

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Arwen and Damien

November 15, 1993

Pouring over a thirty-page legal document, Arwen sat under a tree in the courtyard outside the cafeteria of Grace Coolidge High School. Eighteen senior girls and four senior guys milled around nearby, smoking as they did every lunch hour. Highly allergic to cigarette smoke, Arwen was there for the sunlight, last days of autumn leaves, and the comparative privacy. She soldiered on reading the document even as her eyes watered and nose ran amidst all the smoking.

Hoping that “Be patient” didn’t mean “keep away,” I walked up to her. “What’s doin’?”

“I’m reading my mother’s will,” Arwen said distractedly. “I’m turning eighteen soon and wondering if that means anything of note.”

“Is this your first time seeing it?” I asked. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mo Willis smoking nearby. She mouthed the words, “Fuck her hard!” I smiled and shook my head at her. Pressing the point, Mo made the “finger in hole gesture,” and tossed her head back, mutely moaning. At least she was on our side. I returned my attention to Arwen, who was still absorbed in reading. She was about to snap at me to leave her in peace, but changed her mind abruptly, deciding instead to bring me up to speed. “I can’t figure out how old I have to be to claim my inheritance money and share of Pokatny Confections. The legalese is incomprehensible.”

Since she didn’t invite me to sit on the grass next to her, I remained standing. “Pokatny Confections is your mom’s company, but it’s named after your dad?”

“If a couple co-founds a company, it sucks if it’s only named after the husband, right?”

“Definitely!” I said with conviction.

Arwen smirked. “I’m glad I’m having a good influence on you, my friend. You’ve got a male chauvinist streak, there. Not sure if you’re aware.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I pointed at the will. “You want me to have a look at that?”

Arwen slapped my hand away. “I don’t want you to know how much money I’m getting. You’ll go from just loving me for my big boobies to just loving me for my inheritance.”

“I love everything about you,” I said, without a trace of irony.

“Liar.”

“No. I’m serious.”

Arwen looked up. “You can’t be. Come on. Tell me one thing you don’t like about me.”

I smiled crookedly. “The blue balls you give me.”

“Gross.” Arwen pulled a face and looked at the wall again.

I tried to recover control of the conversation. “What are you gonna do about this will?”

“I have a big question, so I’m going to the law office tomorrow.”

“What’s that?”

“An office maintained by a lawyer or a firm of lawyers for the practice of law.”

I laughed. “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

“If I’m reading this right, I can start collecting enough money to move out of my dad’s house, get away from my wicked stepmother and stepsister, and restart my life on my terms.”

“And you can date whoever you want?” I would like to say I managed to keep the glee out of my voice, but I didn’t.

Arwen arched an evil eyebrow. “I can fuck every guy in New York if I wanted to.” Never before had I known how terrible and overpowering jealousy could feel. The redder my complexion got the wider Arwen’s smile grew. “Something wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. That sounds like a fantastic plan. You deserve to celebrate your freedom.”

“Every guy in New York does sound like fun.” She paused for effect. “Hey, Damien. I’ve just had a wild thought. You’re a New Yorker, aren’t you?”

“Why, yes.” An image of Arwen roasting me over a spit with an apple shoved in my mouth popped into my head. “Yes, I am.”

“Cool, cool. I might even fuck a few chicks, too. Try that out. I mean, scissoring sounds like such fun, doesn’t it? Have you heard of scissoring?”

"You know me." I threw my hands up in the air. "Of course, I haven't!"

Arwen folded up the will, slipped it into her pocket, and stood. She stared at me with shining, silver eyes. "I know I've been needling you just now, but I'm deadly serious here. If I get my inheritance, I'm breaking up with Rolf. I want to be with you." She pointed a commanding finger at me. "But don't you dare get too excited! I almost didn't tell you. I wanted to be sure it was good news, first. But I can't keep secrets from you. You look so fucking miserable when I keep you in suspense, I just can't leave you hanging." She paused, debating whether or not to bring up a point that irritated her. "Of course, you need to . . ."

"What?" I asked.

Arwen poked me in the chest with her finger. "Listen, here, dummy. I'm gonna have to insist you stop asking random MILFs to the prom. It's bad enough I have to compete with your memory of St. Marina of Dazzo. Now I'm biting my nails worrying about you ogling cougars?"

"Wait a second—"

"Well, you gave me a kick in the pants. Forced me to look at this fakakta legal situation."

"The only reason I started looking elsewhere for prom dates is I had no idea there was any hope for us. You know. As a couple. I was okay with the friendship."

"Were you?" Arwen's eyes narrowed. "I wasn't."

I paused. "It'll be cool when I don't answer that question."

Arwen looked thoughtful. "Here's another difficult question for you."

"Uh-oh. Now what?"

"I realize this is putting the cart before the horse, but what are your feelings about wedding rings? I don't like them, myself. They're like a wolf peeing on a woman to mark his territory, don't you think?"

I grimaced. "If you want to be *negative* about it. I think they're romantic."

"I'd rather not feel peed on."

"I have no desire to pee on you."

"Cool." Arwen said. "Then don't ever buy me a ring."

I looked heavenwards. "If you insist."

Speaking of wolves marking their territory, Rolf chose that moment to come up behind Arwen and place his hand firmly on her ass. "Howya doin', honey?"

Arwen spun on her heels and kissed Rolf on the cheek. "Good. How are you?"

"Same shit, different day. What are you two conspiring about?"

November 21, 1993

"Greetings and salutations!"

I threw anaconda arms around Grandma Antje, squeezing the life out of her. "Okay, okay, I can't breathe!" she gasped. I released Grandma from the love-hold of death, murmuring, "Sorry! I'm just excited to see you!"

"He's been loud and demonstrative lately," Dad told his mother. "Unfortunately."

I pounded my chest with my fist, a boastful Klingon. "I'm good in small doses!"

Leo chuckled. "You and that Klingon chest punch you do!"

"Before I forget, these are for Gianna." Grandma fished some Weight Watchers coupons out of her purse handed them to Mom.

Mom thanked Grandma and hugged her. "Hi, Antje."

Grandma had arrived the Saturday before Thanksgiving to observe a small Thanksgiving "lunch" of coffee and cakes with us a few days early, since we would be celebrating the actual day at Uncle Carmine's. (Fortunately, things were going well between Mom and Carmine these days, their protracted argument over money long forgotten.) "Diet Thanksgiving" would only last about three hours before it was time for Dad to bring Grandma back to the Bronx. The welcome scene playing out in our living room by the front door was a low-rent re-enactment of the infamous Christmas visit that ended with the packing up of the Christmas tree, only Grandma was now doing a one-woman show.

Another major difference between now and then: my parents, brother, and I were all older, wiser, and happier. As different as Dad

had become lately, a strong case could be made that my mother had undergone the most startling metamorphosis of all. This was the first fall of Mom's phased retirement. At the end of last spring's semester, she began an extended disability leave due to her now-pronounced hearing loss. The leave would take several years to run its course, finishing right when she reached sixty-five, when she could retire as planned without having to teach a single lesson again. Most importantly, Mom didn't have to sit in standstill traffic every day to get to "glorious downtown Brooklyn." Nor did she have to spend so much of her time at home grading unreadable freshman composition papers, and cooking and cleaning for the three agreeable-but-lazy male gadabouts taking up all the oxygen in her house. Indeed, she had taken to forgetting to cook dinner more and more of late, leaving the three of us humps to fend for ourselves, foraging for nuts and berries. These few-but-sweeping changes made Mom happier than I'd ever seen her. I was delighted for her.

With her college teaching career over, Mom could dedicate her newfound free time to her own hobbies. Unlike many other baby boomers — who dreaded the potential of existential angst and senility following retirement, and made blood vows to die at their desks rather than ever allowing themselves the luxury of retirement — Mom had no regrets leaving work behind with some years of life and moderately good health left to live. As Mom said, "Only boring people get bored." Mom was neither boring nor bored in retirement. A recent convert to the religion of genealogy, Mom had reconstructed her family tree going back as far as the late eighteenth century, to the family of Rocco Ambrogio Catorzia. While more recent ancestors had lived out their lives in and around Naples, we were surprised to discover that Rocco had been born in Armento, Italy, in 1788 and died in Paarl, South Africa, in 1858. Thanks to tracing her roots to Rocco Catorzia (a.k.a. Rocco Catoggio), Mom had found a cousin from a branch of our family currently in Namibia, also descended from Rocco. Retha-Louise Hofmeyr was a professional pianist, public radio music producer, Director of Arts in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture (MYNSSC) for Namibia, and the most wonderful newly discovered relative a person could ask for. Becoming pen pals

with an overseas cousin who had a vibrant personality awakened in Mom an enthusiasm for a living extended family member — an enthusiasm that mitigated the pain she had felt mourning all the family members she had grown up with who had died over the years. Before long, Mom found several more extended family members located throughout America, and reached out to all of them by letter, since she could not hear well on the telephone. Still more surprising, Mom reigned in her mild, New-York-City-centric agoraphobia enough to travel to meet them in their homes in Virginia, Florida, and New Orleans. Sadly, she wasn't ready for Namibia or Armento yet, thanks to her collapsed arches. Health problems notwithstanding, Mom was traveling again. Like magic, new photos were appearing in her albums. These were the first trips since 1963 that she had taken solo or with friends, and not as a wife and mother on a family vacation. Thanks to this new lease on life, Mom had no trouble laughing off Grandma's Weight Watchers fliers. Mom held them up so I could take a gander at them. "Look what Grandma gave me!"

"What a lovely present!" I shouted. Then Mom and I gave each other a high five.

"A high five?" Dad tutted. "That was a bit uncouth."

Leo led Grandma into the kitchen from the family room. Cannolis, Napoleons, tiramisu, and panettone from Alfonso's Pastry Shoppe covered the kitchen table. We sat down to the sugary spread as Mom served us coffee and tea to accompany it. "You seem like you're in a good mood, Damien," Grandma mentioned. "That can't be because you have that terrible goatee. You need to shave. Beards are messy. And it has a red tint that doesn't match your brown hair."

I was expecting the complaint. Grandma never had a kind word to say about facial hair. "I'll shave it before my senior portrait. I wanted to look like the Master from *Doctor Who*."

Mom appeared over us brandishing an enormous knife, asking who wanted a slice of panettone. For a second, I worried she was about to saw off Grandma's tongue. I asked for the thinnest slice because I was planning on eating a little of everything.

"Be careful," Grandma warned. "Your metabolism may slow down soon. You'll get fat."

"Me?" I asked. "Fat? I'm as thin as Gumby! My metabolism will never slow that much."

"Just be careful." She looked at Leo, who was now a freshman in my high school. It had been a long time since we had been in the same school together, but we gave each other the room we needed to make our own friends. Our paths didn't cross much at all, even during breakfast and lunch periods. "You don't speak much, do you?"

"Not as much as some people," Leo said.

"What do you like to do with yourself? All the same things as Damien?"

"No. I have my own interests. LEGO. Computer games. Writing."

"What are these computer games you like?" Grandma had decided years ago that Leo simply didn't speak and had given up on him. This decision offended me on behalf of my brother, so I was relieved to see her give Leo another try today. Happily, Leo had been growing more outgoing and loquacious in recent years. This was the first time he responded to one of Grandma's overtures wholeheartedly. He shared his thoughts on *Warlords* and Sierra adventure games with her, and for an appropriate amount of time. Grandma listened for as long as she was capable before cutting him off. "Leo, I have a personal question to ask you."

"Sure."

"Have you ever heard the story of the death of Virginia Rappe?"

"No."

"She's the woman who was crushed to death by Fatty Arbuckle."

Somehow, Mom heard this entire exchange. Standing, fighting to keep her composure, Mom proceeded slowly downstairs to the basement. She placed her face against a decorative pillow on a couch in the downstairs study and laughed hysterically into it.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Leo fought to keep his own composure by committing himself wholeheartedly to Grandma's chosen topic. "Oh, yes! Of course. I remember now. I've been reading up on the scandal. There's some debate about what really happened. A lot of people say Arbuckle was innocent and was the victim of a smear campaign. Rappe died from a ruptured bladder. People assumed it ruptured because he crushed her to death, but she suffered from chronic cystitis, a condition that inflames the bladder."

Grandma produced a cigarette from her purse and lit it. “Fatty Arbuckle was guilty.”

Leo shrugged. “I just thought you’d be interested that he might not have done it.”

“Too bad Weight Watchers didn’t exist back then. Virginia Rappe might still be alive. And you, Damien, better not eat so many pastries when your metabolism slows. You may get fat and crush a woman under your enormous girth during sex.”

“That’s true,” said Leo. “We wouldn’t want that.”

I nodded sagely. “I can see it in my mind’s eye as if it has already happened. Me flattening some poor girl to death. Pancaking her with my massive beer belly.”

“Do you have a girlfriend, by the way?” Grandma asked me.

“If you’d asked me two days ago, I’d have said ‘no,’ but I might actually have a girlfriend. Her name is Arwen!”

Leo raised his eyebrows. “Which of her parents was way too into *Lord of the Rings*?”

“Her late mother.”

“Is Arwen sexy?” Grandma asked. “You deserve a sexy woman because you have bedroom eyes. Don’t go out with anyone morbidly obese. Get yourself a nice girl with a Body Mass Index of eighteen to twenty-five. She doesn’t have a fat posterior, does she?”

Again, I was trying not to laugh at Grandma. “Her posterior is fine.”

“Show us a picture of her culi,” Leo demanded, facetiously.

Grandma was grave. “Her posterior is only going get bigger.”

I coughed a half-laugh into my fist. “She has a normal-sized posterior.”

“Okay. Good.” Grandma punctuated the end of the exchange by exhaling more smoke.

This is all she wants to know about Arwen? “Can I tell you about her, now? Because her weight isn’t interesting to me. She’s been a friend of mine for years. It is really exciting and romantic — in a *When Harry Met Sally* kind of way — that we will be a couple after all this time.”

“If she has the right Body Mass Index and a reasonable-sized posterior, then I think you two might be happy together.”

Dad suddenly looked concerned and placed his hand gently on my wrist. “But her ass isn’t too small, is it? If she doesn’t have an ass, then there’s nothing to cup in your hands.”

I couldn’t decide whether to be angry or laugh hysterically, so my emotions shorted out. “I can’t believe this conversation. I’m only worried about religious differences.”

“Who cares what her religion is if she’s got a good ass?” Dad asked. “I wouldn’t.”

I sighed with relief. “Okay, then. No objections on your end.”

“Just as long as Dad has no objections to her end,” Leo joked.

“I have a surprise for you,” Grandma said to me, unexpectedly.

“Oh?” I braced myself for anything. One never knew what Grandma would say or do next — unless, of course, she said exactly what you feared she would. Conversations with Grandma were among some of life’s most surreal experiences. Grandma stood up and walked to the kitchen counter, where she had placed a soccer-ball sized paper bag without my noticing it. “Damien, since your dad only likes to see me once a year, I’m not sure if I’ll be around when you graduate. So, I wanted to give you your ‘Good luck in college’ present early.”

What can it be? A framed portrait of Fatty Arbuckle? Grandma never had much of a handle on my taste, so it can’t possibly be a good present. She reached into the bag and produced a fully painted porcelain statuette of Wonder Woman soaring through the clouds. I jumped out of the chair and scooped the statue out of her hands. “Wow!”

Grandma sounded sad. “I didn’t want to get it, but you still like comic books at your age, so I thought it was ideal. There was a magazine ad: Three payments of \$29.99, plus shipping.”

“Yes!” I put the statue down and gave Grandma another bear hug.

“Ow! Ow! Stop it. Too tight. Can’t breathe.”

I let go. “Thank you! I’m taking it upstairs.” I grabbed the statue and the shopping bag, sprinted out of the kitchen, up the stairs, and into my bedroom. The only other object I had like this was a similarly sized porcelain statue of the Joker, dressed in a formal purple suit and purple hat, laughing hysterically at the skull of Yorick, which he brandished over his head. Wonder Woman and the Joker: The two wolves inside me. I picked up the Joker statue from atop my dresser,

placed it in the shopping bag, and placed the shopping bag on the floor of my closet. I then put the Wonder Woman statue prominently where the Joker statue once stood. I didn't need the Joker to help me deal with my rage and despair anymore. I needed Wonder Woman to help me hope for a better future than the dark present I'd been living in all these years, especially at school. Mom was happier since her retirement. Dad was mellower and easier to get along with. Leo and I were getting on better than ever. Grandma was suddenly funnier than she was offensive. I had a girlfriend. Now, my imaginary best friend was on my dresser: The comic book face of American Transcendentalism and ecofeminism. I wanted to be more like her, and less like the Joker. That seemed much more possible now. I looked down at the Diana of Themyscira, daughter of Hippolyta, soaring through the clouds, two doves flying through the clouds with her. I could fly with her, too. I called to mind my favorite words of Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart! — it seems to say, — there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power."

November 22, 1993

Arwen was absent on Monday. I was desperate to see her. The desperation was compounded by the realization that, since I'd only ever seen her at school, or in larger gatherings where I had not been the one to call to invite her, I didn't know her phone number. I considered looking it up in the white pages but wasn't sure if she had her own phone line in her room. If she didn't, I'd likely call the main line by mistake and get one of the folks who had been keeping us apart all these years. My not being able to see her or talk to her made me weird and obsessive. My imagination became alarmingly lurid, and I started having the kinds of graphic images in my mind I suspected Salty had when he fantasized about her. I wanted to do terrible things to her.

All day and all night since our first kiss, I fucked Arwen in my imagination. This was a strange fixation for me. I'd had my crushes

before. I'd had my fixations before. I had never been as single-minded as *this* before. Of course, as Salty would be the first to point out, I knew virtually nothing about the sex act itself — what it looked like at its most basic, and what all the Masters and Johnson stages and positions were. Sure, I'd taken part in a hardcore double-feature at Kyle's house, when he, Salty, David, and I raided Kyle's evil step-father's porn collection and fast-forwarded to the good parts of *Candy Strippers* and *The Devil in Miss Jones*. The guys were beside themselves with laughter over my hypnotic fascination with all the extreme close-ups of fellatio, vaginal fisting, and anal penetration, accompanied by exactly the kind of 1970s porn film soundtrack I'd often been told to expect. *That's what it looks like?* I thought but dared not say aloud. *That isn't exactly romantic, is it? It seems a bit meaty? Like meat slapping meat?* I *said* none of these things, but my face said them all for me, which was why the guys started hooting and hollering at me. Despite this porn-centric crash-course — and David Litvinov's recently borrowed, clinical, New Age-instructional video about the joys of cunnilingus and fingerbanging — I was pretty sure I had no idea what sex was *actually* like. Still, I found myself stretching my knowledge and imagination to its breaking point picturing every kind of sex with Arwen in every possible location. Thanks to the unusually extended conversation I'd just had about her having just the right size ass, it featured more prominently than I expected it to in a couple of scenarios involving her and a pool table. When I ran out of positions and locations to imagine, I sampled a variety of role-playing scenarios. One of my favorites involved Arwen as a traffic cop who had pulled me over for speeding, drew her gun on me, and forced me to go down on her on the side of the road. I'd also imagined she was a librarian who had taken me into a rarely used records room on the pretext of showing me a valuable document, locked the door, and informed me there was no such document. Another scenario involved me arriving at a drive-up burger joint. Arwen was the carhop on roller skates who delivered my food, then joined me in the back seat of my bright red 1959 Cadillac Eldorado. In one of the more bizarre scenarios, Arwen and I found ourselves on a tropical beach after some sort of apocalypse, and the angel Gabriel was informing us that most of humanity had been

killed off and it was our task as a couple to repopulate the planet. All this meant was, after two years of functional impotence and a dick so dead it could barely be coaxed into life in total privacy, I managed to masturbate over Arwen twenty-five times between the afternoon of November fifteenth and the morning of November 22. This was unheard of for me, and I was quite proud of myself. On that Monday at school, I was rock hard again and hoping to find Arwen. We could find our way into a bathroom stall or a utility closet somewhere and she could help me out with playing with my cock. Be nice to have her hand on me, instead of my own, for once. But no, she was absent. Where was she?

I ran the mile home that afternoon, made some excuses to my mom about needing the car, borrowed it, and drove right to the mall, hoping to find Arwen at Kentucky Fried Chicken in the food court. I blasted through a red light on Victory Boulevard with a newly installed motion camera and saw a flash of light out of the corner of my eye as I crossed the intersection. That ticket would be expensive, but there wouldn't be a moving violation on my driver's license, because the camera didn't identify the driver, just the offending car's plate. I almost got a second ticket driving slightly too quickly past a speed trap on Richmond Avenue, only someone else was going ten-miles-per-hour faster and they were the ones the police put their flashers and siren on for. I pulled into one of the parking lots surrounding the mall, and parked diagonally, taking up two spots with my one car. I knew someone would probably slash my tires or key the door in retaliation, but whatever. I sprinted into the second-floor entrance of the mall, pushed my way through the two sets of glass doors into the JC Penny wing, and almost bowled Arwen herself over. I skidded to a halt one yard behind her. Arwen whirled around and a "Whoa!" escaped from her mouth. She was in full KFC regalia, on her way to the food court for her shift.

"Arwen!" I cried, moving towards her to give her a romantic, crushing bear hug.

"No, no, no!" She closed her eyes, held up her hands "stop," and recoiled.

I paused in mid-air, my arms outstretched, frozen in time. *"The Recoil?" Oh, shit.*

She half-opened an eye, saw the hug wasn't going to happen, opened both eyes, and lowered her arms. "Hey, there."

Scoffing and pointing accusing fingers at me, three people brushed past, reminding me that Arwen and I stood in the JC Penny foyer, blocking the entrance doors. We were forcing a steady stream of disgruntled and scandalized people to skirt around us or shove their way through us. When a three-generation family of seven, complete with a double stroller appeared, Arwen and I sidestepped them and settled into the carpeted, lady's evening wear and undergarments department. Slipping my hands in my pockets to appear nonchalant, I summoned the courage to say, "I missed you in school."

Arwen remained tense and skittish. "I saw my lawyer today!" She said that oddly loud.

"Not a great conversation?" I asked quietly.

Tears escaped from her eyes and slid down her cheeks. "Not a stitch of good news."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I took a furtive look around at my surroundings and was once again annoyed that I was surrounded by headless, armless mannequins dressed in bras, panties, teddies, and sheer, see-through nightgowns. "Not just for what I'm losing, but for you."

"At least I still have a minimum wage job in food service," she said bitterly.

"Yeah."

She stared at me. "Is that it? Can I go now? I'm late."

I panicked. If I allowed the conversation to end, we would become strangers to each other. "Wait. What do we do now?"

Arwen gave a short, bitter laugh. "We' don't do anything. I need to figure out what I must do now. There is no 'we.'"

"But couldn't we just—"

"Goodbye, Damien." This was Arwen's final farewell to me. Our relationship was over. It was Thanksgiving, and we wouldn't be graduating until next June, but we were done. We might see each other in the hallway, cafeteria, or gym, but we would no longer speak to one another beyond "good morning" or "how are you?" It would

be professional and civil, but that would be all. Somehow, I held myself together. I wasn't sure why I hadn't melted into a small puddle of water on the floor next to the display of Cortland Intimates Open Bottom Girdles.

"I love you, Arwen." I always dreaded saying those words. For years, I'd avoided admitting to myself that I loved Arwen, but if this was going to be our final conversation, I had to say it now. The meteor was about to strike. I was being expelled. Moving to Paraguay. Dying. The words had barely been spoken when I feared I had made an awful mistake. Had I just done something profoundly cruel to her by telling her I loved her? Her reaction made me think my worst fears had been correct: her long, slow, sad exhale. I imagined her thinking: "I know. I've always known. Couldn't you have said it years ago when it might have meant more? Changed things? Why say this now, to make this terrible moment as hard on me as possible?"

"I know this isn't your decision," I added hastily, still looking at my shoes. "And I'm not saying this to make you sad. I just want you to know that, even if we can't be together, and we can't be friends, I'm so glad we met. I think you may have saved my life. You definitely saved my sanity, back in junior high, during all those library lunches. We had great times together."

"I liked when we danced," Arwen whispered. "At the Sweet Sixteen."

"Me, too. That was fun, wasn't it?"

"I got in so much trouble," Arwen smiled. "It was worth it."

"I think about that night all the time."

"Me, too. I think about it all the time, too."

We stood, two yards apart, both looking at the ground.

"I need to go," Arwen said.

"Okay."

"Bye."

"Okay."

Arwen turned, walked six steps away from me, towards the food court. Then stopped. Her shoulders hunched and her head bowed. She scuttled back in my direction, threw her arms around me and buried her face in my shoulder. "I love you, too." Then she hurried off and disappeared from my sight as hastily as she could, weeping quietly.

I looked down at the Cortland Intimates Open Bottom Girdles. They were \$9.99, marked down from \$14.99, but only if you had a JC Penny credit card. Wait. I'm confused. Aren't all girdles open bottomed? If so, why label this that, specifically?

"Can I help you, sir?" a saleswoman asked. She was sizing me up, trying to figure out if I was there to buy my girlfriend some lingerie as more of a present to myself than to her, or if I was single, and a pervert, and I was there to ogle and hump the headless mannequin in the teddy.

"Sorry," I said. "I was lost in thought. I'm headed to Waldenbooks." Even though I just told her I was heading into the mall proper, I turned around and left the building through the two sets of doors. I wondered if the saleswoman cared enough about my about-face to be befuddled.

November 23, 1993

In 1990, the classic Martin Scorsese gangster film *Goodfellas* dropped like a cultural atom bomb on Staten Island. Anecdotal evidence suggested to me that "everyone" on the island had seen this grotesque film multiple times in the theater, and "everyone" wanted to live inside it permanently. This idea was made particularly clear to me in the high school cafeteria during lunch period the day after my apocalyptic conversation with Arwen. I sat with Salty, David, and Kyle, not telling them anything about what had happened in the mall. Salty held aloft a small plastic cup of apple juice. "They're serving urine samples today! My favorite."

"Oh, God!" David moaned in ecstasy after taking a bite out of the obviously canned lumps of strawberry preserves on something resembling a pastry. "I love jelly ca-cas!"

Kyle stared down at his own pastry, which was covered in florescent blue icing. "I wish I'd gotten a jelly ca-ca. They ran out and gave me this. But what the hell is it?"

"I don't eat blue food that's not a berry," said David. "Who ever heard of blue icing?"

"I've seen it before," said Salty. "Your mother put that blue icing on my penis last night."

When I laughed until I cried, David got mad at me. "It wasn't *that* funny."

I laughed hysterically for another minute, holding my pained sides.

"Jesus Christ," Kyle murmured. "What the hell is up with you today, Damien?"

Tony emerged from the serving chamber holding a recyclable cardboard lunch tray and slid into the adjacent table with the Merry Men. They sat inches from each other but talked so loud during casual conversation, it was as if they were shouting to one another over a yawning chasm. "Mammolito! What's with this pastry, man?"

Bobby laughed. "It's good, Tony. Just what a growin' boy needs."

"But what's that shit they put on it?" Tony angrily yelled this out loud enough for the whole cafeteria to hear, in a thick Brooklyn accent. I couldn't help but burst out laughing hysterically again. Tony leaped out of his seat and ran up to me, crimson with rage. "What's so funny? What, do I amuse you, or something? Does something about me amuse you?"

"Sorry, Tony," I said. "I'm laughing in agreement. Don't worry, the icing may be blue, but its high in beta-carotene."

"Oh, you're laughing in agreement?" Tony asked. "Is that it?"

"You were just funny, just then, you know?" I offered, my laughter dying down.

"No, no, I don't know! You said it. How do I know? You said I'm funny. How the fuck am I funny? Am I a clown to you? What's so funny about me? Tell me! Tell me what's funny!"

I felt fear. Then it dawned on me. "Wait a minute! Are you quoting *Goodfellas* to me?"

Tony stepped back. "What?"

Kyle, Salty, and the assemblage of Scholars Academy students at our table who had been shrinking in their seats up until this point — not wanting to get involved or cause a rumble between the multiethnic gifted table and the Italian Merry Men table — suddenly sat upright.

"He is quoting *Goodfellas*!" David laughed. "He *is*!"

Tony looked more confused than caught out. He had

unintentionally quoted the scene. He held up a finger, declaring his emotional authenticity. “Not for nuthin’, but I ain’t quotin’ *nobody*. I’m fuckin’ angry ova here.”

I grinned. “You’re totally quoting Joe Pesci. Are we playing a scene here?”

“No, I’m serious, man,” Tony insisted. “I’m mad at you.”

“I tell you what: you wanna scare me, write your own dialogue. Don’t bite off Martin Scorsese. I mean, I like to quote movies as much as anyone. More than most, even. But I know when I’m doing it! You’re living Pesci’s role by accident, or some weird voodoo shit right now.”

Bobby guffawed, “You got wrecked, Tony! You’re a mess! Egon just destroyed you!”

Tony flicked his chin at Bobby as he returned to his seat. “You’re rooting for him? Didn’t he kick your ass once?”

“Yeah, but I deserved it. Anyway, you got wrecked! By Egon! You’re a mess!”

Thank you, Bobby, for the Italian solidarity. And you can call me Egon any time.

David grew thoughtful. “Don’t you guys think HBO should produce a *Goodfellas* TV show? They should totally do that. I bet it would be the best weekly show of all time!”

“No!” I screamed. All conversation in the lunchroom ceased as people tried to figure out where the blood-curdling shriek came from. When they saw it was me and I appeared to be in neither pain nor danger, they shrugged and returned to their lunches. I looked at David. “No, I don’t ever want to see a *Goodfellas* series. I’d strangle myself with dental floss.”

“Surely as a devotee of serious cinema—”

“No!”

“How about a show that’s a mashup of *Wall Street* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*?”

“No! I want a show about nice, decent human beings, not sociopathic white guys!”

“Maybe they can make the secretary a sympathetic viewpoint character, just for you.”

"No! No, no, no, no, no!" I pounded my fist on the table to punctuate each "No!"

"You're getting weirder by the day, Damien," David declared.

During this unnaturally tense exchange, I almost missed it when Arwen and her stepsister, What's-her-name, walked by our table. "Hi, Arwen!" I called out. I couldn't tell you what my tone was. It wasn't high-pitched to make me sound non-threatening. It wasn't my normal baritone. It wasn't plaintive. It wasn't confident. It wasn't natural, or charming.

Arwen inclined her head in acknowledgement, said nothing, and kept moving. Whatshername threw me a dirty look and mouthed the words, "Don't talk to her!" After they were gone, my friends all looked at me with open curiosity, but didn't say anything. I tried to go back to eating but burst out laughing hysterically. I took two minutes to regain my composure.

"Damn, man," David breathed. "You laugh more than Jack Nicholson's Joker and Mark Hamill's Joker combined! And at the same kinds of totally inappropriate times."

"He laughs when he's in pain," Kyle said, looking at me sideways.

"I do," I admitted.

"You wanna tell us what's going on?" Kyle asked.

I regaled the boys with my interpretation of "O What a Beautiful Morning" from *Oklahoma!* and only stopped singing when they promised not to press me about Arwen.

November 24, 1993

I picked up the receiver of the rotary phone in my bedroom and called the number in the white pages under A. Pokatny. An answering machine recording came on that was a robot's voice repeating the phone number I had just dialed, pointedly failing to identify who lived at that residence, and asking callers to leave a message. I considered my options when it beeped. It was probably her number, but the robot voice was disconcerting. I also wasn't sure if she was sitting right next to the phone, screening all her calls. (Fun fact: In the days before cell

phones, calls were only answered by people who were sitting within a few yards of the phone, which was attached to the wall by a cable.) Finally, both Salty and Kyle had recently teased me mercilessly for the general quality of my answering machine messages.

"I got your terrible message," Kyle said to me just last week.

"What was wrong with my message?" I had asked him.

"The better question is: what is wrong with you? You sound like a psychopath: Crispin Glover meets Jim Carrey. Learn how to leave a proper answering machine message!"

Salty had agreed, "They're bad in a different way each time, but they're always bad."

"Wait a minute," I gave Salty a skeptical look. "I never call you."

"Kyle plays me the ones you leave on his machine and we laugh at you together."

I glanced sheepishly Kyle. "Are my voice messages really *that* bad?"

"You need to stop leaving people answering machine messages. I'm not kidding."

I hung up at the beep. Then I worried that Arwen might have been in the kitchen downstairs and missed the call on her personal line. What if she ran upstairs to get the phone and just missed it? It was five p.m. Close to dinner. Did her family sit down together sometime between five and seven to eat, or was this one of those families that didn't eat together? Was she some sort of latchkey kid? I had no idea. I tried calling again. As the phone rang, I had a sudden terror that she'd pick up, have a neutral sounding voice that gave me no cues, and I'd have no idea what to say to her. As it turns out, I need not have worried. I got the answering machine again, felt an overwhelming temptation to leave a message, subdued the temptation, and hung up. The problem was, if I didn't leave a message, she'd never know I'd called. But I didn't want to leave a message. I should call again later. Or tomorrow.

Wait. I should just leave a dang message now so I know that she knows that I called. I dialed again. I heard the beep at the end of the robot voice salutation. Then I remembered Kyle's exhortation to stop leaving messages, so I hung up without leaving a message.

*

November 25, 1993

“What’s your fucking problem?” Aunt Beatrice asked me.

“Nuthin’.” Slouched posture and pale, hang-dog demeanor, I sat alone at the dining room table, staring glumly at my plate of turkey, cranberry sauce, stuffing, and peas, waiting for grace to be said so I could eat. Grumbling, Aunt Beatrice went to the adjoining kitchen to find my mother to complain about me. In the kitchen, fifteen relatives picked their way through a buffet of traditional and Italian-style Thanksgiving main and side dishes. Since several of my favorite family members, including the elder Bianca Natali, had passed away in the years since the pool party reunion, I felt disconnected from the Basile clan writ large. Baby Bianca and Cousin Gabriel were the exceptions since they were as fun and friendly as ever, as well as comparatively young and fit. Our deceased relatives were not the only ones missing this Thanksgiving: Emily Basile-Scrosciare and her husband Matt were both still vertical but had gradually phased out participation in any and all family gatherings. There was less mystery concerning the absence of Emily’s leather-skirt-wearing sister Nicole: She had developed a series of physical and mental debilitations that had forced her into hermitage. Sadly, Dad wouldn’t have Nicole’s flat bottom to mock any more. I felt Uncle Skippy’s absence keenly, as well, not because I saw him as a figure of fun, but because he was a lovely human being. In the wake of his wife’s passing, and his own declining health, Skippy now came as a matched set with his unshaven, baseball-cap-wearing brother-in-law, Orlando, who did nothing but complain ad nauseum about immigrants and affirmative action. Mom and Carmine had nothing good to say about Orlando, but I have to admit, nothing could have prepared me for just how awful a person he was when I finally met him in the flesh the year before. Still, I would have put up with Orlando blaming Black people for his misbegotten life if it meant I got to see Skippy at least one more time before he died.

Replacing the deceased and missing in action were new extended-family recruits of questionable merit: Beatrice’s daughter Concetta’s agreeable new husband and the less agreeable members of his extended family, including his parents, sister, sister’s husband, brother, and

brother's wife. Thanksgiving was one of my favorite holidays, but *who the fuck were these people?* Admittedly, it occurred to me I should still be friendly and talk to everyone if I could get out of my funk long enough to do it. One of the new in-laws appeared to be the latest model aging divorcée in form-fitting clothing — spandex pants, a sports bra, and a headband. *I should ask her out*, I thought sadly, with almost no enthusiasm. I stared at her, trying to muster the will to take a mental picture of her to masturbate to later, but I was too damn sad to put in the effort.

Lorenzo (“Alexa Hente”) Basile dropped into the chair beside me, sporting a John Franco New York Mets T-shirt. He caught me checking out his middle-aged sister-in-law and chuckled. “Sports bras don’t do it for me. They’re like Fort Knox.” He grabbed a roll and bit right into it. His mom snapped at him from the kitchen sink, “Hey, Bluto! Wait for grace!”

Alexa Hente scowled and did what his mother ordered. He paused to stare at my skinny arms. “What’s going on with these?” He squeezed my forearm and bicep, testing them. “You need some definition.” These were the first four sentences he’d said to me in as many years.

I said, “Hey, yo, Alexa Hente. I got a question for you.”

Alexa Hente turned his unenthusiastic eyes upon me.

I pressed on. “That Jewish girl you were in love with? You said she broke your heart?”

Alexa Hente blinked. “How do you know about Rachel?”

“You talked to Dad and Grandpa about her by the swimming pool at the reunion.”

“You remember a conversation from ten years ago you heard about secondhand?”

I nodded.

Alexa Hente smirked. “I can’t even remember what happened to me yesterday. Why are you asking me about Rachel Goodman?”

“I’m in love with a Jewish girl that I can’t be with because her parents won’t allow it. I was wondering how you got over Rachel. And how long it took.”

Alexa Hente looked sad. “Who says I ever got over Rachel?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Alexa Hente chuckled, “Nothing will fuck you up for life like falling head over heels for someone you can’t be with.”

Alexa Hente’s more sensitive and loquacious twin brother Gabriel took the seat on the other side of me and said, “It’ll get better. I fall in love with people who don’t love me back every other week. It’s a hobby of mine. And look at me! I’m fine. You will be, too.”

“Yeah, you’re fine,” Alexa Hente scoffed.

“I am!” Gabriel smirked and returned his attention to me. “I love my brother to death, but don’t listen to him. He’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer.” Once again, I was devastated, and Gabriel was here for me, restoring my faith that “This too shall pass.” Gabriel had always been my Hope Doctor, giving me much needed medicine at just the right time. He had done me this favor many times during my years in junior high hell. Each time he came to Staten Island to visit my mom, or to see me on my birthday, he saw that I was looking pale and desolate, and did what he could to bolster my spirits. He told me tales of surviving his own difficult adolescence:

“When I was your age, I was the uncool, overweight twin brother of the coolest, manliest athlete in the school. Lorenzo was the football hero. I was his weakling opposite number. They teased me mercilessly. It was awful! But I got through it. I grew up, I lost weight, and I wound up making a ton of friends when I got older. Heck, these days, I’m more cut than Lorenzo. He’s really let himself go since high school! So, things got better for me. They’ll get better for you, too. I know that doesn’t help you much now, but please try to hold onto that. Make it something to look forward to.” Hearing this advice from Gabriel made me realize that I was not alone as I thought I was. Gabriel was instrumental in giving me the strength I needed to carry on — to make it to junior high graduation when I would have preferred to just give up on life.

And now, here I was in high school, damaged goods once again. And here was Gabriel, helping me pick up the pieces of my broken heart one more time. “You’re basically the coolest cousin of all time,” I told Gabriel at the Thanksgiving table. “You’re my hero, man.”

“Ah, I’m nothing to write home about.” Gabriel flashed his infectious smile. He looked handsome, loving, and outgoing. How

he ever had trouble making friends was beyond me.

To my enormous surprise, Mom's Uncle Skippy chose that moment to walk up to the long dining room table, accompanied by his dreadful brother-in-law, Orlando. I wanted to jump up to hug Skippy, but the room was suddenly filled to bursting. I felt pinned against the wall behind me. "Uncle Skippy!" I waved. "I missed you!"

I shouted too loud, even for Skippy's hearing problem. He flinched. "What? You missed me? Why did you miss me?" *Uh-oh. I'm getting the Recoil from Uncle Skippy.*

I blushed. "Not every day, of course. It has just been a while. It is good to see you."

Skippy had a deer in the headlights look, as if I'd asked him to prom. "I didn't miss you."

I waved him off. "That's fine. Fuggedaboutit! I'm not worth missing."

As Skippy and Orlando went as far from me as they could to find their seats, I heard Orlando grouse, "I coulda gone to college, but some Black athlete took my scholarship and failed out after one year, because he had natural sports talent but couldn't read!"

Alexa Hente sighed. "That guy does nothing but complain about his lost scholarship. I don't believe he even had a scholarship to lose. I think he pulled that grievance out of his ass."

I nodded. "Orlando sure spends plenty of time rummaging around in his own ass. He's got his head up it day and night."

Uncle Carmine sat across from me with his mountainous plate of spaghetti and no American Thanksgiving food in sight. "You talkin' to my sons?" he asked me. "I'm sorry about that. Well, I'm not sorry about Gabriel. He's got all the personality in the family. He's a great guy. I'm sorry about Alexa Hente, over here. He has no personality. And my daughter over there in the kitchen? Concetta? She's got the personality of an old shoe." I laughed a little too loud, then worried Alexa Hente would smack me upside the head over it. And yet, he sat motionless, proving his father correct. "How are you doin', there, Damien?" Uncle Carmine asked.

The question warmed my heart. I hadn't expected him to ask after me. "I'm so glad you asked, Uncle Carmine. Things have been a little

crazy and I can really use someone to talk to.”

Uncomfortable and impatient, Carmine held up a traffic-cop hand to stop me. “Listen, babe, when people ask you how you’re doin’, they don’t really want you to go into an honest answer. They just want you to say ‘Okay, can’t complain.’ I’ve got three adult kids, a son-in-law, and a wife with health problems. I lose way too much money each week at the races. I’ve got businesses losing money. Tax audits up the ass. I can’t hear about new problems. I just wanted to say, ‘hi’ and ‘happy Thanksgiving.’ I didn’t want to hear your life story.”

I held my hands up in surrender. “I hear you.”

Uncle Carmine visibly relaxed. “I tell you what, babe: let me give you the advice I give everyone every time they tell me their problems. It doesn’t matter what the problems are. The same advice applies. Imagine you’re at a long table with a buncha people you’re jealous of. You’re having a bad time of it. You think they’re doing better than you. You take your bag o’problems and put it on the table. Everyone else does the same with their bag o’problems. Then everyone has a chance to swap out their bag o’problems with someone else’s. Guess what? Everyone takes their own bag back. Every time.”

“Yeah?”

“Everyone else’s life looks better at first. Then you think about it and realize you don’t appreciate what you got, and you don’t want to trade places with them.”

Solid bartender advice. He wasn’t an intellectual, but Uncle Carmine had his moments. “That works for me.”

“Yeah, well, good,” Uncle Carmine said. “Let’s try this again. ‘How are you doin?’”

“‘Can’t complain, Uncle Carmine,’” I said.

“That is the correct answer. Anything new going on that isn’t too deep or sad?”

“Mom still has a crush on Albert Finney from the first time she saw *Tom Jones*. I finally saw the movie and loved it, so I’m gonna read the Henry Fielding book.”

Uncle Carmine brightened. “Ah! Tom Jones! What a fantastic singer. ‘It’s Not Unusual.’ ‘Delilah.’ I saw him at the Garden State Arts Center back in ’70. Best concert ever. He pals around with Albert

Finney? I did not know that.”

The mistake was so natural that it didn’t catch me off guard. I smiled at it, and Uncle Carmine took my smile to be enthusiasm for Tom Jones. “Tom Jones is the man,” I agreed.

“Isn’t he?” my uncle asked. “I’m so glad you’re into Tom Jones!”

Uncle Carmine, Cousin Gabriel, Alexa Hente, and I formed an impromptu barbershop quartet and began singing “It’s Not Unusual.” Our family members all turned to stare at us, blown away by our sudden decision to serenade them with Vegas showroom music.

When my parents, Leo, and I returned home, we found the day’s issue of *The Staten Island Chronicle* rolled up in a rubber band, resting against our front door. As we went inside, I broke the rubber band and unfurled the paper. The headline read: *GOOD SAMARITAN KILLER STRIKES AGAIN, Roadside Seductress Claims Tenth Victim*. I was glad they changed the misnomer from Black Widow to Good Samaritan Killer. It had a good ring to it. I also liked the phrase “roadside seductress.”

I laughed evilly. *If you gotta go, that’s the way to go. Dead sexy.*

November 30, 1993

I kept getting Arwen’s robot-voice answering machine and not leaving messages. If only she knew I was trying to reach her. Was she never in her room? Was she there, but assumed the hang-ups were all “you could be one of seven free Caribbean cruise contest winners” calls? I’d mailed her a love letter three days ago. It was four pages, heartfelt, and inspired by Elizabethan Love Lyric Poetry. I had written many beautiful sentiments into those pages, and one appallingly stupid one. Three days after mailing the letter, I had already forgotten all the beautiful sentiments and recalled only the stupid one. Somewhere at the end of page two, I promised to provide Arwen with regular oral sex if she accepted me. This asinine aside had been inspired by my nail-biting viewing of David Litvinov’s sex-training video, “How to Make Love to a Woman and Please Her Every Time.” The video had been so emphatic that oral sex was the only sex that mattered that I

wanted to reassure Arwen I was in on this Big Womenfolk Secret. Of course, now that the letter was already in the mail and it was far too late to strike the sentence out, did I realize I had made a fatal error in including this line. Since Arwen had no idea I had seen such a video, she would have no context for the pledge, would not understand why I made it, and would be mortally offended, if not frightened and repulsed. I had thought I was making the best possible argument for myself as a boyfriend. Instead, I would most certainly come off as weird, overly explicit, and nauseatingly aggressive. Whatever. Whether or not that insane line single-handedly torpedoed my chances of a sympathetic response, Arwen should have the note in hand.

I'm a dead man and I refuse to admit it to myself. My time with Arwen is over. "My doom has come upon me; let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter."

I drove out to Arwen's home on Todt Hill with a big bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. The Victorian structure was impressive, surrounded by the largest yard I'd seen on Staten Island outside of the Conference House. Apparently, there was money in confectionary. I left Mom's car one block from the Pokatny Palace and crept under strategically placed security cameras mounted on the lampposts that illuminated the circular driveway. I scooted over the waist-high brick wall that cordoned off her front yard and driveway from the sidewalk. I snuck around the back of the house to locate Arwen's second-floor bedroom. I settled on the most likely candidate: the one with the pink curtains. Naturally, I would feel like a total horse's ass if I'd chosen What's-her-name's bedroom instead of hers, but my instincts told me it was Arwen's window. I tossed a small pebble. It plinked off the glass with a cracking sound that made me fear I'd broken a cobweb pattern into it. Looking again, I was relieved to see that the glass was undamaged. A light went on in the bedroom. A hand raised the window. Then it struck me: *Arwen is a tomboy. She probably wouldn't have pink curtains.* Arwen's stepsister poked her head out the window. Her face registered surprise, fear, annoyance, and derision all at once. "She isn't home, you idiot. Get off our property before I call the police."

"Can you tell her I was here?"

"Leave her alone. She's done with you."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I'm not a liar!" She couldn't have looked more affronted. "And what was with that dumbass letter you sent? What possessed you to offer to eat her out regularly, Crackhead?"

A feeling swept over me that was reminiscent of the worst stomach virus I'd ever had. *Is it too late to invent a time machine and go back in time to stop myself writing that note? Or, at the very least, omit the muff-diving paragraph?* "I was just kidding about that," I offered feebly.

She disappeared from the window, reappeared, and hurled four crumpled up pieces of paper out the window. They bounced a few times before settling into the grass near my feet. "Here! It was the kind of love letter a fascist would write. Arwen circled all the most patriarchal sentiments in red and corrected your most cringe-inducing sentences. There's also some marginalia that deconstructs your prose from a feminist perspective."

I plucked up the four pieces of paper but was too frightened to open them and smooth them out. "And will those be her thoughts and feelings in red ink, or yours? Wouldn't Arwen, of all people, have read it sympathetically? Given me the benefit of the doubt?"

"*Any woman* would have reacted to your shitty love letter the exact same way we did."

"Even a woman who really loved me?" If those red corrections were really from Arwen, I wasn't sure I could handle seeing them. I remembered how Mr. Darcy felt when Elizabeth Bennet ripped his marriage proposal to shreds and turned it against him, using it as proof positive that he was a heartless monster. If Elizabeth's litany of complaints almost broke Darcy's will to live, how would I hold up under a similar assault? Could I read Arwen's enraged, blood-red deconstruction of my pornographic profession of undying love without shattering into a billion glass fragments? No, I could not. I knew my limitations. Unsurprisingly, Darcy is the better man.

"Go!" Miriam yelled. "Make tracks now, or I'll set the Mastiff on you."

"But Lillian—"

"*Lillian*? My name is Miriam! How long have you known me?"

"Um . . ."

"I'm calling the police," she pulled her head back inside and slammed the window.

I dropped the flowers and chocolates on the grass, vaulted myself over the brick wall, and sprinted back to Mom's car.

I couldn't bring myself to look at the deconstructed love letter when I got home. What story would the corrections tell? That I'm a fucking idiot. I knew that already. I didn't need a spotlight shone on what I already knew. I tossed the letter into the kitchen trash. I spent the rest of the evening looking warily at the receptacle, wondering if the pieces of paper would leap out, unfurl themselves in front of me, and force me to face their contents.

Now that I had trespassed on her property, I realized the wise and considerate thing to do would be give Arwen a wide berth for at least a month. All I need do was listen to my head, and there would be plenty of time for us to cool off a little and discuss things as adults in four weeks.

The problem, of course, was I was no longer entirely sane.

December 1, 1993

I fit my clumsy index finger into the rotary dial, noticing my bitten-down fingernails. I'd only just dialed the last number when Arwen picked up so quickly that I hadn't heard it ring on my end. "Yes?" The ostensibly sweet single word left an angry, hurt, and impatient aftertaste.

I hadn't expected her to answer. "Oh, yes. Hi, Arwen. I wanted to tell you I was sorry."

"For what?"

"You know. Just sorry."

Pause. "The display on my nightstand phone reads: 'Damian Cavalieri: 57 missed calls.'"

A familiar chill swept over me. It came anytime I'd done something stupid to make her angry with me. "Your phone keeps track of who calls and how many times they called?"

"Yes, it does."

I looked down at my own, ancient, telecommunications device. "I didn't know that such technology existed. If I'd known, I would have only called one time and stopped." That *may* have been true. "Or called, waited a week, tried again." *Fifty-seven calls? That was villainous behavior. Hardly the actions of a gentleman. How could I consider myself a good person now?*

"Fifty-seven calls," she repeated. "This phone has been ringing off the hook and flashing your name for days. I've been sitting here next to it. I saw your name flash every time. I made a point of not picking up. And yet, the damn phone kept ringing." Arwen spoke without modulating her voice, in precise, Lauren Bacall tones. It was a voice I normally found sexy.

"And my love-letter writing skills leave something to be desired," I added miserably.

"Your communications skills can stand some improvement in general."

"That's a hard criticism for a literature and creative writing student to hear."

"You go from one extreme to the other. First you go way out on a limb, and then you run for the hills. It's maddening."

"I'm particularly sorry about that one part of my letter. You know."

Arwen harrumphed. "What the fuck was that all about? That was tacky and peculiar."

"There's a story there, but I won't bore you with it. Did your sister tell you I brought some flowers and chocolates by?"

"She may have mentioned it." Arwen paused, waiting for me to say more. When I couldn't think of anything to offer, she added, "I could have sworn we decided not to see each other anymore. Am I just imagining the conversation we had in JC Penny? We had it near all the bras if that helps jog your memory."

I took a moment to compose myself. "I wanted to honor your wishes, but I lost control of my feelings. I'm having a lot of trouble getting through all the stages of grief. I've gotten stuck in

the mud of 'denial' and 'bargaining.' I don't want to believe that everything is different now."

"You've made this as hard on me as you possibly could," she said, flatly.

I didn't want to make it easy for you. I want it to be as hard for you as possible. But I didn't want revenge. I wanted you to change your mind. "I know I picked the worst time to tell you I loved you. I picked the wrong time to buy you flowers and write you a love letter. But I felt cheated. I was going to ask you to the prom. I'd always wanted to do these things, and I was robbed of the chance. In my heart, I knew there was no way I'd get you to change your mind about us, but I had to try. You're worth fighting for. And if I couldn't get you to change your mind, I at least wanted to show you, one last time, how I felt, as part of the goodbye."

Arwen's voice lost its neutrality. She was flustered. "That was selfish. The conversation we had in the mall should have been enough for you. It was enough for me. You spoilt it."

"Please don't say that."

She must have heard me snifle since she allowed her tone to turn conciliatory. "Okay. I suppose you didn't *spoil* it."

"Thank you." I assumed she could hear each of my tears falling, though they were silent. "I took for granted we'd always be friends. I was biding my time for my chance to be with you when, suddenly, there wasn't any time left. I'm sorry I didn't respect your request to give you space. I accept that we can't be friends any more. I just wanted you to know before I went away how much you mean to me. And I overdid it." I paused. "I hope that was a real apology and not just a bunch of excuses and self-justifications. I know men aren't good at apologies and they give those 'I'm sorry if I offended you' bullshit apologies. I hope this is a real one and not that."

Her extended silence worried me. Just as my mounting panic was about to compel me to start speaking again, she replied, "I've never had a real apology from anyone before. Certainly not from a guy. Thank you. I appreciate this call. I really do."

I surprised myself by smiling. “Really? Call number fifty-eight wasn’t awful?”

“Call fifty-eight was very nice. I’m glad I picked up.”