



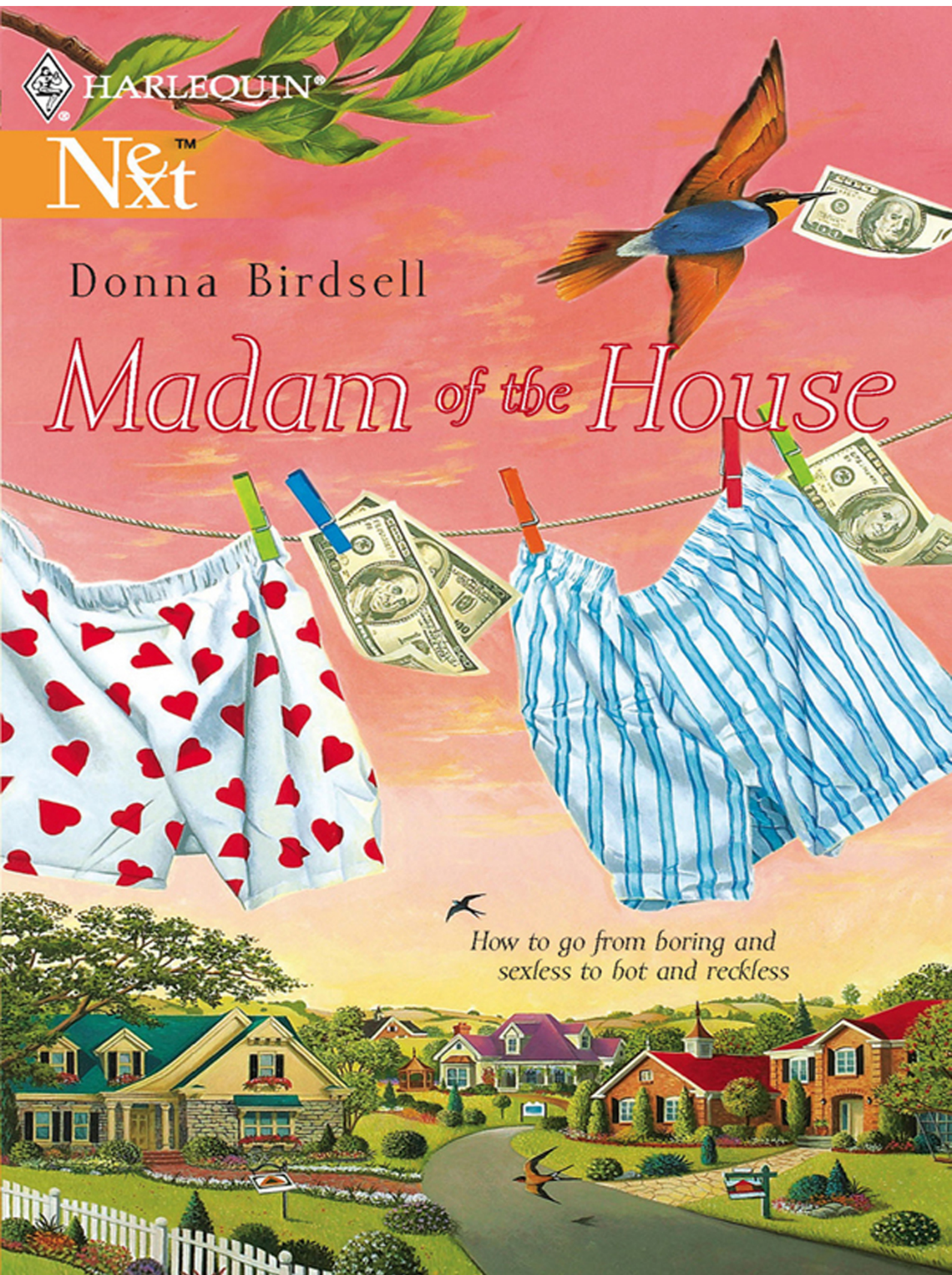
HARLEQUIN®

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Donna Birdsell

Madam of the House

*How to go from boring and
sexless to hot and reckless*



Mills & Boon M&B

Donna Birdsell

Madam Of The House

«HarperCollins»

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From Madame of the Million-Dollar Deal to Madam of the HouseIt was a great idea—why not bring lonely hearts together and make money? Real estate agent Cecilia Katz’s brilliant brainstorm gave a whole new meaning to an open house. Especially with her hunky new assistant hiring the hot young studs to mingle with bored housewives. Who dreamed a game of Truth or Dare would lead to a flourishing business for the nearly broke single mother?Until a stash of drugs is found and the cops start nosing around. Add in a lethally gorgeous real estate rival, and a risky business just got a whole lot riskier. But Cecilia’s up for the challenge. And with the help of Jake the babemagnet, watch her transform a life that’s boring and sexless to one that’s hot and reckless!

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“A lap dance with the waiter?”

Cecilia shook her head. “Are you insane? I can barely get the guy to give me a straw with my drink.”

Dannie shrugged. “Hey. You picked Dare, and that’s the dare. Take it or leave it. But if you leave it, you know what happens.”

The Fallback Dare.

“In the case of forfeit of an Official Dare,” Cecilia intoned, “the Daree shall be forced to perform the Fallback Dare, which shall consist of phoning her current crush, and confessing all feelings she might have to such crush.”

She pictured that phone call in her mind.

Hello, Jake? This is your boss, Cecilia. I think you’re really, really sexy, and I want you to know that even though you are my assistant and I’m just about old enough to be your mother, I have smoky sex dreams about you almost every night.

Donna Birdsell

Donna Birdsell lives near Philadelphia, where she absolutely doesn't get any of her ideas from her perfectly normal family, friends and neighbors.

She's addicted to reality television and chocolate, loves a good snowstorm and cooks to relax.

She spent many years writing press releases, newsletters and marketing brochures until a pregnancy complication kept her home from the office. She needed something to keep her busy, so she started her very first novel.

Five years later her dream of becoming a published fiction author came true when *The Painted Rose*, her first historical romance, was released.

She is excited about writing for Harlequin NEXT. You can reach Donna through her Web site at www.DonnaBirdsell.com.

Madam of the House



Donna Birdsell



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From the Author

Dear Reader,

I'm an '80s junkie.

What can I say? The music, the fashion, the valley-girl vocabulary. Totally awesome!

I was in high school in the '80s, and the decade brings back fond memories of big hair, big shoulders, big belts and big dates.

It also brings back fond memories of hanging out with my girlfriends, gossiping, doing our nails in study hall, debating who was the cutest boy in Spanish class and which guy from The Breakfast Club would probably be the best kisser. (I always voted for Emilio Estevez.)

I got many letters from readers who said the first Truth or Dare book, Suburban Secrets, brought back lots of good memories for them, too. I hope this book does the same. I also hope it brings a brief, thoughtful moment about why we, as a society, view older-woman/younger-man relationships with relative disdain.

Most of all, though, I hope it makes you laugh.

Come visit my Web site at www.DonnaBirdsell.com, where you can take an '80s quiz, e-mail me, or share your own memories by posting a message to my blog.

Best wishes,

Donna Birdsell

P.S. Many thanks to Susan Yannessa for her help with the real estate particulars. Of course, any mistakes are purely my own!

For Laina.

You should write a book.

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CHAPTER 1

“Kid,” Monty had told her, a half-smoked Cuban cigar dangling between his teeth—the permanent accessory accompanied all of Monty’s words of wisdom—“the best piece of advice I can give you is this—personal availability is the key to making sales. When you get a call from a potential buyer, drop everything.”

Cecilia Katz, known in southeastern Pennsylvania real estate circles as The Madam of the Million-Dollar Deal, had come to realize that everything in life could somehow relate back to the tenets imparted to her by her late mentor, Montgomery Frye.

Monty Frye was a firm believer that real estate equaled life. That if you didn’t put your whole heart and soul into a sale, you weren’t worth the paper your license was printed on. That if you weren’t willing to forsake all else to meet a client for a showing, you may as well be selling time-shares in the Poconos.

So when the muffled strains of “Viva Las Vegas” echoed through the silence of St. John’s Episcopal Church, distracting Monty’s mourners from one of the most uninspired eulogies Cecilia had ever sat through, she didn’t hesitate to answer her cell phone.

She dug through her purse, finding it wedged between a half-eaten PowerBar and an electronic lockbox she needed to put on the door of a house she’d just been contracted to sell.

“This is Cecilia,” she whispered into the phone.

The elderly woman beside her gave her an acid look.

“Hang on.” Cecilia hunkered into a crouch, working her way to the far end of the pew while, at the pulpit, a puffy-eyed golf buddy extolled the virtues of Monty’s tee shot.

She hurried up the side aisle of the church, through the vestibule and out the red, arched front door into a blinding October morning.

“Okay. What’s up?” She lit her first cigarette of the day, sucking the smoke deep into her lungs. Her exhale doubled as a sigh of relief.

“Marcia Hagstrom wants to look at the Grove place again.” The voice of Jake Eamon, her assistant, cut in and out over the crappy connection.

Jake was manning her phone at Belkin-Frye Real Estate while Cecilia and most of the other agents from the office attended the funeral for her unfortunate mentor, who had dropped dead of a heart attack during negotiations on an eight-bedroom, six-and-a-half-bath estate home on the Main Line.

Cecilia hadn’t been shocked at the news, but she had been saddened by it. Monty had been her chaperone into the world of real estate, her adviser, her friend and—when she’d finally hit her stride—her stiffest competition. He was now, of course, stiffer than ever.

Still, she felt absolutely no guilt over the fact that she’d left in the middle of the service to take a call. Monty would have done the same—especially these days, when sales were hard to come by.

“You’re kidding me,” Cecilia said, dragging on the cigarette. “She wants to look at it again?”

“Says she’s bringing her husband, but they need to do it right away. Maybe she’s really serious this time.”

Yeah, thought Cecilia, and maybe when I get home I’ll find George Clooney waiting for me in the bedroom in a tuxedo, with a bottle of Cristal and a dozen roses.

She crushed out the cigarette beneath the toe of her ridiculously expensive black patent-leather pump. “All right. Let’s hope the third time’s a charm. Tell them I’ll meet them at the house in—” she checked her watch “—twenty-five minutes.”

She headed for the Carmona Red Porsche Cayenne her husband had surprised her with two years ago, when times were better. Much better.

Now Ben was gone, and when she looked at the pricey SUV, all she could see were the seventeen payments she still owed.

She slid onto the black leather of the driver's seat and rested her head on the steering wheel. She wasn't a religious person—she'd pretty much ditched the strict Catholicism she'd been raised on when she married a nonpracticing Jew—but she figured as long as she was this close to a church, it couldn't hurt to pray.

“Dear God,” she said into the silence of the car. “It's been fourteen years since my last confession. I have a lot to answer for, I know. And I will, soon. I promise. But right now I need a favor.” She took a deep breath. “I really, really need to make this sale. I would appreciate it. And I'll try to keep the sinning to a minimum. Thank you.”

She made the sign of the cross, lit another cigarette and pulled out of the lot.

“See you, Monty.”

If there was real estate in the afterlife, Monty probably already had his license.

AFTER TWO LAPS through the 8,000-square-foot house and twenty minutes camping out in the master bedroom's walk-in closet, Cecilia still couldn't get a read on Grant Hagstrom. Apparently, neither could his wife.

“So? What do you think, darling?” Marcia linked her arm through her husband's.

Cecilia held her breath.

Grant Hagstrom frowned, the wrinkles on his forehead creating a relief map of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. “It's a little ostentatious for my taste.”

This from a man with an electric-pink tie and a diamond pinky ring the size of a Frisbee.

Marcia's surgically altered smile grew painfully tight. “Ms. Katz, may I speak to my husband alone, please?”

“Of course.”

Cecilia left them in the closet and went downstairs to the massive kitchen, where miles of sandalwood cabinets had undoubtedly required the clear-cut logging of at least an acre of Peruvian rainforest.

She sighed. The house really was ostentatious.

From the kitchen she could see the great room, which featured, as her entry in the Multiple Listing Service touted, “Gorgeous Twin Stone Fireplaces!” at either end, and “Fabulous Exposed Oak Beams!” across the ceiling.

Ostentatious, perhaps. But it was a great place. One of a kind.

The couple who owned the house had thrown some legendary parties, complete with helicopter rides, live elephants, fire eaters and—during one unseasonably warm Christmas—imported snow.

Don Grove was a semiretired music company executive who liked to show his clients a good time. Rumor had it the cops had been called out more than once to break up cat-fights between warring pop divas.

But the Groves had decided to move permanently to their home in London, and Cecilia had been trying to unload the house for nearly nine months. True, a place like this didn't sell overnight. But she hadn't earned her reputation as a closer by sitting on her high heels.

Last year she'd sold more than forty-two million dollars' worth of prime suburban Philadelphia real estate. She'd been in the Platinum Club at Belkin-Frye five years running. This was her forte.

She'd never had this much trouble selling a house before. And she had never needed to sell a house more. If the Hagstroms bought this place it would mean a huge commission, with her as both the listing agent and the selling agent. Six percent of three-point-two million dollars. Minus Belkin-Frye's twenty-percent cut of that commission, of course.

She could make up a lot of ground with that chunk of change. She hadn't pulled in a check like that for more than a year. The real estate market had been leveling off, and demand for these types of

homes—costly showpieces that required a fortune in upkeep—had dwindled. Unfortunately for her, they were the bulk of her business. She'd become a seller of “exclusive” properties.

She gnawed on a fake fingernail, watching as the Hagstroms emerged onto the flagstone terrace by the pool. Through a set of French doors, she could see Marcia's preternaturally smooth face, the red slash of her mouth forming the suggestion of a frown. Grant's back was toward the window, his bulk shifting beneath his wife's glare. Or what would have been a glare, had recent Botox treatments not made all forms of facial expression temporarily impossible.

“Come on, Marcia. Work it,” Cecilia whispered. And then she closed her eyes and prayed again. Wow. Twice in one day.

God wasn't going to know what to do with herself.

JAKE MET CECILIA at the reception desk, looking like he just stepped off the pages of a Neiman Marcus mailer in a moss-green sport jacket and gold striped tie. With his dark hair and money-green eyes, he drew slavering looks from every female in the office—and a few men, too.

Jake walked Cecilia back to her office. “So?”

Cecilia plunked her bag down on her desk and collapsed into the leather executive chair. “They passed.”

Jake shook his head. “I'm sorry.”

“Me, too. They're the only ones who've even looked at the place in three months.”

Jake came up behind her and kneaded the knots in her shoulders with the strong, gentle touch of one who had worked his way through college as a masseur. “I have faith in you. If you can't sell that house, nobody can.”

Cecilia sighed and closed her eyes, ignoring the butterflies in her stomach that sprang to life whenever Jake touched her. He was her assistant, for crying out loud. Her very young, very impressionable assistant. And she was, if not actually at least technically, still married.

But Jake had a knack for making her feel good.

Beneath his buttoned-down good looks beat the heart of a true flower child. His meditation/yoga/karma kind of attitude infused an air of calm into her hectic life and gave her momentary glimpses of what life might be like if she weren't so driven.

And although his eternal optimism drove her crazy, he made up for it by being so much fun to look at.

Jake ended the massage, letting his hands linger a bit too long on her shoulders. Or was that just her imagination?

Or maybe a little wishful thinking? Her mind whispered.

Oh, boy. She was sinning again, wasn't she?

She raised her eyes heavenward. “Sorry!”

“Sorry for what?” Jake asked.

“Not you. Never mind.” She scooted her chair up to her desk and shuffled some papers around. “Any other calls while I was out?”

“I don't know what's on your voice mail, but I only got one. Some woman named Dannie. I left the slip on your desk.”

“Dannie?” Cecilia dug through the piles on her desk. It had to be Dannie Peters—now Dannie Treat—her best friend from high school. Or one of them, anyway.

She and Dannie, Grace Poleiski and Roseanna Richardson had all run around together. They'd been inseparable, cutting classes, smoking in the girls' room and doing each others' nails in study hall.

She retrieved the pink message slip and checked the number. Yep, it was her. She picked up the phone and punched in Dannie's number with the eraser end of a pencil.

“Hello?” As it always did, Dannie's familiar voice sucked Cecilia directly back to 1984, when her legs were skinny and her hair was big, and her main concern was whether or not she'd let her current boyfriend get to second at the movies on Friday night.

“Hey, Dannie.”

“Cecilia!”

“What’s up? I haven’t heard from you in while. You doing okay?”

Cecilia heard shrieking in the background, and then Dannie’s muffled voice. “Richard Andrew Treat. Get the Tinkertoy out of your sister’s nose right now. And don’t give me that look.” Heavy sigh into the phone. “Sorry. Boys.”

“Say no more.” Cecilia’s own son was pretty mellow, but she remembered how her brothers could have brought a Marine drill sergeant to tears when they were kids. “What’s going on?”

“We’re having a last-minute girls’ night out,” Dannie said. “I talked to Roseanna yesterday, and we both agreed we could use a little fun. How about you?”

“Count me in. Where?”

“Philly. A bar in Center City called Caligula. They have an eighties night there that’s supposed to be a riot.”

“Sounds great. What time?”

“How about eight-thirty? We’ll get a jump on the young’uns.”

“Remember when our nights out didn’t even start until eleven?”

“Oh, yeah. I remember.”

Cecilia heard an awful screeching noise on the other end, then Dannie yelling, “Richard! Matchbox cars do not belong in the garbage disposal!” Dannie came back on the line, breathless. “Cecilia, I have to run. But I’ll see you tonight?”

“Absolutely.”

Cecilia placed the phone in the cradle and smiled. It would be great to see her old friends again. Especially Dannie, who’d been going through a rough time lately.

Her husband had died suddenly eight months before, on a business trip off the coast of Mexico, leaving Dannie with four kids under the age of six.

Cecilia sighed. Life hadn’t gone the way either of them had imagined it would when they were filling out their M.A.S.H. books and conferring with their Magic 8 Balls in study hall.

CHAPTER 2

Not every property is a winner. The outside might be mint, but the inside could look like crap in a blender.

Monty could have been talking about Ben. Mint on the outside, crap in a blender on the inside.

It was still strange, though, after four months, to come home and not see him sitting in sweatpants and a T-shirt at the computer. He'd be watching a stock ticker scroll across the bottom of the screen, the blue-gray light illuminating the dark stubble on his chin, Coke cans and junk-food wrappers littering the floor around him.

There had never been a "Hi, honey. How was your day?" Or, "You look exhausted. Should I cook dinner?"

Maybe a "Banco de Chile is down two points, but it's going to rally. I can feel it." Or "I just bought five hundred shares of Sara Lee at rock bottom."

In reality, Ben's self-proclaimed skill at predicting stock performance sucked. Big time. Before Cecilia had discovered that, though, he'd managed to lose more than sixty thousand dollars of their joint savings day-trading on the Internet.

She kicked her shoes off near the door and pressed the button on the answering machine sitting on the hall table.

"Ms. Katz. This is Melvin Weber from the Catalina School again." A dry, clipped male voice emanated from the machine. Cecilia's stomach did a little flip. "I'm calling to remind you that we haven't received payment for this semester. Please let us know when we can expect it."

"Ugh." Cecilia exhaled. She stared at the blinking light on the machine. Seven more messages, most of them undoubtedly similar to the one she just heard.

Unable to listen without some sort of fortification, she shed her jacket, unbuttoned the top button of her blouse and grabbed a bag of M&M's from the pantry.

As she munched on a handful, she leafed through the pile of mail she'd brought in.

Bills.

Visa. American Express. Lord and Taylor. Boxwood Country Club.

She was still paying off charges from a year ago. Most of them were Ben's, but she'd done her share of frivolous spending when she'd believed there would be no end to the cash flow.

She picked up an envelope from Cyber-Trade, ignoring the fact that it wasn't addressed to her. If Ben was going to continue to have his mail sent to the house, it was fair game. She ran a fingernail under the edge and slid the statement out.

He'd lost another six thousand dollars? Where was he getting the money? He'd cleaned out their joint accounts long ago.

She picked up the phone and dialed Ben's mother's house. Ben answered on the first ring.

"I just opened your statement from Cyber-Trade by accident."

Silence.

"Where are you getting this kind of money, Ben?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it? I'm sitting here busting my butt, trying to pay off the debts you left me with, and you're losing another six thousand dollars?"

"I had some money in savings at work. I never closed out the account when they laid me off, so they mailed me a check last week."

"Then you should have sent it to me, to pay some bills."

"But I'm going to make a killing, Cece. I have a really hot lead on an IPO—"

“Ben, stop,” she said. She rubbed a spot on her forehead that had all the markings of an impending tension headache. “Ever since you lost your job, you’ve done nothing but sit in front of the computer. I know it’s hard to get back out there, but you have to try.”

“I’m not ready yet.”

“Well, when do you think you’ll be ready? We’ve got bills piled up to the ceiling, and I can’t handle them anymore.”

“That isn’t all my fault, you know. I’m not the one with a closet full of five-hundred-dollar shoes. And you’re the one who wanted Brian in that private school. It’s costing us a damn fortune.”

“You mean it’s costing me a damn fortune,” she snapped. She took a deep breath and lowered her voice. “He’s got problems, Ben. He needs help.”

“The kid would be fine if you’d just leave him alone. Give him some time.”

Ben steadfastly refused to acknowledge the complexity of their son’s difficulties. It didn’t help that all three developmental pediatricians she’d gone to had given them different diagnoses. One put Brian on the autistic scale. Another called it a language delay. The third said he’d catch up with the other children, eventually.

When Brian was a toddler, Ben had insisted his social issues were merely shyness, his speech difficulties just “a boy thing.” But as Brian got older, Ben handled the problems by simply ignoring them.

Cecilia, on the other hand, had always taken an aggressive approach. When the school district refused to provide therapy for him because there was no clear diagnosis of his difficulties she discovered the Catalina School.

It had been a godsend. It was a place where her son could get intensive daily therapy and live with other children who had the same types of problems, and it was close enough to visit every weekend.

Although Brian’s first few weeks away had almost killed her, their son had adjusted beautifully to the boarding school and was improving every day.

“Brian is getting a fantastic education at the Catalina School,” she said to Ben. “But that kind of individualized attention doesn’t come cheap.”

“That’s what it always comes down to, doesn’t it? Money.” Ben’s tone was bitter.

“In this case, yes. When it can pay for the best education for our son, it does.”

“Why is everything about Brian? Ten years it’s been all about him. I needed a little attention, too, you know. I could have used some sympathy.”

Cecilia squeezed her eyes closed. “I was there for you, Ben. I tried to be understanding. I know what you’re going through is hard, but you’ve got to pull it together.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“I want you to see someone,” she said. “A psychologist or a psychiatrist or something. I really think you have an addiction.”

“An addiction?”

“Yes, a day-trading addiction. It’s like gambling. How much do you have to lose to stop?”

“You’re always blowing things out of proportion,” he argued.

“You don’t think losing almost seventy thousand dollars qualifies as a problem?” She could feel a tiny vein pulsing in her forehead.

“It takes money to make money.”

How many times had she heard that? Enough to know that he’d never change his mantra.

She rubbed the vein in her forehead and forced herself to calm down. “Whatever. Just send me some money before you blow it all on your IPO, okay?”

“Great. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” The dial tone hummed in her ear.

He’d hung up on her. Again.

She grabbed a glass of wine and walked out on the deck, lighting a cigarette and staring out over the lawn.

The green of the seventh hole of Boxwood Country Club, the golf course her development was built around, winked like an emerald through the trees. In one corner of the yard sat a little patch of hard, brown dirt.

Brian's garden, his project for the past summer.

Unfortunately, he'd planted it in a section of the yard that got about thirteen minutes of mild morning sunlight, and never managed to grow more than a single daffodil and a couple of small, rubbery carrots.

They'd eaten the carrots one night with dinner, and she'd never seen her son so proud.

She smiled. He was allowed to come home for the long Columbus Day weekend, and she had lots of things planned. A trip to the aquarium in Camden, and maybe the Franklin Institute. He loved exploring the giant replica of the human heart there, and putting his hand on the static generator so his hair stood on end.

Someday, she hoped, he'd be living with her again, and they could do fun things all the time, not just on long weekends and during the summer.

She blinked against the stinging behind her eyes— Cecilia Katz did not cry—and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray she kept on the deck.

At least she had a night out with the girls to look forward to.

The last time they'd gone out, they'd ended up in Atlantic City at three in the morning, playing craps with a busload of senior citizens from the Pleasant Park Rest Home in Jersey City.

One hot roller, an octogenarian named Myra, walked away with a stack of twenty-five-dollar chips as long as her liver-spotted arm. But Cecilia and her friends hadn't been so lucky. They'd cleaned all the change out of the bottoms of their purses, maxed out their debit cards, and had to pay the tolls on the way home with a credit card.

But damn, it had been fun.

She needed another night like that. Desperately.

"Let's face it, Cecilia," she said out loud. "You need a lot of things desperately."

CHAPTER 3

Everyone likes a new house. Everything is shiny and the roof doesn't sag. But the older ones, they're the ones with real character.

Caligula, the club where Cecilia was supposed to meet Dannie and Roseanna, was cool and stylish, boasting faux-marble columns and several seating areas strewn with over-stuffed throw pillows and understuffed young women.

Cecilia scanned the room, but Dannie and Roseanna hadn't yet arrived.

She checked her watch. It was early, and the place wasn't anywhere near capacity yet. The hard-core partyers wouldn't roll in until the next shift. At thirty-nine and three-quarters, Cecilia was well past her partying prime, sent down to the minor leagues along with the other Gen-Xers and the kids with fake IDs.

Cecilia grabbed a table and lit a cigarette, watching the door for her friends. A heart-stoppingly gorgeous waiter in a short little toga and gold-leaf headpiece wandered over to take her order.

"Would you like a drink?"

"How about a club soda with lime for now. I'm waiting for some friends."

"Sure thing." He winked, and her stomach fluttered just a little.

She admired the flex of his calf muscles in the laced up sandals he wore. She imagined Jake would look pretty good in that getup.

Oops. Another impure thought for confession. She was really racking them up.

The DJ made an announcement to kick off Caligula's '80s night, and started with one of Cecilia's favorites, "Superfreak" by Rick James. She watched the door as a group of twenty-something women trickled in, with tiny shirts and tiny waists and tiny rhinestone-studded cell-phone purses hanging from their wrists. They pretended to ignore the group of twenty-something guys hanging by the door who were giving them the once-over.

Dannie and Roseanna came in behind the young women, their heads pressed together, laughing. They made no bones about checking out the guys near the door, and much to Cecilia's satisfaction, they got several appreciative glances in return.

The women located Cecilia and navigated through the growing crowd.

"Hey, chicklet!" Roseanna plunked down into one of the seats and gave Cecilia a peck on the cheek. "How's it going?"

"Eh. How about you?"

"Eh."

"How's work?"

Roseanna, a die-hard music fanatic, was a writer for the local music-scene magazine. She always joked it wasn't so much the poor man's version of Rolling Stone, it was the really, really destitute man's version.

"I don't know, Cece. Maybe I'm getting too old for this job."

"Oh, come on. You know more about music than anybody I know."

Roseanna shook her head. "I just can't get into the new stuff, you know? I feel like my parents sometimes. I just want to say, 'What is this crap? This isn't music.'"

"Well, sit back and relax, 'cause you're not going to hear any of that crap tonight," Dannie said. "It's all oldies but goodies here."

As if to punctuate Dannie's words, a song by Roseanna's all-time favorite band, the Aching Loins, blasted out over the dance floor. The three women screamed.

The hot waiter materialized with Cecilia's club soda.

"No way, Spartacus. Take that back," Dannie said. "And bring us a round of Gladiators."

In a couple of minutes he returned with a trayful of pretty pink drinks.

Cecilia removed the pineapple wedge and took a sip. “Why do they call this a Gladiator?”

Dannie gave her an evil grin. “Because it’s gonna kick your ass.”

The Gladiator, did, indeed, live up to its name, and by the second round, the girls were making some noise.

They tore up the dance floor to “Love Shack” by the B52s, “You Spin Me Right Round” by Dead or Alive, and “Head to Toe” by Lisa Lisa, and had returned to the table when Roseanna pointed to someone who’d just come in the door. “Look.”

A tall woman in a red silk jacket scanned the crowd. She looked familiar.

“OH. MY. GOD. It’s Grace Poleiski,” Dannie said.

“I saw her at Beruglia’s when I went there for lunch today,” Roseanna said, grinning. “I didn’t think you guys would mind if I invited her.”

“Are you kidding!” Cecilia laughed. “It’s gonna be just like old times.”

AFTER THE USUAL NICETIES about who’d lost weight (Cecilia and Roseanna), who’d lost a husband (Grace, Cecilia and Dannie) and who’d lost the ability to party all night and still function in the morning (all of them), the waiter appeared with a tray of pale-orange shots.

He set one in front of each of them, pulled a pack of matches out of the folds of his toga and lit the shots. Low blue flames danced on the surface of the liquor.

“Don’t forget to blow ’em out before you drink ’em,” he said. “We’ve had a couple of mishaps.”

Roseanna smiled. “Remember when Dannie accidentally lit her hair on fire while she was smoking a cigarette in the girls’ bathroom?”

“What did she expect?” said Cecilia. “She used so much hairspray, her hair wouldn’t have moved in a hurricane.”

“Come on.” Dannie laughed. “My hair wasn’t any worse than anyone else’s. In fact, I remember Grace getting hers tangled in the volleyball net in gym class. That hairdo had to be at least a foot high.”

They all cracked up.

The waiter walked away, his tight little butt all but peeking out from under the toga.

Dannie propped her chin up on her hand. “Those look like my sheets he’s wearing.”

“You wish,” Cecilia said.

Grace pulled a bunch of pictures out of her purse and passed them around.

“Oh, God. I remember this skirt,” Roseanna said. “I couldn’t get one thigh in there, now.”

“Sure you could,” Dannie said. “It would be a little tight, though.”

“Ha, ha.” Roseanna passed the pictures to Cecilia. “Hey, remember when we used to play Truth or Dare in study hall?”

“Yeah. I think Mr. Montrose almost had a heart attack,” said Cecilia. “You’d always dare me to lean over his desk to ask him a question.”

“He couldn’t stand up for the rest of the class,” Dannie said.

“In his defense, you did have some pretty nice boobs,” said Roseanna.

“To Mr. Montrose.” Grace raised the shot the waiter had just delivered. They all toasted Mr. Montrose and blew out their Flaming Togas.

“Let’s play,” said Roseanna.

“Play what?”

“Truth or Dare.”

“Here?” Grace said. “You’re crazy.”

“It’ll be fun,” said Dannie.

“Why not?” said Cecilia.

Music thumped in the background. Motley Crüe belted out, “Girls, Girls, Girls.”

“What the hell,” Grace said.

“Who’s going first?” Dannie asked.

“I will.” Cecilia had been first in lots of things. She’d been the first to get a bra, the first to get her period, and the first to wear gauchos to school.

She was the first girl on the debate team (she never lost a debate), the first freshman to go to the senior prom (with Kyle Farber, the captain of the debate team), and the first one to let a boy see her underwear (Kyle Farber, the night of the prom).

So it only followed that she’d go first. At least, this was the logic after three Gladiators and a Flaming Toga.

“Okay, Truth or Dare?” Grace said.

“Dare,” said Cecilia.

Dannie rubbed her hands together. “Great. Here’s one. Get our waiter to bring us a round of shots on the house. By whatever means possible.”

“Nah, that’s too easy,” Grace interrupted. “How about she has to get the waiter’s phone number?”

“Oh, that’s good.” Dannie laughed.

“Are you kidding me? Shots? Phone numbers? That’s lame.” Roseanna closed one eye and tipped her glass toward Cecilia. “Here’s a dare. You have to get the waiter to give you...a lap dance.”

The three other women hooted and clinked glasses.

“A lap dance?” Cecilia shook her head. “Are you insane? I can’t get that guy to give me a lap dance. I can barely get him to give me a straw with my drink.”

Roseanna snickered.

Dannie shrugged. “Hey. You picked Dare, and that’s the dare. Take it or leave it. But if you leave it, you know what happens.”

The Alternate Dare.

“In the case of forfeit of an Official Dare,” Cecilia intoned, “the daree shall be forced to perform the Alternate Dare, which shall consist of phoning her current crush, and confessing all feelings she might have for such crush.”

Cecilia imagined how that phone conversation might go:

“Hello, Jake? This is your boss, Cecilia. I’m calling to tell you I think you’re really, really sexy. You smell great, and I love the dimples on your earlobes. I want you to know that even though you are my assistant and I’m just about old enough to be your mother, I have smoky sex dreams about you almost every night.”

A wave of queasiness washed over her.

“No copping out,” Roseanna warned. “We swore on our posters of Jon Bon Jovi.”

“I remember. Jeez. Did I say I wasn’t going to do the dare? I never said I wasn’t going to do the dare.” Cecilia sucked down the rest of her drink and ran her fingers through her hair. “Just... get him over here.”

Dannie waved to the waiter, who stood near the drink station at the bar, as still as a Roman statue and twice as gorgeous.

Cecilia’s heart sped up to Moderately Dangerous on the heart attack scale. As the waiter neared, he morphed for a moment into Jake.

Cecilia blinked and Jake was gone, but the stud-boy who now stood before her was only a slightly less fantasy-inducing alternative.

She forced herself to stay cool. “Hey, Spartacus, how about a lap dance?”

Grace spewed a mouthful of Gladiator all over the table. Dannie covered her face with her hands. Only Roseanna was able to keep a straight face.

The waiter’s eyes grew wide. Cute. Like Bambi.

Oh, dear Lord. She was propositioning Bambi.

She quickly banished that image from her mind.

“Pardon me?” The waiter said, apparently believing he’d misunderstood.

If only.

“May I have a lap dance, please?” Cecilia waved two twenty dollar bills in front of him, which he pretty much ignored.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but this isn’t that kind of establishment.”

She ignored the ma’am thing. “What kind of establishment is that?”

“The management doesn’t allow hands-on entertainment, if you know what I mean. We have strict rules.”

She fished another twenty out of her wallet and added it to the others, fanning herself with the bills. “It wouldn’t exactly be hands-on, now would it?”

Spartacus had finally taken notice of the bills, and moved a little closer. Close enough for her to smell the fabric softener on his toga.

She fished another twenty—her last one—out of her wallet. There went her lunch money for the next two weeks. She was quite fond of lunch. This lap dance had so better be worth it.

“And if there were no hands involved,” she continued, “you wouldn’t exactly be breaking the rules, would you?” she said.

“No, I suppose I wouldn’t.” He glanced around, presumably to make sure no management was watching.

Prince’s “Little Red Corvette” blared over the sound system. Perfect.

Cecilia drove it home. “What do you say, Spartacus?” She waved the eighty dollars in front of him.

The waiter took the money and tucked it into the folds of his toga. “I say, get ready for the best lap dance you ever had.”

“TONIGHT’S GOING TO go down in history as the best Truth or Dare game ever,” Dannie said, rubbing an ice cube on her neck.

“It is, isn’t it?”

Cecilia puffed on a cigarette, making tiny smoke rings by tapping on her cheek. She glanced over her shoulder at Grace, who sat at the bar sucking face with an unbelievably hot stranger.

They’d dared her to give him the undies she was wearing. And now, it seemed, she might end up giving him a whole lot more.

“I don’t believe it,” Dannie said. “Look at her. She actually did it.”

“She always had guts.”

“She sure did.” Dannie’s eyes held a faraway look.

Cecilia had always been a teeny bit jealous of Grace’s in your-face audacity. Cecilia may have been first at lots of things, but Grace was the group’s official rebel. The one time Cecilia had been a rebel herself, she’d gotten nailed for smoking in the dorms at cheerleading camp.

She and her roommate had caused the whole squad to get kicked out of camp, and they had to spend the entire football season on the sidelines, freezing their butts off in those short little skirts.

She exhaled a cloud of smoke. She really had to quit smoking. She’d promised Brian months ago that she’d stop by the time he came home for Columbus Day weekend.

She checked her watch. Midnight. Time was officially up.

“Okay, we’ve lost Grace,” Dannie said. “And Roseanna’s no good anymore.”

Roseanna’s head currently lay on the table, on a pillow of cocktail napkins.

“Doesn’t matter,” Cecilia said. “You’re the only one who hasn’t had a turn at the game, and I can handle it. Truth or Dare?”

Dannie slumped in her chair. “I dunno. You pick for me.”

Cecilia chewed on her straw for a minute. “Okay. Truth. I want to know what’s going on with you.”

“What do you mean?”

Cecilia leaned in. “I know you, Dannie. Something’s wrong. Are you missing Roger?”

Dannie snorted. “Yeah. I don’t know what I miss more, the lying or the cheating.” She shook her head. “Oh, God. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but he was such a shit.” She began to cry.

Cecilia lifted Roseanna’s head and retrieved a cocktail napkin, which she handed to Dannie. “He cheated on you?”

Dannie nodded. “At least once that I know of. But probably way more than that.” She sighed. “He was a good father, though.”

That was Dannie. Always looking at the shiny side of the penny.

“I’m so sorry,” Cecilia said. “But you know you could have talked to me about it. Anytime.”

“I guess I was embarrassed, which is just silly. Life would be so much better if we could all just share our secrets and get them off our chests. Don’t you think?”

“Hmm.” Cecilia chewed on an ice cube. “As a matter of fact...”

Dannie dabbed her eyes with the now-soggy napkin. “What? You have a secret, too?”

Cecilia pushed her shot away. “I really have to sober up.”

Dannie squeezed her hand. “Come on. I’m your friend. Maybe I can help.”

“Well, the thing is, I’m—” Cecilia sighed “—well, I’m flat broke.”

CHAPTER 4

Everything is negotiable.

As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

Here she was, complaining to Dannie of all people. Dannie, a widow with four kids, who never had enough of anything.

“Cece, let me help you,” Dannie said. “I can lend you some money.”

Cecilia shook her head. “No, I’m going to get out of this somehow.” She didn’t want to tell Dannie that whatever she could lend her wouldn’t pay the charge-card bill for Ben’s golf shirts.

Dannie looked as if she were going to say something, but stopped.

Cecilia sighed. She supposed getting everything off her chest couldn’t hurt. It was a night for truths as well as dares, wasn’t it? “The truth is, Ben never even tried to find a job after he was laid off. He started day-trading instead. In the beginning he made some money, but mostly he’s been losing. A fortune. My fortune.”

“But your job...” Dannie said.

Cecilia shook her head. “The real estate market is tanking. I can’t sell a house to save my life. If this keeps up, I’m going to have to start doing open houses again.” She felt the dreaded sting behind her eyes again.

Dannie gave her a sympathetic look. “Anything I can do, let me know. Okay?”

Cecilia nodded. She sucked down a glass of water and chewed on the ice as she and Dannie sat there together, lost in their own thoughts.

The first few notes of Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock and Roll” blared over the speaker system. Tom Cruise slid through Cecilia’s mind in his underwear, and she smiled. “Oh, screw it. Let’s just have a good time.”

She and Dannie sang along with the song and reminisced about the night they’d sneaked into a movie theater to see Risky Business. They’d only been fourteen, not legally allowed into an R-rated flick, but a friend who worked at the Cineplex let them in.

Years later, Cecilia realized that most of the movie had gone right over her head, but the image of Tom Cruise in his tighty whities had certainly stuck.

“Hey, I know,” Dannie yelled over the music. “You could do what Joel did in Risky Business.”

“What? Hire a hooker?”

Dannie laughed. “No. You know, have a party. Round up some call girls and show some rich boys a good time.”

“Right.” Cecilia laughed, trying to picture herself arranging a “good time” for her friends’ teenage sons. Yuck.

Roseanna raised her head. “Party?”

Cecilia stubbed out her cigarette. “Yeah, there’s a kegger out on Creek Road. Wanna go?”

Dannie laughed at the mention of their favorite high school hangout. “Come on. Let’s get Rosie out of here.”

“Okay, just let me check on Grace first.”

Cecilia pushed her way through the crowd to the other side of the bar, where Grace was still sucking face with the leather-clad hottie.

“You okay?” she asked.

Grace nodded.

“How are you getting home?”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“Okay.” Cecilia winked at the guy. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he said. Rose Frost lipstick smeared his lips.

Cecilia felt a flash of envy for her friend. She still remembered that feeling—that out-of-body high—that always accompanied brand-new kisses.

Cecilia returned to the table and waved to Grace. She made a fist and held it to her cheek like a telephone receiver, mouthing the words, “Call me.”

Then she and Dannie slung their arms around Roseanna and dragged her through the crowd toward the door.

“Come on, gorgeous. Let’s try to get you home before you lose your cookies.”

A DULL PAIN throbbed behind Cecilia’s eyes as she brewed a pot of coffee the following morning. Her breath smelled like a burned-out distillery, and her fingertips were yellow from nicotine.

She had to stop drinking. She had to stop smoking. Today. Now.

She took the pack of cigarettes from her handbag and emptied them into the sink, firing up the garbage disposal. The sound bore into her brain like a jackhammer.

Oh, man. This might not be the best day to quit smoking.

Her malaise eased a bit when she realized that in just a few hours she’d be on her way to pick up Brian at the Catalina School.

She hummed “Old Time Rock and Roll” as she flipped through a shoe catalog, planning her afternoon with her son until an annoying beeping sound coming from the street disturbed her thoughts.

It sounded like a trash truck, but it wasn’t trash day.

Coffee mug in hand, she wandered through the dining room and into the formal living room, to the bowed window overlooking the driveway. A green-and-yellow truck was backing into the drive. Sunlight glinted off the shiny silver flat bed, which seemed to be falling off the truck.

No, it wasn’t falling. It was tilting.

She squinted, unable to see too clearly without her contact lenses. What...?

“Shit!” She bolted for the front door, spilling coffee down the front of her robe and onto the white wool carpet.

She reached the steps that led down to the drive just as a large man with an obscene amount of butt-crack showing hooked the rear axle of her Cayenne to a winch.

“Hey!” she shouted. “What are you doing?”

He stood up. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re trying to steal my car.”

He guffawed. “That’s a good one.”

“No, really. What are you doing?”

The guy grinned. “I’m repossessing your vehicle.”

“What!”

“Look.” He waddled over and handed her a clipboard with a blue form containing her name and address, a description of the Cayenne, the VIN number and the license plate number.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

He spit a stream of tobacco juice onto the lawn. “You ain’t made your payments, lady. I’m taking the car.”

“Oh, no. No no no.” She read the name in the blue oval above his shirt pocket. “Ed, you can’t take my car. I need my car.”

“Sorry. I guess you shoulda thought about that when you weren’t writing those checks.” He walked to the back of the truck and threw a lever. The Cayenne slowly began to move up onto the tilted flatbed.

“Stop! You’re not listening to me. I—”

Oh, God. What was she going to do?

“I have an emergency. I’m supposed to donate a kidney this afternoon.”

Ed snorted. “Like I haven’t heard that one before.”

“I’m delivering toys for underprivileged children?”

Ed shook his head.

She exhaled through pursed lips. “Hang on, please. Wait here one minute.”

She ran into the house and found her purse, digging out her wallet. Damn it! Empty!

She’d given that waiter every penny she had for the lap dance.

She ran for the door, stopping briefly at the hall mirror to smooth down her sleep-rumpled hair.

Discarding her coffee-stained robe, she ran back outside in nothing but her baby doll pajamas.

Ed’s eyes bugged.

“Listen,” she said, “I’m begging you. You can’t take my car.”

Ed’s eyes gravitated to her chest, as if they were magnets and her breasts were little refrigerators.

“If I had any money I’d give it to you, I swear. But I spent it all on a lap dance last night.”

She could see Ed working the image through his head, and she realized it was probably a much different scenario than the one that had actually occurred.

She wasn’t about to bust his bubble.

Tiny beads of sweat formed on Ed’s upper lip. He shook his head. “I can’t. I have a repo contract with the bank.”

“It was a great lap dance,” she said, pooching out her lower lip and thrusting a hip toward him.

“Lady—”

“Please, Ed.” She reached out and touched the collar of his blue work shirt lightly. Beseechingly. “I’m having a really, really bad week.”

Dear God, I’ll see you in confession on Sunday. I swear. Until then, just one more little favor?

Ed’s face softened. Was it possible he’d been influenced by the Supreme Being? Or was he just hypnotized by her breasts?

“I promise I’ll take care of this next week,” she said in a whispery voice.

Ed shook his head, but ripped the work order off the clipboard. “I guess I could misplace the paperwork for a little while. But if the bank doesn’t cancel the order, I’ll be back.”

“Of course. Oh, wow. Thank you so much.”

“Right.”

He bent down to unhook the winch, giving Cecilia an eyeful of that special cleavage only overweight service men seemed to possess.

That reminded her. She had a rump roast in the freezer she wanted to thaw.

CECILIA SQUEEZED ONTO a bench in the sauna at the Boxwood Country Club Fitness Center, hoping to sweat out the remnants of alcohol and nicotine from the night before.

The place was filled to busting with women attempting to fight the ravages of age by any means possible. Physical, chemical, surgical—anything to stave off the dreaded sags and bags of middle age.

She stretched out her legs, exhausted from almost an hour on the treadmill, which reminded her of her life right now. Lots of effort to get absolutely nowhere.

The door to the sauna opened and an aerobicized woman with short, bottle-blond hair entered, wrapped in one of the blue-and-white-striped club towels.

“Hey, Marjorie.”

Marjorie Almswhite, one of the wealthier women who frequented the club, was a widow with a wicked sense of humor and an eye for young men.

“Hey, Cecilia. Were you spinning?”

“No, just the treadmill today.”

“Too bad. Kevin was teaching the spinning class.”

The heat seemed to go up a few degrees in the sauna, as all the women audibly sighed.

Kevin Trawler, one of the fitness instructors at the club, wasn’t what you’d call classically handsome. But he had a certain naive charm and the tightest butt Cecilia had ever seen. He was also about half the age of most of the women who frequented his classes.

“I know,” Cecilia said. “I couldn’t get in. The class was filled.”

“Early bird gets the worm,” said Gretchen Stevens in a smug, singsong voice.

“Are you?” Marjorie asked.

“Am I what?”

“Getting the worm?”

They all laughed.

“As a matter of fact,” Gretchen said defensively, “I caught Kevin looking at my boobs today during class.”

“Really?” said Marjorie. “Are you sure he wasn’t looking at your belly button? They’re in the same general area these days.”

Gretchen pulled her towel tight around her and huffed out of the sauna, slamming the door behind her.

Some of the women snickered.

Cecilia shook her head. “Getting the worm...”

Marjorie sighed. “Honey, it’s been so long since I got a worm like that, I wouldn’t remember what to do with it.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to get a worm like that,” said Betsy Gardner, the club’s resident airhead.

“At the bait shop,” Marjorie returned.

“Don’t you mean the jail-bait shop?” said Cecilia.

“What? You don’t approve?” Marjorie said.

Cecilia shrugged. “Far be it from me to ruin your fishing fantasies. I just think I’d prefer someone a little more...mature.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire, her mind whispered, as the memory of Jake Eamon’s hands on her shoulders pulsed like a subliminal message through her brain.

She shifted uncomfortably. It was getting way too hot in that sauna.

“Who wants an old worm when you can have a nice young one?” Marjorie said.

Betsy leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. “I hate to break it to you Marjie, but the only way you’re getting a nice young one is if you pay for it.”

Marjorie shrugged. “Hey, if I knew of a good bait shop around here, I’d shell out in a second.”

By the silence in the sauna, Cecilia suspected they were all thinking the same thing.

Too bad it wasn’t that easy.

“Let’s face it,” Betsy said gloomily. “None of us is going fishing anytime soon.”

CECILIA MADE a quick stop at the Shop ‘n Bag on her way to the turnpike. She’d run out of a couple of things, including ibuprofen, which she desperately needed at the moment, both for her hangover and a raging case of cramps. She also wanted to pick up some of Brian’s favorite snacks for the car ride.

She trudged through the store, studiously avoiding the customer service counter and the cigarettes, loading her basket with over-the-counter products she hoped would stave off the symptoms of various ailments she’d been cultivating. Tension headaches from work. Corns from the absurd high heels she’d become addicted to. Pulled muscles from the gym. Heartburn from Ben.

She picked up a bag of salted pumpkin seeds and some granola bars for Brian, and snagged a giant bag of M&M’s for herself. Chocolate had powerful healing properties.

At the checkout, she plunked her basket on the conveyor belt and dug through her purse for her VIP card. She held it out to the checker, a young, all-American-type guy with a mop of blond hair, who completely failed to notice she was there.

That never would have happened five years ago.

Okay, maybe it would have happened five years ago. But definitely not ten years ago.

“So what’re you gonna do?” said the checker to the bagger, another frat-boy type. Both wore Temple University sweatshirts.

“I don’t know,” said the bagger. “I can just about afford beer with what I make here. Tuition? Forget it. I’m going to have to take next semester off.”

“Excuse me...” Cecilia waved her card at the checker.

Ignored again.

“But you’re supposed to graduate in May, dude,” the checker said.

The bagger shrugged. “What can I do? I already have so many loans out, I’m gonna be freakin’ forty by the time I pay them off.”

“Hey!” Cecilia said.

The boys finally looked at her.

“Forty isn’t that old.”

The checker’s ears turned red. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“Ma’am,” she muttered under her breath.

The checker unloaded the stuff from her basket and ran it over the scanner.

“Gimme those,” she said, grabbing the M&M’s out of the bagger’s hand and opening them with her teeth.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Stop calling me ma’am.”

“Yes, ma—” He clammed up.

The checker scanned the box of tampons she’d picked up, and a knowing look passed between the two guys.

She pointed at the bagger. “Oh, you think I’m just a hormonal old lady, huh? I’ll have you know, we old ladies work hard to maintain ourselves. Do you know how many pints of Ben & Jerry’s I’ve passed up for my butt’s sake? Do you know how many miles I’ve logged on the treadmill?”

The bagger shook his head. “No, uh...miss?”

She gave them both a scathing look. “You owe me for that hard work. You, and every other man on the planet. So you better not ever call anyone under eighty ‘ma’am’ again.”

“Yes, miss.”

“And one more thing.” They looked at her the way men should always look at women—both fearful and expectant. She leaned in. “You better have the decency to watch my ass when I’m walking away.”

CHAPTER 5

Whatever you do, don't let yourself get backed into a corner.

In the half hour it took to reach the top of the winding hill leading up to the Catalina School, Cecilia had eaten half the bag of M&M's, added up everything and everyone she owed in her head and chewed her thumbnail down to a bloody nub.

She found a parking spot in the circle outside the boys' dorm and climbed the wide, stone steps to the door, admiring as she did every weekend the placid beauty of the place. No wonder Brian loved it here.

The dorm rested on the crest of the hill, which overlooked a sprawling formal garden arranged on tiers, meticulously maintained since the school opened in the late nineteenth century.

The dorm was swarming with excited parents picking up their kids for the weekend. Most families lived too far away for the weekly visits Cecilia was able to make, so the activity was unusual.

When Cecilia checked in at the desk, a tall, brittle-looking man she didn't recognize greeted her.

"You are here to pick up...?"

"Brian Katz. Room 101."

"Ah, yes. Mrs. Katz."

She didn't care for his tone.

"I'm Victor Newhouse, the new director of student living."

"A pleasure," she said, even though it definitely wasn't. "May I go up to Brian's room?"

"Just a moment, please. Wait right here."

He disappeared into the office behind the desk, and closed the door.

Cecilia leaned up against the desk and watched the bustling in the lobby for a while. She checked her watch. Six minutes.

"Hello?" She called.

Victor emerged from the back room. "Sorry. I had to make a call."

"I see. May I go get my son now?"

"In just a moment."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. Is something wrong? Is Brian okay?"

"Of course, of course. We..."

The dorm door pushed open, and suddenly it was clear what she'd been waiting for. Or rather, who.

Melvin Weber, the school's finance director, hurried in, his thin blond comb-over flapping up in the gust created by the door's closing.

Cecilia steeled herself.

"Mrs. Katz, I'm so glad I caught you."

That was exactly how she felt. Caught. Trapped. By the look on Melvin's face, he was moving in for the kill, and she couldn't even chew her leg off to get away.

"Mr. Weber, how nice to see you again," she said, shifting into full bitch-queen mode. If she couldn't get away, maybe she could bully him into submission. "I've come to pick up Brian, and I'm in rather a hurry. If you'll excuse me—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Katz. But I can't let you go until we discuss your outstanding financial obligation to the Catalina School."

"Outstanding...? I'm afraid I don't know to what you are referring." She did her best imitation of her fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Wickett, who was largely regarded as the meanest teacher in the state of Pennsylvania and was rumored to have been created from a block of ice.

The Mrs. Wickett thing was ineffective in the face of Melvin Weber's crusade.

The finance director patted his comb-over back into place. “Brian’s fall tuition, Mrs. Katz. We’ve attempted to contact you on numerous occasions. Your check bounced.”

Cecilia’s stomach dropped. Her gaze slid sideways to Victor Newhouse, who looked as if he were wishing for a bucket of popcorn and a box of Junior Mints to go with the show.

“Mr. Newhouse, would you kindly excuse us?” she said.

Newhouse looked at Weber, and Weber nodded. Newhouse looked crestfallen. “Of course. I’ll just wait in the office.”

“Perhaps you’d be so kind as to go get my son for me, so we can be on our way without further delay.”

He hesitated.

“Are you holding my son hostage, Mr. Newhouse? Is that what you’re doing?”

“Certainly not!”

“Then, will you please go get him?”

Weber nodded to Newhouse.

“Sure. Of course.” Newhouse came around the desk and headed up the hall, dragging his feet, clearly hoping to hear the end of the conversation.

Cecilia brushed an errant curl from her forehead. “Mr. Weber, if payment hasn’t reached you, I do apologize. We’ve been having a bit of trouble with our bank accounts, a snafu with account numbers or something, and I asked my husband to handle this matter. However, as you might know, we are estranged, and it’s a bit of a messy situation. I assure you that I will send another check first thing on Tuesday.”

Weber’s lips formed a tight line. “See that you do, Mrs. Katz. I know how much effort you put into getting your son admitted to the Catalina School. It would be a shame if we had to release him.”

AN HOUR LATER, with Brian listening to his MP3 player and munching pumpkin seeds in the back of the Cayenne, Cecilia ate the remainder of the M&M’s and chewed the rest of her fingernails down to bloody stumps.

What in the hell was she going to do?

This was definitely not the weekend to quit smoking.

She glanced at her son in the rearview mirror. He looked more relaxed, happier, than she’d seen him in a long time.

She simply could not take him out of Catalina.

But where was she going to get the tuition money? She’d been playing musical payments with all of her bills since March, trying to make her commission checks stretch farther than her Aunt Theresa’s girdles.

The money just wasn’t there.

Her mind flooded with thoughts of torturing Ben. Nothing too severe. Maybe just extracting one of his kidneys with a rusty lawnmower blade. As a bonus she might be able to sell it on eBay.

She counted to ten and cleared her mind. She’d handled tougher situations. There had to be a way to come up with some quick cash.

She’d already taken two ten-thousand-dollar advances on her commission from Belkin-Frye. She couldn’t ask for any more, especially now that Monty was gone.

She’d sold off all the antiques in the house that were worth anything months ago, so that was a dead end. She’d gotten advances on her credit cards and a second mortgage on their home, going into more debt to pay debt.

She’d cashed in the retirement account from her first job, selling pharmaceuticals for a big New Jersey drug company. The penalties had killed her, and she’d lost her matching funds, but she’d been desperate.

“Mom, can we get a puppy?” Brian called to her from the back seat. “Ethan has a puppy.”

She smiled. “Not right now, buddy. Puppies are a big responsibility. They take a lot of time.”
And a lot of money.

She glanced at Brian in the rearview. He was frowning. “But Ethan has a puppy.”

“I’m sorry, Brian. But we just can’t do it right now.”

“But Ethan has a puppy.”

“Yes. Ethan’s mother is home all the time.”

“Why aren’t you home all the time?”

“Because I work, honey. You know that.”

“You work a lot.”

“Not enough these days,” she said, mostly to herself. She sighed. “If we got a puppy, wouldn’t you like to be here with it? Maybe we’ll get one when you come home for the summer.”

He stared out the window.

Brian wasn’t good with waiting. Didn’t understand the concept, really. To him, anything that wasn’t happening in the present wasn’t happening at all. When he was younger, he used to throw the most awful tantrums, screaming and thrashing when he couldn’t have something the minute he wanted it.

Ben, and many of their family members, had seen it as Brian having been spoiled. But Cecilia suspected it was something different.

It was as if her son had no concept of time. He didn’t understand “soon” or “tomorrow” or “later,” or any of the other words that could give him hope. If he wanted a toy or a book or a snack, these words meant nothing. While other children heard promise in these words, Brian only seemed confused and dejected by them.

In the back seat, Brian started rocking.

Cecilia resisted the urge to drive straight to the pet store. A puppy wouldn’t fix this. Wouldn’t fix him.

Experience told her that Brian would soon move on to something else, and that his disappointments would be many, over the weekend. But thankfully none of them would last too long.

A few minutes later he said, “Did you know there are 512 M&M’s in a one-pound bag?”

“But this is...was...a two-pound bag,” she said. “How many were in this one?”

Brian looked out the window for a moment, and said, “One thousand and twenty-four.”

She smiled and said, “Very good, honey!”

Meanwhile, she was trying to calculate how much time she’d have to log on the stationary bike to burn off the calories in 1024 M&M’s.

That was one equation she wasn’t eager to solve.

The phone was ringing when they walked into the house. Cecilia picked up the cordless in the kitchen. “Hello?”

“Cece, it’s me.”

“Dannie?”

“Yeah. Listen, I need a favor.”

“Okay. What’s going on?”

“I need you to—” Cecilia heard screaming in the background. “Wait a second...”

Cecilia walked back into the hallway, half listening to Dannie yell at Richard for stuffing a waffle into the DVD player.

Brian stood just inside the door, quiet and unmoving, and for a nanosecond—a dark, regretful nanosecond—she wished Brian would put a waffle in the DVD player, just once.

She wished he would laugh and play baseball with the neighborhood kids and hug her spontaneously.

She held her hand over the phone's mouthpiece. "It's okay, honey. You can go up to your room if you want." She gave him a gentle nudge on the shoulder and picked up his small suitcase, following him up the stairs.

"All right. I'm back." Dannie sounded breathless.

Then again, Dannie always sounded breathless.

"What do you need?" Cecilia asked.

"I need someone to take Quincy for a couple of days."

"Quincy?" Cecilia ran through Dannie's kids names in her mind. Quincy wasn't there. "Who's Quincy?"

"My dog."

Before Cecilia could say anything, Dannie rushed on.

"I've got to go out of town. It's an emergency. My mother-in-law is going to take the kids, but she's allergic to the dog. Or so she says."

"I don't know—"

"Please, Cece. You've always been a dog lover. Quincy is great. You'll adore him!"

"I'll adore him, huh?"

"Absolutely. And you know I wouldn't ask unless it was an emergency."

Cecilia thought about Brian asking for a puppy. Maybe this would be a good way to see how he would handle an animal in the house.

"For a couple of days?" Cecilia said.

"Right. Two, maybe three, tops."

"Okay. What the hell. Ben's coming over for dinner and he hates dogs. Besides, I'll be home most of the weekend with Brian. Bring him over."

"Great! Thank you so much. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Cecilia left Brian alone in his room to get reacquainted with his things—which remained exactly as he had left them a month and a half ago when he'd gone off to school—and went back downstairs.

She dialed Ben's mother's number.

When Ben answered, she said, "Well? Are you coming over?"

"Why? Was I supposed to?"

She counted to ten under her breath. "Yes, you were supposed to. I'm making a roast for dinner. Brian's here."

"Brian's there?"

"Yes, he is. I told you two weeks ago I was bringing him home for the long weekend."

"Oh, right. Great. Okay, I'll be over in a little while."

BY SIX O'CLOCK, it became painfully apparent Ben wasn't coming.

More angry than upset now, Cecilia went out onto the deck, wishing to God she hadn't quit smoking, and checked the roast she'd been cooking on the grill.

When the weather was mild, she cooked everything on the grill. Pizza. Turkey breasts. Casseroles. Chili. In a few weeks, though, it would be too cold. She always got just a tiny bit depressed when she had to move her base of operations back to the kitchen.

She loved hanging out on the deck in her bare feet, drinking a beer or maybe a Margarita, watching the sun set. Sometimes she would imagine she was going to leave all this stress behind and move to some tropical island, where she would whip up spectacular meals in coconut shells over a fire pit, and spend her life tanned, relaxed and slightly tipsy.

She and Brian would take long walks on the beach, looking for shells. She'd make necklaces out of them, and they'd sell them on the beach. Or maybe she could braid hair.

No. She'd be terrible at that.

She'd once tried to braid Grace's hair for school pictures, and Grace had ended up looking like an insane Pippi Long-stocking. People probably wouldn't pay to look like that.

She daydreamed about beaches and Jake and cigarettes, and then about ways to dispose of Ben's body. And then the doorbell rang.

Cecilia made her way through the house to the front door.

Dannie stood on the step, a twin on each hip, little Betsy clinging to her skirt, Richard running circles in the yard and a Shetland pony on a leash trampling the yellow corydalis in the bed beside the door.

“Hi,” Dannie said. “Are you ready for Quincy?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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