

LAURIE NOTARO

spooky little girl



Illustrated by the New York Times bestselling author of
THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR and **THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE STREET**

““Hilarious.””

—--*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, on *The Idiot Girl and the Flaming Tantrum of Death*

““[Laurie Notaro] writes with a flair that leaves you knowing she would be a gal you could commiserate with over a bucket of longneck beers. If you need to laugh over the little annoyances of life, this is a book for you. If you need to cry over a few of them, *Flaming Tantrum* can fit that bill, too.””

—--*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, on *The Idiot Girl and the Flaming Tantrum of Death*

““A double-handful of chuckle-worthy vignettes Notaro blends sardonic, often self-deprecating comedy with disarming sincerity.””

—--*Publishers Weekly*, on *The Idiot Girl and the Flaming Tantrum of Death*

““[Notaro's] quirky humor, which she's previously showcased in her cult-classic essays on girly dorkdom, runs rampant.””

—--*BUST*, on *There's a (Slight) Chance I Might Be Going to Hell*

““Notaro is everywoman. She is every woman who has ever made a bad judgment, overindulged (you pick the vice), been on a fad diet, been misunderstood at work, been at odds with her mother or been frustrated with her grandmother's obsession with Lifetime TV, while somehow being a little too familiar with the conflicted, star-crossed personages of those movies.””

—--*San Antonio Express-News*, on *I Love Everybody*

““[Notaro] may be the funniest writer in this solar system.””

—--*The Miami Herald*, on *Autobiography of a Fat Bride*

ALSO BY LAURIE NOTARO

The Idiot Girl and the Flaming Tantrum of Death *There's a (Slight) Chance I Might Be Going to Hell*
An Idiot Girl's Christmas We Thought You Would Be Prettier *I Love Everybody (and Other Atrocious Lies)*
Autobiography of a Fat Bride *The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club*

To my Nana, who I hope is eating Italian cookies, having coffee, and playing cards with her friends and my Pop Pop (and maybe even Frank Sinatra) wherever she is now. We miss you.

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chapter one You Win

The very moment when the cab pulled up to the curb, Lucy Fisher knew that she was seeing something exceptional.

Directly in front of her fifties-ranch-style red-brick house, a woman dressed in flowing white was wrestling with nothing short of a cloud in Lucy's yard. For a ridiculous moment, Lucy's mind determined that it was a dilapidated angel desperately trying to climb back aboard her ride, almost like a surfer that had toppled off a board.

But a second later, Lucy realized it was simply a homeless lady, complete with stolen grocery cart, trying to shove a shimmering white mass into a huge dirty plastic bag, like processed meat into a sausage casing. Lucy sat there, nearly smiling at the curiosity that she was witnessing as the cloud flapped against the woman's head, briefly slapping her face as if she was about to be bound with the

wrappings of a shiny Gabor sister mummy.

It took less than a fraction of the next second for Lucy to suddenly—and clearly—realize that the white mass was no cloud at all.

““HEY!”” she shouted, furiously popping the door open and flying out of the backseat as if superpower had been activated. ““HEY! What are you doing! Put that back! That’s my dress! *That MY wedding dress!*””

““That’ll be twenty-two seventy, lady!”” the driver called after Lucy as she bounded across the street toward her house and the homeless woman.

But Lucy failed to hear him. When she came within an arm’s length of the woman, she grabbed two handfuls of satin and lace and tugged the dress out of the woman’s grasp as hard as she could.

““Give me that!”” Lucy snarled, tugging, pulling. ““What are you doing with my dress? Give me my dress!””

““This is my dress now!”” the woman, who was twice Lucy’s size, hissed back, and she jerked the dress back with all of her might. ““You can’t change your mind! You can’t leave all of this out for the taking and then just change your mind when someone else decides they want it!””

““Twenty-three fifty,”” the cabdriver called again, this time louder.

““Give me my damn dress,”” Lucy shouted as she tugged harder. ““I just had my last fitting for *Give it to me!*””

““It’s mine!”” the woman yelled back. ““I found it just laying here. Finders keepers!””

““It is accruing twenty-nine percent interest on my Visa, and that makes it mine!”” Lucy gathered a portion of her strength, gritted her teeth, locked eyes with her opponent, and then pulled as hard as she could, producing a shriek from the woman that was loud, high-pitched, and shrill, like she was coming apart.

How did she do that? Lucy thought. *How did she do that without opening her mouth?*

And then Lucy understood. The satin and lace, once taut between the women, was now slack, although neither had let go. Lucy looked down at the tear, which had screamed as it was being ripped, now frayed, open, and destroyed. The two women looked at the mess in their hands, neither one saying a word.

““Okay, then,”” the homeless woman finally said as she dropped her end onto the ground. ““You win.””

““Twenty-five even, and the meter is still running,”” the cabdriver called impatiently.

Lucy looked up from the white mess in her hands, through the collection of light brown curls that had fallen into her face, and finally saw what the cabdriver saw. What the homeless woman saw. What every car passing on the street in front of her house had seen.

Her life. Spread out all over the lawn, littered in the gutter, spilling out of the bed of her truck that was parked in the driveway. Her brand-new thirty-six-inch television sitting in her front yard like a postmodern flamingo; her laptop bag, with the corner of her computer peeking out of it, flung onto the ground like a stepping stone. Her grandmother's antique rocking chair tipped up against the mailbox as if someone had recently been dumped out of it. Her clothes, her photo albums, her everything, was spread out over the front lawn, on exhibition, for anyone to come and poke at, pick through, gawk at.

A comforter. A lamp. A saucepan.

““If it works, I'll take that TV,”” the cabdriver said, chuckling. ““Or even if it don't work, I'll still take it. Meter's still running, lady.””

Lucy turned around and marched back toward the cab. ““Pop the trunk,”” she demanded of the driver. She reached into the backseat, grabbed her purse, and then yanked her suitcase from the trunk.

““Here,”” Lucy said as she tossed a twenty and a five at the driver, and looked at him with sharpened eyes. ““Go rent to own your own flat screen.””

And then, because she wasn't sure what else she should do, she rolled her suitcase to the sidewalk in front of her house, with her tattered wedding dress shoved underneath her arm, stood there for a moment, and wondered what the hell was going on.

An hour and forty-five minutes earlier, Lucy's plane had touched down on the runway in Phoenix after returning from what was supposed to have been a fantastic weeklong vacation in Hawaii. She had left Martin, her fiancée, and her job as a dental hygienist to travel to the tropical paradise with her best friend and co-worker, Jilly, and their friend, the office receptionist, Marianne. Instead, the trip defied their expectations as soon as they arrived. Their luxurious boutique accommodations were nothing more than a roadside motel with a museum-quality collection of insects; the discount-brand sunscreen Lucy had purchased was cheap for a reason; and it was suspected that either the pig or some shellfish the girls gobbled at the luau could have rightly benefited from a little more time in the cooker. Lucy spent the majority of her seven days in Hawaii fighting off ants and mosquitoes in a shabby motel, watching her skin burn, bubble, and peel like a paper label off a jar; and trying to master a lopsided, dirty toilet with missing floor bolts.

None of that, however, could hold a candle to the trip's high point, which began when she was simply having some drinks in the motel bar with Marianne, who was on a mad prowl for a vacation fling. The receptionist was less than versed at the art of flirting and might have been more successful in making a match had she invested in a hairbrush and attended to the area of her upper lip, which didn't look so much like a lip as it did a pelt. While that sort of fur growth is great on a kitten, Lucy thought, it just didn't reap the same snuggle rewards on a woman who often had Cheetos dust clinging to hers. Lucy never had too many problems attracting men; she only had trouble attracting men who weren't already married, weren't unemployed at the moment, or weren't just going into or just coming out of rehab. Her warm, strong eyes were clearly her best feature and made her look openly approachable, followed by a definitive straight nose and genetically predisposed perfectly aligned teeth. She looked friendly and fun, and was just unpolished enough to look like she knew how to relax and have a good time.

And that's just what Lucy was trying to do, that last night at the hotel bar. She just wanted to relax.

and have fun, but as the night mercilessly dragged on, she began feeling tired and weary.

After too many rounds of drinks, Marianne finally zeroed in on a target and tried desperately to capture the attention of a man sitting on the opposite side of the motel bar, despite the fact that he was wearing a T-shirt that stated DEFINE GIRLFRIEND.

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief when the guy finally sent Marianne a drink and then asked if she wanted to join a poker game upstairs. Lucy reluctantly agreed after much persistence and arm-tugging from Marianne, under the condition that Lucy was going to stay for five minutes only. She had had her fair share of slushy umbrella drinks and wanted nothing more than to go to bed like Jilly had hours earlier, but she also knew she couldn't let Marianne go alone. The moment they stepped foot into her room, it was Marianne who shot back down the hall toward the elevator without any warning, shrieking that she'd left her key card at the bar and that she'd be right back.

Suddenly, a beer was in Lucy's hand, and she sipped it. Not only was it warm and bitter, but it tasted downright odd. Skanky guy, skunky beer. She sat in a side chair, waiting for Marianne's return, and when the guy leaned back on the bed and smiled at her, Lucy's stomach flipped. She stood up to say she was going to wait for her friend in the hall, and the nausea of the undercooked shellfish hit her again. Luckily she was able to make it several steps and shut the bathroom door behind her before getting sick. After splashing cold water on her face, Lucy finally stumbled out of the bathroom ten minutes later to find that Marianne had still not returned, the television was off, and the guy was smiling at her.

"You know, if you brush your teeth," he said as he sat up, "we could still have a good time."

Lucy wanted to vomit all over again. Her pulse pounded in her temples. She looked at him, picked up her purse that was sitting at the foot of the bed, and then opened the door to find Marianne coming down the hallway with her key card in her hand.

"Hey," Lucy said to the guy before she shut the door, "Define 'asshole.'"

By the time the plane touched ground in Phoenix, Lucy didn't want anything more than to simply go home. She couldn't wait to fall onto her own creaky couch, pet her dog, Tulip, and crack open whatever cold drink she could find in the fridge. She was excited to see Martin, and hoped that they could spend that night watching old movies on TV, their favorite way to spend any night.

Waiting for the trio of girls to emerge from behind the security gate was Warren, Jilly's broad, tall, bearded, and jolly husband, who had agreed to give Marianne a lift home, too. Lucy looked around for Martin but didn't see him anywhere.

"I'm sure he's just running behind," Lucy said, and smiled, although she couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed that he wasn't there to meet her. He'd probably had a late truck come in at Safeway where he was the manager of the produce department and had to unload it. *That's Martin. Got bus lost track of time, forgot to call. Probably doesn't know he's late, she thought. I wonder if he even remembers that I was coming come today. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that man was having an affair with a head of cabbage.*

Warren came forward with a huge grin and gave Jilly a kiss on her freckled cheek and a quick squeeze

before he picked up her bag.

Lucy flipped open her phone and speed dialed Martin's number.

"Just what I thought," she said, and laughed a little when it went straight to voice mail. "I'm sure that there are five hundred heads of lettuce demanding his attention."

Jilly nodded and smiled. "Nah. I bet he's down at baggage claim, waiting with a big bouquet of flowers," she reassured Lucy. "You just wait and see. Martin, forget anything? You're insane, and your blood alcohol level still hasn't recouped yet."

But when they descended the escalator to baggage claim, there was no bouquet of flowers waiting for her, no Martin. She tried his cell again. Straight to voice mail.

"What should we do?" Jilly asked Lucy after she saw her hang up again. "Warren brought the truck..... so there's only room for three of us..... I could have him drop us off and then come back."

"I can be back here in forty minutes," Warren confirmed.

"No, that's silly, that's silly," Lucy said, shaking her head. "I'll try him again, and if I don't get a hold of him, I'll take a cab. How much could it possibly be, ten, fifteen bucks?"

"Are you sure?" Jilly asked, tucking a strand of her straight strawberry blond hair behind her ear. "Warren doesn't mind."

"I'll take a cab." Lucy laughed. "I'm a big girl. I should have called him this morning to remind him. He just forgot. I'll see you at work tomorrow. I swear I'm fine."

"All right," Jilly agreed, hesitantly. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I'll see you guys tomorrow," Lucy said firmly.

"See you tomorrow, Lucy," Marianne called as she waved. The three of them started for the parking lot.

The cab had circled the Safeway parking lot two times when the driver asked Lucy if she wanted to go around again. Martin's beat-up red Ford Ranger truck was nowhere in sight. Lucy had figured that the cab could just drop her off at the store, Martin could run her home, and they'd save a couple of bucks, but it wasn't working out exactly as she had hoped.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Maybe I should run inside and see if he's on lunch something."

"Your dime," the driver said. "Meter's running."

Lucy could see her fare was already almost twenty dollars, and she didn't have much more than that in her purse. If she ran around Safeway for several minutes, she wouldn't have enough to pay her fare if Martin wasn't around, let alone a tip.

“Just take me home,” she said, sighing.

After Lucy had rather unsuccessfully won the tug of war over her wedding dress and the cab had driven away, she found herself standing in front of her house, shaking her head, trying to make sense of things. She fished her house keys out of her purse and started up the driveway, dragging her suitcase behind her, the ruined dress under her arm. As she passed the bed of her truck, she saw heaps of her clothes, shoes, purses, everything from her closet. On the lawn was her television, computer books, photo albums, a blanket her grandmother had crocheted. Everything she owned, everything that was hers. Lucy's head spun like she had downed a six-pack and gone on a Tilt-a-Whirl ride. Her mind searched for any reason that could clarify the scenario. Had they been robbed and everything out here was not worthy of stealing? Or worse, had some part of the house caught fire and this was what had been saved? Did Martin have some sort of yard sale, after which he had neglected to bring anything back inside the house? Were they being evicted, was the house being foreclosed on, had he stopped making payments and not told her? What was going on, what had happened? Where the hell was Martin?

As she neared the front door, she dialed Martin's cell again, praying for him to answer. The phone rang, rang, rang, and then, again, went to voice mail.

“CALL ME BACK,” Lucy demanded into the phone. “What happened? Everything's out on the lawn. *Would you please call me back?* Are you all right? What is going on?”

She tried to insert the key into the lock, but it wouldn't fit.

The key, *her* key, refused to slide into the lock. She tried it again, this time with more force. It wouldn't fit. She took a step back and took a deep breath. “This can't be happening,” she said aloud, then took the key again and with all of her might, with her teeth grinding, tried to shove it into the keyhole, but to no avail. Had they been evicted and the locks changed? But when she looked in through the living room window, everything appeared normal. There was Martin's La-Z-Boy recliner, their nasty burlap couch, the coffee table. All was as it should have been.

This was unbelievable. She let go of the suitcase, took a step back from the door again, closed her eyes, and tried to calm down.

But Lucy knew she wasn't very good at calming down.

She raised her hand and threw her useless key ring against the front door as she screamed.

Suddenly, she heard barking. There, inside the house, standing at the window, was Tulip, Lucy's old graying golden retriever mix.

“Hi, sugar,” Lucy said, immediately feeling her blood pressure drop as she put her hand up to the window. “How are you, sweetheart? Are you being a good girl? Are you? Did you miss me? I missed you. I really did. Do you know why the TV is next to the mailbox and why my panties are scattered all over the bed of my truck? Do you? Do you know what's going on? I wish you could tell me.”

Tulip licked her side of the glass where Lucy had put her hand, then sat, panting patiently. She barked again, moving her head almost in a nod, her eyes on Lucy the whole time. She had been Lucy's best

friend for years, since the day Lucy had found her at the pound as a puppy. Flea-bitten, shivering, and scared, Tulip had come home with Lucy, and from that day on, they had slept in the same bed, watched the same television shows, and celebrated life's accomplishments together. Tulip was always there to cheer Lucy up, to comfort her when she needed it, and to be the one constant thing that Lucy always knew she could depend upon. Tulip made Lucy feel grounded and safe and always loved. Tulip was everything a dog should be to its person: a valued member of the family, a dear friend, a skilled secret keeper. And when Lucy met Martin three years ago, Tulip came along with the package, as did her basket of balls and hair-covered bed when Lucy eventually moved into his house. Now, standing on the other side of the glass, Tulip wagged her tail and pawed at the window, barking slightly in a very definitive way, as in, "'Don't just stand there, come in!'"

From inside her purse, Lucy heard the ring of her phone. She grabbed it.

"'Martin?'" she asked into the receiver, without so much as looking at who was calling.

"'No,'" Lucy heard on the other end of the phone, followed by a quick little laugh. "'It's Jilly. I got your call from---Wait, you mean Martin is still MIA? That boyfriend of yours is a workaholic.'"

"'Well, I'm at the place that apparently used to be my home,'" Lucy replied, as the severity of the situation started to sink in. "'Jilly everything I own is tossed out on the street and I have no idea where I don't know what's going on. All of my clothes are in the bed of my truck, the furniture I inherited from my grandmother is in the yard, and I just fought a homeless woman for my wedding dress, which is now ripped to shreds. The locks to the house have been changed. I can't get in! Martin won't answer his phone, he won't call me back, and I can't even get inside to get Tulip. He wasn't at Safeway. I drove around the parking lot twice. I don't know what to do. I have no idea what to do. I think he has thrown me out.'"

"'Just stay there,'" Jilly advised. "'Warren and I will be there in ten minutes.'"

Lucy put the phone back into her purse and shook her head, then looked at her dog on the other side of the glass. Tulip didn't take her cocoa-colored eyes off Lucy for one second.

Tulip panted. Lucy tried to smile for her, to make sure Tulip knew everything was going to be all right. She walked into the yard, grabbed the closest box---full of several pairs of her favorite cowboy boots, including a treasured vintage pair from the forties---and tossed it into the bed of the truck. Another box, brimming with purses and shoes, was the next to go. A stack of books from dental school. A pile of white and pastel-colored uniforms for work.

A box of wedding invitations that Lucy had just gotten back from the discount printer and had decided to put off addressing until after she returned from Hawaii, even though the wedding date was only eight weeks away.

She had thought she would have plenty of time.

chapter two The Sinister Potential of Chicken Skin

It wasn't going to be a big wedding, anyway, Lucy had rationalized when she'd found herself daydreaming about her vacation instead of getting a pen and sitting down at the kitchen table.

didn't really even matter when she addressed the invitations. Just a few friends in the backyard with the reception catered by the barbecue place down the street, Martin's favorite. Martin didn't like bunnies, didn't like to make a fuss. He was a direct path kind of guy. If he was at point A and he needed to be at point B, he'd go from A to B, and that would be it. No turns, no sidetracking, no pausing, no stops, just travel the most direct route. Their vacations or weekend trips were always like that. No plans for a detour to see fossilized dinosaur bones embedded in the side of a mountain, because he'd say it all looked like rock, couldn't tell which was which, anyway; no point in stopping to take a picture of a dozen vintage Cadillacs, half buried nose first in the ground at an angle corresponding to that of the Great Pyramid, if you could already see them from the highway; and why would a grown woman want to stop and have lunch at Flintstones Bedrock City on the way back from the Grand Canyon when that cartoon wasn't even on the air anymore?

Thus, when Lucy finally got her sliver of an inheritance check from the sale of the family farm after the death of her grandmother a year earlier, she knew exactly what she was going to do with it. With a nonchalant disregard to her upcoming nuptials, she spent almost the last dime of her inheritance on the Hawaii trip, justifying the cost by categorizing the trip as her bachelorette party and something of a last hurrah. Martin had already informed her that any extended honeymoon was out of the question; his work was too busy, as it was spring and this was his season to make his department shine. Maybe they could take a weekend and camp in Sedona, but nothing longer than that. When Lucy suggested going to Jerome, a former mining town turned artsy enclave, Martin gave her a long look.

““We'd have to stay in a hotel up there,”” he reminded her. ““Why pay for a hotel if you have a tent?””

So when Lucy got her inheritance, she already had her mind made up. She didn't want to take any sort of vacation she would have to drive to, which were all the vacations she had taken with Martin. She wasn't going to camp in a tent, or sleep in a roadside motel with worn carpet and stiff polyester bedspreads and thin beige plastic buckets for ice. She had done all of that for him, and to be honest she never had any longings about sleeping on the ground in a tent for a week without bathing, like Joad. Wherever she went on her vacation, she was going to fly. She was going to go as far as she could imagine. She immediately decided on the most un-Martin place she could think of: Hawaii. It was that simple. *Hawaii*. She imagined herself laughing on the beach and sipping frivolous drinks under exotic palm trees with fringe. She wanted to stay at a fancy hotel, eat steak and shrimp and roasted boar, and wake up early to walk along the beach, even if she didn't have a point A or point B already in mind.

So she called Jilly and proposed that they go. Warren was game. He was up for the girls having a good time for themselves, and then Marianne mentioned that she'd always dreamed of going to Hawaii. Splitting the hotel room three ways sounded great. Lucy pitched it to Martin as sort of a ““last hurrah”” girls' weekend before she and he tied the knot; Marianne found a great deal on a beachfront ““resort.”” Lucy bought her ticket. And while it turned out that it wasn't the most glamorous vacation on earth and she had spent the most memorable moments of it puking in some sleazeball's bathroom, getting away from home had given her time to think, time to laugh, and time to realize that maybe it wasn't such a sin that she hadn't quite gotten around to addressing those invitations just yet.

Martin was a good man. He had good bones, a good heart, a kind voice. He was a quiet man with a gentle character. Typically on-the-dot dependable. So nice anyone could always count on him to help them move. And if there was anything Martin was, it was satisfied. Satisfied with his job managing

the produce department at Safeway, waking up at three in the morning to make sure cabbage was unloaded, and stacked in the display cold case with just the right spacing. Satisfied with his thirteen-year-old red dented truck with a frozen driver's side window and a seat belt so tired of being wound that it could only give enough length to be fastened if he tugged hard at it twice and let it go gently a third time. Satisfied with the spring popping up on the left side of the brown plaid couch every time he'd get up, satisfied with waiting for a movie to go to rental before he would see it, satisfied with basic cable. Satisfied with not complaining once when he would come down with a cold. And, by all accounts, he had been satisfied with Lucy.

Martin had lived his life the way that good men do. Lucy knew that the moment she met him, and she also knew that as far as men went, she had never done any better. She felt safe with him, and taken care of. She knew she would never have to worry about anything as long as Martin was around. He wasn't a yahoo with an on-again, off-again job, a gaggle of kids stringing behind him, or a probation officer he had to visit once a week. He didn't start drinking beer at noon on a Wednesday, and there was not one crazy ex-girlfriend who would crank call him at midnight or drive by the house. He was a guy who washed cucumbers, smiled at every customer, and answered whatever question anyone might have about a radish. His nails were always clean, and his flattop was always neatly trimmed at a precise length. He wasn't unnecessarily tall; he simply rose to an average height. And he had a friendly face, ruddy cheeks, and light blue eyes that twinkled when he smiled, which was frequently. Looking at Martin, no one would ever say he was ruggedly handsome or of model pedigree, but he could have easily been an archetype for the nice, friendly guy.

Although he was kind to Lucy---he would always offer the popcorn bowl to her first on the Friday nights when he rented movies on his way home---he wasn't fanatical about her. It sometimes seemed to her that Martin had figured one day that the time had come to find himself a companion and instead of going to the pound, he'd looked around the produce department and had seen an average-height lady with pretty brown eyes, in her late twenties and dressed in white scrubs with her regular everyday curly light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail with a plain rubber band, about to take down a display of Granny Smith apples by pulling at the ones on the bottom. And so he'd smile

Martin smiled often. He was a big smiler. But after some time, Lucy began to notice that he rarely grinned, never beamed, and hardly laughed the way she loved to laugh. He chuckled, might snicker at a silly joke, but Martin never seemed to let go with a hearty guffaw or even so much as a chortle.

Sometimes in a moment of furious impatience, Lucy would look at Martin and wonder when he was going to *start*. When he might surprise her and go faster than thirty-five miles per hour. He never did. He coasted. A smooth, even coast, no bumps, no jolts, no sudden turns. It seemed as if there was a spark inside Martin that was never going to thrive into anything bigger; a spark that could just never go off, catch fire, and blaze madly. When he proposed to her, he simply came home from work, put his car keys on the hall table, held a ring out in the palm of his hand, and asked, ""What do you think about that?""

Lucy thought maybe it was her, maybe she was the one who was keeping that spark from roaring into fire, but she wasn't sure what else she could do to fuel it, and besides, she already knew that Martin had never set a fire inside of her, either. She loved his sensibility, his kindness, his stability, but as fast as electrical current went, the bathroom lightbulb burned brighter. Certainly, they weren't on fire, but they were warm enough. And there was Martin and Lucy, small sparks going off on either end of the

couch, with a popcorn bowl between them. And Tulip snoring on her dog bed at their feet.

Remarkably, they had really only been in one argument, very early in their relationship, for the whole three years they had been a couple. It was a ridiculous explosion about fried chicken; Martin had brought home original style, and Lucy liked the skinless extra crispy kind. She hated the flop and rubbery texture of chicken skin. She could barely stand to touch it, let alone pull a sheet of it off her dinner. In an instant, Lucy became angry, and when Martin simply shrugged, said he was sorry, and that he would make it a point to get skinless extra crispy next time, she became furious. As Martin looked at her blankly, Lucy fought the chicken skin fight alone, stoking her own fire that Martin refused to fan, building it into an inferno that led to her storming out of the house and hitting the Round About, the bar where she knew Jilly and Warren would be enjoying happy hour as it evolved into double-vision hour.

She spent that night laughing and talking to people she hadn't seen in a while, old drinking buddies that had wondered where she'd vanished to. When she made it back to Jilly and Warren's booth after another trip to the bar, Warren was laughing with an oily-looking guy Lucy had never met, and Jilly was rolling her eyes in disgust. "Pay no attention to him," Jilly whispered. "We call him Icky Ricky. I'm just nice to him because I have to be, but you don't."

"And who is this fine young filly?" the newcomer said as he turned his mustached face toward Lucy, shooting a wave of cigarette and beer breath at her. "I'd like to buy you a drink, miss!"

"I'd like to buy you a toothbrush," Lucy replied.

Lucy did her fair share of ignoring Icky Ricky and danced, laughed, joked with old friends, forgetting about her fight with Martin. The next morning, before Lucy even opened her eyes, she smelled something terrible, the scent of stale beer, Taco Bell, neglected trash, and dirty socks. She knew right away that waking up with "eau de single guy's apartment" was not a positive sign by any means. She breathed a tremendous sign of relief when she swung her legs around the side of the futon she was on and saw her jeans still intact on her lower body. Even her boots were still on, but that was about all she knew.

Beside her she saw the back of a head with shaggy brown hair that was clearly not Martin's neat flattop. The shaggy head rolled over, and in its place was a nasty, oily little mustache.

Oh, my God! a little voice in her head gasped. *Icky Ricky!*

"Where's my stuff?" Lucy demanded, kicking blankets and sheets patterned with a rainbow on the floor that were crumpled on the floor, not daring to pick them up with her hands to look under them.

"And a good morning to you, too, little lady," he said, seeming offended. "All your stuff's in the living room---on the couch, maybe, I dunno where you put it. Are you usually this nasty in the morning?"

"Only on the mornings that I wreck my life," she replied. Lucy found her purse and jacket by the front door on a chair and immediately rifled through her purse to find her keys. She heard shuffling from the bedroom.

“Hey, how 'bout we go grab something to eat?” Icky Ricky said as he emerged from the bedroom with his hair homelessly askew.

Lucy gave him a disgusted look. “No. I'm going home,” she replied, finally finding her keys at the very bottom.

“Okay, then,” Icky Ricky said, looking puzzled. “We could do a drive-through at McDonald's, get a little breakfast burrito?”

“Are you kidding me?” Lucy said as she turned and faced him. “Don't read anything into anything all right? Nothing happened here. Nothing. I don't know what I'm doing here, but I am leaving and going home.”

“Good luck with that, unless you know how to fly!” he said with a laugh that came close to a snort. He reached across his chest and scratched his armpit. “Your car ain't here. Your car's still at the Round About. You got sorta liquored up, miss, so much you couldn't drive. You could barely walk alone by yourself, so I put you in my car and started to take you home, but you passed out cold before I even hit the corner. I don't know where you live, so I brought you back here and put you to bed. Like a gentleman. That's what I am. A *gentleman*.”

Lucy felt a churning ball of sickness develop in her stomach. It suddenly hit her. She didn't remember anything past saying goodbye to Jilly and Warren when the jukebox began playing one of her favorite songs. What had she done? A fight over *chicken skin*. And now here she was, waking up on a dirty rainbow, standing in the middle of Icky Ricky's stinky apartment, about to ask him for a ride back to the bar.

“Let me find my keys,” he said, more than a little discouraged. “Come on, not even just a quick run-through for a burrito? How about if just I get one?”

When Lucy pulled into the driveway, Martin was at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. He looked up to see her as she opened the door and walked into the house.

“I saw your car at the Round About this morning,” Martin said plainly. “You spend the night at Jilly's?”

Lucy shook her head.

Martin paused for a moment and just looked at her.

“I made a mistake, Martin, but I swear to you nothing happened,” she began. “I woke up someplace. I didn't plan on waking up, but nothing happened. I drank too much, and then I drank more and someone tried to take me home but didn't know where I lived, so

“This person, Lucy,” he said quietly. “This person was a man?”

Lucy nodded. “I swear to you nothing happened, Martin. I promise. I would not lie to you. I made a mistake, I acted foolishly. But not one thing happened.”

Martin looked away and then looked back at her.

“All right,” he said slowly. “I’m going to choose to trust you, Lucy. But if this happens again, I know I’ve been made a fool of, and I won’t ask any questions. I’ll just call it a day. Do you understand?”

“Completely,” Lucy replied immediately. “Absolutely.”

That was three years ago. It had been the biggest event in their relationship, and when it was over, was almost forgotten. Since then, they had developed a full Lucy and Martin history: holiday vacations, birthdays, favorite television shows, inside jokes, photo albums, their own side of the bed, who got which drawer in the dresser.

No matter how mundane, or regular or sparkless, they had built a life.

A Lucy and Martin life.

And she could never look at chicken again, alive, dead, fried, or roasted, without feeling her head spin.

By the time Jilly and Warren pulled up in their truck, Lucy had managed to squeeze just about everything into the bed of her truck, except for her grandmother’s rocking chair and the television. After helping Jilly and Warren load those up in their truck, she walked back to the front door to waiting Tulip, who she could barely see anymore. It was getting dark and there were no lights on the house.

“I love you, my good girl,” Lucy said as she put her hand up to the glass, to which the dog reciprocated with raising her big, clunky paw. “I will come back for you, okay? Okay? I will see you soon, sweetheart. I promise.”

Tulip looked at Lucy steadily and blinked. Then she emitted a tiny, almost inaudible little whimper.

Lucy’s eyes burned.

“No, no, no, I’m coming back,” Lucy said softly. “No crying, okay? Be a big girl.”

With that, Tulip dropped her paw and tilted her head slightly.

“That’s my girl,” Lucy said. “We will get this figured out. We will find out what’s going on. I will see you soon, I promise.”

Jilly and Warren were waiting for her. She had to go. She was saying her last goodbye to Tulip when she saw something move back in the shadows, in the kitchen past the living room. Something move. She saw it. It was slight, but it was there.

“Martin,” Lucy said, and squinted her eyes to get a better look, but it was getting dark and all she could really see was a jumble of unidentifiable shadows.

“Martin!” she called this time. “Martin! Please talk to me. Tell me what’s going on! Is that you? Is that you in there? *Is that you? Why are you doing this? Goddamn it! Why are you doing this? Talk to me!*”

There was no answer. She stood as still as she could, staring, watching the stillness in the kitchen, ~~kitchen she thought she'd be drinking a cold Pepsi in by now.~~ Then she saw movement again, just a slight, and instantly felt foolish. The oscillating fan in the kitchen, she realized. It moved the blinds of the sliding glass door when it turned.

Lucy walked backward to her truck, waving to Tulip continuously, until she reached the driveway and could no longer see her.

““Lucy,”” Warren called out from the driver’s side of his truck. ““There’s one last box on the lawn. You can toss it in the back here.””

Lucy shook her head. ““Those are my wedding invitations.”” She shrugged as she opened the door to her truck. ““I don’t think I’ll be needing them.””

From the corner of her eye, Lucy saw something white flutter out of the cab and onto the concrete of the driveway below. It was an envelope. She picked it up. She saw right away that it was Martin’s quick scrawl that had written her name on the front.

Inside, the letter said simply:

You know I will take good care of Tulip until you can come and get her. My day off is Thursday. You can pick her up then.

Martin

chapter three I Will Totally Date a Midget

Lucy had just pulled in behind Warren’s truck in the driveway of her best friend’s house when Jilly walked over to her.

““Do you know what happened?”” Jilly said, her hands in the front pockets of her jeans. ““Why would Martin do something like this?””

Lucy shook her head. ““I have no idea, I really don’t,”” she said honestly. ““He won’t answer his phone. This note he left me says absolutely nothing. Nothing happened. We didn’t have a fight, we didn’t have words. Jilly, it’s just impossible. How can everything be fine one minute and then completely upside down the next?””

““Lucy, well, maybe everything wasn’t fine,”” Jilly said reluctantly. ““Did you ever get any feeling that Martin was I don’t know, that maybe he was messing around?””

““Three hours ago I would have said no,”” Lucy replied, her voice rising. ““But now that I’m homeless, I suppose anything is possible. I would never expect Martin to do this, so I guess, sure. He could have been messing around with a cashier or the girl in the bakery who makes birthday cakes. Sure, why not? It makes about as much sense as anything else. Because he didn’t just throw me out—he blasted me out like a rocket! I don’t know what I’m going to do.””

““Well, you know you can stay here until this all gets figured out,”” Jilly reassured her. ““But in the meantime, I have to tell you something, and I know you’ve had to deal with big stuff today, and if th

could wait, believe me, I wouldn't be telling you now. Nola called. There was a problem with the deposit from the office for the day before we left for Hawaii.""

Nola, the office manager of the dental practice the girls worked at, was easily excited and had a tendency to inflate anything that wasn't noted on her schedule into a drama worthy of a prime-time cable network hour. Her position in Dr. Meadows's office consumed her whole life, and considering that Nola's time was a little free after she clocked out, her entire life force was focused on the office. Lucy and Jilly often mused that Nola's home life was so hollow that she kept a baby monitor on her nightstand with the twin monitor placed strategically in an open desk drawer at the office, or tucked behind a silk plant, so she could listen to the office sleep at night. Rumor had it that Nola had once had a beau, who had broken her heart years earlier, leaving Nola no other choice but to throw herself into the workings and minute details of a dental office.

Every important duty was Nola's responsibility by design; she needed it that way. But there was one exception. Every night at the office, Marianne would total out the day's tally, and whatever was paid in cash and checks that day would get put into a sealed envelope and handed over to the designated deposit person, who would go to the bank on their way home. This method was devised after Nola saw the same man at the same ATM two nights in a row. She became convinced that he was casing her deposit habits and was hatching a plan to kidnap her and sell her into the sex trade in an Eastern Bloc country, like she'd seen in a segment on human trafficking on *48 Hours Mystery*. The following morning she called an urgent staff meeting and demanded that everyone in the office take turns making the deposit and visiting different bank branches all over town, and she had indeed made the schedule. It was now everyone's duty to make the deposit when it was their turn.

"So there's a problem with the deposit," Lucy replied to Jilly snottily. "What was the problem? Did Stranger Danger pop up at one of Nola's spots and she's now wearing a black negligee and marabou slippers somewhere in Estonia?"

Jilly shook her head and grinned. "No. The deposit wasn't made. The bank never got it. She's been tracking it all week to see if it was credited, but it never was. And it wasn't Nola's deposit," Jilly replied. "It was the one from your night."

"My night?" Lucy said, her hands flying up to her mouth in horror. "It was my night? I forgot to make it? *Oh, no!* Shit. I was so excited about the trip that I ran home and just started packing. I must still have it. It's here somewhere. I think I had my black bag that day."

Lucy climbed up into the bed of the truck and found the box of purses and shoes, then handed it down to Jilly.

"Here's the black bag," Jilly announced after digging for a few seconds. She opened the purse, and there was the deposit.

Lucy looked at Jilly, and they both broke out in laughter that immediately sliced the heavy tension that had caused Lucy to break out in a nervous sweat.

"Whew!" Lucy said with a massive rush of relief. "I can't believe I forgot it. I guess I was in for a bigger rush than I thought."

““This is such good news,”” Jilly said, smiling and shaking her head. ““Such good news. I thought Nola was going to have your head. All right. Let’s get your stuff into the garage and then we can get you settled in. You’ve had a long day.””

““I don’t think I’ve ever had a longer one,”” Lucy said in agreement, and started to unload.

As soon as Lucy walked through the door of the office the next morning, Nola bolted into the foyer, her squat figure moving quickly toward Lucy. She had the body of a stout fifth-grade boy---petite in stature but solid in the middle, with several curves on her, though not one of them was desirable. Despite her lack of feminine shapeliness, Nola’s face was soft, her peachy cheeks always a little bit flushed, and her eyes were a deep aqua green. Her chin was delicate and well proportioned to her heart-shaped face, and her black hair, thick and enviably shiny, was always closely cropped in a style that women usually waited until retirement age to acquire. She was in her early thirties and would have been considered almost pretty if it wasn’t for the bulb of a peasant nose that was stuck in the middle of so many enviable features. The nose rendered her not to an unattractive level but to simply plain and unremarkable. She knew this, and had determined a long time ago that what she could not attain with the benefits of beauty, she would take by force and will. With all her might pushing forward like a train, Nola speed walked in through the foyer, her right arm pumping furiously like an oil drill, her left arm pointed at Lucy sternly.

““Dr. Meadows and I need to see you immediately,”” she said as harshly as her dimpled face looked, resembling the closest thing to an angry donut Lucy had ever seen.

““I know. Jilly told me about the missing deposit,”” Lucy replied, trying to ease the situation, pulling the deposit from her purse. ““I have it right here. I’m really sorry.””

Nola looked at Lucy and smirked. ““I said Dr. Meadows and I need to see you,”” she repeated.

““Okay.”” Lucy nodded, eager to settle the situation. It was all very easily explainable, she knew; it was a mistake, a silly, stupid accident, but she was sure Dr. Meadows would understand. It was the first deposit Lucy had ever forgotten about or had made late. She had never been in trouble at the office before, all of her job performance reviews had been positive, and she had faith that the dentist would see this for exactly what it was: a touch of irresponsibility and distraction, but nothing more than that. She had worked for this man for almost two years. Jilly had gotten her the job when the previous hygienist had suddenly quit and they’d needed someone in a hurry. It was a good office, a solid practice, and she knew she was lucky to have the job.

Nola escorted her back to Dr. Meadows’s office, where he was already sitting behind his large mahogany desk.

““Dr. Meadows, I’m very sorry this happened, but I can explain----”” Lucy started, and then stopped when the dentist raised his hand.

““Do you have the deposit, Lucy?”” he asked plainly.

Lucy nodded and handed it to him. Nola looked over her shoulder and watched her carefully.

He took a letter opener, sliced across the virgin seal of the envelope, and pulled out the contents of

various checks and cash. The dentist went through it slowly, and then stopped when he got to particular check.

“Well, it all seems to be here,” he said, without looking up.

“Of course it's all there,” Lucy said with a laugh in response to the absurdity of what she was hearing. “The envelope was sealed. I never opened it. Why would I open it?”

“There was a check in the deposit that was of a sizeable amount,” the dentist said, without a trace of the robust and usually jovial and friendly man Lucy knew. “When the amount didn't show up in the account, well, let's just say that questions arose.”

“Questions?” Lucy found herself saying. “What questions? You can clearly see I never opened the envelope.”

“Well, Lucy,” he continued, looking at Nola and then back to Lucy. “When twenty thousand dollars fails to be accounted for, it becomes a serious situation.”

Lucy's mouth dropped open. “Twenty thousand dollars?” she said, not even believing the amount herself, and then she turned to Nola. “You gave me an envelope with twenty thousand dollars in it and didn't bother to *tell me*?”

“For precisely the reason we're talking to you now, that's something we didn't care to broadcast,” Dr. Meadows said without any further explanation.

Lucy paused for a moment, until it fully hit her. “You think I tried to *steal* that money?” she asked angrily. “How could I steal a check that wasn't made out to me, a check in an envelope that you can clearly see has never been opened?”

“There are ways. They can be washed. It's really very simple. I've seen it done,” Nola said very matter-of-factly, then quickly added, “On TV. It was on *Primetime Live*.”

“I only have basic cable,” Lucy shot back. “I don't get the criminal mastermind channel.”

“And then there's also an issue of pharmaceuticals that went missing before you girls left on vacation,” Dr. Meadows interrupted. “Several bottles of sedatives are not where they should be.”

Lucy could not believe what she was hearing. She shook her head in exasperation. “I don't know anything about that,” she said simply, looking Dr. Meadows in the eye. She would never have done something to jeopardize her job, let alone anything as outlandish as washing checks and stealing medication. She had celebrated holidays and birthdays with the people in this office, including Dr. Meadows. He knew her better than that.

“So I'm going to ask you to submit to a drug test, Lucy,” the dentist said. “I'm asking everybody. I'm not singling you out because of the deposit. Drug use—and theft—will not be tolerated in this office. That's something I can't risk.”

“I have absolutely no problem with that,” Lucy offered. “I'll take any drug test. I have nothing to hide.”

From nowhere, Nola produced a plastic cup with LUCY stretched across the middle of it in marker. Lucy took the cup and headed to the bathroom, where Nola posted herself right outside the door.

Lucy would have found the entire episode laughable, except that five minutes later, her employer came into the break room, where Lucy was waiting. He looked at her for a moment before saying anything.

““You tested positive for cocaine,”” he said simply. ““I have to say I didn’t expect that.””

““That is impossible,”” Lucy asserted. ““It is absolutely impossible. That test is wrong. It’s wrong. This is insane. It’s a mistake. Do another test. There’s no way that’s right. No one’s done cocaine since 1987, except for Fleetwood Mac cover bands!””

Instead of arguing, Dr. Meadows went to the supply cabinet and pulled out another test. Lucy stood there in amazement, wondering how she had never noticed bulk urinalysis drug tests in Costco. The next time, Lucy stood next to Dr. Meadows as he opened a new pouch and lowered what looked like a multipronged dipstick into the urine sample. After the five minutes of laborious dead silence between Dr. Meadows and herself, Lucy saw the results on the test strip herself. A red line appeared after COCAINE.

““I’m sorry, Lucy. I’m going to have to let you go,”” the dentist said. ““It looks like you’ve made some poor decisions. You’ve become a liability to this office, and we can’t run a practice that way.””

““This whole thing is a joke, right? Are you filming this for some crazy show that Nola watches? If you are, I will totally date a midget,”” Lucy said firmly.

““Nola will give you your last paycheck,”” he said. ““I’m sorry it turned out this way, Lucy. Best of luck to you.””

And with that, he turned and walked away, as Lucy stood in the break room, her head swirling almost as quickly as it had when she’d thrown up on vacation in that guy’s toilet. Jilly appeared at the doorway.

““What happened?”” she asked. ““Are you okay?””

Lucy shook her head. ““My test came up positive for coke,”” she said with a little laugh and a shrug.

Jilly looked puzzled. ““What? When did you do *coke*?”” she asked.

““Oh, I dunno,”” Lucy responded. ““When was the last time I got my hair frosted? Long before you could buy a twelve-pack of drug tests at the mall and have your boss mix it up in the break room next to the coffeemaker. I don’t know what happened, Jilly. I haven’t done coke since my boobs were able to hold up a tube top on their own. I don’t even *like* coke. I hate the way its bitterness clings to the back of your throat. All I know is that the test is wrong. And they don’t believe me.””

““Lucy, you’ve got to say something,”” Jilly insisted.

““Oh, I did,”” Lucy said, laughing again in futility. ““So we did the test twice, and the second time I watched with my own eyes as Dr. Meadows stuck a gloved hand into my pee and twirled the stick around like it was a very dirty martini. I’d rather take an unemployment check than watch that again.””

And that's not all. They think I was trying to steal the deposit. Apparently, there was twenty thousand bucks in there that Nola neglected to mention. And you'd better be prepared to submit a sample yourself. Dr. Meadows said they're drug testing everyone because some sedatives are missing from the cabinet. You know how I thought yesterday was the crappiest day ever? Nope. It somehow got topped."

"What are you going to do?" Jilly asked, putting a soft hand on Lucy's arm.

"Good question," she replied. "I'm already a coked-out embezzler, so maybe I'll hit either a street corner and wait for my pimp or a karaoke bar that plays a lot of Stevie Nicks songs. Big deal. So they fired me. Fired me from a job where I spend my days scraping plaque buildup and rotten food from the mouths of people who don't know how to brush their teeth. Do you know I spent roughly six percent of my workday watching people spit? I could go to China if I wanted to see that all day long."

"Try calling Martin again," her friend pleaded.

Lucy took a deep breath. "I have," she admitted, exasperated. "I've been trying to call him since last night, and I tried again this morning. He's disconnected his cellphone and the house phone. What did I do? I don't know what the hell I did. Maybe I'll find out what this is all about when I get Tulip on his day off, on Thursday. I'm still in shock. I can't believe any of this is happening."

"Maybe you should go down to the store and try to talk to him," Jilly suggested.

"Confront Martin?" Lucy laughed. "At work? No way. Only if I never want to straighten this out. I've never known him to do anything remotely like this, but I do know that when Martin is ready to talk, he'll talk. All I can do is hope he will call me back, but if he's this upset, it's got to be on his own terms. Maybe he just needs time to calm down from whatever freaked him out, but my hope is not high. He threw me out without so much as one word of explanation. Truthfully, that's not something I want to lock into for a lifetime, you know? Cold feet is one thing, but this?"

"Yeah, you're right. You can stay at our place as long as you need to," Jilly reassured her.

"Thanks," Lucy said with a nod before Jilly gave her a hug, but Lucy already knew that although it was a selfless offer, it wasn't an option. How long could she sleep on Jilly's couch with no job and no references to get another one? How long could she bunk in the living room of a generous friend who she had hardly any money saved to get her own apartment? Easily, she would need to work for a month or two before she'd have enough money for a month's rent and security deposit. No one was going to rent to her if she was unemployed. And despite Jilly's love for Tulip, how could Lucy ask that her friends take in her dog, too? Lucy had one, and only one, option, so after she got everything she had from her cubby in the break room and her last measly check from Nola, she sat in the cab of her truck in the parking lot of the doctor's office and dialed her cellphone.

Flagstaff wasn't that far away, Lucy told herself. Two hours, two and a half, tops. She could haul a lot of her stuff up in one day, and easily make the drive down to get Tulip on Thursday. It was simple. Staying at her sister's was really the only thing she could do. The only true way family can throw you out is with an appearance by the sheriff holding a warrant.

And Alice was the only family Lucy had left besides an odd cousin here or there. They had been raised

by their grandmother Naunie, a fiery no-nonsense woman with an inch of patience that burned quicker than an oil-soaked candlewick. When they were barely toddlers, Lucy and Alice were collected and taken to the family farm by Naunie after both their parents had been killed in a car accident. Lucy and Alice grew up there with the help of an uncle until he was pulled into a combination of the way a vacuum cleaner sucks up a penny. After that, it had just been the three of them, making a life and creating a family of their own, depending only on each other. It was times like this that Lucy knew she could count on her sister.

““It’ll only be for a little while,”” Lucy told Alice. ““Won’t take me long to get my stuff together and figure something out. Plus, I haven’t seen you for a while. It’ll be good to catch up.””

““Actually, I could use the help around here. Things are a little tight,”” Alice replied. ““I haven’t gotten a child support check in months, and I just put almost everything I had into getting a new transmission for a car I shoulda junked years ago. I would love to have you, Lucy.””

““And Tulip, too?”” Lucy almost hesitated to ask.

““No question. Jared would love to have a pal to run around with in the backyard. A nine-year-old boy has more energy than he ought to,”” her sister added. ““It would be wonderful if your nephew got to know you better. The divorce was hard for him. My ex-husband has a new family now, so apparently it was easy for him to forget about his old one. It will be a good distraction to have you and Tulip here.””

So with help from Warren, Lucy once again loaded up the back of the truck with everything she could squeeze in, and left the remainder piled in the corner of Jilly’s garage, promising to come and claim it when she had all of this trouble sorted out. Before she left, Jilly made sure Lucy set herself up with a free email account since her old one was through the cable company back at Martin’s house. This way they could keep in touch, even if it was a while before Lucy got really settled.

““If your phone ever gets shut off, at least you can pop into one of those Internet cafés and check your email for a dollar,”” Jilly said as Lucy put her keys in the ignition and turned the engine over. ““Don’t let me lose you, Lucy.””

Lucy looked at her friend quizzically and laughed. ““How you gonna lose me, Jilly?”” She smirked. ““You’ve got a bunch of my stuff sitting where your car should be. I always come back for what’s mine!””

““All right, then,”” Jilly said as she smacked the window frame with her hand and smiled. ““You go on and go. You’ve always been nothin’ but trouble.””

Lucy laughed, and then backed out of the driveway and headed for I-17 in her truck, the bed covered with tarps and ropes to hold everything down. Whatever Lucy owned that wasn’t in the bed of the truck or stashed in Jilly’s garage was in her pocket. She was the only one who had failed the drug test in the office, and when Nola had handed her check over, she’d done so with the side note that Lucy’s benefits were paid up until the end of the month, including life and health insurance, but once the month was over, the benefits ended. Nola had also said that if Lucy had any plans to file for unemployment, she should know that Nola would see to it directly that Dr. Meadows would appeal on the grounds of financial fraud. So Lucy had cashed her last paycheck—less than a couple hundred

dollars---and with what she had left in the bank, the grand total rolled to \$430, folded in a lump, the front right pocket of her jeans.

On the drive up north, she tried not to remember what had crumbled over the last couple of days. Every time her mind snuck over and picked at that spot, she changed the station on the radio and tried to find a song she knew the words to. She laughed at the clichée when Gloria Gaynor wailed through the static that she would survive, and Lucy gave in and wailed along with her. *I'm not going to focus on any of it*, she told herself firmly. *I'm going to take what I've got and move on to something else, something new, something different. This is a whole new chance for me. A brand-new chapter in my life. I get to start over with not one single string.*

Lucy switched the radio station again. She sang along, mumbling at first, then clearer, more legible, and louder, and then as loud as she could.

Outside the truck on the interstate, the tall, spired cacti were flashing by less and less, slowly overcome by the dusty green brush that signaled that she was leaving the desert.

Lucy looked over and saw the brush form one continuous sage-colored blurry line. For the first time in what seemed like forever, she was glad.

It had been a while since Lucy had been up to Alice's, but when she pulled into the dirt circular driveway, the house looked shabbier than she remembered it, almost as if tweakers had spent the night and sucked some life out of it. A dry brown pot of withered petunias sat next to the door of the light blue, weathered, low-slung wood-paneled house. The posts of the spilt rail fence leaned in various unintentional directions. Pine needles from the towering trees blanketed the ground everywhere enough that it looked like they hadn't been raked up in years. Lucy knew it had been hard for Alice since she and her husband had split the year before, so if Lucy's living at the house would help her sister out, it made everything seem a little brighter. She decided that this would be good, for her to get out of Phoenix for a while, clear her head. She could water flowers or fix a fence. She wished she had been able to bring Tulip with her, but in two days, she'd be able to drive back to Phoenix to pick her up and really start everything all over again.

The front door opened, and Alice, tall and thin, her wispy hair back in a ponytail, stepped outside. With a wide smile, she came toward Lucy, walking down the driveway, barefoot, with her arms open wide. The joy on her face charged Lucy, and when they finally embraced in an earnest hug, Alice emitted a glad, true deep-throated laugh.

"I am so happy you're here," she said as she held Lucy close to her.

"Me, too," Lucy agreed with a full smile.

"I'm so sorry about Martin," Alice said with a squeeze, and then she pulled back to look at her sister. "'You haven't heard from him at all?'"

Lucy shook her head as she pulled back. "'He wouldn't call me back, and now his number's been disconnected,'" she said with a shrug. "'There's not much I can do, you know? Maybe he'll talk to me when I go pick Tulip up. He'll have to say *something*.'"

Alice held Lucy at arm's length. "And what about work? Is there any way to sort that out?"

Lucy shook her head again. "I was the only one who came up dirty, and I still can't tell you why," she answered. "But I've decided to look at this as an opportunity to start over again. New job, new life, new everything. Who knows what tomorrow will bring, right?"

Later that night, Lucy opened the oven door and pulled out a beautifully browned pan of meat loaf made from Naunie's beloved recipe, while Alice gave the mashed potatoes one last whirl with the hand mixer. Jared put the plates on the kitchen table, and lined the forks and knives along the sides. Then, and Lucy ruffled his hair as she reached over and placed the meat loaf on a trivet square in the middle. He smiled as he sat down at the dinner table. His Aunt Lucy had bought him a present, a little iPod he could keep in his pocket and listen to while taking the bus to and from school. Lucy knew she didn't have the money to be buying things like that, but it hadn't been that expensive, and when he showed it to his mother at the store display when they had all been out that afternoon, his face had lit up. It seemed to Lucy that he hadn't had much to smile about for a while, and that she should have been there for him long before this. The player made him happy, which, in turn, made Lucy happy. Besides, she was heading to the unemployment office first thing tomorrow, ready to battle any claim against her that Dr. Meadows might make, so week after next, there would be money coming in, whether or not she had found a job yet.

"Naunie's meat loaf!" Alice said excitedly as she placed the potatoes next to the meat loaf. "It smells so good. I can't wait to eat it. I miss all of her home cooking, and tomorrow I get to have a meat loaf sandwich for lunch right after I have my yearly review at work, in which, crossing fingers, I will get a nice big raise."

Lucy dropped a huge spoonful of mashed potatoes onto Jared's plate. "Of course you're going to get a raise. You've been working at the school district since you guys moved up here. This here is lucky meat loaf, you know! You can't eat Naunie's meat loaf and not be lucky!"

"All right, then. In that case, you're going to have good luck at the unemployment office," Alice said, raising her can of Diet Coke.

"To a raise and to early retirement," Lucy joked as she raised her soda can and Jared raised his glass of milk. "Cheers!"

"And to Naunie's meat loaf," Alice interjected. "Cheers!"

"What do you remember about Naunie?" Lucy asked her nephew after the toast.

"Well," Jared began after he took a forkful of fluffy, creamy potatoes. "I remember one summer when we were visiting the farm on vacation and she made me go out and run the hose over that big pig named Willy, who I think really liked being washed, because he snorted and then he smiled at me. The next night she said, 'Isn't Willy a good pig?' and I said yes, that he was very nice. And she said, 'No, not nice! *Tasty!*' and took another bite of her pork chop."

Lucy nodded. "Well, you know, she had a habit of doing that," she said simply, as Alice slid a slice of the meat loaf onto Jared's plate. "You learned not to get attached to anything on the farm, even smiling pigs. Do you remember anything else about her?"

““She seemed pretty cranky most of the time,”” Jared said honestly. ““But she did make good Wil chops.””

““You know, your Naunie was something else,”” Lucy offered. ““Not only could she dress and fry up pig, but there wasn’t anything she couldn’t do—and if she didn’t know how to do something when she started, she’d figure it out until she was finished. She never left anything undone. She had an iron will, that cranky old lady.””

““We were able to get the car fixed with the money when we sold her farm,”” his mother reminded him. ““And we bought you a new bike. I remember you being pretty happy about that.””

Her son nodded. ““I do like my bike,”” he said with a smile.

““It’s a good thing you still have that money from the farm,”” Alice said to Lucy. ““That will be a nice cushion for you until you find something.””

Lucy stopped. She didn’t know what to say. She now felt terrible about blowing the money on a vacation when Alice was struggling with simply paying for necessities. How could she possibly say that she had taken her share of the farm that her grandmother had broken her back to keep going and had blown it on a lousy trip to Hawaii? Lucy was quickly ashamed at what she had done with her portion, the pinnacle of the vacation spent hurling into a stranger’s toilet after drinking some horrible bitter beer, a bitterness that had hung in the back of her throat just like---

Lucy gasped and nearly dropped her fork.

Holy shit, she thought. Holy shit.

He laced my beer. That asshole roofied my beer with coke while I was waiting for Marianne.

Holy shit.

““Lucy!”” Alice yelled as she ran into the house, the door slamming loudly behind her. ““Lucy! I need your truck! My car won’t start! Where are your keys?””

Lucy shot awake on the sleeper couch when she heard Alice yelling. Light filled the living room with dusty yellow streams that stretched across the room.

““What?”” Lucy mumbled groggily.

““I need your keys!”” Alice demanded, poking her head through the doorway that connected the living room and kitchen. ““My review! My review is in twenty-five minutes, Lucy! I can’t be late. God, I can’t be late. *Where are your keys?*””

Lucy struggled to remember where she’d put them. Had she placed them on the kitchen counter? Were they in her purse?

““I d-dunno,”” she stammered groggily. ““Kitchen counter, purse. One of those.””

She heard Alice searching the counter, then the collision of metal keys against one another as she

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