

She thought this over for a second. "Oh. Okay."

I felt a surge of relief. "Okay. Now, let's find a seat."

We met Terrie at my favorite spot in the bleachers, admired Jason's perfect free-throw form and watched our team get soundly crushed by the visitors. And, though Angelique totally got into the game, even she knew the real event was yet to come.

Terrie said, "Well, we lost, but at least we had the game's best scorer on our side. Number 45. That new Jason guy."

I grinned. "Yeah. He was good, huh?"

My friend squinted at me. "What's that smile mean, Ellie? You don't like him or anything, do you?"

Always, always deny.

I made a face. "No, of course not. But this afternoon he asked me to save him a dance tonight."

Terrie's eyebrows rocketed upward, and Angelique looked at me as if I'd just recited a flawless, accent-free verse by Sartre.

"It's no big deal. He probably already forgot about it..."

My friend whooped and grabbed my hands. "C'mon, Ellie! We've got to get you ready before the dance starts. I have makeup with me." She tugged at me until I stood. "You, too, Angelique. Let's pretend we're hot girls on the town tonight, okay?"

Angelique answered with an enthusiastic, "Okay!"

A half hour later, with faces adequately freshened, we entered the second gym, the one we lowly underclassmen used daily for P.E.

I felt the usual pit-of-my-stomach nausea just walking through those doors but, I'll acknowledge, the place had been transformed. Where there'd been floor mats and tubs of volleyballs, now stood a DJ with giant stereophonic speakers, two turntables and four boxes of LPs and cassettes. Where nets had been, there were now snacks, streamers and colored lights. The gym looked almost inviting.

The dance started in the usual way: Kids milling around trying not to meet anyone's glance as they plunged their hands into bowls of pretzel sticks or corn chips. The lights flashed and the music blared frantically, pushing me into a state of fuzzy sensory overload. The moment I saw Jason strolling toward us, though, my attention became laser-focused.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," Terrie and Angelique said together.

"Great game," I said. "You scored a lot." Then, when his smile brightened, I wanted to shoot myself.

But Jason wasn't Sam. He didn't fire back a rude retort like *Yeah, but I'd like to score some more.* Jason only said, "Thanks." Then he turned to Angelique. "Are you new to the

school, too?"

She shook her head. "I'm Ellie's cousin."

He nodded once. "Cool."

And that was our complete, unabridged conversation.

As my heartbeat raced in time to The Cars, we munched on Doritos. The DJ played Blondie, Styx, Asia, REO Speedwagon. We drank Dixie cups of Pepsi. The tempo slowed to a moderately paced Elton John song. Terrie nabbed four stale brownies and passed them out to us on little cornucopia napkins.

None of us looked each other in the eye. Not once.

I noticed Jason surreptitiously checking out Angelique, and I could tell he approved. In his defense, my cousin was not—objectively speaking—unattractive. She just had a bad habit of saying screwy things. In French. My new fear was that, though Jason wanted to start the night with me, he might decide he wanted to end it with her.

I glimpsed Sam and one of his buddies conferring with the DJ about the tunes across the room. I couldn't hear a word of their exchange, but lots of hand-waving and head-nodding resulted.

A couple of guys from the basketball team greeted Jason with a wave. He returned the friendly gesture. A Journey ballad began to play, and Jason's teammates pulled two girls onto the dance floor to get the ball rolling. I sighed.

"How 'bout that dance now?" Jason asked.

I waited a second to make sure he was talking to me and not to my cousin. "Okay," I said.

He grinned and reached for my hand. It was just so...to use a Jane word...*chivalrous*.

Jason held me loosely as we danced. We grazed against each other in a stream of bodies

that soon grew to be a sea of teens. He tightened his grip, and the other people—like the popular guys, the cliquish girls and even Sam—faded into the backdrop.

When the song ended, he leaned in as though he might kiss me, but he didn't. "Thanks," he whispered. "I really liked that."

I looked up at him, mute, and nodded.

He squeezed my arms and went off to join the other basketball jocks. Then all three guys promptly disappeared into the night.

I didn't mind their departure, though. One nice dance was all I'd been hoping for, and I hadn't yet learned to demand more from men. But, despite my low expectations, what happened next blindsided me.

As I walked back toward Angelique and Terrie, foolishly meditating on how satisfying the evening had turned out to be, something slammed into me. Hard. Sam Blaine.

"What now?" I said, surprised, as always, by the magnetism he projected at close range.

"Nothing." He glanced at Jason's retreating form and his blue eyes iced over. "Let's dance."

Before I could argue against it or come up with a good excuse not to, Sam pulled me back onto the floor.

I pleaded to Jane with silent insistence for help. *What should I say to him? What should I do?*

Let him lead you in both the dance and the conversation, Jane instructed. *He will reveal his intentions presently.*

"So, what do you think of the music?" Sam said, his tone proving this was no casual inquiry.

I listened as Don Henley lamented "The End of the Innocence," my fingers tingling and nearly shaking from the contact with Sam's hand and his muscular shoulder. "It seems good."

"It better be," he replied sharply, but I wasn't sure if he was directing this warning at me or at the DJ.

I swayed ungracefully in his grasp and both of us lapsed into silence. I appealed to Jane again. *Can't you do some kind of "Cyrano" thing? Make me sound sophisticated for a change?*

She tsked. *This is an awkward phase you are in, Ellie, but it will pass with time. As others learn to see you more clearly, so you will learn to see yourself. You are lovelier than you think and have admirers already. Albeit inappropriate ones.*

Who? Jason? I asked her. *He's friendly to everybody.*

Perhaps, but there is also Mr. Blaine. Though I urge you to discourage his attentions.

I studied the insolent teen staring down at me, his lips rigid, his eyes forbidding. Much as I wished otherwise, I was sure he was up to no good. *Sam? That's ridiculous*, I told her.

It ought to be so, replied Jane, *but I fear it is not. He appears to be capable of very little of value, but he did manage to detect your intelligence and kindheartedness. He seems drawn to these qualities in you.*

I considered this and, for an instant, I was flattered. But Sam being sincere in his admiration struck me as preposterous, and I said so. *The guy only likes to fight with me.*

Jane sighed. *You have much to learn about human nature, Ellie.*

Sam puffed out some air. "Are you bored or something?"

"What? No," I said to him.

"You look like you're really out of it. Or lovesick over that loser Jason. Or maybe high," he added, as if issuing a challenge.

"Well, I'm not any of those."

He rolled his eyes and his grip on my hand and waist tightened. "Heard you brought your cousin along tonight." He nodded in the direction of my companions. "She's kinda hot."

My throat seized up.

"Maybe I should ask her to dance later," he threatened.

"Maybe you should," I snapped back, although, like a brainless twit, the thought made me irrationally jealous.

"Well, that's why I asked *you* to dance. Figured you could give me a proper introduction." He shot me an audacious smirk.

Ouch.

To Jane I said, *What did I tell you?*

To Sam I said, "Fine." I pulled out of his grasp, crossed my arms and glared at him, hoping to God I hid my emotions well enough. Sam could never be trusted with the truth about my feelings for him. He'd pounce on any display of weakness.

He stared at me in frigid silence before pivoting on his sneaker sole and ambling toward Angelique.

I took a deep breath and followed him.

"Hey," he said to her. "I'm Sam and you're...cute."

Gag me, I thought, because it was, you know, still the '80s.

But Angelique grinned at the lame line. "Hi, Sam," she said.

Terrie, who stood watching this train wreck from a mere two feet away, murmured, "Watch it, Blaine."

Sam shrugged then turned his highest wattage smile on my cousin. "What's your name?"

Angelique glanced between the three of us and looked confused. “Angelique?” she said, her voice uncertain.

“Yes,” I said, trying to help her out because, no matter how displeased I might’ve been about her tagging along with me that night, everything about Sam’s recent hot-cold, fake-flirting, wacko behavior displeased me more. “Sam Blaine, this is Angelique Lawson. She’s here visiting. Try to be polite for a change.”

Sam acted as if I were invisible. He said to Angelique, “Too bad you’re not planning to stay for good. We could use a few new faces here, especially pretty ones like yours.” He grinned at her and my insides twisted. “Can I talk you into hanging around?”

Angelique blushed. She looked so flustered I worried she might break into nervous French at any moment.

He didn’t wait for her to answer. “Ah, Angelique. Well, I’m glad we met. Maybe I’ll see you later tonight?” He reached out and patted her arm.

“Peut-être,” she murmured. “I mean, perhaps.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up and he became even more debonair. “Oh, you speak French? *Je t’aime le français.”* He bowed slightly and gave her another of his winning grins.

Jane declared, *I abhor this boy*, her tone startling in its vehemence.

I gulped back my own displeasure. Since when did Sam Blaine speak French? He’d taken only Spanish classes since sixth grade...

My cousin stammered out a timid *“O-Oui.”*

“Fantastique,” Sam said, glancing over at me. Finally. “Well, we’ve got Spandau Ballet coming up soon, and there’s somewhere else I need to be for it.” He arched a victorious eyebrow in my direction then turned back toward Angelique. *“Au revoir, mon chéri,”* he told her.

Then, very deliberately, he eyed a sophomore female I recognized all too well. The girl stood along the wall with a small troupe of friends nearby, and Sam made sure I knew who he was looking at before striding toward her.

With Terrie glaring at his back and my cousin staring at him with an expression of pure astonishment, I told myself I was glad to see Sam walk away. I just wished he'd have walked toward almost anyone else.

Ellie, stop this, Jane ordered. *Feel no regret in his departure. You are right to be rid of him.*

Yeah, probably, I said as I watched him sidle up to Stacy Daschell and grin at her in that charming, charismatic way that came so naturally to him.

Jane's disdainful sniff echoed in my mind. *He would have brought trouble upon you, and you know too well he meant only ill will to your cousin.*

I know. Then the voices outside my head began debating and I was forced to pay attention to the females I could see.

"He's an, um, interesting guy," Angelique said.

"He's a little snot," Terrie replied. She made a fist, punched it into her opposite palm and caught my eye.

I blinked but tried to keep my expression impassive. Jane was right, of course. Sam's intentions toward my cousin were hardly, as she would say, "honorable." Especially not now when he had his arm around Stacy's shoulders. Damn him.

Angelique saw where I was looking and frowned. "Um, Ellie, is something going on that I should know about? Should I not be talking to him?" Her forehead creased and she squinted at me with a look I interpreted as total bewilderment. "There was an odd...oh, *je ne sais quoi*, I

guess, between you two. Sorry about the French." She nibbled on her lip.

I almost laughed. "Yeah, I don't know what it is either, but total *hate* has to come pretty close." I shrugged at her, trying to keep the hurt from showing. "Talk with him if you want. I don't care."

Terrie's gaze flicked toward the ceiling and back, but she refrained from saying the "Yeah, right..." that I knew she was thinking. Terrie had, after all, caught me writing "Ellie Blaine" on a piece of scratch paper back in September.

As we watched Sam pull Stacy away from her friends and toward a darkened corner, Terrie motioned us closer. "Stacy's totally wasted," she said, the voice of authority on school gossip. "And she just got dumped, you know."

"Really?" I didn't know. I didn't think anybody ever dared to cross Stacy, not even her upperclassman, wrestling-champion, now-ex-boyfriend. And he dumped her! Huh. Wonders never ceased.

"You mean that blonde girl, right?" Angelique jabbed her finger in Sam and Stacy's direction. "The tall, snooty-looking one with the really pointy nose?"

In spite of myself, I did laugh this time. Sometimes it was easy to appreciate my Genius Cousin. "The very one."

Do not look, Jane told me.

Why not? I looked anyway.

Across the gym, Sam whispered something in Stacy's ear, which made her crack a smile. Then she leaned against him and touched her pointy nose to his straight one. He grinned at her again, extra brightly.

I swallowed.

Terrie grabbed a few more brownies from the refreshment table. “Here,” she said, thrusting the dried-out chocolate squares at my cousin and me. Repulsive, but eating them gave us something to do.

When I stepped away to toss out my napkin and scavenge around for another Dixie cup of soda, I saw a couple of guys from Terrie’s biology class talking to her and Angelique. All four of them spontaneously laughed about something.

I downed my thimble of Pepsi and took a step back toward them just as that Spandau Ballet song came on. It was “True.”

Do not look, Jane said again.

But I ignored her and glanced over at Sam, who had his lips on Stacy’s neck. Stacy, meanwhile, threw her head back and put her hands on Sam’s ass.

Aw, no.

I saw my friend and my cousin being led to the dance floor by the two bio guys. All of them looked like they were having more fun than actors in a *Love Boat* episode.

Do NOT look, Jane warned for the third time.

But did I listen? No. You’d think I’d learn.

Now Sam’s mouth covered Stacy’s. He was in the process of devouring her whole, and she was letting him. Right there. In full view of everyone. To the sounds of Spandau Ballet.

I winced.

Then the worst of it happened.

As he traced patterns on her back and dipped his fingers to her waistband to skim the top of her jeans, he caught my gaze and held it. He lifted one corner of his lips in acknowledgement and projected his most conquering stare right back. He all but shouted across the gym, “See what

you're missing, Ellie Barnett? See how I don't need you to have a good time. I could have anyone I want, and I don't want *you*."

And at that moment, when his triumphant blue eyes turned away from mine and fixed on Stacy's unnaturally perky chest, I vowed I wouldn't want him either, not even in secret. Jane was right about him being a big jerk like Wickham. And I knew with absolute certainty that I'd *never* let myself get seduced into liking Sam Blaine again, no matter what.

Let me repeat: NEVER.

Which just goes to show how wishy-washy I turned out to be. Because, as the years went by, look at what I did? Not only did I let myself get seduced into *liking* Sam Blaine and into taking some consequent action (but just once, okay, and we used a condom), in no way was I able to keep secret the private heartache that resulted.

Sam knew.

Jane knew.

Hell, *Camryn* knew, and even that bastard Dominic might've guessed.

All these years later and I was *still* being driven to battle Sam—and my inappropriate feelings for him—by forces that seemed beyond my control. So, I decided my only hope for the dream relationship I longed for rested in finding a man who was the Anti-Sam. The Anyone-But-Him Hero of my Heart. I still didn't know where, precisely, to hunt for such a mortal, but I was open to possibilities and more than willing to stalk a little, if necessary.

And I was just optimistic (and, well, desperate) enough to think I'd succeed in capturing a guy like that...one who'd be my Sam-Antidote and heal the hurt Sam had inflicted.

"Women fancy admiration means more than it does...and men take care that they should."

—*Pride and Prejudice*

CHAPTER THREE

In the weeks that followed my running into Sam at that bar, my life began the last stage of a drastic surface metamorphosis.

In one sense, I knew I was finally becoming the monarch I'd dreamed of. I'd emerged from my cocoon of adolescence, transitioned into young adulthood and was incredibly close to being able to float around the world of grownups in my butterfly costume. Inside, however, I remained much the confused caterpillar I'd always been.

The problem, of course, was that the people around me, with the exception of Jane, rarely looked beneath the surface so, to them, I appeared fine. Or, at least, as fine as they figured I *should* be. And this forced me to keep up the charade of "fineness" at home.

Case in point: we had a family dinner the night before I drove off to grad school. Mom made her famous chicken potpie, which I usually loved, but in the wake of having so recently seen Sam again and having just broken up with Dominic, I didn't have much of an appetite. So I picked at my food while my family discussed me in their typical, ever-tactful manner.

My dad, smiling at the steaming potpie, said, "Our Ellie, off to do more studying. Hmm. I hope you like it." He sounded slightly mystified. Dad was a pretty bright guy, but he let me

know on multiple occasions how, when he was in school, he couldn't wait to get out of college and get his first real job. "Two more years, right?"

I nodded. Two more years of going fulltime and I'd have dual masters' degrees: M.A. (Masters of Arts in English Lit) and M.L.S (Masters of Library Science).

"Well...good," he said. "We know you'll do well at that."

Di snickered and hissed under her breath, "Yes. It's the *one* thing 'Our Ellie' knows how to do well."

I glanced at her mutely and sighed. Becoming "Mrs. Evans" had not improved my sister's temperament one whit. Name change or no, she remained the same nasty Diana Lynn Barnett who'd hated me since toddlerhood.

My brother Gregory, however, in a rare gust of goodwill, said to Di's new husband Alex, "Ellie was always the best student in the family. She got more A's in one year than I got in all of high school."

"That's cool," Alex said, his dangly silver earring swinging freely between strands of his long dark hair as he nodded politely and dug into his dinner.

I shot Gregory a brief and grateful grin, but then Mom burst in. "Well, no. I think Angelique got more A's than anyone in the family. She's at Stanford now, you know."

Mom said this for Alex's benefit, but I was, indeed, *well* aware of my cousin's whereabouts. Aunt Candice, whose move to Illinois those years ago had afforded her easy weekly visits to my parents' house, proved herself incapable of speaking a multi-syllabic sentence without referencing her daughter's battle against "those uncouth Californians."

"Angelique is, of course, going to Stanford for *her* graduate studies," my aunt often commented. "They overlooked her after high school, put her on a 'wait list' for undergrad

entry—the nerve of them! But, they sure realized their mistake later. I told her, I said, 'Angelique, darling, you should just forget about Stanford. Make them suffer. Give the Ivies another try, or keep living at home and continuing on at Northwestern.' But—" Aunt Candice sighed, "she insisted on moving out West and joining all those surfing and roller-blading Californians." She grimaced. "They're going to get skin cancer, the lot of them. I keep sending her bottles of sunscreen, but I'm not sure it's enough."

Since I was staying safely in the frigid Midwest, I didn't require nearly as much sunscreen as my Genius Cousin, but Mom tucked a bottle into my bag anyway. And the next morning I left home and soon found myself on my new campus in my new life, three hours south of Glen Forest, registered as an official grad student.

Unlike my undergraduate years, I wasn't forced to take any sucky P.E. courses, pointless mathematics classes or boring humanities prerequisites. I could focus exclusively on literature with my side order of library science.

But, just like my undergrad years, and my high school years before them, it turned out that academic issues weren't destined to be my problem—guys were. And just like my coursework increased in difficulty from the undergrad to grad level, so did the degree of conniving I encountered from the male members of the species. Brent Sullivan headed the 400-level class on Problematic Men.

"Check the list," Brent said to me one early winter night during my first semester. "I dare you."

The curly-haired, future MBA grad leaned across Wilder Hall's front desk, where I was working the eight to ten p.m. shift. (I needed the money and wanted a job nearby. Since I lived on the 3rd floor of Wilder, the only all-grad student dorm on campus, it took me exactly thirty-

two seconds to get to work.)

Brent pointed to the reservation book. The saucy twist to his lips only grew more pronounced as he edged nearer to me.

I flipped open the book and, sure enough, his name was penciled in. Sauna key. Ten o'clock. That very night. In my best barbed tone, I said, "So, what then? Are you issuing a general invitation?"

He laughed and brought his nose a mere two inches from mine. "No. A very specific one. To you."

"I see." I pretended to be like a fine English lady I knew, and I forced my excitement and my anxiety under control. "The Sauna" was our university's equivalent to something like "Make Out Point," a locale visited for the purpose of getting personal with someone of the opposite sex. A private invitation to the sauna was right up there with the phrase "My roommate's gone...wanna come up and see my beer-can collection?"

"Do you, Ellie? Do you see?" Brent asked me.

I stared at Brent but didn't answer. He loved the chase and, having been his prey for a month now, I knew better than to give in too quickly. In studying his face for so long, though, I noticed that only a couple of small blemishes marred his smooth, golden complexion. His pores, though large, were somehow intriguing, especially up close like this. It made me laugh. That was my test to see if I had a bad case of lust—when even a guy's pores looked sexy.

"What's so funny?" he said, seeming surprised by my reaction and, for once, a little vulnerable. It was the vulnerability that finally got to me.

He pulled back a few inches, and I realized this was the moment of truth. The time when I needed to choose whether to follow up or not.

"You are," I told him. I glanced down at my Poetry 417 notes, riffled through them until I found the Henry Vaughan page and began quoting from a complicated seventeenth century poem called "Corruption."

I finished reading and Brent grinned carefully at me. "I have no freakin' idea what that means."

"I'll give you a hint," I said, pointing to the title.

His grin broadened. "Ah. So that's what you see."

"Exactly," I said dryly, but I added a smile and a wink so he knew I was stepping into the game. "The verse is actually about death, but Vaughan named it 'Cor—"

He reached out and snagged my sweatshirt collar with his finger, tugging me toward him. He planted a kiss on my lips. A long, hot one. No doubt at all about his sexual orientation. (Given my vast history of mistakes, I didn't want to misinterpret a guy's intentions again. I'd already made that error as an undergrad.)

"I'll be back at ten, then," he informed me. And he strode away, the picture of fearlessness and unquestioned masculinity. The sauciness back in place. The vulnerability a well-used, now-discarded tool.

The desk phone rang.

"Wilder Hall," I said, my lips still smoldering from Brent's kiss, my mind racing with the possibilities of where this relationship might be headed.

"Hi, Ellie! How are you?" The relentlessly cheerful voice of my cousin came across the line loud and clear.

"Angelique. What's up?" I asked this although I already had a sneaking suspicion. She'd been calling me from Stanford with goofy questions about sex and dating all semester. California

guys were, presumably, a new breed of male, and any prior advice about Midwestern men didn't apply.

"I've got a question for you." She paused to add suspense. "What do you wear to a bar mitzvah?"

"What?"

"A bar mitzvah. You know that Jewish ceremony thingy where the boys—"

"I know what it *is*, Angelique. But what are you doing going to one?"

"Oh, well my boyfriend's Jewish," she said breezily, as if the knowledge of this wouldn't give her mother—and half the members of our extended WASPy family—a coronary. "His nephew is having his next weekend, and Leo invited me."

"Leo? That guy you thought was so cute in your Renaissance Music class?"

"Yeah." She sighed happily. "I think I'm going to marry him, Ellie."

"Wow. That's...wow. And, um, about Aunt Candice...you've maybe mentioned this possibility to her?"

"Nope. Not yet. But she's going to *love* him. Dad and the twins will, too, I just know it. Leo's so smart and funny, and his parents are the nicest, most laidback people ever. *Très gentils.* His sister Lily kind of reminds me of you, actually. Really into books. It's her son that's having the bar mitzvah."

"Got it," I said. "Well, I've never been to one, but I hear they're kind of like weddings as far as formal attire goes. You should dress up."

"See, that's what I thought, but Leo likes to joke around so much. He said I could wear whatever I wanted. That he'd like me best in a toga." She laughed. "But then, he's a fan of the Roman period." When I didn't laugh along, she added, "He's getting his Ph.D. in Italian

history."

"Ah," I said. "That explains it."

"Anyway, thanks for your help! I'm going to make dinner now," she informed me, which made sense since it was only six-thirty Pacific Time. "What do you think? Egg salad sandwich and soup or a veggie-and-cheese omelet?"

"The omelet, and let me know how the bar mitzvah goes, will you?"

She blew me a kiss over the phone line. "I will. Thanks, Ellie. Love you!"

"You, too," I said, but she'd already hung up.

Whoa. Marriage.

Again.

My first seriously close encounter with it had been my sister's wedding to Alex, of course, but that hardly counted, since she kept me completely out of the loop as far as her matrimonial affairs went. My good friend and undergrad roomie—Kim—was getting hitched soon to her longtime boyfriend Tom, and I was going to be in that wedding. But Kim and Tom lived hours away in central Wisconsin. I wouldn't see any of their post-marital stuff close up.

But now...Angelique?

I couldn't help but wonder: Would *I* ever meet a guy I could marry? A guy who'd propose to me? One I could take home and introduce to my parents as my fiancé?

Maybe Brent will be the one, I suggested to Jane, trying out the idea. True, I didn't know him that well—yet—but he was manly enough. A macho man, actually. The only type of male I'd endeavored to date since Mark Williams (a genuinely wonderful guy who was the greatest boyfriend ever during college...until he "came out" to me). *But Brent also has something of Sam in him, with that love of bantering and his natural...oh—*

Impertinence? Jane supplied.

Well, yeah.

She sniffed, making it clear she didn't endorse Brent as a marital prospect.

Your sister is a married woman now, perhaps she can offer you some beneficial advice?

I laughed aloud. *Not likely, Jane. You know how I feel about trying to talk with her. You know it's futile.*

I know no such thing, Jane retorted. *You are such a stubborn young being, Ellie. I only mention this because a time will come when you may wish to cherish your sisterly relationsh—*

"Can I have change for a five?" a 2nd-floor resident asked me, interrupting Jane's latest lecture.

"Sure," I said, pulling out the cash box and contemplating doing something reckless with Brent Sullivan.

I decided I didn't want to think about marriage. I didn't want to imagine Angelique getting wild-n-wacky at a bar mitzvah with her Stanford boyfriend. I didn't want to patch up my relationship with my malicious sister. In fact, I didn't want to have the voices of Reason and Maturity in my head at all that night.

Instead, I just wanted to think about Brent. About being young and free and potentially in love. About my own life and what I wanted from it: Some respect from my immediate family. A career I enjoyed and was good at. One man who cared about me and whom I cared about in return.

How bad could it be to, for once, go after exactly what I needed, even if the method wasn't wholly and completely honorable?

What are you devising, Ellie? Jane said in her Warning tone.

Nothing.

Nonsense. Tell me. I implore you not to do anything regrettable.

But because I'd momentarily forgotten the tremendous pain I'd endured at the hands of men when I'd ignored Jane in the past, I shut my eyes and shut Jane out of my mind for the night.

While this skill was something I'd learned to do as I'd grown older (one I'd often had reasonable grounds for exercising, particularly when boys and bedrooms were involved), and while Jane herself elected to shut *me* out on occasion as well...this time it was a mistake on my part. No question about it.

***

Brent led me by the hand through the door of the now-unlocked sauna room. Then he locked it behind us.

"Alone at last," he said with his trademark spider-to-the-fly smirk.

"Yep," I replied, eloquent as always.

I wondered what his lead-in line would be. How long it would take before he began to kiss me. If I could give off the appearance of cool until I knew where he was headed. And, mostly, if our month of verbal foreplay meant anything when it came down to lip-to-lip action.

I took a couple of deep breaths and surreptitiously studied Brent's attractive physique. My fingers itched from wanting to run them through his dark curly hair, but I clasped them together instead.

I wasn't quite subtle enough. He caught me staring and looked at me as if he knew what I was thinking.

"I brought along a deck of cards." He punctuated this statement by pulling them out of

his back pocket and waving them in the air. “Thought, maybe, we could play a game or two of ‘Go Fish.’”

Not the opening line I’d expected. “Here?” I said, unsure how to respond. “In the sauna?”

“Well, yeah. Every time I have to fish for another card, I also get to fish for an item of clothing.” He grinned. “One of yours.”

My heart, which had been pounding frantically, stopped. Then restarted. “Oh. Uh, Brent—”

“Now before you go disagreeing with me, just think of how fun it’ll be. I bet no one’s done that in here yet. We could be total originals.”

“I—I’m not sure I want to make my mark as a trendsetter in quite that way.” Not that I was opposed to seeing more of him, but I’d expected at least an attempt at hugging or kissing before we started discarding clothes. I had to laugh, though, and eye his body one more time. Who else would’ve thought of “Strip Go Fish”?

Unfortunately, when he caught my admiring stare, Brent had his way in, and he knew it.

“Ellie,” he said, his voice low and seductive. “Remember, if you have to go fish, you get to make a clothing selection, too.” He held my hands and pressed them up against his hard chest. “Aren’t you even a little curious?”

This was the dangerous line women had to walk. Curiosity versus consequences.

“Of course,” I whispered. “But we haven’t known each other for very long and—”

“That’s not true,” he said, adamant. “We’ve been friends for ages, and I know you’re nice and friendly, cute and smart, into poetry and English and stuff. I *know* you, Ellie. I just wanna get to know you better.”

I was being an idiot. Exhibit A: Even *thinking* of considering a Very Lame Line like that.

Exhibit B: Going ahead and considering it anyway. However, this was a case where curiosity bested consequences. In my defense, I did make a brief plea for responsibility.

"Let's get to know each other then," I whispered. "But, please, let's take things slow. I'm not ready to go...too far, just yet. Okay?"

He nodded, looking gleeful, and I realized I'd just given him the female equivalent of a Very Lame Line.

Brent turned on the switch to start the sauna. Within, moments the room began heating up. At this rate, we might have to begin removing clothing before the card game began. I unbuttoned the top of my shirt and pushed up my sleeves. Brent untucked his jersey and plopped down on the floor.

He shuffled the deck like a Vegas dealer. The cards buzzed in his palms, smacking into each other and falling neatly into place. Then he dealt us both seven cards each, placing the remainder in the middle.

He studied his hand and rearranged a few. "You can go first," he said with a gallant smile.

I fanned out my cards. Two eights, a four, a three, a ten, a king and an ace. I removed my pair of eights and laid them on the warm tile.

Brent looked impressed by my early match and winked at me. "Way to go."

"Thanks. Okay, I'd like a four please."

He scanned his cards and his grin broadened. "Sorry, don't have it. Go fish."

What to do?

I selected a card from the pile. A six of spades. I added it to my hand and stared at him.

"What else will you take?" he asked, pointing to his torso with his open palm.

"Your, um, left shoe."

He raised his eyebrows and slowly untied his sneaker. He pulled it off and handed it to me. "Hope it's not too stinky for you."

I shook my head. "Your turn."

"A jack, any suit."

Damn. I didn't have it. I swallowed hard and said, "Go fish."

Brent grinned as he reached for a card. "And I'll take your shirt, too."

"My shirt? Already?"

"Yep. Off with it." He motioned for me to pass it over to him.

So, he was going to play hardball, was he? I unbuttoned my blouse and slowly tugged it off, glad my bra was full coverage and freshly washed.

He eyed me with an appreciation far more licentious than reverential. "Thanks. Back to you."

"A three," I said.

He raised a cocky brow and plucked one out of his hand. "Here you go."

"Thank you." Then I winced. It was his turn again.

"Ten," he said.

I exhaled and handed my ten of hearts over. "Okay, Brent, give me a king."

"No king. Sorry, sugarplum." He shook his head with feigned sadness. "Go fish."

I blindly grabbed a card then pointed my index finger at him. "And I want the jeans, too."

A laugh erupted from him. "Okay. Now you're getting into the spirit of things." Then he very deliberately unfastened his belt, his eyes never leaving my face, and he slid them off, taking the right sneaker with them. He tossed the jeans over to me and retied his remaining sneaker as I

watched. The distorted shape of his white briefs boasted full arousal.

I felt the room temperature spike. Boy, that sauna was really working.

"My turn, Ellie." His voice was even lower now and even more seductive. I felt a chill of excitement despite the heat. "Do you have a five for me?"

"No," I whispered.

He paused, waiting.

"Go fish," I said finally.

He grabbed a card from the pile and winked. "Bra."

My jaw dropped. "I—uh—"

"Don't back out on me now."

"Umm..." Oh, what the hell. I shrugged and unhooked the back clasp. So much for full coverage.

"I'll take that," he whispered.

I handed the bra to him and crossed my arms.

"No fair."

"Tough," I said.

"Your turn," he reminded me.

"Yeah. That's right. And I want an ace." The kind of ace that would get him back good.

He shook his head. "No ace, baby doll. You know what to do." His grinned dared me. "Go fish."

I drew a card, leaned toward him and said, "Your briefs please. Now."

His look was jubilant not embarrassed. Brent knew what he was doing. He pulled the briefs off and dangled them on his finger. I, of course, wasn't really focused on the underwear.

Brent had been fortunate in the endowment department, and it was a pleasure to observe the length and firmness of him. So much so that I'd forgotten to keep my arms crossed.

"Finish the game?" he asked, his tone amused.

"S-Sure."

"A nine, then."

I didn't bother looking down at my hand. I knew I didn't have it. "Go fish."

He put his cards on the tile floor. "I want the rest of your clothing."

"Okay," I heard myself say. "Likewise."

We shucked whatever we were still wearing, and Brent swept the cards aside. He pressed his body against mine and his lips swooped in to taste my mouth. To consume it.

I felt like a kid sneaking chocolate bars on Halloween night. How after a busy evening of trick-or-treating, when we'd already eaten our allotment of sweets, I'd tiptoe out of bed and into the kitchen, find my stash and secretly devour another Snickers or Milky Way. It was bad for me. I knew I didn't need it. It kind of made my stomach roil. But the temptation was too strong for me to ignore. Brent Sullivan was just like that candy.

"I want you," he whispered. "I'm crazy about you. Be my girlfriend, Ellie."

I nodded and hoped, rather than believed, he was sincere in his intentions.

He didn't waste time trying to convince me further with words after that. He just used his hands and his mouth and his hips and his...well, let's just say that Brent had come prepared for "safe sex" and what followed wasn't at all mediocre. My body was euphoric. My heart less so.

Brent nibbled on my neck in that rare, tranquil moment of afterglow. "We've gotta return the key by midnight," he said between nips. "That gives us only another fifteen, twenty minutes. Anything special you wanna do?"

"Can we just talk?"

He shrugged and withdrew his teeth from my neck. "Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"Our relationship."

His eyes grew wide, but he glanced away—to keep me from reading his expression, I figured.

I sat up.

"Yeah?" he said.

I picked through the clothes until I found my bra and panties. I slipped those back on, fast. "So, when you said you wanted me to be your girlfriend, did you mean just for tonight? Or were you thinking longer term? Like that we'd be, you know, exclusively dating now?"

He met my eye and beamed a bright smile at me. "The second option, Ellie."

Thank God.

"Oh, fine," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I was just checking."

"I don't hide out in the sauna with just *anyone*. I really, really like you." He paused and his look turned serious. "You feel that way about me, too, right? You're not just using me to get your jollies, are you, El?"

"Of course not. You're smart and funny and...very, very sexy. I really like you, too."

He exhaled heavily. "Well, that's a relief. I don't wanna play those kind of games. You know, where one person is in it only for the sex. Somebody always gets hurt then."

I nodded, seeing new depths in this guy that I'd missed during our bantering sessions at the front desk. My heart started to relax a little and marriage, suddenly, didn't seem quite so much of a long shot. I mean, there we were—both twenty-two—legal and nearly self-supporting

adults. Within a year and a half we'd be all set to live responsible, grown-up lives. We could realistically get married within a few weeks of grad school graduation. In a matter of seconds, I had our lives planned out between now and retirement.

Brent gave me an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Yeah, let's be exclusive," he said, almost to himself. Then, apparently deciding to go commando, he zipped up his jeans and expertly tucked his white briefs into his waistband. He covered it up with his jersey and slipped on his sneakers. "I'm ready to get outta here whenever you are."

I finished getting dressed and we left the sauna holding hands and grinning at each other.

I thought it was the start of a beautiful relationship.

As usual, I thought wrong.

With the exception of enjoying a couple blissful months of hot sex, life went on much as it always had.

In the light of day, and with my full conscious mind open to her again, Jane, of course, tried to advise me.

She cautioned, *There is, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.*

She counseled, *Every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason.*

She said, hopefully, *You are too sensible a girl to fall in love merely because you are warned against it.*

But I wasn't sensible. I was a fool. And I let her words of wisdom float in and out of my lust-crazed brain, until one afternoon when I went to visit my friend Erica in another dorm.

Erica was an undergrad, a senior, but only a year younger than me and in one of the lit classes that could be taken by both grads and undergrads.

Like me, she was an English geek.

Unlike me, she'd set her sights on a somewhat more illustrious career path than that of a high-school librarian. She wanted to become a famous poet and (for income until the fame kicked in) a professor at a Big Ten university. When we got together we liked to talk Classics.

That day, with the help of passages from a variety of mournful poets, we were discussing her feelings toward her high school boyfriend Ryan, who died in a tragic car accident back then.

"I don't think it's wrong for those memories to dim, Erica. I doubt Ryan would want you to stop living. To still be thinking only of him."

"I know he wouldn't. But I feel odd about letting go completely. It's as though I'm losing a sensitivity I'd had. I'm afraid if I really put my love for Ryan in the past, then I'm not *feeling* enough somehow. That a *real* poet would never recover. Do you know what I mean?" She squinted at me.

I squinted back and nodded. "I think so. That someone else might think you don't have the heart of a poet or that you're incapable of really *getting* literature if you move on from this tragedy that shaped your youth."

"Yes!" She paced the dorm-room floor. "And that's a stupid, selfish motive, I know." She paused. "Do you think I'm repressing things?"

At this I laughed. "Nobody I know dissects thoughts and emotions like you do. If you're suddenly repressing your grief, you'd need someone a whole lot more skilled in psychotherapy than I am to figure it out. I think maybe you're just finally healing."

"But so soon?"

"Soon? It's been six years."

She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah."

As my friend took this in, I thought about what I'd lost in high school. True, not a literal death, but the demise of an innocence, a hopefulness. And, yeah, my virginity, too, but who was counting?

Okay, so it was clichéd.

All of it.

I wasn't a completely unaware idiot despite this latest lapse into melodrama. But—I had to say it—being with Brent, despite Jane's disapproval, was bringing me back to life.

"Did you ever read—" Erica said as she riffled through one of her lit texts. Most of our conversations began with that phrase. "Oh. Here it is. This passage by Elizabeth Barrett Browning?" She handed me the book, and I'd just begun skimming the lines she pointed to, when Erica's door banged open and her roommate waltzed in.

Disappointment surged through me. "Hey, Rochelle, how are you?" I said, striving for friendly but detached. I hoped the dopey senior would grab a granola bar and leave again, but she dropped down beside us and exhaled breathily.

Conversations were always reduced to the lowest common denominator and, in this case, I knew we'd turn from Classic Poetry to Campus Gossip in a matter of nanoseconds. Rochelle didn't prove me wrong.

"Lord, did I ever hear the stupidest thing today!" she said, shaking her shoulder-length hair and getting comfortable on Erica's bed. "Some boys are *soooo* obvious. Trish's boyfriend is here again."

Erica groaned. "That guy has to be such a sleaze. I've never met him, but she talks constantly about what they do together. It's nauseating."

Rochelle twisted a lock of her streaked hair and sent us a smirk. "Well, now he's gotten

her into stripping during card games. She was jabbering about it before he showed up. Then they disappeared into the sauna."

I felt a blush begin at the base of my neck and knew it was creeping its way upward. "The sauna? Really?"

"Yeah, because Trish's roommate studies a lot in their room and Trish's boyfriend isn't from this dorm. He's a *grad* student," Rochelle explained with a roll of her eyes. "But he hangs out here often enough. Like practically every afternoon for *hours*. I try to avoid him."

"Oh," I said. "Um, what's his name?"

Rochelle bit her lower lip. "Brad—"

I felt a tiny swell of relief.

"—or maybe it's Brett. I don't remember exactly, but it's something like that. Anyway, he told her they were going to play 'Strip Go Fish' today. Can you believe it?" Rochelle rolled her eyes again.

I closed mine and tried to rein in the tears fighting to escape.

Duped again.

An idiot after all.

How much more proof did I need?

I heard Jane sigh deep inside my mind, but she didn't berate me. She had to know my days of being naively trusting of men were over.

OVER.

"You okay?" Erica asked me, tilting her head to one side and studying my face.

"Yep." I blinked and began gathering my things. "But I need to get to the library to finish a project for one of my MLS classes." I forced a bright smile at both of them. "Good talking to

you two. See you in lit, Erica."

I waved and walked out the door fast, still grinning like the mentally deficient person I was.

And, of course I didn't go to the library.

I clomped down four flights of stairs and camped out in their dorm's basement, in the little study right across from their sauna room. Clearly, I was a glutton for humiliation, but I needed to be absolutely, positively certain.

After all, it wasn't *impossible* that some other guy could use the same sex-getting tactics as Brent.

There might actually *be* a Brad or a Brett.

Maybe there was a *group* of grad-school guys who strategized together—as part of some morally decrepit team or something—and they'd come up with foolproof lines to use on their unsuspecting girlfriends.

It didn't mean Brent cheated on me. Not for sure. Not yet.

I pretended to read one of my MLS books. *The Dewey Decimal System: Selected Readings in Theory, Organization and Application.* Second edition. Written by Someone Very Pretentious, Ph.D., and penned with all the humor and insight of a text on dental flossing techniques.

An hour and seventeen minutes dragged on. Then the door to the sauna swung open. I heard female giggling first, followed by a male laugh.

Brent.

So, all hope for our Happily Ever After ended right there.

The pain of betrayal burned down my throat as I swallowed, but I didn't plug my ears or

close my eyes. I didn't run and hide. I listened. I watched.

I had my book open, its spine cracking, and I peered over its creased pages as Brent and a blonde I figured must be Trish walked out of the steamy room and into the hall. He was framed through both doorways, The Other Woman by his side. What a picture. What a con.

His gaze met mine, initially friendly, not comprehending. And then the eyes grew wide as recognition dawned. Four seconds, at most, split into subdivisions of time like an atom in a nuclear reactor, and equally explosive. Melodramatic emotions detonated in my brain.

"I—I gotta talk to someone," I heard him say to Trish as he bid her a quick farewell. But not before she kissed him hard on the lips and grinned at him. He smiled tightly at her, his next glance in my direction was sheepish and utterly vulnerable.

That was when I closed my eyes.

When Trish was safely out of sight, he bolted into the study and stood by me, looking hurt and, unbelievably, like *he* was the one who'd been wronged.

"What are you doing *here*, Ellie?" He shifted his weight between his feet a time or two then ended up leaning against the back of one of the chairs. "I mean, this dorm...it's, um...I didn't think you ever came here. Is it something you do often?"

I looked at the seven other people studying in the room, their gazes ranging from seemingly absorbed by their own stuff to obviously irritated by our distracting conversation.

I sighed. "If I didn't already know the answer, Brent, I'd ask you the same." I got up and pushed my way past him to get to the door.

He chased after me. Down the hallway, up the stairs, through the first floor corridor to the dorm's back exit (I couldn't fathom walking through the crowded lobby) and outside into the winter chill.

As I stepped onto the wet sidewalk, avoiding the clumps of snow clinging to the pavement, he called, “Please, Ellie. Stop. I’m sorry.”

I stopped.

I swiveled toward him, my heart and my fingers already numb, and I realized with a clarity I’d never before experienced that I had no idea what I was doing.

I didn’t know who I was.

I didn’t know who I wanted to be with. Hell, after the past couple of hours, maybe nobody.

I didn’t know where I was going in life or even where I was walking to in the next few minutes.

I didn’t know anything other than I wanted the day’s nightmare to end. And that somehow, somewhere there had to be an easier way to meet a good man, and I desperately wanted to know the secret.

“It just happened once or twice,” Brent explained, as if fewer than five indiscretions didn’t count. “And I like you better than her. I—I really, uh, kind of love you.” He paused. “C’mon, Ellie. Say something.”

I studied his handsome face, so flushed with embarrassment—real or contrived—then turned my attention toward the quad where scores of students milled around and chatted daily, regardless of the weather. About twenty yards away a lively assembly of females had gathered and several delighted giggles rose above the pack.

I pointed at the group and said to Brent, “Go fish.”