

Synchronized Breathing

By
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TWCS 
PUBLISHING HOUSE

First published by The Writer's Coffee Shop, 2013

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Paperback ISBN- 978-1-61213-189-4
E-book ISBN- 978-1-61213-190-0

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the US Congress Library.

Cover Illustration: Nina Hunter

www.thewriterscoffeeshop.com/tellison

This book is dedicated to late bloomers.

Chapter One

The Lemon Marriage

Having to move back in with my mother and teenage brother at the ripe old age of thirty-five seemed to loudly announce my failure as an adult. Ugly thoughts rattled around inside my head as I packed up the car and put Oliver into his car seat for the drive over the hill to my mother's apartment in Beverly Hills.

As we wound our way up through the canyons, the wretched nagging voice that keeps a running tally of my missteps had a field day. *Congratulations on yet another screwup, Scarlett. What's this now—a stalled career and a failed marriage? You're on quite a roll!*

That voice was happy to throw a virtual catalogue of prior lapses in good judgment back in my face, as if it thought I needed reminding. Despite those missteps, this time I knew I was doing the right thing.

Sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when a marriage goes from merely unraveling to unsalvageable. It can be an insidious process; you don't necessarily feel the cords fraying as it's happening. But sometimes a sequence of events can clobber you over the head as in, 'take that, stupid' and you know that fighting for the marriage isn't going to be worth it. The outcome isn't going to be good, in fact, it has become terminal and it is no longer a matter of *if* but *when*.

That's how I felt when I found the photos.

My mother was over, visiting. Oliver was napping and she wanted to show me an article on the Internet about the benefits of extended breastfeeding. She followed me over to the computer and took a seat beside me. As I turned the computer on, a new file in the corner of the desktop titled *homework* caught my eye. As my husband was chronically underemployed, the folder became instantly intriguing. What homework could he possibly have and why wouldn't he have said anything about it? Curiosity got the better of me. I clicked on it and then gasped as we were greeted by the contents of his private photo collection.

“Oh, my,” my mother said and didn’t bother to mask her pitying tone. “Let me put on my glasses.”

I was speechless. But that didn’t stop me from frantically clicking on all the files. My husband had been busy. There were literally hundreds of photos showcasing his member in various artistic poses—Naked Erect Penis in the garden catching some rays, Erect Penis proudly emerging from a sea of bubbles in the bath. Sleepy, Flaccid Penis lying in repose on the couch. He had lovingly documented his dick in all facets of its daily life.

My mother let out a long sigh and shook her head.

“Well, that’s a very time-consuming hobby. No wonder he doesn’t have time for a real job, he’s already got one.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

But that wasn’t the end of the union. We limped along for months after that, somehow managing to survive our fights—that was until today.

Dragging an oversized suitcase behind me, a well-worn diaper bag slung over my shoulder and balancing Oliver on my hip, I hauled us into the elevator. I let Oliver press all the buttons, purely because he loved to. Besides, it delayed the inevitable.

Here I was—returning to the womb after the collapse of my marriage. It was official: I was a mess. I was a walking advertisement for the utter mismanagement of my life. If there had been a management team responsible for this succession of lousy choices, heads would be rolling. But sadly, the only rolling head was my own.

The one person who was positively *ecstatic* at this news was my mother. Oliver had barely touched the doorbell when she flung the door wide open, as if greeting a spring feast after a winter of famine.

“Darlings!”

Her face dropped when she saw my tear-stained visage, and then again at the box of animal cookies that had exploded out of the overstuffed diaper bag and onto the floor in the hallway.

Oliver darted past us in a mad dash to get to the fish tank, which was the center of the universe as far as he was concerned.

“Oh, Scarlett. Come in, darling” she said, and gave a dismissive wave of her manicured hand. “Don’t worry. *Everybody* has a crappy first marriage. Husbands are left by placing one foot in front of the other and not looking back. It’s time to pick yourself up and move on.”

She stepped out of the way as I lugged our belongings and shards of animal cookies over her threshold.

My mother—or CeCe, as she preferred to be called—had three marriages under her belt, so leaving a husband was a subject she knew quite a bit about.

“You’re are still young, Scarlett. Well, okay, maybe not exactly *young*, but young enough, and you don’t look *too* worse for wear! Plus, you have darling little Oliver’s welfare to consider now, so you simply cannot indulge your taste in *subpar* men any longer.”

My questionable taste in men had long been a favorite subject of CeCe's to revisit whenever the opportunity presented itself. And as her newly minted roommate and captive audience, this was a good one.

"Darling," she said, "the only surprise in any of this is that you lasted as long as you did in that lemon of a marriage. This is the best bloody decision you've made in years!"

To say that CeCe was not fond of my soon-to-be ex-husband was an understatement.

That man couldn't lure me out of a burning building was the nicest thing she had to say about him.

Immune to his charms from the very beginning, her naked loathing was hard to miss. She could send an unmistakable chill through the room on a sweltering day merely by laying eyes on the man.

He didn't exactly strive to alter her low assessment of him, either. Despite my urging, he wouldn't so much as lift a finger for her or clean a dish after a holiday dinner. Blessed with good looks, he was the sort of Los Angeles fellow who expected to be catered to. Unaccustomed to women rebuffing his charm, he wasn't used to having to *earn* anyone's favors. The sheer gift of his presence was supposed to be enough. Until, of course, it wasn't—which was how I ended up on her doorstep.

Seeking refuge with my mother made about as much sense as leaping from the frying pan into the fire but I didn't have any other options. Planning ahead was never something I was good at, and sometimes one has no idea that this will be the day one leaves their husband.

"Well, I do think we should pop open some champagne and celebrate the end of that lemon marriage! It's about time." CeCe headed purposefully to the kitchen, taking time to do a little victory jig on the way.

"Oh . . . no, I'm not quite up to celebrating yet." I sank into the couch wearily, watching Oliver smacking the side of CeCe's oversized fish tank, sending terrified goldfish darting in every direction.

"Look, Mama! Make them go!" He watched with pride at this accomplishment.

"Don't whack the glass, Ollie. That scares them," I said with more than a reasonable note of irritation. Each loud thwack felt like a new crack forming in my skull.

"Oliver, the fish are a bit tired, darling. They've been swimming all day," CeCe called out from the kitchen. "Let them have a rest. Come here, love. I saved some lovely big chocolate strawberries just for you. Look!"

Oliver obediently heeded the call and joined CeCe in the kitchen.

CeCe was very good at anticipating when I was about to lose it. She relied on distraction to diffuse tense situations, often employing chocolate or booze—ideally both. This was one of her greatest attributes, as far as I was concerned.

CeCe set the elegant, slender glasses on the coffee table and proceeded to open the bottle of Dom she kept cold for precisely these sorts of occasions.

“No, CeCe, I don’t want to drink. It will only make me feel worse.”

“Nonsense,” she insisted, and handed me a glass. “We have to mark the occasion. Thank God you’re finally off-loading that dropkick. Cheers!”

As the newly appointed hostess of my divorce party, CeCe was a hard person to say no to.

“Cheers.” I lifted my glass to take an obligatory sip of the annoyingly happy bubbly.

Oliver was preoccupied with two large chocolate strawberries and began taking turns nibbling on them while pink juice streamed down his chin.

CeCe made a preemptive dive at him with a cloth napkin and then took a seat beside me. “Here’s to the end of that awful chapter with the miserable X!”

We had dubbed my husband ‘X,’ so Oliver wouldn’t know whom we were talking about. It was about the only non-expetive laced, child-friendly name CeCe could come up with for him. Wanker, asshole, and shithead weren’t going to cut it.

“Now, I blame myself for this travesty of a marriage,” CeCe said. “Clearly, I made some sort of colossal screwup somewhere in your upbringing that you resorted to marrying him in the first place. Exactly how you became so wretched and desperate that you thought he was your last option is anyone’s guess. If only I’d sent you to that Swiss finishing school, you would have learned to make better choices. You would have been exposed to a better class of men . . . and *this* would never have happened.”

This was a tired old joke between us and translated to ‘if I’d sent you away, you might have done well and married *rich* instead of an underemployed musician without a pot to piss in.’

“I doubt a Swiss finishing school would have saved me from myself, CeCe.” I was tired of beating a dead horse.

“Well, at least we could have tried!” CeCe gave an exasperated exhale.

CeCe had her own plan of action regarding romance: Find—and sometimes marry—a man, leave said man, and then move to a different country. Rinse and then repeat, sometimes in dizzying succession. By comparison, I was a rank amateur. But if there was one thing I learned from leaving our native Australia and traveling the globe with CeCe, bouncing from man to man, it was that no matter how hard you try to leave it behind, shit travels.

Leaving my own marriage had been a fantasy for quite some time. In fact, from within an hour of Oliver’s birth, I had been aware of the clock ticking down on our union. There was an unshakable sense of *what the fuck have I done?* I tried to dismiss it as postpartum malaise but instead of clouding my thinking, it was as if things suddenly became crystal clear. I felt as if a veil was snatched away and what I was left with was an unsustainable situation.

The sole power X held over me was Oliver, a fact not lost on either of us. When we argued, X would race over to Oliver and hold him up out of my reach, taunting me. When these fights would drag on and become

unbearable, I dared to suggest separation, and held my breath to see how he would take it. He would laugh at the suggestion and throw my past in my face. “You can’t support him. You’re a loser, Scarlett. What have you ever done with your life? If you wanna go there, I’ll make sure that no judge in the world will give you Oliver.”

That threat was enough to keep me contained, at least for a while. Part of me was scared he might be right. It was no secret that I had never been good at making sound financial choices in life, and hadn’t had a steady job in years. In my darkest moments, I did feel like a loser. It was painful to think that I was so transparent, but that was how I had always been. I’d never developed much of an exterior barrier against the world. Despite disappointments in life that might serve to toughen others, I remained very much a soft-shell crab.

“So, that’s it then? *C’est fini*?” CeCe snapped me back to attention.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“What happened this time?” CeCe inquired with a hint of excitement.

“Our same dysfunctional dance . . . and then he said the magic words . . .”

I paused and watched Oliver dancing in front of the television. Blissfully ignorant of the significance of the day, he was sucking on his strawberry and bouncing in time with the music from a peanut butter jingle.

“He said ‘Take all of your shit and take *your* baby and get out,’ ” I said quietly.

“Ah, yes. Well, we’ve heard that refrain before.” CeCe reached for a chocolate.

“Yes, but this time I didn’t wait for him to calm down. I suppose I’d had enough. I did just what he told me to do . . . and here we are.”

“Well, it’s about time. I can’t imagine what you ever saw in him. And to think of all the other eligible men you’ve met . . .”

“He cast some sort of spell on me, I guess, that caused all logic and reason to disappear. Whatever it was, it’s worn off now so let’s not dwell on it, shall we? Moving on . . .” I said with faux cheeriness.

Oliver darted around the living room searching for the items he’d stashed during our last visit a week ago: his tiny silver airplane with the chipped red paint, the well-worn SpongeBob SquarePants blanket, and his blue rubber ball with white stars on it. He set out his recovered items on the antique Chinese table in front of CeCe, next to his stack of favorite books.

“Read a story, CeCe.” Oliver plucked one from the pile and set it on her lap.

CeCe had cleverly trained Oliver from the beginning to refer to her as *CeCe*, and never *Grandmother*. *Grandmother* was *très gauche* in CeCe’s book—not to mention sexually repellent—and therefore forbidden. Come to think of it, calling her *Mother* didn’t rate much higher.

With Oliver and CeCe occupied for a moment, I excused myself. All I wanted to do was crawl into a hole and hide, but with a toddler, one was never afforded that luxury. A nervous breakdown was out of the question,

so a moment of solitude in the loo would have to suffice.

I fished my cell phone out of my purse. I needed to call my best friend, Emma, and give her the news.

As I walked down the long corridor to the guest bathroom, I passed CeCe's wall of family photos and was struck by the lone photograph from my wedding. It was as if I was seeing it clearly for the first time. X was smiling with his arms clasped around me territorially and I was staring into the camera, wearing a vacant gaze. Despite the frozen smile, a sort of resignation registered in my eyes. On some level, I knew what I was in for, and somehow accepted it.

I checked my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Was there anybody in there anymore? Sometimes it was hard to tell. I used to have a lot more life in me. I used to have a bit of spark, a bit of game going on. What happened?

CeCe had been quick to share that one of her dear friends had expressed concern over how sad I looked in recent photos. I believe she used the words *beaten down* and it was hard to argue against that sentiment. Still, CeCe's genes were putting up a good fight. I could still be considered somewhat attractive—at least in good lighting—but I had looked unhappy for a long time and it would take a while to undo that. There was now a deep worry crease etched between my eyebrows that I'd have to live with and my dirty-blond hair hung shapelessly around my face, in dire need of a trim. I was hardly in go-out-and-set-the-world-on-fire shape, but exactly who is when they've just left a marriage? Most people looked like shit on a day like this unless they were having an affair and enjoying tons of sex. I should be so lucky.

I called Emma.

"I've finally done it," I said when she answered. "I've left him. Oliver and I are at CeCe's."

"Holy shit. Are you okay?"

"I don't know. It's too soon to tell. I feel a bit wobbly. One moment I'm excited, and the next I want to throw up."

"Listen, this split has been coming for a long time." Emma's voice could always calm me when I was in a state. "It was bound to happen. The only thing you had in common with him was that you wanted to start a family."

"I blame that damn *Newsweek* article that told me my eggs were getting old and that if I didn't hurry, I'd have to flush the dream of being a mother down the toilet, too, along with all the other dreams I didn't quite live up to . . . so I grabbed the nearest penis in a mad panic, and look where it got me."

"It got you a beautiful son."

"That's true. He is the best thing that ever happened to me, so from that perspective it was a brilliant move. But I have this sinking feeling that the undoing of this marriage is going to be a lot harder than the getting into it was. I've no idea what I'm going to do now."

“You don’t have to figure it all out today. Just deal with one day at a time right now. Get some sleep. Let’s talk in the morning. This is a big step. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks.”

Unlike other dreams I’d let go of, motherhood was not going to pass me by. And that’s where X came in. Timing was the key element in our union. My lifelong dream of being an actress had died a slow and painful death and it seemed that creating my own family was the only dream I had left that was attainable.

I splashed cold water on my face and willed myself to pull it together.

Oliver was sitting on CeCe’s lap listening enraptured to her racy version of *Little Red Riding Hood* when I returned.

“Yes . . . he was a very, *very* naughty wolf, up to all sorts of tricks that put him in bad standing with the young ladies in his village.” She bounced Oliver wildly up and down on her lap to emphasize the naughty bits, while he giggled uncontrollably. CeCe’s wicked sense of humor was another asset I was counting on to get me through the next uncertain months.

“Come on, Ollie,” I said. “It’s time for your bath.”

“No, you relax. I’ll give him a bath.” CeCe swept him up into her arms.

“Thanks, CeCe.” I was thrilled at having a rare moment with nothing to do. That specific aspect of domesticity with CeCe was something I could get used to. She was very helpful with Oliver and it was a stark contrast to life with X. He never helped me bathe Oliver. He was a fastidious house cleaner but did little in terms of helping with childcare. If I left them together briefly to go to the market, when I returned, Oliver would be crying and X would be whining about it. It was hardly worth the bother. Oliver and I developed our routines and X became less and less a part of the equation. In a way, it seemed Oliver and I had been in rehearsal for this separation for ages and by now, we had it down.

I surrendered into the comfort of one of CeCe’s oversized chairs and swung my legs over the arm of it as if I were a child. Here we were, safe in my mother’s apartment. The thought both soothed and repelled me in equal measures.

Then I had the joyful realization that I could turn the television on—and watch any program I wanted—without X berating me for it. Television was for simpletons, he reasoned, but it was merely another form of control.

CeCe’s apartment had been acquired in a settlement with her third husband and she lived there with my nineteen-year-old brother, Sam. A nicely appointed apartment, it sat on a palm tree lined street and was filled with her beloved Chinese antiques. It was spacious and offered a dazzling view of the Hollywood Hills but there were only two bedrooms—and both were very much taken. CeCe already had a crib in her bedroom for Oliver for whenever we visited, and she graciously offered me her day bed to sleep in. Living in a dorm room setup with my mother was hardly anybody’s idea of a good time but it would cover us for the time being. I was counting on

some miraculous twist of fate to occur and facilitate us finding a place of our own, although I had to admit the idea terrified me.

A few days later, as news of the split spread, three of my closest girlfriends—Autumn, Susan and Emma—came over after Oliver’s bedtime to lend their support. With Oliver sound asleep in the next room, we were free to say whatever we wanted without having to edit or use delicate, boring language.

The four of us had come to Los Angeles in our twenties to make our mark. Emma and I were studying to become actresses, Susan was driven to be a top talent agent and Autumn . . . well, nobody was really sure what her original goal was, but her biggest claim to fame was as a voracious man-eater. Here we were, over ten years later and Susan was a partner at her agency, Emma enjoyed success as a working actress, and Autumn was in demand as a stylist as well as a world class consumer of men.

CeCe had left for a date, but ever the hostess, she set out a wine and cheese platter for us with a side of chocolate truffles. It was classic CeCe—a first-aid kit for the senses. We sat around the fireplace and I began to fill everyone in on the split.

Autumn spoke with characteristic candor. “Oh, come on, Scarlett, it was time to move on. What were you doing with him anyway? He was always talking about how ‘*evolved*’ he was. What a fucking bore! Anyone who feels the need to tell you how ‘*evolved*’ they are obviously isn’t. You’re in your sexual prime. I say we throw you a divorce party and get you back out there! You need to get back on the horse!”

“I couldn’t even find a horse in this funk, let alone remember what to do with one if I did,” I said flatly.

It was a sad fact that I didn’t fantasize anymore. I had trouble conjuring anything remotely sexy in my head. It was as if my former sexy self had closed up shop entirely and moved on. *And that used to be my very favorite part.*

“Oh, I’m pretty sure you’d remember how to ride one . . .” Autumn gave one of her trademark snickers.

“I don’t recall the last time I had sex that wasn’t . . . perfunctory,” I said, and searched my memory bank for a highlight.

“There’s a big hint right there. Who needs perfunctory sex?” Autumn recoiled at the thought. “I would have been long gone.”

“Yes, but that’s what any relationship becomes. At least you’re free now to start over,” said Susan. She may have become the very picture of married stability, but I knew her back in the single, chandelier-swinging days.

Emma opened the Cabernet and poured four glasses. “I feel so guilty that I didn’t try and stop you from marrying him. He wasn’t the right man for you. We should have staged an intervention or something.”

“I felt that way, too, but you wouldn’t have listened.” Susan accepted a glass of wine.

“You’re right. That’s the scary part. I had a terrible feeling it wasn’t going

to work but I felt compelled to do it anyway. How screwed up is that? I leapt into this marriage with my fingers crossed, so I have no business being surprised that it didn't work out."

"Look," Susan said, "you have Oliver out of the deal. That makes it all worthwhile, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely," I said, cheered by the thought. "My only defense is that I thought it was what I was supposed to do. I was at *that age* with absolutely nothing happening in life, so it seemed like the logical next step. I just had no idea how much work being married to the wrong person can be. It was misery."

"Every marriage is work, but the trick is to pick someone you actually want to be married to." Susan smiled at me.

Susan was my opposite in almost every way. Logical and levelheaded, her pragmatic view of life was so foreign to me that I often thought she was speaking another language.

"I'll try to remember that for next time," I said. "If there ever is a next time."

"You gave it your best shot," she said. "Personally, I thought you should have bailed right after you found all those nude photos. You've been very tolerant, as far as I'm concerned."

"What photos are you talking about?" Autumn asked. "Why I don't know about this?"

"You've been away on location. Tell her." Emma nudged me.

"One day, while I was using the computer, I stumbled upon his extensive nude photo collection."

"Of other women?" Autumn shrieked.

"No . . . that would actually make a certain amount of sense. They were all nude pictures of *him*, but mostly just of his dick."

I got up and put another log in the fire, as Autumn scrambled to reclaim her jaw from the floor.

Stunned silence followed, so I pressed on. "His penis obsession was hardly a new thing. After all, it was his most prized possession, but seeing the photos en masse was a bit much. There were hundreds of pictures of his penis—chilling out in the garden, lathering himself in the bath, erect penis checking the mailbox. It was nuts. It was like that traveling Gnome series of photos—but each one featuring his dick in a new pose. Even his winking asshole made some artistic cameos!"

"Jeez . . . how on earth did he manage that?" asked Autumn, instantly intrigued.

"See . . . all that yoga pays off." Susan's quip sent Emma into hysterics.

"Hey, I'm not saying the guy isn't creative! It's amazing how creative you can be when you have nothing to do all day but play with yourself." I squeezed myself back on the couch in between Emma and Autumn.

"Wow . . . I had no idea. I guess he's not the total bore I thought he was after all," Autumn said with awe.

“I just had less and less respect for him and that’s a very difficult thing to overcome in a marriage, especially with all of our other issues.”

“So, what did you say to him?” Autumn was now almost bouncing out of her seat with excitement.

“I said *what’s with all the dick photos?* He laughed and said he was ‘just having some fun’. He even turned one of the photos into his screensaver so that twelve gleaming images of his penis greeted me every time I used the computer. It felt like I was living with a teenage boy who’d just discovered the pleasures of wanking and not a forty-year-old man. CeCe caught an eyeful too. She was there when I found them.”

“What did she say?” asked Emma.

“She said she was *underwhelmed*.”

“And let’s face it, CeCe would know!” Susan said, sending Emma into another fit of giggles.

“Wow. I had no idea.” Autumn continued to grapple with the news. “He just looks so . . . *vanilla* to me.”

“That’s what all the gay guys do,” said Emma. “They send each other pictures of their dicks! Do you think he flipped to the other team?”

“Who knows what he was up to? All I could think was ‘*What am I doing here?*’ I’m exhausted from nursing and caring for the baby all day and night while my unemployed husband blasts music and dances around naked in the garden taking pictures of his cock, like some demented elf.”

“Do you think he was having affairs?” Autumn asked the question everyone was wondering.

“I don’t know . . . maybe . . . probably. But in the end I didn’t want to know. I didn’t need confirmation. I just wanted out. I wasn’t winning any awards in the doting wife department, either. We had this resentment toward each other that lay just under the surface and counseling didn’t help. I wasn’t up for all that cock worshipping. It got to the point where I couldn’t stand to sleep with him—so yes, he probably did go and find someone else. It was beginning to look that way. I couldn’t fight for the marriage anymore. What was the point?”

“But you did try to make it work. I watched you struggle,” Emma said softly.

“I did try to make the best of it but it became so exhausting. All that cooking I did, trying to be Martha fucking Stewart. I tried to conform to his crazy diets. It drove me nuts. Every week a new one: vegan, raw, macrobiotic and then cycle back to steak and martinis. I mean, come on! He was always trying to *find* himself by trying on different jobs, different diets and fitness routines, and all those yoga retreats.”

“Oh, my God . . .” Emma rolled her eyes dramatically. “Forget the yoga! Do you remember that crazy cycling phase he went through? That was the worst! He was always pedaling somewhere on his bike, like a mad cycling fool in his colorful spandex shorts with his weird little helmet.” Emma leapt up and acted out furious pedaling around the living room, eliciting riotous

laughter from the group.

“He didn’t know who he was, and that was part of the problem,” I explained after we’d all calmed down. “But he also didn’t have a clue who *I* was. Just because he met me in a yoga class he assumed that I was this ‘Yoga-Girl’ and ultra health-conscious, when anyone who actually knows me can tell you I eat far too much sugar, I can’t live without my caffeine and television, and I can get bloody lazy if I don’t watch out.”

“Well, you are Australian. That should have been his first clue that there’d be some bad behavior,” Susan said.

“He despised all those things about me. And trying to be something or someone I wasn’t just to make him happy, wasn’t working. He had this fantasy of me that I could never live up to.” I drained the last of my wine.

“Remember how he used to get mad if your hair didn’t look perfect? That always bothered me.” Emma quickly topped off my glass.

“Yes, he made me do the ‘hair check’ all the time. If we were going out and he didn’t like the way my hair looked, he’d wait in the car and send me back inside to fix it.” I cringed at the memory.

“Okay, that’s just weird,” Susan said with authority. “What guy cares what your hair looks like? Usually they want to mess it up, not fix it. That’s creepy.”

“I always felt like I was disappointing him in one way or another.” I felt that familiar knot forming in my stomach.

“I think you’ve got that backward.” Susan commented and took a sip of wine.

“I kept thinking, *‘Is this what I’ve waited my whole life for?’* Is this what I came all the way to America for? It just felt like some heavy karmic debt I had to pay. There wasn’t anything joyful or redeeming about our marriage—other than Oliver—and that’s a big burden for a child to bear.”

“Next time, don’t marry the stalker!” Susan warned.

“That’s true,” I said. “He was terribly hard to shake.”

“Before you get serious with anyone again, he’s going to have to pass a committee,” said Emma, reaching for a slice of Brie.

“The good news is it can only get better!” Susan said.

The acid began churning in my stomach again. I got up to fetch the antacid tablets from my purse.

“And by the way,” Emma called after me, “where is the fabulous Miss CeCe tonight? She would hate to be missing out on any X bashing.”

“Naturally, Miss CeCe has a date.” I looked around for where I’d thrown my purse and tossed a few of the colorful tablets into my mouth and began to chew them, followed by a swig of wine for good measure.

“Why is it that your mother has more dates than anyone I know?” asked Emma.

“That’s an easy one,” Autumn said. “It’s because CeCe’s one lusty broad! The last time I saw her she gave me a lesson on the importance of giving a proper prostate massage! She even demonstrated with a gyrating finger!”

Autumn lifted her pinkie in the air and showed us her best twirling technique.

“Yep . . . that’s my mother for you,” I sighed, and took another swig of wine to dispense with the unpleasant chalky aftertaste.

“Where does she meet all these men? I’d like to meet more men,” stated Autumn with surprising enthusiasm coming from someone already in a relationship. Autumn was famously allergic to monogamy.

“Mostly through Internet dating sites, but sometimes other sources,” I said, and flopped into the armchair facing Susan. “All she has to do is step out of the apartment and they seem to trail her all over town.”

“I love your mother,” Emma said with enthusiasm. “She’s hysterical. We once had an entire conversation about vibrators and lubrication—which ones are organic and don’t have all the silicone and crap in them. She’s a wealth of information, that woman. She shares sex tips as if she were sharing a soufflé recipe. Maybe she should write a sex blog for seniors or something—”

“Well, that’s all very entertaining, but not when it’s coming from your own *mother!*” I groaned.

“Come on, it’s still funny.”

“The other day, she was extolling the virtues of anal sex while tying Oliver’s shoelaces, and I just about lost it! I got really pissed off. She can’t get away with that forever . . . he’s a two-year-old now but he won’t stay two forever! She honestly sees nothing wrong with sharing all of this info and has no regard for whose little ears she might be polluting—mostly mine. Besides, I really don’t need those images dancing in my head.” I shuddered at the thought.

“Well, what did she have to say about it?” Autumn’s interest was suddenly piqued.

“Oh, I don’t know. She was going on and on . . . something about trying to avoid it while you have hemorrhoids.” I sighed, exasperated.

“I would think that wouldn’t need to be stated.” Susan gave a snort.

“God bless her! I’m sure she’s having hotter sex than all of us put together,” said Emma.

“Speak for yourself,” Autumn said with a hint of indignation.

Autumn fancied herself an expert on sex and the idea that someone might have anything over her, let alone a sixty-year-old woman, likely didn’t sit very well.

“Who’s having hot sex?” Sam, my brother, asked appearing out of nowhere and startling us into an awkward silence. He’d been so quiet in his room that I’d forgotten he was home.

He took the gum out of his mouth and launched it into the fireplace.

“Believe me, you don’t want to know.” I grimaced.

“Fair enough. So how is everyone this evening?” He popped a white chocolate truffle into his mouth.

“Sam . . . tell me, how old are you?” asked Autumn while giving him an

appraising once-over that made me slightly uncomfortable.

“Nineteen.” Sam gave a halfhearted tug at his low-riding jeans. A very healthy portion of his teenage ass was hanging out in the terribly offensive style all the kids his age seemed to favor.

“You’re turning into quite the fox, Sam. Are you still with your same girlfriend? What was her name again?” Autumn continued to grill him playfully.

“Mikki. I’m on my way to pick her up now. We’re going to a movie.” He ran his hand through his hair, which was stiff from all the hair products he regularly plied it with.

“Sam takes after CeCe. I’m the only one in this family that tanks in the love department.” I waved my wine in the air in the defeatist fashion I’d resorted to a lot recently.

“Have fun. Say hi to Mikki for us.” Autumn craned her neck to watch him walk to the door.

“Good-night, ladies.” Sam waved and disappeared into the night.

“He is going to be quite a lothario. I can smell it.” Autumn nodded approvingly.

“Autumn! You’ve known him since he was a little kid.” I felt protective all of a sudden.

“I didn’t say I wanted to date him!” Autumn chuckled. “I was just acknowledging what a fine young man he’s growing into.”

“Well, I don’t like to think of him that way. He’s my baby brother.”

We heard the key in the lock, and CeCe appeared.

“CeCe . . . come and join us,” I called out to her.

CeCe walked in and immediately cheered at the sight of us. “Oh, I’m glad you’re all still here!” she said, and took off her jacket.

“How was your date?” Emma asked.

“Ah, my date . . . well, he was a crashing bore and he lives in Simi Valley.” She laid her jacket down over the back of my armchair. “I can’t decide which is worse.”

“Simi Valley?” Autumn scoffed at this bit of news.

“Isn’t that a bit *geographically undesirable* for you, CeCe?” Susan offered diplomatically.

“Yes, among other things.” CeCe sighed. “Of course, he didn’t *tell* me he lived in Simi Bloody Valley, which was clever since I would have instantly dismissed him if he had. He was smart enough to meet me halfway, but the statistical likelihood of me finding my match hiding away in the boondocks of Simi Valley is about twenty million to one.”

“Forget that clown. Come and have some wine with us,” Emma said as she opened another bottle of wine. “We were just talking about you!”

Emma poured a glass and handed it to CeCe.

“Thank you, darling.” CeCe gladly accepted it, and perched on the arm of the couch.

“You’re looking ultraconservative tonight, CeCe,” said Susan.

It was true. CeCe was unusually subdued in a black silk pantsuit with a single strand of generously proportioned pearls.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in pearls before, CeCe.” Emma agreed.

“Ah, well . . . it might *look* conservative.” CeCe slowly fingered the pearls. “But you haven’t a clue where these pearls have *been*, now have you, darling?”

“That’s right, we don’t,” I said quickly. “And let’s leave it that way, shall we?”

“I can assure you that they’ve led a very full and well-traveled life,” CeCe said while everyone erupted into laughter.

“Thank you for that lovely visual, CeCe. How about a toast?” I attempted to steer the conversation in another direction.

“All right, then, Scarlett. I’ll make a toast. Here’s to exploring new fellows and new adventures!” CeCe said with renewed enthusiasm.

“Hear, hear,” said Autumn with vigor.

“I’ll happily take a new man, but I’m not sure my husband would approve,” said Emma with a wicked laugh.

“Yeah, sometimes I’d like to trade mine in, too,” said Susan.

“Don’t despair, ladies,” said CeCe, warming to another of her favorite subjects. “No need to ditch the old ones. Contrary to popular belief, you can teach an old man a few new tricks. It’s all in the presentation. They are generally quite willing to learn. You really can get them to do just about anything.”

“No, CeCe, *you* can get them to do just about anything,” I said. “We’ve decided you should teach a class or write a saucy blog or something!”

“Well, I’ll drink to that, too. Bottoms up, ladies!” CeCe lifted her glass.

With the twinkling lights of the Hollywood Hills in the background, the five of us toasted to new beginnings while I attempted to squash my growing apprehension along with my burgeoning ulcer.

Chapter Two

Men for CeCe

CeCe had been puttering about in the closet when she stuck her head out the door, looked over to where Oliver and I were reading on her bed and said, “Darling, are these your knickers or are they mine?”

She held up the tiniest pair of apricot-colored Cosabella G-string panties and waved them at me.

“Um . . . they’re yours.” I acknowledged the fact after a totally unnecessary inspection.

My sixty-year-old mother had sexier underwear than I did, a depressing fact I chose not to dwell on. CeCe had sought to remedy this situation for years and bought me flimsy, barely-there lingerie that I hid in a drawer and had no occasion to wear. Whose mother buys their grown daughter knickers with naughty little peepholes in the back?

Living in cramped quarters with one’s mother was not without its challenges, the least of which being the delicate laundry issues. Having to share a bedroom as if we were college roommates and not presumably mature women quickly grew tiresome. CeCe often made unusual moans and called names out in her sleep, which she confessed often got her into trouble with her lovers. Unlike Oliver, who slept like a log, I had a hard time quieting my thoughts as it was, and didn’t need to hear CeCe barking orders at lovers in her sleep.

There are few secrets in a two-bedroom apartment spilling over with occupants. It was quickly apparent that even my baby brother enjoyed a better sex life than I did, which was admittedly a low bar.

CeCe went back to her lingerie and Ollie and I went back to reading *Goodnight Moon*.

Just as I got Ollie settled down again, Sam and his steady girlfriend—a dark-haired minx named Mikki—darted by the bedroom door talking and laughing loudly on their way to the kitchen.

Ollie bolted up and made a mad scramble to get off the bed and out the door to them.

“Ollie, come back!” It was impossible to compete with the allure of a teenage uncle.

Mikki was a near-constant presence in the apartment and stayed over most nights. She was so skinny that if she stood sideways, she nearly disappeared. Severe looking with pale skin, she wore her jet-black hair in an asymmetrical bob which she straightened every day with a flatiron. She may have been from Beverly Hills but her wardrobe screamed Las Vegas and consisted of very revealing, low-cut T-shirts that always showed a flash of a leopard-print or fuchsia bra underneath, and barely-there nylon miniskirts. Black ankle boots coupled with white bobby socks completed her look. Despite her flamboyant wardrobe choices, the most fascinating thing about her was her extraordinary confidence. An unusually opinionated girl for nineteen, Mikki was a force to be reckoned with. It was not unusual for her to tell a roomful of adults that they were *misinformed* about politics, religion, or any other topic that came up during dinner conversation. My little brother had his hands full.

As soon as Ollie made it out to the kitchen, Mikki and Sam darted back past him, tousling his hair in the process, and retreated to Sam’s room, locking the door behind them.

Ollie trailed after them and wailed his displeasure at the closed door.

“Sam . . . open door, now! *Please* . . .” Ollie cried while taking his disappointment out on the indifferent door and thumping at it.

“Not now, Ollie. I’m taking a nap.”

“But, you’re not sleeping. I can hear you! Saaaaammm!”

“*Not now, Ollie!*” Sam said in a tone that Ollie knew not to challenge.

Ollie leaned his head against the door in defeat.

I watched this familiar scene play out and waited.

Oliver reluctantly dragged himself back to me, and sank heavily into my arms. “Mama, I’m pissed out!” His cheeks flushed with frustration.

“I know *just* how you feel, sweetheart,” I said and tried not to laugh. CeCe and I were both guilty of saying we were ‘pissed off’ about something from time to time, and this was his version.

Before long, strange noises began to emanate from the bedroom, squeaking sounds that landed somewhere between a bleat and a meow.

Ollie’s face scrunched up as he strained to decipher what the noise was. He turned his attention in the direction of Sam’s closed door again.

I started singing in an attempt to drown out the feral noises. “The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round . . .”

“Wait . . . Mama, stop! Stop singing!” Ollie tried to cover my mouth with his hand. “Is that a *cat*?”

“No, there are no cats in there, Ollie,” I said.

“Shhh . . .” He paused, listening intently. “What is that?”

“They’re playing a game called ‘Old McDonald had a farm’ and they

make funny animal sounds!” I said, pleased with my ingenuity.

“I want to play, too.” He tugged at the leg of my sweatpants.

“They’re playing the teenage version,” I said, and whisked him away from the bedroom door and the mysteries it contained.

Sometimes the fact that I had anything left of my sanity felt like quite an achievement.

CeCe preferred to turn a blind eye—or blind ear—to whatever Sam was up to in the apartment. While Sam and Mikki were content to frolic in his bedroom making animal noises, CeCe was actively baiting her hooks and trolling the Internet for eligible men. The moment she got home from work, she grabbed a glass of wine and made a beeline to the computer to check the day’s haul. With the giddiness of a teenager, she couldn’t wait to share her ‘Catch of the Day’.

“Oh, darling, come and have a look at this fellow,” CeCe said, tapping a perfect red nail at a profile picture on her computer screen. “This one says he likes sailing . . . and traveling . . . and Indian food! And he has a full head of hair!”

“A trifecta,” I said, unsure of what else to say.

“You’re not really looking at him . . . have a *good* look,” she said ignoring my lack of enthusiasm.

I leaned over her shoulder to get a better look at the fellow in question. They all looked the same to me. “That’s nice, CeCe. He looks . . . *nice*,” I said, straining to come up with something. “At least he’s not wearing a wedding ring in the picture on the boat. That’s a good start.”

Historically, many of her Internet prospects turned out to be married and looking for a little fun on the side.

“Here, what about this other one . . . let me find him again. He really is a bit naughty with his innuendo!” She chuckled. “But a bad boy now and then can be a good thing! Oh, this chap here, he *loves* his limericks. He sends me one every day. Listen to this:

*There was an old boy from Philly,
Who had a wonderful way with his willie,
The women would tease and strip, he took his pick,
Jiggling his hips, he fucked their lips,
He was an expert at diddling those fillies!”*

“Wow. That’s talent for you. I’m really tired, CeCe. I need to go to bed.” I was desperate for an escape.

“Darling, this is how it’s done these days . . . it’s a virtual carousel of fellows. This whole world of available men comes right to you, right in your own home,” she said, relishing the concept. “It’s like shooting fish in a barrel!”

“I can hardly wait,” I said, flatly.

I felt a panic attack brewing, and briefly entertained an urge to run away until I remembered that I had nowhere else to run.

“This is what you’ll be doing shortly, too, darling. It’s so much fun!”

I nodded and started picking again at my already raw cuticles.

“We just need to get you back out there. I’m really excited about your future, Scarlett, and you should be, too!”

The Victoria’s Secret sweatpants that Sam and Mikki had given me for my birthday were a little less snug around the bum these days thanks to my ‘divorce diet,’ and that discovery was about as close to excited as I got about anything. A carousel of men was something I felt quite certain I could do without.

“I’m going to go and check on Oliver,” I said, and left her to her own amusement.

“All right, darling,” she said.

Observing my mother at close range again was illuminating. She’d always had a way with men but now I was viewing her through experienced adult eyes. CeCe was a champion dater with more energy than most women half her age—including me—and she maintained an air of detachment that bewitched men in droves. A curious mix of allure and indifference, they couldn’t figure her out. She was not only beautiful—with piercing ice blue eyes, light brown hair and a slender, yet voluptuous frame—but more impressively, CeCe was smart as a whip. She loved nothing more than a good game of verbal volleyball and could intellectually wipe the floor with most of her opponents if she felt so inclined. However, that keen intellect became totally disabled when choosing men. My father, her first husband, decided when I was a baby that fatherhood was not for him. Theirs was a torrid love affair that wasn’t built to survive the rigors of child rearing, so he took himself out of the picture, and hadn’t been heard from since. CeCe’s choices in men often defied explanation, much like many of my own choices. Living with her was a painful reminder that the apple fell very close to the tree.

No matter what mistakes I had made in the past, Oliver was living proof that at least I had done one thing right. Having this little person to love and care for gave my life a much-needed purpose. Sunny little Ollie had the ability to pierce whatever funk I was in momentarily, but he wasn’t used to having me in such a distracted state. He would cup my face in his tiny hands and say, “Don’t make the sad face. Just make the Mama face!”

Oliver was adjusting well to our new living situation. CeCe had been Oliver’s primary babysitter since birth and hence they shared a close bond. In the mornings, CeCe often made tea and pancakes with him before she went to work. On the weekends, she would take him on the veranda to do some gardening or to lunch at Neiman Marcus. This was a routine that had been in place for quite some time and now there was even more time for activities.

Oliver never asked when we would be going home. I wondered how he was processing this huge change.

“We’re going to be staying here with CeCe and Sam for a while,” I told him. “Mama and Daddy are going to be living in two different places but

you will still see both of us.”

“Okay, Mama” was all he said about the subject.

X and I communicated mostly via e-mails and Oliver started having regular visits with his dad three times a week. One morning, when I dropped Oliver at X’s, I noticed that every photo I was in on the refrigerator collage now had a monster magnet placed directly over my face. I was a vampire in one, a scary green dragon in another, and Frankenstein’s monster in yet another. This represented a lot of effort. The precise placement in areas that Ollie couldn’t reach indicated a rather tall suspect. I gave X a look and said, “Nice.”

X grumbled something inaudible.

He didn’t look like he was faring very well. His blond hair was uncharacteristically unkempt and his brown eyes seemed perpetually bloodshot. He was furious with me for leaving, and despite what I said, he seemed to prefer to believe that this was merely a phase I was going through and that I was coming back.

“You’ve gone crazy. This isn’t you,” X insisted as he followed me down the driveway out to the car, leaving Oliver unattended in the house. “You’re having a really bad postpartum reaction.”

“What are you talking about? Oliver is two!” I said, incredulously.

“You just need to come to your senses and love me again,” he said, grabbing my wrists unexpectedly and trying to pull me into an embrace.

“What are you doing?” I struggled to get free of him.

“I can make you love me again.”

“Stop it.” I pushed him off. “Ollie’s in the house alone . . . *please* watch him.” I hurried down the path to my car. I looked around to see if any of the neighbors had caught any of this madness.

“Stop this nonsense and come home!” He hovered behind me as I got into my car, and draped himself over the open door, making it difficult for me to close it. “I *know* you still love me . . . you just need to come to your senses.” He began to sob, making it almost unbearable.

I cringed. What hold he once had over me was long gone. “Are you listening? I don’t want to keep going through this with you. *Please* go and check on Oliver.” I firmly closed the door. His persistence rattled me. He wasn’t hearing anything I said.

“You’re having a breakdown, Scarlett . . . but we’ll get through this,” he shouted through the crack in the window. “I still love you!”

Still shaking, I drove off leaving him standing on the street in his bathrobe.



Most husbands would prefer to think their wives had gone mad when they wanted a divorce. I had my share of moments of madness but I was not mad. At least, I hoped not.

Later that day, Dr. Goldberg, my longstanding ob-gyn called out of the blue.

“Your husband called me,” he said. “He seems to think you’ve lost your mind and are suffering from postpartum depression—even though I pointed out the extreme unlikelihood of that scenario at this late stage.”

“What did he want from you?” I was completely bewildered.

“He made some disturbing allegations, Scarlett. I’ve known you for a long time, so I didn’t buy it, but other people might. I don’t know how to say this but . . . watch your back.”

“What do you mean? What is he planning to do?” My whole body began to tremble.

“I have no idea but it doesn’t sound good. Take care of yourself, Scarlett.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” I was seething. I hung up and instantly burst into great floods of tears.

When things weren’t going as he planned, X always had a few tricks up his sleeve. I’d seen this behavior from him before, but it had never been aimed specifically at me. It was deeply unsettling.

“How dare he?” CeCe shrieked when I told her. “He’s got some bloody nerve. If anyone’s loony it’s him.”

“You and I know that but some people don’t see through him. He can be creepily convincing.”

“You have the creepy part right but I have to believe that people aren’t going to buy anything he says. He’s hardly an impartial player in all of this.”

I hoped that she was right.

I worked to avoid awkward exchanges by making them brief or by bringing someone with me. But even when I didn’t have to see him, he called every day to speak with Oliver and we would go around and around again.

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m not coming home.”

“Let’s talk about this—”

“There’s nothing to salvage here. This separation has been a long time in the making. It’s not a snap decision.” I didn’t want to meet with him or give him any false hope. We’d already been to counseling. Twice. There was no point in dragging it out further.

“I didn’t think you really meant it.” He sounded surprised when I maintained my position.

“But I did mean it. We don’t work together. You know that.”

“I want my family back.”

“You love the *idea* of us, of having a family, but you don’t love me.” I was quiet but firm.

X was invested in how we looked, the portrait of an attractive, young family—but none of it had ever felt real to me. It was as if we became illuminated only when people were watching.

“Are you having an affair?” he asked.

“No, of course not,” I replied.

There had been no affair, but I had certainly been ripe for one if the opportunity had presented itself.

“You must be seeing someone or why else would you leave?” he insisted.

“No, I’m not leaving you *for* anybody . . . I’m leaving you for me.”

Seeing no progress, he swiftly changed tactics. “Your mother is making you do this.”

“What’s CeCe got to do with anything?”

“This is all her fault.” His voice trembled with anger.

It was true that CeCe was never a fan of his but she had never actively campaigned for this outcome.

“This separation is all my doing, I’m afraid. No co-conspirators here.”

“Sure it is,” he grumbled.

The cleaving process was exhausting. X refused to take any responsibility for problems in our marriage and that was one of the many reasons I was leaving him.

In the beginning of our relationship, X had won me over with charm and persistence. He was fun and *available*—quite unlike other men I’d dated. In hindsight, perhaps he was a little *too* available and I should have questioned why other elements in his life were lacking that he had so much free time for me. Unfortunately, one never thinks of those things in the throes of a blossoming romance. X hated his job selling advertising for a radio station and preferred to sit around, strumming on his guitar, composing love songs. How those traits in my mind translated into *husband* and *father* cannot be easily explained. He was more like the fun college boyfriend that you have a fling with but never consider marrying. Unfulfilled by our careers and desperately seeking to fill that emptiness, our static-cling relationship propelled us forward into domesticity. Before long we were living together, then married and then pregnant, in quick succession.

We were both to blame in the collapse of the marriage but X preferred to let his anger bleed out onto CeCe any chance he got. She was an easy target. If she made the mistake of answering the phone, he would say, “I know what you’re doing CeCe . . . you’re on a mission to get rid of all dads,” or some variation on that tired theme, but his wrath wasn’t limited to CeCe. If Sam answered the phone, X would bellow, “You’re not Oliver’s father! I know what you’re trying to do . . . you’re never going to replace me!”

Sam would hand me the phone and whisper, “Look out . . . X forgot to take his meds today!”

X’s next move was to cut off my cell phone and family credit card. Although I was expecting he would do it at some point, it upped my anxiety considerably. I felt unmoored, as the last vestiges of marital security were being stripped away.

When these dark, emotional storms were looming, Sam would often say,

“Hey, Ollie, why don’t we go down to the park?” Then he would scoop Oliver up with one arm and turn him upside down until Oliver was laughing hysterically. Sam was a big kid himself, so he was a great help buffering Ollie from any fallout. Happily, he had a lot more tolerance for mind-numbing kid activities than I did—especially in my current state—and he would sit on the floor with Ollie and build with his blocks, play cars, or make Lego towers.

While Sam was happy to swoop in and help, Mikki was less predictable. Sometimes she was an angel, but then other times, having a two-year-old boy taking attention away from her left her hurling expletives in Sam’s direction. Another argument between them would lead to further audible rounds of makeup sex.

During Ollie’s visits with his father, there was the strange new burden of free time. So accustomed to having a toddler with me 24/7, I felt bereft without Oliver bouncing on my hip, sharing his sweet, bubbling commentary on the world. There was no Ollie to sing in the car with and no Ollie to snuggle up with to take a much-needed nap.

It seemed I had forgotten how to conduct myself as a separate person. Mommy-mode was all I knew. Trips to the market became futile. Sometimes the point of my mission—find something to eat—seemed beyond my capabilities. It was as if the aisles were filled with items in a foreign language. Everything looked familiar but I was lost.

The sunny Southern California climate seemed to mock my despair. The weather was perfect. There were annoyingly perfect-looking people everywhere living perfect-looking lives in perfect-looking houses. It was dreadfully oppressive, not to mention lonely. Looks must be deceiving. Could I really be the only person making a mess of their life in this perfect-looking town?

The nights were the worst. While Oliver slept peacefully, I would often sit in the living room in the dark and watch the goldfish in the fish tank, as if waiting for them to tell me what to do next. Their swollen bodies danced and sashayed confidently before me with tiny flecks of gold catching the light in the most mesmerizing fashion.

“Oh for God’s sake, Scarlett, stop staring at the bloody fish and go get yourself a man.” CeCe flicked at me with her tea towel. “At least get your hair done or a manicure or *something*. Your hair is looking very drab and you’ve been picking at your fingers a lot lately, darling. You’ll feel much better if you get out and do something for yourself.”

“She’s right. Do one thing right now to make yourself feel better,” said Emma during a call while on a break from shooting a television commercial. “Go to a movie, go for a walk or go down to the mall and have a wander around.”

“That sounds very sensible, but I have no idea what I even like anymore. I just feel numb,” I said, aware of how strange that sounded. “I expected to feel a bit better by now, that’s all. It’s been a month and the vast relief I was

expecting hasn't arrived. I couldn't wait to leave and now . . . everything feels so black to me."

"It's still early in the process. You knew this wasn't going to be a picnic. He wasn't going to make this easy for you."

"You're right. He was going to fight this no matter what. I have no regrets about leaving. It's just been a bit glum, that's all—"

"It's called divorce and there's a reason it has such a bad rap. It sucks but you'll get through it. I'll call you later. Love you!"

"Thanks. Love you, too."

I sought comfort in another cup of tea. When in doubt, have some more tea, as my grandmother always said, which CeCe later amended to wine.

Exchanges with X became cool, but mostly cordial. We existed beneath the thin veneer of civility, circling each other, unsure of what the other was going to do next. Who would make the next move? I suspected he was up to something. He was a little *too* quiet. Friends referred me to several attorneys but I hadn't made a move before X surprised me and served me with divorce papers. I hired the first available lawyer and put the retainer on my credit card. Then everything deteriorated from bad to worse.

"There is nothing lousier than a Christmas divorce," I said to Emma as we walked through The Grove, dodging Santa's elves and carolers. "A Christmas divorce announces that all pretenses of civility have been stripped away and the parties couldn't wait one minute longer to tear into each other."

"Maybe courts should shut down for the whole month of December."

"What could be more miserable than being fought over by pit-bull attorneys while having happy Christmas music blasted at you at every turn like some sort of warped soundtrack?"

"Yes, it's hideous," Emma said. "But you have to do it sooner or later, so you may as well dive in now. There's no reason to delay it."

"You're right."

I watched a young mother smoothing her son's hair into compliance before taking his turn on Santa's knee. Having to watch other people's holiday merriment without my son felt like cruel and unusual punishment. What was the point of any of it without Ollie?

With Oliver as our sole marital asset, we embarked on a nasty custody fight. Several times a week, legal-sized envelopes arrived from my new divorce attorney and sat ominously on the kitchen counter. My stomach would wrench at the sight of them. They were exploding bombs of emotional shrapnel designed to inflict as much anguish as possible. I would leave the hate-filled envelopes sitting unopened for days.

"CeCe! I cannot believe these papers!" I shrieked after finally reading the contents of one of them. "It seems that anyone I've ever met—including his *entire* family—has written a declaration stating what a terrible mother I am. This part here says I'm a bad influence on Oliver because I do not respect animals. *Respect animals?* Do you know what he's referring to? He's told

them I couldn't stand the stinking blackbirds in the yard that wreaked havoc and ruined my vegetable patch. I threw a stick at the bloody things once! That's my 'big danger to animals moment'. Call PETA immediately!"

"Well, why can't you put in there that he used to masturbate with the kitchen utensils?" CeCe retorted. "And tell them that it traumatized you and that's why you don't like to cook anymore. You should put that in there! Now *that's* cruel and unusual punishment!"

"I can't put that in there. The judge doesn't want to hear that. I can't even believe I told you about that."

"Well, he's a vengeful bastard. He's doing exactly what he said he would. He's trying to take Oliver from you. There'll be a line around the block with people ready to declare what a loon he is. Don't you worry, it's all nonsense."

An assortment of betrayals flowed thick and fast on the divorce track, including documents chronicling our marriage—and my behavior—in twisted detail with startling declarations from people I had formerly counted as friends or in-laws who now assailed my character. Bizarrely, this process even extended to include near strangers, people whose random interactions with me somehow confirmed my husband's low opinion of me as a mother and qualified as fodder for X's case.

I was completely unprepared for this vile aspect of divorce.

"Nobody warned me to expect that every silly thing I'd ever said or done, or every irritable exchange I'd ever had would be trotted out, taken out of context, or spun to make me look like the worst human being on the planet." I complained bitterly to my lawyer who, much to my chagrin preferred to let some of the silly accusations stand. He didn't want to waste time with what he saw as insignificant blather. His calm demeanor soothed me on the phone until I remembered what it cost me to actually get him on the phone. Invariably, when we hung up, the sense of panic resumed.

I was in way over my head. X had been vastly more productive with his free time, soliciting people and cataloguing damaging declarations. The absurdity didn't end there. I was required to read each ridiculous accusation and give my version of events. It was madness with a price tag to match. It was a complete waste of time, energy, and resources. I only had one credit card and this legal battle was going to suck it dry.

"You naively assumed that nasty divorces were reserved for celebrities or people with lots of money. You're finding out that isn't the case," Emma said.

"I'm getting a crash course in all of it now."

Aside from the regular searing pain in my chest, the divorce was leaving what I feared was an indelible stain on my psyche.

There were physical tolls to be paid, too.

"Darling . . . you're getting very skinny and not in a good way. For God's sake, have a sandwich." CeCe would reprimand me but I could barely eat. Or sleep. I dropped twelve pounds in a month—startling on a small frame. I

hadn't looked thirty-five before all the shit hit the fan, but the stress and incredible fatigue made me feel seventy-five.

"Here you go, I got you a present." CeCe presented me with a big plastic bag containing new paints, a set of brushes and canvases. "Why don't you start painting again? You used to love it. And if you do that, you'll get more therapy out of it than talking to the fish at night."

"CeCe! Thank you! I guess that's better than drowning myself in large amounts of alcohol, which was sort of the direction I was thinking about taking."

From that point on, my sleepless nights became more productive. The paintings were predictably dark and raw. They were portraits of women, often naked and looking wounded, some standing at the edge of a steep cliff, looking out. Others featured frail women sitting alone in oversized chairs, their faces hollow and sunken-looking. It was how I felt—naked, vulnerable, broken. I hid them away in the hall closet and couldn't bear for anyone to see them. They were so starkly personal that I couldn't risk feeling any more exposed than I already did.

I still had no idea what I was going to do next. When people asked me what my plan was, I would smile and say 'I'm working on that' or if I was feeling surly, I might say 'I'm thinking of joining the *Cirque Du Soleil*.'

After witnessing a few rounds of pummeling, courtesy of divorce court, CeCe stepped up with her cattle prod. "This is enough now, Scarlett. Stop moping. Go find yourself a bit of fun before you shrivel into a bitter old prune! Go on a date! Oliver deserves a mother who's happy. You can't allow this to define your life. Get cracking! Shake the cobwebs off!"

"Okay, but I'm *not* ready to do the Internet dating thing."

"Well, you need to do something, and that much is abundantly clear."

After Oliver was in bed, CeCe and I often had conversations over a glass of wine or a cup of tea in front of the fireplace. These were the prime moments in which CeCe loved to revisit my lost romantic opportunities.

"Oh, Scarlett . . . you should never have let that fabulous Francesco get away."

"CeCe, that was fifteen years ago."

"Yes, but you would have had a very good life with him. He was an excellent provider . . . a true Alpha male. He loved the best of everything in life."

"Yes, Francisco was loaded, but don't you remember how difficult he was? His nit-picking drove me nuts. Who cares how much money he had? I never would have been able to live with all that scrutiny. He would stare at me and I'd think he was going to say something nice like how much he loved me and then he would say, 'Oh, sweetie, your skin looks like shit. You *really* need to get a facial' or 'Are you sure you need to eat *another* piece of chocolate? It'll go straight to your bottom, right where you don't need it!' I was never skinny or fit enough for him. He hated my clothes, too. The criticism was relentless."

CeCe was unconvinced. “Nah . . . he was a fabulous catch. You never should have let him get away.”

Irritated by her lack of support, I decided to share the final deal-breaker.

“Well, he might have been a ‘fabulous catch’ but he was a little weird, sexually.”

This got her attention.

“Weird? In what way exactly?”

“He wanted me to pee on him while we were having sex . . . but I couldn’t stop laughing long enough to perform. So I guess I managed to screw that up, too. Yes, for some skinny bitch with perfect skin who likes to piss on her rich man he was ‘the perfect catch’ but he wasn’t for me.”

She let out a long sigh. “Is that all? For God’s sake, Scarlett, the world could have been your oyster and you threw it away! You pissed away a *golden opportunity!*” She chortled loudly, enjoying her own joke. “Scarlett, you and your delicate sensibilities . . . I can’t imagine where you inherited those from! You know, I had a lover once, his name was Herbert . . . or was it Garry? He was very fond of that sort of thing . . . I think it’s perfectly acceptable, as long as you’re the piss-*er* and not the piss-*ee!*”

Sharing details with CeCe always backfired. Not only would it titillate her, but it would also highlight another arena in which I was somehow deficient. Then it would prompt her to divulge a memory of a past lover’s predilections, and disclosures of that nature from one’s mother were best kept to a minimum.

CeCe’s robust sexual appetites and proclivities were topics I preferred to steer clear of but this was virtually impossible. Even the most innocent topic—or a news story on television about Homeland Security—would remind her of a tale about her traveling through airport security from Mexico with her vibrators, or somehow linked to another memory of a raunchy encounter she felt compelled to share.

Still chuckling at the memory of Herbert, she said, “What you need is a bit of romance. Put some color in your cheeks! Recycling might be a quicker option at this point. There must be somebody from the past you want to dig up.”

“All right.” I surrendered. “Let me give it some thought . . .”

Chapter Three

The Ex-Files

It was time to get the ball rolling. If I kept focusing on the divorce, on how long it was taking, and how little control over any of it I had, it made me nuts. I needed some male company. I needed a distraction. Precisely one candidate unfurled himself from the recesses of my mind—the surly old Malibu Pirate, Dominick.

“I’ve thought about what you said. I suppose I could give Dominick a call and do a bit of recycling,” I told CeCe the next day.

“Oh yes, darling Dominick!” she said, getting excited. “Now that’s a stellar idea!”

Dominick had been the last man I dated before I married X and was now about to be the first person I looked up post-marriage; my marital bookend. There was a certain pleasing symmetry to this decision—and it signified movement—although I wasn’t certain in which direction.

Dominick and I had plenty of history. Ruggedly handsome and masculine in a way that weakened the knees of any female in his vicinity, if he was available, he would fit the bill. Dominick could be counted on for exactly two things: witty repartee and a rollicking good lay. We dated over a number of years before I got married, but had never sustained anything resembling a conventional relationship. That wasn’t his style. Dominick kept it casual. He enjoyed his position as a privileged bachelor far too much to compromise the myriad of opportunities with the Malibu babes who would literally stroll down the beach and offer themselves to him.

Besides his sexual prowess, I also craved his wicked wit. Dominick’s sense of humor rivaled CeCe’s in terms of its blatant political incorrectness. He could almost be considered an Australian male in terms of bawdiness. He could be charming if it suited him, or if he was in a foul mood he could be a total asshole. It was a roll of the dice. He could turn that wicked tongue-lashing in my direction—and not always in a good way.

I indulged myself in my own highlight reel of old memories with

Dominick. I imagined what it might be like to be with him again. Possibly naked. I had a fondness for him that survived despite questionable behavior on his part, and a marriage on mine.

Our sordid history had started ten years earlier, when we were introduced by a guy named Teddy from my acting class.

“You need to meet Dominick B. He’s having a birthday party this weekend in Malibu—you *have* to come. His parties are really fun.” Teddy scrawled the address on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

I wasn’t in the habit of turning down invitations to parties in Malibu.

‘Dominick B’ turned out to be from a prominent Hollywood family and his birthday party was populated with celebrities, hip children of celebrities, and women who mastered that chic tawny Malibu beach look effortlessly. Emma and I had tried unsuccessfully to blend in. I remember feeling very self-conscious in my new a-little-too-snug lime green pants—which could not have been less Malibu chic—and was seriously rethinking that purchase when Dominick appeared and introduced himself. He had a great smile. I liked him immediately.

After securing two glasses of white wine for us, he was dragged away by a tanned, midriff-baring six-foot blonde who tossed her artfully shaggy mane and whispered suggestively in his ear. He turned, looked me in the eye and said, “I’ll see *you* later,” as if he meant it.

Dominick’s house was standard bachelor fare, except for its location right on the Malibu sand, which elevated it to spectacular. There was a large deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean and a hot tub filled to capacity with bikini-clad lovelies. The living room featured a pool table, a huge television and a large dining table filled with delicacies from Marmalade Café—a local Malibu restaurant. Emma and I wandered around and helped ourselves to some glorious coconut cupcakes. While Emma was chatting with a music executive, I noticed that the six-foot blonde was now happily seated on someone else’s lap.

Dominick appeared behind me, touched my elbow lightly, and said, “Come take a walk with me.”

I leapt at the bait.

He gave me a brief tour of the rest of the house—including the master bedroom, which showcased large photographs of his famous family. This family presence loomed large, like a shadow over the room. There was a glossy magazine that featured one of his sisters on the cover displayed right next to the bed. It was a curious choice. Did the women he bedded need additional prompting? It was hard to imagine he needed help getting anybody’s knickers off. Did coming from a Hollywood dynasty guarantee you were a better lay? As if reading my thoughts, he suddenly seemed embarrassed by the memorabilia and abruptly concluded the bedroom tour. We then made our way down the side steps and onto the beach.

“And this is my backyard,” he said and gestured out to the ocean.

“Lucky you.”

I studied his face in the moonlight. He was distinctly male. There was nothing feminine about him. He had a strong jaw and light green eyes that sparkled mischievously. I liked the way he moved. He had a lingering, leisurely gait, which suggested he'd just finished doing something naughty and you'd just have to wait until it was your turn. His dark hair was thick and wavy and casually swept down over his eyes. I resisted the urge to run my fingers through it.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Sydney, originally."

"I love Sydney! I've spent a bit of time there over the years."

Although the conversation was innocent, he held my gaze in a way that made me blush.

Teddy called out to us from the balcony and broke the spell. Apparently, there was an urgent matter that required Dominick's immediate attention, so we headed back to the house.

Once inside, I ran into Emma. "There you are! I was looking for you—where did you disappear to?"

"I went for a walk with Dominick. He's really sexy!"

"What the hell's on your face?"

"What?"

"On your eye . . . what is that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Come in here." She pulled me into the nearest bathroom and examined me in its harsh, unforgiving light.

I looked in the mirror and was horrified to find that there were remnants of the coconut cupcake stuck to my eyelashes. I must have wiped my face and inadvertently smeared on the crumbs, which were now clinging like crusty little snowflakes to my eyelashes. It looked like I was in the throes of a nasty bout of conjunctivitis.

"Oh, great. How did I not realize that was there?"

Emma dissolved unhelpfully into a fit of giggles.

What a fool. There I was thinking we were having a 'moment' on the beach together and that he couldn't take his eyes off me, while in reality he was probably wondering if I had a contagious infection. How utterly mortifying.

"Let's get out of here," I whispered.

I was too embarrassed to face Dominick, even *sans* crumbs, so we left without saying good-bye.

When I saw Teddy the next week in class, he didn't mention Dominick but invited me to another party the following weekend in Santa Monica.

Dominick was there when I arrived at the party. He seemed a little drunk. Teddy made sure to mention that Dominick was now courting a girl with a Hollywood pedigree, and had been sending her flowers all week. I wasn't sure why he needed me to know this important detail but I immediately felt deflated.

I wondered what type of flowers a man like Dominick might send. Roses would be too predictable. Lilies wouldn't be enough of a statement. Maybe peonies?

Disheartened by this news, I avoided Dominick all night until he cornered me in the kitchen.

"There you are! Where are those lovely green pants?"

"I gave them the night off. In fact, I may be sending them on a permanent vacation to Goodwill."

"Don't say that! I'm in love with them! I could keep track of you all night in those things, neon green in a sea of beige. They were perfect. Like a green flag waving at me from across the room!" He gave me an exaggerated wave to illustrate the effect. "Men start wars over asses like yours. You should be proud of that booty. Don't hide it, for God's sake! Flaunt it!"

I couldn't help but laugh. He was cute and funny—but courting someone else. What lousy timing.

"Well, nice to see you but I have to go," I said and headed for the door.

"Let me walk you out." He didn't wait for a response and ushered me out the back door, which led into the alley. Once outside, he made an awkward lunge for me, pressed me up against an oversized garbage can, and sloppily attempted to stick his tongue down my throat. I had been dying to kiss him but not in his current state and not like this.

"Come home with me." His voice was slurred.

"What?"

"You heard me . . . come home with me. I've been thinking about you all week."

"Oh, is that right? I can't imagine you had the time between sending flower arrangements to what's her name?"

He looked completely floored.

"Oh . . . that . . . well, I was trying to make a good impression . . ."

"What kind of impression do you think you're making trying to mount me on the garbage can? Who's getting the better deal here?"

"You're the better deal, Scarlett."

Why was it men only said this to me when they were drunk or committed to someone else? Why couldn't I be someone's *better deal* when they were sober and single?

I pushed him off. "Good-night, Romeo!"

I crossed the street to my car.

"You know where to find me if you change your mind!" he shouted after me.

He stood at the side of the road, a sexy unavailable drunken mess.

He was precisely my type.



The next time I ran into Dominick, it was eight months later at a coffee shop on Montana Avenue. He and what's her name had broken up and he wasted no time in finally asking me out on a real date. One date turned into several. We had romantic dinners in Malibu and went for long walks on the beach with his dog. Things were going well between us but as soon as I started to relax a bit, I felt him pulling away.

Luckily, work was keeping me busy and I didn't have time to dwell on Dominick. I landed a plum makeup job for a press junket promoting a blockbuster action film with a big film star—the devastatingly handsome Garrison Lee. Having a glamorous all-expenses-paid week in New York with a big movie star does wonders for a girl's spirits. Garrison's good looks were exceeded only by his grace and charm. He had a good sense of humor about the silliness attached to being a movie star and was easy to work with. A job with him was a dream gig. Had he not been married, I would have flung myself at him. Garrison's New York hair-stylist GiGi turned out to be tons of fun so we ran around Manhattan together shopping or just hanging out, and had a ball. It was just what I needed.

Job done and flush with cash, I treated myself to a yoga retreat in Santa Barbara. By the time I came home, Dominick had been looking for me.

I didn't pretend to resist. Curiosity got the better of me. I raced out to Malibu to see him. He looked happy to see me. Even his dog seemed happy to see me.

“Oh, no . . . you've caught the too-much-yoga disease. All you girls catch that. You're getting too skinny. What happened to the ass I was so enchanted with? Where did it go?” he asked while trying to lift my skirt with his barbecue tongs. He pulled me onto his lap and kissed me.

“I've missed you,” he said while kissing my exposed shoulder. “Can you believe I'm saying that? I'm usually impervious to that gooey shit. It doesn't happen often, let me tell you.”

Dominick prepared a wonderful lobster dinner for us and we ate it on his deck at sunset. While he concentrated on his lobster, I drank in every detail about him. His face was tan from an afternoon in the sun. His five o'clock shadow highlighted his undeniable scruffy appeal, while his linen shirt was loose and falling open to expose a map of baby-fine hair on his chest. As I watched him struggle earnestly with his lobster, I was overcome with such a bubbling desire for him that I couldn't contain it. I had to have him. I stepped away from my lobster, walked over to him, and planted a buttery kiss on his lips as I ran my hand down his shirt and unzipped his pants. We made love right there on the wooden deck.

Things went well for a while but then without notice, the scales tipped and he bailed. I started seeing someone else, and he started dating someone else, but that didn't stop him from calling to check the temperature.

The phone calls typically went like this:

“Hello my saucy Scarlett. What are you doing?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Why don’t you come over and sit on my face?”

“Why, that’s the most charming invitation I’ve had all day.”

It would all depend on the timing. If he managed to catch me when I was bored enough with no real boyfriend prospects in sight, we might be on again. Sometimes I would summon the strength to sit one round out and tell him to piss off, but the key to his extraordinary success was his timing. He would wait long enough between calls that I couldn’t possibly have managed to sustain my irritation with him. We would drift back together like this until I had the audacity ‘to go and get married’, which he took as a personal insult. When I ran into him at yoga—married and six months’ pregnant—he looked utterly betrayed. For once, I was the unavailable one.

Now, I was available again.

The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t, as CeCe says. So why not give him a call? I had nothing to lose.