

**ALL THE
WRONG PLACES**
JOY FIELDING

ZAFFRE

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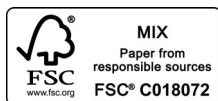
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To Warren, with love always

Chapter One

“So, tell me about yourself,” he says. He smiles what he hopes is a sweet smile—neither too big nor too small, one that hints at a wry, maybe even offbeat sense of humor that he thinks would appeal to her. He wants to charm her. He wants her to like him.

The young woman sitting across from him at the immaculately set table for two hesitates. When she speaks, her voice is soft, tremulous. “What do you want to know?”

She is beautiful: late twenties, porcelain skin, deep blue eyes, long brown hair, just the right amount of visible cleavage. Exactly as advertised, which isn’t always the case. Usually the photos they post are a few years old, the women themselves older still. “Well, for starters, why a dating app? I mean, you’re gorgeous. I can’t imagine you’d have any trouble meeting guys, especially in a city like Boston.”

She hesitates again. She’s shy, thoughtful as opposed to self-absorbed. Something else he likes. “I just thought it would be fun,” she admits. “All my friends are on them. And I’ve kind of been out of the dating scene for a while . . .”

“You had a boyfriend?”

She nods. “We broke up about four months ago.”

“You broke up with him?”

“Actually, no. He broke up with me.”

He laughs. “I find that hard to believe.”

“He said he wasn’t ready to be tied down,” she offers without prompting. Her eyes fill with tears. Several escape without warning, clinging to her bottom lashes.

Instinctively he reaches across the table to wipe them away, careful not to disturb her mascara. “You miss him,” he says.

“No,” she says quickly. “Not really. It’s just hard sometimes. It’s more being part of a couple I miss, our friends . . .”

“Were you together long?”

“A little over a year. What about you?”

He smiles. *She’s trying*, he thinks. Even though he can see her heart isn’t really in it. Still, some women never even think to ask. “Me? No. It’s been a while since I’ve been in a serious relationship. But we were talking about you.”

She looks toward her plate. She hasn’t touched her food, and he spent hours preparing it, letting the expensive steaks marinate all afternoon, wrapping the large Idaho potatoes in tinfoil for baking, arranging the watermelon and feta cheese salad just so on the delicate floral china, wanting to impress her. *Maybe she’s a vegetarian*, he thinks, although there was nothing on her profile to indicate that.

He should have asked when he suggested dinner. “Tell me about your childhood,” he says now.

She looks surprised. “My childhood?”

“I’m assuming you had one.” Again, the sweet smile hinting at greater depths.

"It was pretty ordinary. Nothing much to tell."

"I'm guessing upper middle class," he offers, hoping to stimulate the conversation. "Comfortable lifestyle, maybe a nanny or a housekeeper, parents who loved you, made sure you had everything your little heart desired."

"Not really. Well, maybe at first," she agrees tentatively. "Until I was about six and my parents got divorced. Then everything changed."

"How so?"

"We had to move. My mom had to go back to work. My dad remarried a woman we didn't like. We were always being shuffled back and forth."

"We?"

"My brothers and I."

"I like that you say 'I,'" he interrupts. "Most people would say 'me.' They have no respect for grammar. Or maybe they just don't know the difference between the subject and the object of a sentence. I don't know." He shrugs, sensing her mounting discomfort. Not everyone is as concerned with grammar as he is. "How many brothers do you have?" he asks, aiming for safer ground.

"Two. One's in New York. The other one's in L.A."

"And your mom? Where is she?"

"Here. In Boston."

"Does she know where you are tonight? Well, how could she?" he asks, answering one question with another. "Don't think she'd approve of your agreeing to have dinner in a stranger's apartment, would she? Are you always this adventurous?" He cocks

his head to one side, a gesture some have called charming, and waits for her response.

Another hesitation. "No."

"Should I be flattered? 'Cause I'm feeling kind of flattered here, I gotta admit."

She blushes, although whether the sudden redness in her cheeks is from embarrassment or anticipation, he isn't sure.

"Is it because I'm so good-looking?" He says this playfully, accompanied by yet another smile, his sweetest one so far, and although she doesn't respond, he knows he's right. He *is* that good-looking. ("Pretty boy," his father used to sneer.) Much better-looking than the picture he posted on the dating site, which in truth isn't a picture of him at all, just some shirtless model with handsomely generic features and washboard abs whose photograph he saw in a *Men's Health* magazine.

Good-looking enough to make a woman silence the nagging voice in her head warning her to beware, to follow him out of the crowded bar where they'd agreed to meet and go with him to his apartment near Sargent's Wharf, where he's promised a gourmet feast.

"You're not eating," he says. "Is the steak too rare for you?"

"No. I just can't . . ."

"Please. You have to at least try it." He cuts a piece of meat from his own plate and extends his fork across the table toward her mouth. "Please," he says again, as blood drips from the steak to stain the white tablecloth.

She opens her mouth to receive the almost raw piece of meat.

"Chew carefully," he advises. "Wouldn't want you to choke."

"Please . . ." she says, as the cellphone in his pocket rings.

"Hold on. I'll just be a minute." He removes the phone from his pocket and swipes its thin face from left to right, then lifts it to his ear. "Well, hello there," he says, lowering his voice seductively, his lips grazing the phone's smooth surface. *Finally*, he thinks.

"Hi," the woman on the other end of the line responds. "Is this . . . Mr. Right Now?" She giggles and he laughs. Mr. Right Now is the name he goes by on the multiple dating sites to which he subscribes.

"It is. Is this . . . Wildflower?"

"It is," she says, more than a trace self-consciously, not as comfortable with pseudonyms as he is.

"Well, Wildflower," he says. "I'm so glad you called." He's been anticipating this moment for what feels like forever.

"Are you still in Florida?" she asks. "Is this a bad time?"

"No. It's perfect. I just got back into town about an hour ago."

"How's your mother?"

"Much better. Thanks for asking. How are you?"

"Me? I'm fine." She hesitates. "I was thinking maybe you were right, that it's time we give this another try."

"No maybes about it," he says, eager to nail her down. "At least on my end. How about Wednesday?"

"Wednesday is good."

"Great. Are you familiar with Anthony's Bar, over on Boylston? I know it's usually crowded and it can be pretty noisy, but—"

"Anthony's is great," she says, as he knew she would. Crowded, noisy bars are always a woman's preferred place to meet.

He smiles at the woman sitting across the table, notes the tears now wriggling freely down her cheeks. He checks his watch, making no move to wipe the tears away. Anthony's Bar is where he met her less than two hours ago. He is being rude and insensitive.

"Say six o'clock?" he says into the phone.

"Six is good."

"No more last-minute cancellations?"

"I'll be there at six on the button."

"No!" his dinner companion shouts unexpectedly. "Don't . . ."

He is instantly on his feet, his hand sweeping across the table to slap her hard across the face. It connects with such ferocity that the chair to which she is securely tied, her hands handcuffed behind her back, teeters on its hind legs and threatens to fall, causing the noose looped around her neck to tighten. He watches as she gasps frantically for air. Another minute of flailing uselessly about and she will likely lose consciousness.

He's not ready for that. He isn't done with her yet.

"What was that?" the woman calling herself Wildflower asks.

"What was what?" he asks easily in return, walking around the table to steady the chair, then covering the frantic woman's mouth with his free hand. "Oh. Probably just the TV. Some guy getting the shit kicked out of him. Excuse the language."

A second's silence. He can almost feel Wildflower smile.

"Are you going to tell me your real name?" she ventures.

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," he replies flirtatiously. A lie. He never tells any of the women his real name. "Although I gotta say, I kind of like Wildflower."

“Then suppose we leave things the way they are for now.”

“Till Wednesday, then,” he says.

“Till Wednesday.”

“Looking forward to it.”

He returns the phone to his pocket and removes his hand from the woman’s mouth. “If you scream, I’ll stick this steak knife in your eye,” he says calmly, brandishing its serrated edge in front of her face. The noose around her neck is now buried inside her flesh. He doubts she has enough air to scream, even if she were so inclined. Still, he’d underestimated her before.

She’d been so easy. Almost too easy. Mesmerized by his beautiful exterior, she’d gone along with his every suggestion, agreeing to leave the dark, crowded bar to enjoy a home-cooked dinner in his apartment, then eagerly sitting down at the small, round table with its white linen tablecloth already in place, not comprehending the danger she was in until her hands were handcuffed behind her and the rope was literally around her throat.

She’d tried so hard, been so compliant, going along with his silly game of pretending they were on a real date, answering his stupid questions, even offering up a few of her own, undoubtedly hoping to save her life. And even when she recognized this for the pipe dream it was, when the phone call convinced her that she was simply one of many, that there was nothing special about her, and that he was already moving forward, who’d have thought she’d have the gumption to try warning his next victim? He admires that.

Not that it matters.

He resumes his seat at the table and calmly finishes his meal, careful to chew each piece of meat thirty times, as his father used to insist. He hopes she won't do anything stupid, something that will make it necessary to finish her off quickly. He wants to take his time with her, show her he's more than just a pretty face.

He smiles, hoping to convey that she has his full attention. She deserves that. But even as he lifts the last piece of steak toward his lips, his imagination is already leaping ahead.

To Wednesday.

And the woman who will be his crowning achievement: Wildflower.

Chapter Two

Three weeks earlier

At just after seven A.M. Paige Hamilton woke up to find her mother sitting on the side of her bed in her pajamas, her normally youthful features betrayed by a series of worried lines that made her look every one of her seventy years.

“Mom?”

“How was your date last night?”

“You woke me up to ask about my date?”

“How was it?”

“Not good.” Paige pushed herself up on her elbows, recalling last night’s unfortunate rendezvous as she shook her shoulder-length brown hair from her eyes. The man had been at least twenty pounds heavier and five inches shorter than his profile on Match Sticks indicated. What was the matter with these guys? Did they think that women didn’t have eyes, that they wouldn’t notice the discrepancy?

“That’s too bad,” her mother said. “You thought he sounded promising.”

“Mom . . . what’s going on?”

"I don't want to worry you."

"Too late for that."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Tell me what's wrong."

Her mother's sigh shook the double bed. "I think I might be having a stroke."

Paige was instantly on her feet, dancing abstract circles on the hardwood floor. "What are you talking about? What makes you think you're having a stroke?" She searched her mother's face for signs of anything off balance. A drooping eyelid, a twitching lip. "You're not slurring your words. Are you dizzy? Are you in pain?"

"I'm not in pain. I'm not dizzy," her mother repeated. "You have such a lovely figure," she said, as if this were a perfectly normal thing to say under the circumstances.

Paige grabbed her pink silk robe from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her naked body, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"I didn't realize you slept in the nude," her mother continued. "I always wanted to do that, but your father preferred pajamas, so I followed his lead."

"Mom! Focus! Why do you think you're having a stroke?"

"It's my vision," her mother said. "It's kind of weird."

"What do you mean, it's kind of weird? How weird?"

"I'm seeing all these flashing lights and squiggly lines, and I remember reading that a change in vision is often the first sign you're having a stroke. Or maybe a detached retina. What do you think?"

"I think I'm calling nine-one-one."

"Really, darling? Do you think that's necessary?"

"Yes, Mom. I really, really do." Paige grabbed her cellphone from the night table and pressed the emergency digits. "Try to stay calm," she advised her mother, although *she* was the one on the verge of hysteria. She'd lost her father to cancer two years ago. She wasn't ready to lose her mother, too. At thirty-three, she was much too young to be an orphan. "What are you doing?" she asked as her mother pushed herself off the bed.

"I should probably get dressed."

"Sit back down," Paige said, listening to the phone's persistent ring against her ear. "Don't move." She threw her free arm into the air in frustration. "What's the matter with these people? Why aren't they answering the phone? I thought this was supposed to be an emerg—"

"Nine-one-one," a woman's voice said, interrupting Paige's tirade. "What is your emergency?"

"My mother's having a stroke."

"Well, it could be a detached retina," her mother qualified.

"We need an ambulance right away." Paige quickly gave the dispatcher the address of her mother's posh Back Bay condominium. "They'll be here in five minutes," she said, crossing to the en suite bathroom and throwing some cold water on her face, then applying deodorant before grabbing the first thing she saw in her closet and pulling it over her head.

"That's a pretty dress," her mother said. "Is it new?"

Paige glanced at the shapeless floral sundress that Noah had always despised. She quickly reminded herself that Noah's

likes and dislikes were no longer her concern. "No. I've had it a while." She retrieved a pair of lace panties from the top drawer of her dresser and stepped into them, pulling them up over her slim hips.

"You don't wear a bra?" her mother asked.

"Well, I don't really need one," Paige said, deciding that attempting a normal conversation was her mother's way of assuring her that everything would be all right, that even if her retina was detaching or, God forbid, she was having a stroke, she would be fine.

Except things weren't fine. They hadn't been fine in a while.

"I never used to need one either," her mother said, almost wistfully. She looked down at her more than ample chest. "And then suddenly, I get these. Now! When nobody's looking. When nobody cares."

In other circumstances, Paige might have laughed. Now she could only fight back tears. "*I* care." She sat down beside her mother and hugged her close.

"You're a good girl." Her mother leaned her head against Paige's shoulder. "I love you more than anything in the world. You know that, don't you?"

"I know." Paige felt a pang of guilt. Not because she didn't love her mother. She did. It was just that she'd always been more of a daddy's girl, her father's outsized personality having tended to overshadow everything in its path, even when he was on his deathbed. "I love you, too."

"Don't you worry." Her mother patted Paige's knee. "I'll be okay."

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Paige smiled, knowing such promises were futile. Hadn’t her mother made the same promise when her father was first diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him barely a year later?

“Don’t worry. Your father will be fine,” she’d assured both Paige and her brother, although it was doubtful that Michael, older than Paige by almost four years and a successful cardiologist in Livingston, New Jersey, had been as gullible.

Her mother looked toward the bedroom door. “I should at least put on a robe.”

“I’ll get it,” Paige said. “Don’t move.”

“Bring a change of clothes for when they send me home,” her mother called after her as Paige marched toward the master bedroom down the hall. The July sun was already streaming through the automatic blinds in the living room, sending streaks, like bolts of lightning, across the beige marble floor.

Her parents had moved into the two-bedroom condominium five years ago, downsizing from their six-thousand-plus-square-foot home in the suburb of Weston. (“Who needs such a big place anymore?” her mother had asked at the time. “You kids are long gone and the dog is dead.”)

Had her mother always had this sardonic sense of humor? Paige wondered now. Why hadn’t she noticed before?

The condo, located in one of Boston’s most prestigious neighborhoods, was spacious and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows in the living-dining area as well as the library that had doubled as her father’s office and the small family

room off the large kitchen. The two bedrooms were located off the main hall in the opposite wing of the apartment. Each room afforded an equally stunning view of the city.

Paige cut across the ivory silk-and-wool carpet that covered the master bedroom floor, slamming her hip against one of the four posters of the king-size bed as she hurried toward the walk-in closet. *Well, more a room full of closets*, Paige thought, wondering if her father's clothes still occupied the half that had been his, or if her mother had finally packed them off to Goodwill. Robert Hamilton had been such a natty dresser, whether wearing a suit and tie or more casual attire. *And those socks*, Paige thought with a smile. Years before it had become fashionable, her father had sported a huge selection of colorful, wildly patterned socks that were a perfect complement to his equally huge and colorful personality.

Tears clouded Paige's eyes and she brushed them aside. She missed her father so much.

Was she about to lose her mother, too? Was everyone she loved destined to abandon her?

"God, you're a selfish bitch," she muttered, retrieving her mother's blue terry-cloth robe from a hook inside the closet, then selecting a pink cotton dress and some surprisingly racy underwear from the built-in dresser—had her mother always worn bikini panties and push-up bras?—and carrying everything back to her room.

Not that the second bedroom had been meant for her. Originally, it was intended as a guest room, for whenever Michael and his family came to visit. But Michael's busy schedule had

precluded such visits happening often, and his wife had preferred staying in a hotel, so the room had stayed largely empty and unused. But then Paige's father had died, and six months ago she'd lost her job, and two months after that, her live-in boyfriend had left her for another woman—well, technically, *she* was the one who'd had to move out—so Paige's mother had suggested that she move in with her. “Just temporarily,” she'd stressed. “Until you're back on your feet again.”

Was that ever going to happen? Paige wondered now, entering the bedroom to find her mother standing beside the window, staring down at the tree-lined street ten stories below. “Mom, what are you doing? I told you to stay still.”

“I'm just admiring the day. There isn't a cloud in the sky.”

“Can you see all right?” Paige asked. “What's happening with your eyes?”

“Still lots of fireworks. It's kind of like one of those sound-and-light shows. Only without the sound.” Her lips curled into a weak smile.

“You're scaring me.”

“I'm sorry, darling. That's the last thing I want to do. I'll be fine. I promise.”

The phone rang as Paige was helping her mother on with her robe. Paige listened to the concierge's worried voice, then hung up the phone and took a deep breath before attempting a smile of her own. “The ambulance is here.”

Chapter Three

“Joan Hamilton?” the man asked, entering the small, nondescript office and shutting the door behind him, his eyes darting between Paige and her mother. He was young and pleasant-looking, with a full head of dark, wavy hair. He wore a white coat over slim khaki pants and a navy-and-white-checked shirt.

“That’s me,” Paige’s mother said, lifting her hand into the air and wiggling her fingers. She’d changed out of her pajamas into the clothes Paige had brought along.

“I’m Dr. Barelli.” The doctor sat down behind his desk, smiling at the two women sitting across from him. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel fine,” Joan Hamilton said. “A little foolish. My eyes are . . . well, they seem to be . . . fine.”

Dr. Barelli opened the folder in his hands, scanning its contents as Paige and her mother watched him expectantly. Not that there was anything else to look at—the pale green walls were bare except for a generic reproduction of a boring landscape; the furnishings were minimal and strictly utilitarian; the desk was void of personal touches or family photographs; the window behind it overlooked a brick wall. Probably some sort of communal space, used for quick discussions and consultations. Still, the room was a welcome respite from the endless corridors and plastic chairs

Paige had been sitting in since they'd arrived at Mass General. If she never saw another ancient edition of *Star* magazine, it would be too soon.

It was approaching one o'clock in the afternoon. They'd been at the hospital almost five hours. Her mother had undergone a multitude of tests, including an MRI and a retinal scan, as well as a series of examinations to determine whether her heart was operating as it should. Technicians had drawn so much blood, Paige marveled that her mother had any color left at all.

"Well," the doctor began, looking up from his folder and smiling again. The smile sent creases up his cheeks to his eyes. "It's all good news, from what I can see."

"Good news?" Paige and her mother repeated simultaneously.

"Your blood tests are normal, boringly so, if you don't mind my saying. Your blood pressure's a little high, but nothing to be overly concerned about. Both your retinas are exactly where they should be. Your vision is excellent for a woman your age. As is your brain function and just about everything else that we tested for. In fact, you just might be the healthiest person in this place."

"Well, isn't that lovely," Joan Hamilton said.

Paige gasped with relief. "But . . . her eyes . . ."

"Classic ocular migraine," the doctor explained.

"A migraine?" Joan repeated. "But I didn't have a headache."

"You're lucky," Dr. Barelli said, dark eyes sparkling.

"I don't understand," Paige said.

"Your mother experienced the aura that often accompanies migraines. They involve lots of squiggles and flashing lights, usually starting small and then building in intensity before petering out, usually in twenty to thirty minutes."

"That's exactly what happened," Joan Hamilton agreed.

"They're not uncommon, especially as you get older. And the good news is that they're not serious. More of a nuisance than anything else. You might not have another one for years," the doctor continued, speaking directly to Paige's mother, "or you might have one tomorrow." He went on to say that although there were many theories as to what caused them, no one really knew for sure, and that while medication could be taken, the auras usually disappeared before such medication could take effect, so it was preferable just to wait them out. "Of course, if you're driving, I'd advise pulling over."

"That's it?" Paige asked as her mother rose to her feet.

"That's it." Dr. Barelli extended his hand across the desk for the women to shake.

"An ocular migraine," Joan said, almost proudly, as they waited for the elevator. "Who knew?"

"You must be starving," Paige said, speaking for both of them as they stepped onto the street moments later. She'd been surviving on black coffee since they'd exited the ambulance and, as far as she knew, her mother hadn't had a thing to eat or drink since last night.

"I'm famished," her mother agreed. "Let's go somewhere nice for lunch. Do you have time?"

Paige checked her watch. She had a job interview at three o'clock, her first one in more than two weeks, so it was important she not be late. Normally she preferred being early, but she'd learned the hard way that being early wasn't always a great idea. She closed her eyes, seeing herself tiptoe down the narrow hall of her old apartment toward the bedroom

she shared with Noah, hearing the all-too-familiar laughter behind the bedroom door. “There’s a neat little café over on Charles Street,” she said loudly, trying to block out the sound of that laughter.

“Why are you shouting?” her mother asked.

“Sorry,” Paige said, hailing a nearby taxi.

Unfortunately, the small café was crowded with tourists, drawn to the street’s reputation for quirky fashions and charming antiques shops, and they had to wait for a table.

“Dr. Barelli was very cute, didn’t you think?” her mother said when they were finally seated and their order taken.

“A little young.”

“They’re *all* young. *You’re* young.”

Paige’s cellphone rang before she could think of a suitable response. She reached into her beige canvas bag and extricated the phone, grateful for the interruption. Her mother meant well, but Paige wasn’t in the mood for one of her patented *you’re a smart, beautiful girl, there are plenty more fish in the sea* pep talks. “Chloe, hi,” she said to her oldest and best friend.

“Can you come over?” Chloe said, wasting no time on unnecessary pleasantries.

“Is something wrong?” Paige pictured her friend pushing her straight blond hair away from her pale blue eyes and chewing on her full bottom lip.

“Only everything.”

Shit, Paige thought, understanding the source of Chloe’s problems without having to be told. “I have a job interview at three. I can come over after that.”

“Great. See you then.”

“Something wrong?” her mother asked, repeating her daughter’s question as Paige returned the phone to her purse.

Paige shrugged. “*Only everything*,” she heard Chloe say.

“About the doctor . . .” her mother began. “I just meant—”

“I know what you meant, Mom,” Paige interrupted. “But it’s not like I’ve locked myself away in some tower. I’m putting myself out there. I’m on a dozen dating sites. I’ve gone out with six guys in as many weeks . . .”

“Maybe you’re being too picky.”

“Maybe,” Paige said, too tired and hungry to argue. Was it being too picky to expect a man to be . . . honest? Were *all* men liars? “What about you?” she asked, turning the tables on her mother.

“What do you mean, what about me?”

“It’s been two years since Daddy died. Have you ever considered . . . ?” She could barely finish the thought, let alone the sentence, the idea of her mother being interested in any man other than her father too ridiculous to contemplate.

“Don’t be silly, darling. I’m an old woman.”

“Seventy is hardly old. Not anymore. And you look fantastic. Dr. Barelli said you’re in great shape.”

“For a woman my age,” Joan Hamilton qualified, although there was something in her tone that said the idea of her dating again might not be so preposterous after all. She patted the side of her stylish blond bob.

“Maybe *you* should go on Match Sticks,” Paige said, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and wondering why she was persisting. She looked around the restaurant’s small, dark interior for the waiter, wondering what was taking so long with their

food. “Oh, God,” she said, suddenly burrowing down in her seat and covering the side of her face with her hand. Could this day get any worse?

“What is it?”

“Don’t look.”

Her mother immediately twisted in her chair to look behind her.

“I said *don’t* . . .”

“Sorry, darling. It’s an automatic reaction when someone tells you not to look,” Joan Hamilton said sheepishly. “Did she see us? Is she coming over?”

“Oh, yes,” Paige said, sitting back up and watching her cousin approach, reminded of the expression “it’s like looking in the mirror.” Except she was pretty sure that expression was intended to be ironic, whereas looking at her cousin actually *was* like looking in the mirror, so striking was their resemblance. Which probably wasn’t that surprising, considering that their fathers had been identical twins and the two girls had been born within days of each other.

“Well, hello, you two,” Heather said, bending down to kiss her aunt’s cheek, seemingly unaware of the stiffening of Joan’s shoulders. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Paige wondered whether the cliché was deliberate or if her cousin couldn’t help it, never having had an original thought in her life. She cursed herself for having forgotten that the office where her cousin worked was only blocks away.

Or maybe she hadn’t forgotten. Maybe she’d been daring fate and fate had taken up the challenge, raising an invisible middle finger in response.

“No hellos?” Heather asked. “Okay, well. Have it your way. How goes the job hunt?” She smiled at Paige, as if she were actually expecting an answer.

Paige fought the urge to punch her cousin in the nose.

Heather shifted her weight from one foot to the other, tucking her shoulder-length brown hair behind one ear. “Well, okay, then. Nice bumping into you two. Guess I’ll see you at the party.”

Oh, shit, thought Paige, watching Heather wiggle away on four-inch heels.

“Don’t you have a skirt like that?” her mother asked.

“I’m not going to that stupid party,” Paige said.

“Oh, darling. It’s your uncle’s eightieth birthday. I know it won’t be easy, but how can you not?”

“Because I can’t,” Paige said. It was hard enough for her to be around her uncle in the best of times, to have this living, breathing replica of her father still enjoying life when her father was in the ground. How dare her uncle get to be eighty when his twin brother, superior to him in every way, hadn’t been as fortunate! How could her mother bear to look at the man?

Of course, that wasn’t the only reason Paige didn’t want to go. Maybe not even the main one.

“You could always bring a date,” her mother suggested as the waiter approached with their food.

“Two Cobb salads,” the young man said as he deposited their bowls on the table.

“Maybe someone from one of those sites you’re on . . .” her mother said.

Paige stabbed at her salad with her fork and said nothing.

Chapter Four

She'd come home early.

That was her second mistake.

The first had been not calling to alert him.

Of course, Paige hadn't realized at the time that alerting Noah was necessary. Or had she? Hadn't she been at least a little suspicious? Wasn't that the real reason she hadn't phoned to tell him that Chloe and Matt had returned home an hour earlier than expected from their weekly date night—Chloe had obviously been crying; there was a suspicious-looking red mark on her cheek—and that she was on her way home?

Chloe's usual babysitter had canceled at the last moment and Chloe had called in a panic—Matt was already waiting at the restaurant and he hated any last-minute changes in plans—and asked Paige if she could come over. "I'd ask my mother, but she's . . . well, you know . . . my mother."

Paige had said yes, she'd be delighted. She loved Chloe's two young children as if they were her own and enjoyed spending time with them. Besides, she would do anything for Chloe, whose mother was a total disaster, a woman incapable of seeing anything beyond the tip of her own nose. It was a miracle that

Chloe had turned out the way she had, which was, simply put, one of the sweetest people Paige had ever met.

Maybe too sweet.

Too sweet for a man like Matt, that was for sure.

Too sweet for her own good, Paige worried.

Noah hadn't objected to Paige bailing on their plans at the last minute. In fact, he'd seemed relieved, saying he hadn't been especially keen on the movie Paige had suggested anyway, and that he could use the time to prepare for the case he was working on, then get to bed early, hopefully catch up on some much-needed sleep. "It's shaping up to be a very busy week," he'd said.

Paige understood this was code for "no sex tonight," even though it was the weekend and their sex life had been less than stellar of late. "I've just got so much on my plate," he'd apologized the last time he'd blamed exhaustion and overwork for turning down her romantic overtures. Paige had smiled and said she understood. But she didn't really. As a lawyer hoping one day to make partner with the large downtown firm that employed him, Noah had been exhausted and overworked since the day they'd met. It had never stopped him from being an eager and avid lover. But something had changed in the last few months, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Or maybe she knew exactly where to put her finger.

And whom to point that finger at.

Maybe that was the problem.

Which was why she hadn't phoned to alert him she was on her way home, why she hadn't bothered shouting her usual hello when she entered the foyer of their small apartment, why

she hadn't even glanced into the living room to check if he was there as she'd tiptoed down the hall toward the closed bedroom door. Nor had she hesitated when she heard the giggles emanating from the other side, knowing even before she pushed open the door and saw the naked body straddling Noah's whose body it would be, whose startled face she would find.

"Are you kidding me?" Paige had shouted as her cousin scrambled to her feet, tripping and almost falling as she struggled into her underwear. "I don't believe this."

Except she *did* believe it. In truth, Paige would have been shocked if the woman she'd discovered straddling her boyfriend had been anyone *but* Heather. Her cousin had always coveted whatever Paige had, be it clothing, hairstyles, or men. When Paige signed up for modeling lessons as a teenager, so had Heather. When Paige learned to play guitar, Heather had immediately signed up for lessons. When Paige bought a new pair of rhinestone-studded sneakers, Heather had run right out and bought the exact same ones.

When Paige later grumbled about these things to her father, he'd smiled and reminded her that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." His brother had been the same way with him. "But he was never as good," he'd added with a wink. "And everybody knew it."

So no one was surprised that when Paige went into advertising after graduating college, Heather had followed suit, joining a larger if less prestigious agency, where she'd languished in an entry-level position for years before finally being promoted to one of six junior account managers. Paige, also to no one's surprise,

had risen quickly through the ranks of her smaller boutique firm to become director of strategic planning.

And then, out of the blue, her agency had been swallowed by a larger New York company. They'd brought in their own people, and Paige had found herself unceremoniously spit out, along with most of the original senior management.

"That's so awful," Heather had commiserated, managing to sound sincere despite the slight gleam in her eye. "After so many years. You must be devastated."

"I'll find something else."

"Of course you will."

Except it turned out that there weren't a lot of options available for directors of strategic planning. In fact, there were none. The few jobs Paige interviewed for were for less senior positions, and while she would have happily taken any one of them, especially as one month stretched into six, she was repeatedly deemed "too qualified."

Meanwhile, Heather had begun spending more and more time at Paige's apartment, dropping over with supposed leads about potential jobs, bringing over take-out dinners she'd pick up at Eataly on her way home from work, listening with rapt attention as Noah talked about his day, laughing at even the feeblest of his jokes, and being so obvious in her attempts to flatter and impress him that Paige and Noah would sometimes joke about it after she'd left.

Turned out Noah liked obvious.

Turned out they'd been sleeping together for more than a month before Paige discovered them.

"I can't even say he left me for a younger woman," Paige had wailed to Chloe. "She's two days older than I am. And we're practically twins, for God's sake, so it can't be her looks."

"Well, it certainly isn't her personality," Chloe said.

"Oh, God," Paige wailed.

"What?"

"She must be great in bed."

"You think?"

"What else could it be?"

"It can't be that. She doesn't have the imagination."

"Well, she must have something I don't," Paige argued.

"No. Noah's just an idiot."

"Okay," Paige agreed. "Let's go with that."

Heather and Noah had been living together now for almost four months, and their relationship had caused an undeniable rift between the two families. Paige hadn't spoken to her cousin since the night she'd found her with Noah, despite Heather's halfhearted attempts at reconciliation. Out of loyalty, her mother had turned down all invitations to dine with her brother-in-law and his wife.

And now Ted Hamilton was turning eighty and a big party was being held in his honor at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel a week from Saturday night, and her mother felt obligated to go and wanted Paige to come along. "You could always bring a date," she'd suggested, knowing Heather would be there with Noah.

"Yeah, right," Paige whispered, pulling out her phone as she exited the Prudential Building onto Boylston Street, checking for messages and finding none. She hailed a cab and settled into the

backseat, giving the driver Chloe's address in Cambridge and silently reviewing the job interview she'd just left, going over the questions she'd been asked and the answers she'd given, knowing that it hadn't gone as well as she'd hoped, that her answers had been tentative at best, her confidence shattered after six months of being unemployed.

She just wasn't as sharp as she'd wanted to be, as she *needed* to be, if she was to secure another position. Plus, she looked less than professional in the shapeless floral shift she'd thrown on so carelessly this morning. At the very least, she should have gone home to change. She wasn't even wearing a bra, for God's sake. Even Heather would have had the good sense to dress in something more appropriate.

What was it her father had said when comparing her to her cousin? "You have the confidence without the attitude. Heather has the attitude without the confidence."

Now Paige had neither.

And Heather had Noah.

And she would most certainly be showing him off at her father's party.

"Shit," Paige said, louder than she'd intended.

"You say something?" the cabbie asked as they were approaching the Harvard Bridge.

"No, sorry," Paige apologized, returning her attention to her phone. She clicked onto Match Sticks and scrolled through the ever-expanding list of possible suitors. *Stud Muffin*, one prospect boasted beside a picture of a regrettably shirtless man biting into a giant chocolate chip muffin. Paige swiped left, watching his

image disappear. *Romeo*, read the name beside a dough-faced, middle-aged man who claimed to be a fan of long walks in the rain. “Really?” Paige whispered, swiping left again. There were people who actually enjoyed walking in the rain? *Romeo* was followed by *Chaucer*, *Luther*, and *Just Plain Alan*. “Just plain no,” Paige said, swiping left each time. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe she *was* too picky.

“Hold on. Who’s this?” she asked, stopping on a picture of a man calling himself Mr. Right Now. Paige laughed. At least this guy had a sense of humor. And he was exceptionally handsome. Assuming he looked anything at all like the picture he’d posted, he’d be the ideal revenge date to bring to her uncle’s party. “No,” she said, imaginary alarm bells ringing in her head as she recalled last night’s fiasco. “You are definitely too good to be true.” She clicked off the site and tossed the phone into her purse.

What had become of meeting a potential romantic partner at work or through mutual friends, or even picking up someone at a bar? Had the ease and expediency of today’s technology rendered even such basic human contact obsolete? “Ah, the good old days.”

“You say something?” the cabbie asked again.

“Lots of traffic,” Paige improvised.

“Always is.”

Paige nodded, watching the long line of cars inching their way across the Charles River toward Cambridge. Maybe expediency was only part of it, she thought. Maybe everyone was just lonely. She leaned back against the brown vinyl seat and closed her eyes, surprised to find Mr. Right Now waiting for her behind her closed lids. Too lonely to wait for a chance encounter at work

or count on a suggestion from a friend. Too lazy to head out to a bar, too afraid to risk rejection face-to-face.

So maybe she'd revisit Match Sticks later, maybe even swipe right on Mr. Right Now's picture and wait to see if he'd return her interest. Was there any chance he was as good as advertised? "Yeah, right," Paige whispered. "Dream on."