



1992

Weird People

Joy Marie Humphrey

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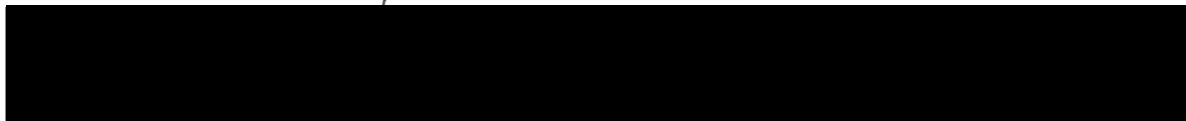
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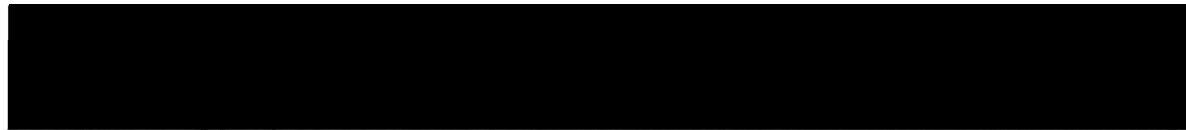
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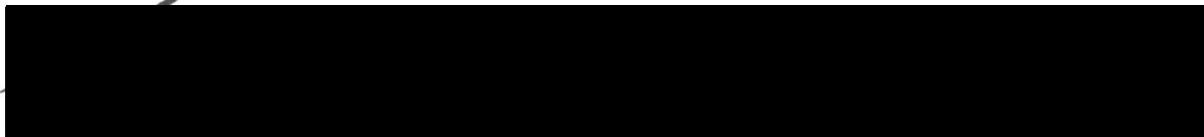
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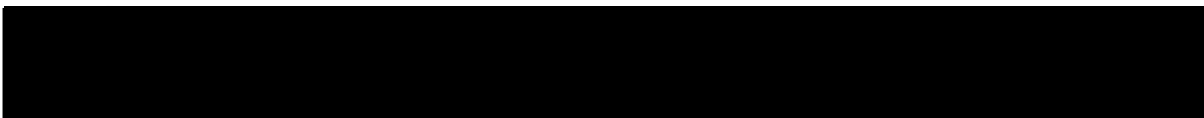
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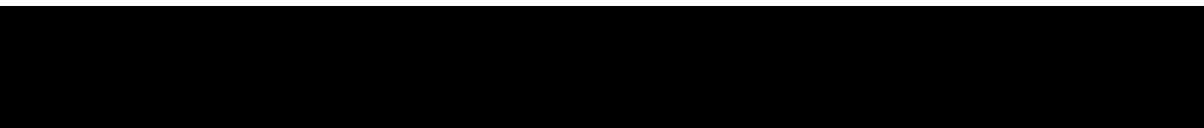
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Weird People

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Acknowledgments

For Dario

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Chapter I

It was our thirty-fourth birthday, a Saturday, when I first mentioned Iris to my best friend, Michael. As usual, I was getting things in order for our afternoon party. On the kitchen counter, I set out a bottle of Absolut vodka, a bottle of Martini and Rossi vermouth, a jar of green olives, toothpicks and two martini glasses. On the living room coffee table, I arranged two Best Western ash trays, two hard packs of Marlboro reds, and two cigarette holders. I put the "Mary Poppins" video in the VCR. Surveying the party accoutrements, I had an overwhelming sense of security. I had the same birthday as my best friend, and we did the same thing every year. I couldn't ask for more. Having created the ritual we'd indulged in over the past four years of watching "Mary Poppins" two or three times while drinking martinis and smoking cigarettes, I noted to Michael how much significance it held for us. Here we were, Jane and Michael, as close as brother and sister, even if we didn't look it (I had blonde hair, he had brown, he wore glasses, I didn't), watching a movie whose main characters were also named Jane and Michael and who were actually brother and sister. Uncanny, right? As for the Marlboro reds, that was the brand of cigarette we'd both chosen when, in our nasty adolescence, not having an inkling that the other existed, we tried smoking

for the first time. This was more of a coincidence than you would think, considering everyone was smoking clove cigarettes at the time. And then there were the martinis which were of paramount significance. They harked back to the first time we met. It was in Steve of Beverly Hills. We were both trying to buy the last set of four martini glasses that had stems constructed out of multi-colored geometric shapes.

Michael, then a stranger and somewhat pushy, I thought, said, "My editor is coming over for cocktails tonight and she refuses to drink her martinis if they aren't in martini glasses."

I said, "I never invite my editor anywhere. The way I see it, it's his job to make me happy, and what makes me happy are martinis in martini glasses, specifically ones with colorful geometric stems."

He said, "I see" and he turned a questioning look on his friend who was with him. Both men were good looking, Michael in a sort of professorial way with his round, wire rimmed spectacles and his hair neatly trimmed and thinning, and his friend looking like a European model, dark complected with jutting facial bones and reeking of musk. Naturally, I thought they were "together," you know, so when the musk fellow said, "Why don't you split them and when one of you needs four, you can borrow them from the other," I didn't feel in the least threatened about handing over my phone number.

Michael had called me the next day asking me if he could take me to dinner to thank me for being so generous. I agreed, and we dined at Louise's Trattoria on Melrose Avenue.

Over our fettucini with chicken, sundried tomatoes and scallions in a cream sauce, I found out Michael was a romance novelist.

"You're joking, right?"

"Romance is serious business," he said, diligently twirling his fettucini on his fork. "I have a huge following. Haven't you ever heard of me? Michael Adora? I've got an entire rack in just about every grocery store."

"Impressive," I said.

"I can't believe you haven't heard of me," he said.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings or anything," I said, "but I don't read that crap."

He raised his glass of pinot grigio at me. "Your tact is charming."

"I'm surprised you haven't heard of me," I said. "Jane Label? Columnist for Flick?"

"What's Flick?"

"Oh, please," I said, putting my fork down in disgust. "It's only the number one selling weekly foreign movie magazine in the country. I can't believe you haven't heard of it. I do that movie review column in the back, you know, 'Little Thoughts on the Big Screen'?"

"'Little Thoughts on the Big Screen'? Oh boy."

"Don't blame me for that, it was my editor's idea. Dale thinks it's cute. I wanted to call it 'Shhh!' because I'm so sick of everyone yapping away during movies."

"Well," said Michael leaning back in his chair, "I guess we're just two

famous people who've never heard of each other."

"I guess so," I said.

"Let's toast to our mutual discovery." He clinked his glass with mine.

"Does this mean I have to read your books?" I said.

"Absolutely," he said. "And I'll wade through your stuff as well."

"I'm honored," I said.

That night after we had cappuccino at The Living Room, I stopped to look in the window of an antique clothing store nearby, turning to Michael to show him a pillbox hat with black netting that I wanted, when he took me by the shoulders and kissed me on the mouth. I politely pushed him away, saying, "I don't do that," meaning, I didn't get involved with men that swung both ways. He looked shocked at first and then nodded his head slowly, saying, "I see." It wasn't until six months later when he tried to set me up with our aerobics instructor, Katy, that I realized we had a big misunderstanding.

"But you said you don't kiss men," Michael said.

"I don't kiss bisexual men," I said.

"So who's bisexual?"

"Oh," I said, "I take it you're not, then?"

"Damn!" said Michael. "This happens every time I hang around Lewis. No wonder I can't get any dates."

By that point in our relationship we had gotten so used to behaving like siblings with each other that we continued to do so, although Michael thought we might just try things on a romantic level for a while to make

sure we had explored all our opportunities. But the thought of suddenly looking into each other's eyes in meaningful ways gave me a stress headache. "You don't want romance," I assured Michael, "it's too complicated." He saw things my way; he usually did.

At 3:00, while I was constructing the last olive kabob on a toothpick, I heard the door open and Michael yell, "Happy B day, Jane," and then I yelled, "In the kitchen."

"Ah, martinis," he said, leaning against the door frame, his wire glasses slightly cockeyed on his nose. "Have you ever considered anything else?"

"What else is there?" I said, arranging the last olive trio on a plate. "Happy birthday to you, too. Here, put these on the coffee table."

I made the martinis and brought them into the living room. Michael was inserting a cigarette in a holder.

"Did you ever consider," he said without looking up, "that we might choose a less deadly vice to indulge in?"

"Like what?" I said, handing him his glass.

"Oh, I don't know." He placed the cigarette on the table and raised his glass. "Like chewing tobacco, maybe."

"Not on my beige sofa."

"It wouldn't have to double as a spittoon."

"But it would. You know how clumsy you get when you drink. Besides, lighting up once a year isn't going to kill us. And I don't know

about you, but I hardly inhale."

"You're getting that lecturing tone with me again. Quick, let's toast before I start seeing the scary similarities between you and my mother."

"Hardy har," I said.

"To the faux smokers," said Michael, clinking his glass against mine. "Long may they live."

"Here, here," I said. We drank. "Okay. Movie time."

I started the movie and we settled ourselves on the sofa, lighting our cigarettes. We never actually watched "Mary Poppins," it was more something for our eyes to look at while we talked to each other.

"So," said Michael, blowing a stream of white smoke at Julie Andrews who was flying through the air, "meet any weird people this week?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I met Dale for lunch at Groanola yesterday, and the waitress turned out to be a real find. She couldn't handle the fact that I wouldn't order anything. I just sat there restacking the Sweet 'n Low packets while Dale ate his whole wheat pancakes and she must have come over about three or four times asking me if I was sure I didn't want anything. I didn't have the heart to tell her I was stopping at Fatburger for a real lunch on my way home. So instead I told her I was on my period and had appetite-suppressing cramps."

"Ha! Dale must have loved that."

"Yeah. He spit up a bit of pancake." I reached for more olives. "So anyway, she jots down this recipe she made up. Something like papaya bran fruit cup. It's supposed to be a muscle relaxant. I told her I

preferred codeine if she had a recipe for that. She thought that was hilarious."

"Jane, you minx."

"Turns out, she's writing a cookbook."

"No."

"Yeah, one of those meatless, save-the-baby-farm-animals ones. She said if I liked the papaya pulp, she'd give me another recipe."

"Naturally you grabbed at the chance," said Michael, finishing off his martini.

"Naturally," I said. "How's dinner next Saturday sound? She's dying to try Louise's. I told her it was all-natural."

"Is it?"

"I don't know." I wiggled my glass at him. "Have another?"

"If I really must."

He followed me into the kitchen. We didn't bother pausing "Mary Poppins."

Michael hoisted himself onto my kitchen counter and I set about making the next round.

"So what's this vege-master's name?"

"Iris," I said. "Iris Kraus."

Michael wrinkled his nose. "Not a pretty name."

"Not a pretty face," I said. "She looks like that girl on 'Scooby Doo,' the brain who always wears the pleated skirt. Iris has got the same short hair and glasses with round black frames. We're talking very thick and

very weird."

"Be still my heart," said Michael. "How's her face? Any horrifying scars? Any glass eyes?"

"No," I said. "She's actually got great bone structure. But--and it's a big but, Michael--she doesn't wear makeup. Ergo, all that potential for being a Cover Girl has been chucked down the commode."

"Ah, the eternal faux pas of the groanola set."

"Now this is where it gets good," I said, handing Michael his martini. "She's got a fantastic body. I mean, we're talking strictly killer. Possibly, just possibly, centerfold material, although I'd have to see her naked to judge properly. But this is the classic part. She's damn near perfect, and guess what she wears?"

Michael squinted his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Wait, don't tell me. I see it now, it's coming in clearly. A leopard-skin body stocking."

"Not hardly," I said. "Try cords. Men's cords. And get this--they were brown."

"Good God," said Michael, jumping down off the counter.

"Yeah, I know. It was great."

"Well you can count me in for Saturday," he said, and we went back to the living room.

We settled into the sofa again and lit up more cigarettes while Dick was waddling around with the cartoon penguins.

"Isn't this great?" I said.

"Hmmm," said Michael. He was busy trying to blow smoke rings.

When Michael and I first began collecting weird people, it was out of a mutually agreed upon need to expand our horizons. It was three years ago, on our birthday. We were on our third martini and halfway through a pack of Marlboro reds, when we decided to assess our lives. At thirty-one, it was good to know where you'd been and where you were going to. We both held English degrees, Michael from UC, Berkeley, and me from UCLA. We were both writers. We both had memberships at The Sports Connection. We were both blasé about star sightings and going to The Hard Rock had long ago lost its lustre. We had arrived, as far as we were concerned. What was left to do to keep us from stagnating? On the theory that people were inherently interesting once you removed their socially acceptable masks, we went on a search for weird people, i.e. individuals who did their own thing without caring whether most of the city thought they were eggheads or radicals or virgins. Mostly it was a lot of fun for all parties involved. Michael or I would invite the weird person out to Louise's for dinner, they would inevitably do something suitable to their label, and Michael and I would get a lot of yucks out of the evening. We would repeat these evenings a few more times but the weird person usually didn't stick around too long, probably because he or she realized we weren't interested in anything more than surface entertainment. We already had each other, Michael and I did. But there always came that point where they would want to get serious. As in:

Let's share about when we first got our periods or when we had our first wet dream, and then we can be best friends for life. Let's not and say we did. We didn't want to be cruel, but if you let someone spill their life all over your living room Dupont Stainmaster carpet, then forever after you would have to remember their birthday and buy them a Christmas present over twenty dollars and invite them over for New Year's Eve if they didn't have anything to do, which they wouldn't because you're their only friend. We tried never to let things get this far; we'd suddenly get very busy when the touchy-feely business started, and we'd say, "So sorry! We've accidentally booked ourselves into the next century." Only once did we have to change our phone numbers.

That week between our birthday and the impending Iris Kraus meeting was standard. I guess you could say it was the calm before the storm. Sunday, Michael and I saw two movies at the Santa Monica Laemmle. We had to change our seats twice because people behind us were talking. The films were mediocre, although Michael persisted in believing one was excellent and one was terrible. I let him talk on as we walked to Chinois for our after-foreign-film beer. Michael consistently tried to convince me of the validity of his opinion, but I was the movie reviewer and he wasn't, so I wrote my column my own way.

Monday morning at 10:00, I met Michael at The Sports Connection for our fat burners class. We got the jailbait instructor who wore pigtails and always said, "kay." "kay, two deep breaths. 'kay, lift those legs

higher. 'kay, now grapevine to the left." We just called her Kay. I forget what her real name was. After class we had protein shakes at the juice bar.

"I came up with a new story line for my next novel," Michael said, twisting back and forth on the bar stool in his grey college sweats. He took no notice of athletic fashion. Unlike me, who was in a royal blue body stocking with a black leotard over it. What Michael termed my black butt floss.

"A new story line?" I said. "Isn't that illegal?"

"If I didn't know you, Jane, I'd think you were being sarcastic."

"I hope it's nothing too complex," I said.

"My fans are not dumb," he said jamming his straw around his shake.

"They're not smart, either."

"At least they don't pretend to be smart like your readers do." He was making a small puddle as liquid sloshed over the glass.

"At least they're aspiring to something." I grabbed a couple napkins. "Here, you're making a mess."

He ignored my offering. "You know, Jane, you've always been incredibly cutting about my work."

I finished off my shake and pushed it aside. "It's kind of hard not to be when you're capable of so much more. You're a good writer and you're wasting yourself on characters named Giselle who have impossibly big boobs and who do nothing but submit to the one pseudo evil man in

the book. How serious can that be?"

Michael stood up, leaving a brownish pool on the countertop.

"You think what I do is so easy," he said. "I'd like to see you try it some time." He left for the showers and I knew he wouldn't wait for me, so I took my time in the locker room.

We had this same conversation with minor variations, almost every week. I couldn't stand the fact that Michael was so unambitious for himself. How could he possibly stomach churning out romance novels for the rest of his life? I didn't like hurting his feelings, but I felt, as a real friend, I needed to spur him on to realize his potential.

Just as I thought, he hadn't waited for me, but I wasn't worried. He would be calling around 4:00 to see how my column was coming and then things would be alright.

I worked at home steadily for most of the afternoon. I had a small office-cum-guest room that overlooked my small backyard-cum-storage shed plot. I had several rose bushes which were nicely taken care of by my gardener, and a stone fountain with a Grecian woman tipping over an urn from which water poured. She was my pride and joy. Michael thought it was pretentious.

Gazing onto my small version of Eden, I let the movies I'd seen replay through my mind. I always made notes on them first, merely logging my first impressions, what I liked, what was stupid, which scenes stayed with me. I was very detailed. I took a break at 2:30 for a Snickers bar and a Slim Fast, went back to work and at 3:45, Michael

called. I picked up the phone on my desk.

"Hi, Michael."

"I hate when you do that," he said. "You sound so smug. One of these days, it's not going to be me and you're going to embarrass yourself."

"Big deal," I said. "How's it coming?"

"Fair. My computer hasn't eaten anything yet today, so I consider myself successful. How 'bout you?"

"Fine. I'm not using a single one of your suggestions. Chinese tonight? I'm having a yen for moo goo gai pan."

"Can't. I promised Lewis I would go to his mom's for dinner. She never wrings her hands as much when I'm there."

"Alright, see you tomorrow then. Give Lewis a big kiss for me."

"You think you're so hilarious."

Tuesday we went to the gym again and managed to avoid a confrontation. I wrote a good first draft of my column and Michael and I went to Barney's Beanery for dinner.

Wednesday I was late for fat burners because my next door neighbor, Clarisse Parkins, stopped me as I was heading out the door. She had an irritating habit of stopping you exactly at the moment when you had no time left. She and her husband Harry and their two-year-old daughter Ashley lived in the adobe ranch to my left.

"Janie! Wait up a sec!" She came hopping over her lawn towards me in purple leggings and a matching half-top that bared her midriff.

"Hi Clarisse."

"Janie!" She grabbed a hold of my arm and doubled over like she needed to catch her breath. What a phoney. She exercised more than I did, and she could probably climb Everest and still look like she had just come out of the powder room.

"I'm going to be late for aerobics, Clarisse." I tried to disengage myself.

Clarisse managed to stand on her own two feet and she patted her ample chest. "I know, I know, busy single gal. Always on the go."

"What is it, Clarisse." I was looking wistfully at my car.

"I'm having a baby clothes party next Saturday night, and I want you to come."

"No," I said. "See ya." I started to walk away.

"Janie!"

I stopped.

"But Ashley's going to model. She'll be adorable."

"This probably just slipped your mind, Clarisse, but I don't have any children."

"Well you must know some. Don't you have any friends with kids?"

"No," I said, walking toward my car. "I gotta go. Remember me to Ashley."

"I'll take pictures for you." She stood on my walkway and waved me away while I pulled out of the driveway. Pictures. What did I want with pictures of her prima donna daughter? Michael was going to crack up over this one. He was always wanting to know the latest on Parkinson's

Disease, as he called her.

I was late for fat burners, but Kay was teaching again so I didn't mind so much. I told Michael about Clarisse and he told me we should let Iris loose at the baby clothes party just to see what she would do. I said no because Clarisse owned a fur which she purposely let hang on a coat tree in the entry way. Iris didn't strike me as a type who would suffer furriers gladly.

"Who knows," I said, "she might carry spray paint in her blue jean bag."

That afternoon I went back to the Laemmle for a second viewing. I always did this to ensure I hadn't missed anything major and to check my facts. I knew my editor, Dale, wouldn't. He liked to go for the punctuation. I met Michael for dinner at the French Quarter.

Thursdays and Fridays I never went to the gym in the mornings because I needed to wind up my column. Thursday I put the finishing touches on it, and Friday I went in at 9:00 to hand in my piece to Dale and go over any problems he had made up on the last review I'd done. It went the same every Friday. I walked into his office and he jumped up like I'd caught him doing something illegal.

"Jane! What a surprise!"

"Some surprise," I said. "I come in every Friday at nine." I sat in a chair facing him. "Okay, let's get this over with."

"Right." Dale sat back down and picked up an unused pencil. He had a million pinpoint sharp pencils on his desk just like all the lawyers

do on "L.A. Law" but I'd never once seen Dale actually write with one. I began to wonder if they were real pencils.

He made a stab at looking firm and very grim as he flipped through the pages of last week's column. He had a hairless face that was a bit too fleshy for my taste. His hair was sandy brown, short and thick. As far as outstanding features went, he had none.

"We've got to make a few minor changes here, Jane." He said this every time, like it was some group project or something. I did the work on it.

"What now, Dale. Did I misuse a semicolon again?"

He winced at me and cleared his throat. "This little tangent you go off on here at the end, this bit about popcorn-free movie zones and mandatory gags for second time offenders of the silence rule. It's a little, well, out there, don't you think?"

"Not at all," I said, crossing my legs and jiggling my foot up and down. "Anything else?"

Dale looked at me pleadingly. "Jane, please. Perhaps if we just lop off these last two paragraphs..."

"Lop off?" I sat up. "Lop off? I'm not some snot-nosed amateur looking for the big break, Dale. I'm a national fucking columnist. You don't just lop off my stuff. Geez, Dale, how'd you get this job, anyway?" I grabbed one of his pencils and pretended it was a cigarette.

He loosened his tie a little. Talk about plain. Dale always wore solid colored shirts with solid colored ties. No wonder he wasn't married.

"Okay," he said, "maybe we can let this go. But this paragraph over here on the comparison to MTV is a bit on the farfetched side."

"Farfetched?" I threw the pencil down.

"Well, a little nebulous is all."

"Nebulous?" This was, as usual, a waste of my time.

"Jane, it's about Russian peasants."

"MTV exploits everything. Trust me. It's in there."

Dale began squeezing his temples. I could tell this was going to be a long morning.

We fought back and forth for a couple of hours and finally came to a satisfactory end. I agreed to delete the gag punishment at the end. Dale agreed to let the rest go.

"Well, Jane, we're still alive." He chuckled. What a wit. "How about lunch?"

"No thanks, Dale. Watching you eat whole wheat pancakes is a treat, but I'd rather savor the memory."

"Next week, then."

"Whatever."

I called Michael from my car phone.

"Hello?"

"The dweeb wanted me to lop off the popcorn-free zone. Can you believe it? That was the best part."

"So it's staying, of course."

"Of course."

"Are you coming by tonight?"

"Of course."

"You're agreeable today."

"I always feel chipper after squelching Dale. Hey, I wonder if he'd be interested in Iris."

"Think it through, babe. You don't want Dale in your home."

"Wow, that was a close call. Thanks for bringing me to my senses. So what's for dinner?"

"Pasta Puttanesca."

"I'll be there at 6:00."

"Roger."

"Over and out."

I drove to the gym and aerobicized, then went home, ate a can of smoked oysters with lemon juice and tabasco, and then soaked in the tub with a Vanity Fair. I loved Fridays. My short-lived contact with Dale always renewed my appreciation for being able to work out of my home. That sense of contentedness would last the rest of the day. And so there I was, in the middle of the afternoon, soaking in the tub, with a spicy dinner with my best friend to look forward to. It was a glorious way to end the week.

Things were certainly going my way.

Chapter II

Saturday afternoon, I set about doing some minor housework, which I hated, but since Weird Person Iris Kraus was coming over that night, it had to be done. Michael wanted to know why I took so much trouble to impress when we were only entertaining dorks. Did we even care what they thought? For me, it was not so much that I wanted to impress as I wanted to draw a very clear line of demarcation: they were weird, we were not. Normal people always did housework before company arrived.

I put on a Nat King Cole tape, wrapped my hair in a kerchief and got out the Endust. Since my house was so tiny, there wasn't much to do. My living room consisted of a small beige couch (an item of which I was extremely proud. Who but single, tasteful people could own anything heavily-used in beige?), one mahogany end table, a glass coffee table, an uncomfortable rose-patterned wing-backed chair, and a fire place with fake logs that glowed red when you flipped a switch. I had bookcases lining the walls, but since no one ever pulled out a book, I didn't bother dusting those.

Next, I scrubbed the guest bathroom. Everything was done in black and white tile, so it looked impressive even when it was dirty. I stuck two red roses from my garden in a green glass and placed it on the toilet

tank. Beautiful. That was enough for one weird person.

I set out the cocktail supplies, had a chicken liver pate with crumbled hard-boiled egg and caviar on top delivered from Pavilions, took a shower, squeezed into a sleeveless black spandex dress, black hose, red pumps and a red Liz Claiborne blazer. I slicked my hair back into a tight ponytail and was just spraying a little Oscar de la Renta on when I heard a knock at the door followed by, "Hey, Jane, your gardener forgot to wind the hose up again. I almost tripped over it."

"So sue me," I said, coming into the living room.

"I think I will." Michael was wearing his all rayon black suit which made him look very baggy and bony and hip.

"You're looking very funereal," I said, passing to the kitchen. "Pre-Iris martini?"

"Of course," he said, following me. "And you're looking very severe."

"Thank you."

"Is that your real hair?"

"You're so hilarious. Take your drink."

We hung out in the living room and Michael went through my CD's looking for the perfect atmosphere music.

"How about 'Oklahoma'?" he said.

"Too enthusiastic."

"Hey, here's an old Sinatra."

"This is not a lounge."

"Okay, wait, I've got it. Here's the Boston Pops doing Elton John

hits."

Just as we heard the orchestra swell to "Pinball Wizard" the door bell rang. We looked at each other in mock surprise.

"Who could that be?" I said.

"Is it Herr Kraus?"

I socked Michael in the arm and then he socked me in the arm and then I stood at the door making faces until the bell rang again, and then I opened it. There was Iris, in a sleeveless brown dress that looked so rough, I could have sworn it used to hold potatoes.

"Iris!" I said, ushering her inside. "I'm sorry it took me so long. I was in the shower. You found me okay?"

Iris looked intently at Michael and then back at me. "Oh yes," she said. "Fine."

I rolled my eyes at Michael. "This is Michael," I said, "my best friend and resident confessor."

"Hi, Iris, I've heard a lot about you." Michael extended his hand for a friendly shake, but Iris stood frozen, her arms stiff at her side and her mouth slowly dropped open. I noticed she had on lipstick for the occasion. Orange Fireball was a good approximation.

Iris said, "Tell me you love me, and I'll lay down right here and die a satisfied woman."

"Scuse me?" I said. I tried to catch Michael's eye, but he was staring at Iris in a similar open-mouthed idiotic way.

"I have no use for a dead wife, Daphne," said Michael.

"Oh, Geoffrey," said Iris, "Are you proposing?"

"Ummm, did I miss something?" I asked. "Were we supposed to memorize lines?"

"The Ravaged Heart," said Iris, "it's from The Ravaged Heart, and this"--she threw her arms out towards Michael as if to say "Ta-da!"--"is Michael Adora."

"I knew you shouldn't have let your editor talk you into a book photo," I said. And then to Iris, "I see we have an avid reader of the romance in our midst."

Michael had been slapping his forehead with his palm like he had just remembered the words to "Auld Lang Syne." He kept saying, "This is great, this is great."

"I had no idea," said Iris, slightly hyperventilating. "When Jane told me her friend Michael would be here, I didn't even make the connection."

"Yes," I said, "how silly of you. A romance novelist named Michael and my friend named Michael. Funny you didn't catch it."

I was irritated. Yes, Michael was a writer, and yes, you could find his books in any leading grocery store. So what. I was a nationally renowned columnist, but did anyone hemorrhage over meeting me in the flesh? No. And there was Michael, eating the flattery up like it was fucking flambe. Both he and Iris were giving themselves heart attacks over this coincidence, and they probably would have gone on forever, if I hadn't stopped them.

"Martini?" I said too loudly.

"No thanks," said Iris, barely able to take her eyes away from Michael. "I don't drink. But maybe some seltzer water if you have it. I prefer the raspberry flavored."

"I'll see what the manager has in stock," I said and went into the kitchen. I could hear them talking. Michael's voice was squeaking like it did when he discovered a new color of pasta.

I was feeling exceedingly soured. My plans for a whacky and weird evening were destroyed by the very person I thought would supply the whacky and the weird. I had a panicky feeling that Iris and Michael would talk about his romance novels all night. It wasn't that I didn't like to talk about Michael's work, but not for the whole night and to the exclusion of me. Michael always got too serious about his own work, which was not a great frame of mind for him to be in when we were supposed to be making fun of someone.

When I came back into the living room, I saw Michael leaning against my mantel, one elbow resting beside a picture of us at Ed Debevic's, our waitress with a beehive hairdo bent over between us. His other hand held his martini, and he delicately gesticulated with it, as he expounded on why he had decided to make his heroines predominantly brunettes. Iris was perched on the sofa like she was listening to Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount.

"Iris!" I barked. She jumped, and I handed her the seltzer water. I placed the pate on the coffee table. "Hope you like liver."

"Oh thank you, Jane," she said. "Mr. Adora was just telling me how

he thinks up his characters." She looked around at us excitedly. "This is so fascinating."

Michael looked at me sheepishly. I said, "Mr. Adora?"

Then Michael said, "Jane writes a column in Flick magazine. She reviews foreign films."

"Oh," said Iris, politely. "I've never heard of it."

"It's intellectual," I said, "which might be why you've never heard of it."

Michael widened his eyes at me. "Yes, well..." he said.

Iris smiled. "Mr. Adora, did Jane tell you that I'm writing a cookbook?"

"Really?" said Michael.

"Yes, it's all natural foods. I'm still in the experimental stage on the side dishes. Last week I tried out a bulgar chutney combo on my neighbor's cat. It didn't go over too well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Michael. He sounded like he really meant it.

We fell silent, lapping up our respective drinks too quickly now that the conversation had lulled.

"You have a nice home, Jane," said Iris, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"Thank you, Iris," I said. We all looked at our shoes. Then I looked over Iris's head and widened my eyes in panic at Michael. I mouthed, "Say something."

Michael cleared his throat and said with gusto, "Well, Iris, I hope you like pasta."

"Oh yes."

"Great. Let's go!"

"Michael!" I said. Then I looked at Iris who was looking up at me with hesitation. I smiled. "Well, let's drink up then."

Iris gulped her seltzer water and got to her feet. "But your lovely liver, Jane."

"It was just for decoration anyway," I said.

On our way out the door, I poked Michael in the back. "So much for cocktail hour," I whispered.

"I panicked," he said, shrugging.

"So I noticed."

Outside, there was a lot of commotion on Clarisse's property. Yuppie mothers were arriving by the volvo-load.

"Just think, Jane," Michael said, "you could be accessorizing you baby clothes wardrobe right now."

Clarisse appeared on her stoop.

"Janie! Change your mind? You can bring your little friends." She was wearing what looked like a pink wetsuit.

"What's going on?" asked Iris.

"It's a baby clothes party," I said. Then to Clarisse I yelled, "Gee, we'd love to, but me and my little friends are going to dinner. Bye." I turned to Michael and Iris. "Get in the car and lock the doors."

As I was starting up the engine, I could see pink looming larger out of the corner of my eye.

"I think that woman wants to talk to you," said Iris, who was in the front seat.

"No she doesn't," I said as I backed out of the driveway. "She just thinks she does. Everyone wave, now." I drove away leaving Clarisse on my lawn. I was hoping she'd have the good sense not to stand in one place for too long. My grass browns so easily.

"Don't you like babies, Jane?" asked Iris, pushing her glasses back.

"She hates 'em," said Michael from the back seat.

"I don't hate them," I said, "I just really dislike them."

"Jane's sort of a modern day chic scrooge," said Michael.

"Not true," I said, "I love Christmas."

"Yeah, but only because you get presents. You never give any."

"I always give you a present," I said.

"Yeah, but I always have to take it back." Then he said to Iris, "She buys me clothes that are too small."

Iris laughed.

"You try and do something nice," I said. I lapsed into moody silence.

Iris said, "I want to have a baby. I think it would be incredible."

"Yeah well," I said, "I can't help you there. Talk to Michael, he's my maternal half."

Iris turned around in her seat. "You like babies, Mr. Adora?"

"Please," said Michael, "call me Michael. And yes, I hope to have a

few offspring of my own some day."

"Maybe you and Mr. Adora should do some negotiating," I said to Iris.

"Oh no!" said Iris, blushing, "I could never!"

I looked at Michael in my rearview mirror to wink at him, but I noticed he was blushing, too. It was like taking Pollyanna and Opie to dinner.

We got to Louise's and ordered a bottle of pinot grigio. Michael proposed a toast. "To new friends." I raised my eyebrows. Usually for a weird person toast, he would say something in a fake language, something that sounded vaguely German, and then he would translate it into an illogical English meaning like, eat, drink, and don't run with open scissors.

We placed our orders. Michael and I ordered our usuals and Iris opted for the special: the whole wheat pasta with scallops and pine nuts. We sipped our wine and waited for our food, while engaging in a lot of painful chit chat. I began to sense I had made a big collection mistake. Iris was sincerely and disarmingly nice. Aside from her hellacious choice in glasses and her potato dress, there wasn't a whole lot to amuse ourselves with. Niceness wasn't exactly a side-splitter.

When our food arrived, Iris began lifting up her noodles and scallops with her fork and studying them. I looked at Michael who was sitting across from me with Iris. He shrugged.

"Iris," I said, "what are you doing?"

"Inspecting my food," she said, not looking up. "I don't think they've

used any butter. Probably all olive oil."

"Do you want to send it back?" asked Michael.

"Oh no," said Iris looking up, "don't worry about me. I always do this."

"Charming habit," I said, attacking my fettucini.

"You know how if you're a mechanic," said Iris, "you always want to inspect a new car to see how it runs?"

"No," I said.

"Yes," Michael said, pressing his foot on my good Armani pump.

"I like to see how dishes are put together. It gives me ideas." Iris finally took a bite and, nodding, said, "Olive oil."

"Well," said Michael, smiling encouragingly at me, "isn't that interesting, Jane?"

"Riveting," I said.

"That's sort of what I do," said Michael, turning to Iris. "Whatever I read, I study it to see if I can use another author's techniques in my own books."

Iris said, "I should think other authors would study you. You're like Shakespeare or something."

I choked on my wine.

"Are you okay?" asked Iris.

"Fine," I said, patting my mouth with my napkin.

"Well, I don't know about Shakespeare," Michael was saying seriously, "but I have been compared to Victoria Holt."

"Really!" said Iris. "She's one of my favorite authors! Next to you, I mean."

I dropped my fork.

"Thank you, Iris," said Michael. He was beaming so hard we didn't even need a candle at our table. "It's not often I get to meet my fans."

I stood up.

"Where are going?" asked Michael.

"To find a bucket," I said and I headed off to the bathroom. I hung out in front of the mirror for fifteen minutes primping and coiffing with ferocity. The evening was a dud. Who would have thought that Michael and Iris would take to each other seriously? Shakespeare. All he needed was some myopic fluff brain to give importance to his work. He'd never make anything of himself at this rate.

When I got back to the table, Iris was telling Michael where she had read each of his books, and how they made her feel, and what food group she was eating from when she turned page fifty-nine. And Michael was telling Iris how bulgar chutney sounded scrumptious, and that she shouldn't let life's little disappointments get her down. "I admire your risk-taking abilities," he said, twirling his pasta into his spoon. "You're a very brave woman." Please.

I remained quiet for the remainder of the meal glaring at the lover birds over my pinot grigio. Michael looked rather too handsome even though his head was starting to inflate. Iris, on the other hand, was not an attractive woman. But she wasn't ugly. Plain, unnoticeable except for

the glasses. And that mongo chest of hers. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. She probably had those great dark nipples that looked so mysterious and scary and womanly. Unlike mine which were pretty much invisible. The perils of being a real blonde. I consoled myself with the fact that she probably had a lot of unsightly black body hair. I could just picture that unladylike dark fuzz beating a path from her navel to her pubes. And now that I thought of it, I was sure her pubic hair grew halfway down her thighs.

Iris had her address book opened to "A". They were exchanging phone numbers.

"You can reach me during the day mostly," Michael was saying, "or if I'm not there, leave a message on my machine."

Great. That was just fucking great.

When the bill came, Michael made a big show out of picking up the tab. We never did that. We always split it. Driving home, I felt like the chauffeur, even though Iris managed to pull herself away from Michael long enough to sit in the front seat. Even still, she remained twisted around in her seat the whole time. When we pulled into my driveway, I could see Clarisse at her door saying good-bye to a guest. I was kicking myself for not snatching at her invitation. We got out of the car.

"I've had a lovely time," said Iris. "I hope we can do this again soon."

"We'll see," I said, "the next six months are pretty packed."

"Why don't you come in for a drink?" said Michael. Sure, I thought,

and why don't we just give her the keys to the car and give her the house while we're at it.

"I would love to, but I have to work the morning shift tomorrow."

"Ahhh, too bad," I said. "Bye." I walked to my door and went inside. I poured our after-Iris Courvoisiers. Michael came in grinning and I handed him his glass. I waited until he was leaning debonairly over the mantel. Then I said, "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What," he said, coloring.

"What's with this 'Oh, Iris, call me night or day' shit. She'll never leave us alone now, Michael. I can't afford to keep changing my phone number."

"What if I don't want her to leave us alone," he said, staring into his brandy snifter. He shrugged. "I liked her."

I gulped my cognac. "Michael, she's bizarro, nuts, a veritable fruitcake. Look at her glasses, for God's sake."

"Okay, so she's a little different, I admit. But, God, Jane, I'd hardly say she's a fruitcake."

"Well look what she was wearing, will you?"

"Yeah, it was different, but you were right about her body. Strictly killer."

Clearly, I had cooked my own goose. "She's a very hairy girl," I said. "I bet she's gone through half a dozen Epiladies already."

"Jane, what's with you?" Michael was giving me the look I'd often seen him give our weird people when they've done something exceptionally

weird.

"I just don't want to see Iris get hurt," I lied. We stared at each other. Then Michael burst out laughing.

"You're joking, right?"

"Michael, be serious. You didn't play right tonight. You acted like you were really interested."

Michael got up and paced the room. "I was interested, Jane. Why is it so bad that we've discovered a gem out of all those duds?" He stopped in front of me, looking down into my face.

"Because," I said, "you're the only one who thinks she's a gem."

He was silent at that, and then said, "Oh. Well, whatever. We'll see her again and maybe you'll change your mind."

"I won't," I said. Michael took his glasses off and rubbed them on his shirt. He always cleaned his glasses whenever something ticked him off.

"What happened to expanding our horizons, Jane? You're too young to be this inflexible." He put his glasses back on. "I gotta go. I'll call you tomorrow."

I jumped up. "Well you're too young to be this indiscriminate," I countered. "You don't know where she's been."

At that, he laughed. "For heaven's sake, Jane, I'm not going to sleep with her."

"Right," I said, and I watched him let himself out.

Chapter III

The next week could have erased itself from my life, and I never would have missed it. Everyone was acting like an idiot. Dale was more anal than usual and was giving me hell about my paragraphing. And every time I went out the door, Clarisse was holding up new baby wardrobes and wanting me to come over for ten hours to see how stunning Ashley looked in them. Then I went to see "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown" and practically had one myself from the bag sitting behind me, who seemed to have a never-ending supply of Goobers. I finally turned around and said, "Would you kindly pour those damn things in your lap, please? Because if I hear you rattle that box one more time, I'm going to tear your fucking head off." She complained to the manager, but I had moved to another seat. Michael hadn't been at the gym because he had a deadline to meet for his latest book The Corrupted Heart. I hadn't even seen him for dinner, so by Friday, I needed a shoulder to bitch on. I called Him.

"Rescue me! I'm having the week from hell."

"What a drag," said Michael.

"Yes, a major drag, and I need you to whisk me away from this place before Parkinson's Disease decides to show me the family photo album of

Ashley's butt rash. I can be at your hovel with five gallons of Gallo in half an hour."

Silence.

"Don't tell me I'm interrupting something." Michael could have been bucking for Pope, that's how much sex he was having.

"Oh no, no," he said quickly. "Nothing, there's nothing going on."

"Great, how 'bout it then?"

"Well, ummm, sure. But Iris is here."

My stomach clenched.

"Oh," I said.

"We're just going over her cookbook plans, you know, since she's never published before and I have. But, then, I guess you already knew that." He laughed lightly.

"I see," I said.

"You can still come over, I mean, this is not like a date. Ha, ha. Okay, well, anyway..."

"I guess maybe I'll just hit the sack early tonight, Michael. Maybe curl up with a good book. Hey, or maybe I'll read one of yours. I have a whole box full of them. I'd probably just be bored listening to you two talk shop anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said. "Don't worry that you're the only friend I have in the world and I have no one else to turn to. You kids have fun."

"Great, okay," said Michael, "talk to you tomorrow."

I hung up. I stared at the phone. I was being overwhelmed by a highly inappropriate and embarrassing feeling. Jealousy. I was horrified. I thought only lovers suffered from it. But there I was having nightmares about finding the two of them at Louise's, Iris eating my usual. I had to get a grip. But unfortunately, over the month ahead, I just kept losing it.

This is how it unfolded.

Almost immediately, Iris ceased being a weird person (to Michael, at any rate), and became Michael's fling (not his words). Sometimes I behaved in a petty fashion about this, like when I referred to her as "her," "that girl," or "fling." Or when I invited Michael over and not Iris. But why should I have included Iris? We'd never included anyone before. And threesomes were so awkward. But Michael didn't seem to think so. Increasingly, when I called to find out what our plans were for dinner, he would say, "Let's see if Iris would like to go. She doesn't have many friends;" or if I would suggest a greasy visit to Fatburger, he would say, "Well, Iris is here, actually, and, well, you know she doesn't eat meat;" but the clincher came when he said, "Let's go to The Source. Iris is working there tonight." We never called it The Source; we always called it Groanola.

Then there was the gym. Michael and I had always aerobicized together. And I mean together. We stood next to each other, we started off on the same foot, we did our leg lifts on the same leg, we grabbed for our water bottles at the same instant. We practically sweated the same

amount. It was saying a lot for my closeness to Michael that I let him see me sweat. So with this in mind, I think it was highly understandable that I let out a small shriek when I saw Iris on the aerobics floor doing stretches beside Michael. She was wearing a grey sweat suit that said "Berkeley" down one leg and across the chest. Michael's sweats.

"Jane!" said Michael. "Look who's here. You remember Iris."

"Of course I remember Iris, you dip shit," I hissed. I gave Iris a strained smile. "If you haven't been aerobicizing before, there's a good chance you might have a heart attack."

"Don't worry, Jane," said Iris, as she did some deep knee bends, "I'm going to take it slow."

"She's going to take it slow," I said to Michael. "Couldn't you just have left her at home with a Jane Fonda tape?"

"Hey, what's with you? You act like this is a private club, or something."

"Yeah, well maybe it should be." I set my towel and water bottle down and started stretching out. Michael's face was working like he wanted to speak but couldn't. He kept glancing over at Iris and back at me. Then he took his glasses off and started rubbing them on his T-shirt. He was mad. I didn't care.

Class was fair. Iris managed to stay out of my way and she managed to refrain from having a heart attack which slightly disappointed me. I went directly to the showers afterwards, leaving the traitor and his new best friend at the juice bar. When I was showered and changed, I

walked to my car. Michael was leaning against the driver's side door. Iris was nowhere in sight.

"You're ruining my wax job," I said.

"I waxed it, I can ruin it." His arms were folded and he looked irritable.

"Where's your side-kick," I said. I dropped my gym bag and leaned nonchalantly against the BMW parked next to me and the car alarm went off.

"Nice going, Jane."

"Let's get out of here," I said. I grabbed my bag and we jumped in my car. I took off, heading west.

"Don't go too far," Michael said, "my car is back at the gym."

"Where's Iris?"

"She drove her own car. She went home."

I stole a glance at Michael. His mouth was set firmly. I wondered what I was in for.

"Pull over here," he said.

"On the street?" I said.

"We just need to talk, not make a day out of it."

I was feeling incredibly anxious, but I pulled over and cut the engine. I'd never seen Michael like this before. He stared straight ahead and said, "Two things. One, I want you to cut your bitch act with Iris. She's my special friend and I won't have you making fun of her anymore. And two, Iris wants to invite you over for dinner Saturday night. She wants to

know if you eat seaweed."

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel.

"What does 'special friend' mean? Is that like a Mr. Rogers thing or does that mean you've gotten to first base?"

Michael looked at me. "There's more to loving people than getting something off of them."

"I see," I said. "You haven't gotten to first base."

"That's not the point," said Michael, polishing his glasses. "The point is that I like Iris a lot and it makes things difficult when you keep insulting her every chance you get."

"Michael, she's weird. I'm supposed to insult her."

"She's not weird to me, Jane."

"Well you're starting to get weird to me, Michael."

"Does that mean you're going to invite me out to Louise's for your own amusement?"

"I would if I had someone to make fun of you with."

We looked at each other.

"You're being possessive," Michael said.

"You're ignoring me," I said.

"You act like we're married," he said.

"Just because we're not doing it, doesn't mean you can drop me whenever some brunette with big bazookas comes along."

"Take me back to my car," he said.

"Take you own self back. I've got things to do."

"Quit being a baby, Jane. Just take me back to my car."

"Don't order me around," I said. "Get out."

"Oh come off it, Jane."

"Get out!"

"Fine then, I will." He got out.

"Fine," I said.

He slammed the door and started walking away. I stuck my head out my window.

"Hey," I yelled, "Call me later." But he didn't hear me.

This was on a Tuesday. By Thursday I crumpled. I had been to the gym twice since our conversation and neither Michael nor Iris was there. I started to panic. What if Michael dropped his membership? What if he never wanted to see me again? What if he changed his phone number and moved? I had to check it out. I called him Thursday afternoon. Iris answered the phone.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Adora's residence, may I ask who's calling?"

I toyed with the idea of lying, but I knew Michael would probably see through any strange message I might leave.

I said, "It's Jane Label."

"Jane! Michael said you'd be calling."

"He did?"

"Yes, he said you two had a fight and that you could never keep up the silent treatment for long, so I should expect a phone call sometime this afternoon."

I was floored. That bastard.

"Can I talk to him?" I said.

"He's getting his hair done."

"He's getting his hair done? This is a new twist."

"Oh no," said Iris, "he's always gotten his hair done. He goes to some man named Joe. Once a month on Fridays."

"Oh really?" I said. I knew there were no hairdressers named Joe. He was already lying to her. My spirits lifted. "Well, Iris, I was calling to tell the smug bastard that I could make it to dinner Saturday night if the invitation's still open."

"Of course it is, Jane. I'm so glad you're coming. It will be at my place at 7:30."

"Splendid," I said. I then got directions to Iris's place and hung up. I could see how things were. Michael couldn't get Iris off his back so he had resorted to escaping by any means possible. Served him right. I wouldn't have to wait this thing out much longer. Maybe a couple more weeks, two months tops, and then Michael would be pacing my living room pleading with me to help him break it off. Considering this rosy future, I wasn't dreading dinner at Iris's in the least. In fact, I was looking forward to it. I knew I could have hours of fun pinning Michael to the wall about Joe the hairdresser.

Early Saturday evening, I got ready for Iris's dinner. I put on black leggings and an oversized black sweater, belted at the waist, black boots, and huge gold hoop earrings. I teased my hair and sprayed it, then I

painted my lips red. I took a moment to admire myself in my full length mirror. I had to admit, I looked stunning. Sexy but not slutty, outrageous but not tacky. Surely Michael would see how androgynous Iris looked compared to a real woman. Anything to make Iris look bad, that was my motto.

I was actually humming to myself as I drove to Iris's place. She lived in West Hollywood in the rent control district near Fairfax and Santa Monica Boulevard. There was a Russian deli on the corner of her street. Figured she'd go for the ethnic neighborhood. I parked, checking my car alarm twice and walked across the street to her place. She had a guest cottage behind a small, white house and inbetween a couple of boxy, salmon pink apartment complexes. I gingerly picked my way down an overgrown path that led to the back of the main house and found a cement stoop and a white door. Just before I rang the bell, I heard the foliage on the path rustle and a large, stocky man appeared wearing a white dress shirt that was unbuttoned to mid chest and a suede jacket. He had a crewcut and his face was plump and red. He had a gallon of wine in each hand.

When he saw me, he stopped and said, "What have we got here? Hellooo, Missy! I thought you gals only did curbside business. But hey, I'm not complaining. I always thought door-to-door service was the wave of the future. Is this my day or what? I had no idea Michael was a swinger. Sorry, if I had a free hand I'd give it to you. No matter, the name's Joseph Gabriotti. It's Italian, but I'm not a pure bred. My

mother's French. But you gals probably don't need to know our history, right?"

I stared at him. He was beaming at me and moving closer.

"Look, asshole," I said, taking a step back, "I don't know what you're talking about, but I think you've got the wrong house, so why don't you take your party elsewhere." I rang the door bell hoping that I had gotten the right house.

The man stepped onto the stoop and leaned closer to me. I noticed he had a pooka shell choker on and from his smell, I guessed he had taken a bath in Old Spice.

"Whoa, little lady, you are a skittish one, aren't you? No matter, I come on strong at first, but I'm just a big ole T-bear once you get to know me. That's what the ex used to tell me before she ripped my heart out with hardly a blink of her eye. You like burgundy? I can't stand that pansied-ass pink stuff the yuppies are drinking nowadays. But say, if you like burgundy, there's a lot more where this came from, ha, ha. So how did Michael get a hold of you, anyway? Or is this a cold call?"

At that moment, the door opened and Michael was standing there saying, "Great timing, come on in." I hurried inside and pulled him away from the door.

"Michael, that perverted lummoX followed me here and he thinks he knows you."

Michael looked confused as he glanced at the man coming through the doorway. "You mean Joe?"

"Michael, my man! You old tiger, you. Holding out on me, were you? No matter, surprises like these I can take any day. Never thought Iris was the type, but hey, you know what they say about silent waters and what have you. Hope you like burgundy. I couldn't buy any of that pink yuppie crap they're all drinking nowadays."

Michael took one of the bottles and said, "So you've met Jane already?"

"Jane? Ha! Well, okay, alright. I always thought you gals named yourselves Natasha or Crystal or like that. No matter, Jane it is, I won't quibble with you. But say, is that your real name? I thought that was illegal in your line of work. Or just plain dangerous, wouldn't you think? Say, how 'bout a drink before we get this circus on the road, Michael, my man. Say, who cut your hair? Great job! Ha!"

I could tell Michael was trying to suppress a smile but he wasn't very successful. "Joe, this is Jane Label, my friend I'm always telling you about?"

Joe's face fell. "Not the book reviewer."

"Film critic," I said icily.

"No matter," Joe said shaking his head slowly. Then he burst out laughing. "Well how do you like that. And here I thought she was a hooker. For the love of Pete. The whole time I'm thinking, Michael, my man, is giving me a sure thing and it's not even my birthday. Okay, okay, I can adjust, it's no matter. Say, this really calls for a drink, whaddaya say? Hey, how 'bout it?"

I was shaking, I was so furious. Michael was glancing at me nervously.

"Say," said Joe, grabbing the wine from Michael's hand, "whaddaya say I pour the vino, huh? Where's the old lady? Say, Iris, you got a corkscrew? Hope you like burgundy. That pink yuppie trash will toss my cookies every time." He walked off to the kitchen.

"If this is a joke," I said through clenched teeth, "then you better get a new sense of humor."

"Give me a minute, Jane, I can explain," Michael said. "But why don't you have a martini first." He pushed me down onto a plaid love seat and smiled. "There now, just relax."

"Jane!" Iris stood in the doorway with a white chef's apron over blue cords, and a burnt orange turtleneck that had a big gold zipper that went from under her chin to her breast bone. I noticed she was wearing a very worn pair of Wallabies. "I wasn't sure if it was you or not. Joe told me Jean the food critic was here and I thought, either he's confused or my cookbook is getting reviewed before it ever comes out! You look wonderful."

"Thanks," I said, standing up. "I better get going. I've got an early morning film to catch."

"What?" Iris looked dismayed.

"Ha! That's funny, Jane," said Michael, and he pushed me back onto the love seat. "Isn't she funny, Iris?"

"Oh, yes," said Iris, looking confused. "Did I miss another joke?"

"I'll explain it to you later, Iris. Why don't we go get Jane her martini now? Okay, Jane?" He leaned close to me and said in a low voice, "Don't move."

"Say, hey! These pups were screw tops. Hope everyone likes burgundy. No matter, more for me if you don't, ha!" The three of us looked at Joe balancing an old-fashioned Coca-Cola tray with four filled wine glasses on it.

"Oh no," I said.

"Joe!" Michael said, "why don't you bring those back into the kitchen and I'll fix Jane her martini and you can help Iris with the hors d'oeuvres."

"Say, sounds great to me," said Joe.

"But the hors d'oeuvres are already done, Michael," said Iris.

"No they're not," said Michael, "you forgot to put the parsley garnish on them."

"Say, I'm great with garnishes," said Joe. "My mother was a garnish fiend, you might say, being French and all. Even our hot dogs had to have a little fanciment done to them with the pickle spears."

"See that?" said Michael. "A real gourmet." He ushered the two of them back to the kitchen as Iris was saying, "But I don't even have parsley."

When I was finally alone, I threw my head back and closed my eyes. This was worse than any nightmare I'd ever had. Even worse than the one where I accidentally married the bank teller Michael and I once

collected, who moonlighted as Trixie the Clown for children's birthday parties. If it weren't for my impending martini, I would have left while the going was still good. Instead, I sat up and looked around me while I waited. The living room was tiny and filled with knick knacks and mementos and similar junk. Iris had one bookcase that appeared to hold nothing but Michael's Heart series in it. Every wall was covered with photos. I got up and examined them. Most of them were of the same three people, a thin, gawky man with thick glasses similar to Iris's, who looked like a scientist, a floozy-looking blonde in loud-colored outfits, and Iris.

"Those are her parents," Michael said as he came into the room with my cocktail. "Sorry there're only two olives. That was all that was left in the jar."

"Anything will do at this point," I said, and went back to the love seat after taking a gulp of my drink. Michael sat down next to me with a glass of burgundy.

"So what's with the horn dog in the suede?" I said. "Are you and Iris collecting without me?"

"Joe is my hairdresser," said Michael.

"Your hairdresser? He looks like a butcher," I said with a sinking feeling inside. He had been telling Iris the truth. "Since when have you seen a hairdresser?"

"Since you've known me," said Michael. "I go in once a month. Look, I realize now what a stupid idea this all was, but I just thought it might

be fun to do something as couples, you know."

"How could you possibly even imagine that I would go out with a moronic buzz head like that? I can't believe you thought I would like him."

"Well how am I supposed to know what kind of guys you like? You never go out with anyone. Give me a break, it was just a shot in the dark." Michael stared in irritation at his wine as he swirled it. "I was just trying to help."

"What, do you think I'm a loser or something? How could I have gone out with anyone when I've been with you twenty-four hours a day? Just because I haven't had a date recently doesn't mean anything."

"Jane, you haven't had a date in years."

I finished off my martini in one big gulp. "I didn't realize you were counting. You know, you have a very petty side to you."

"Hey, I hadn't had a date in years either, but now I'm going out with Iris and I just thought it might be, you know, healthier if you didn't depend on me so much."

I was speechless. I had no idea Michael thought I was such a burden. This was really turning into a hellish night.

He patted my knee and stood up. "Anyway, let's just forget this. Joe didn't know you would be here, so he doesn't expect anything."

"Oh that's a relief. As if he would have gotten anything if he had. I need another drink."

Michael took my glass. "Don't drink too much, Jane, or Joe might

have to drive you home." He laughed and headed toward the kitchen.

I was about to hurl a coaster at him when Iris came in the room followed by Joe. She set a plate of greenish chips in front of me on a small wooden coffee table, and Joe set a bowl of brown dip next to it. They both pulled up chairs and sat down.

"Couldn't find any parsley," said Joe, "so unfortunately, you can't see my flair for decoration."

"It doesn't seem to me you can do a whole lot with dip," I said, scooping some up with a chip and popping it in my mouth. I made a face. "What is this?"

"Seaweed chips and humus," said Iris. " You don't like it?"

"I try to stay away from healthy foods whenever I can."

"Say, me too," said Joe, tugging his trousers at the knee and hunching over the chips. "But the ex, now. Hallo! She was a health food fiend, don't you know. She was always doing with the sprouts and the bran and the mush this and the bland that and what have you. I go to her one day, I tell my ex this, I say, 'Carmen? No! No more!' That's it, that's all I say, and I walk out the door and I drive straight to Der Weinerschnitzel and I have about five kraut dogs. With fries. Best meal of my life. Course that was before she chopped my heart up into little pieces and slapped my butt with divorce papers."

Iris's mouth was opened and she held a chip suspended in the air.

Michael came in with my drink and sat beside me on the love seat.

"So," he said, smiling at all of us. "How're we doing?"

"Joe was just entertaining us with a wonderful description of his eating habits and his tragic marriage," I said.

"Oh?"

"You know," said Iris, "you should really try to stay away from hot dogs. They're so horrible."

"Hey, don't I know it? Didn't the ex tell me that every day of our life together before she gave me the bloody ax? Iris, for the love of Pete, I've tried to give them up but I'm not the type. I'm the kind of man who eats them RAW! Hallo!" Joe put a loaded humus chip in his mouth and chomped down.

"Iris is right, Joe," said Michael. "No one eats hot dogs anymore. But Iris has got a great recipe for veggie dogs. I have to admit, they're superb."

I looked at Michael. "Is this the same man who wanted to draw pictures of quartered cows on the windows of The Good Earth last halloween?"

"I was ignorant about what I was putting into my body, Jane. And you know, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to start cutting out the fats in your diet. From what I can tell, you're way over your limit."

I laughed. "This is incredible."

"If you think this is incredible," said Iris, "wait til you see dinner!"

Once we were all seated at the table, and Iris had served the food, I was surprised to see that everything on my plate looked normal. Too bad it didn't taste that way. Every item of food seemed to have some

major ingredient missing, like the beef stroganoff was served without the beef and the sour cream, and the salad was served without the dressing and the Baco Bits, and the rice pudding was served without the sugar and the eggs. Someone would have failed Home Ec, that's for sure.

I said, "Is this whole menu going in your cookbook, Iris?"

"Oh yes. And these are all new recipes for me, so I'm very excited about them. You know, ever since Michael started working on his new story line, I've been so motivated to take even more risks myself. More creamless creamed corn?"

"I'll pass," I said. "What's this about a new story line, Michael?"

"I told you at the gym, remember?" he said, helping himself to more stroganoff.

"He's going to blow your socks off with this one," said Iris.

"I hope you're going to throw in some realism this time," said Joe.

"A couple of those characters need to go through some nasty divorces."

"It's even better than that," said Iris. "The main character is going to be a man!"

"A man?" I said.

"Does he get a divorce?" said Joe.

"He falls in love!" shrieked Iris.

"It's sort of a romance novel for men," said Michael.

"I didn't think men read romances," I said.

"Hey, I'm not opposed to the idea, as long as it's got some painful realism and what have you," said Joe.

"I'm sure your editor's going to love this," I said, smirking.

"She thinks it's going to blow everyone's socks off," said Iris.

"Yeah," said Michael, "she's already read a first draft, and she thinks I've really got something here."

"You've written it already?" I said. "Since when have you ever written a novel so fast?"

"I guess you could say the muse is with me," said Michael, and I saw him smile at Iris.

This can't be happening, I thought.

"Why didn't you tell me about all this?" I asked Michael. He was attacking his stroganoff now.

"I tried to," he said with his eyes on his plate. "You wouldn't listen. Iris, I think you've topped yourself on this one. I might have to have thirds."

On my way home that night, I stopped at Carney's and ordered a chili dog and large fries to go and I ate it in bed while watching "The Honeymooners." I tried to block my thoughts, but I couldn't. This thing between Michael and Iris appeared to be more serious than I thought. She was changing him, turning him against me so that he thought I was dependent on him and had a dietary problem. And she had seemed so harmless. Joe was right. Still waters run deep and what have you.

I didn't realize how deep until two weeks later. I'd been trying to get a hold of Michael for the entire weekend but I could only get his answering machine. I was not going to stoop so low as to track him down

at Iris's. Monday evening, he finally called me.

"I'd like to take you out to dinner," he said.

"Uh-oh," I said, "sounds serious."

"How about Louise's, eight o'clock, tomorrow?"

"Is this a no-Iris meal?"

"No Iris."

"Alright, then. Eight o'clock."

We got a table by the window. There were people sitting outside laughing uproariously. But inside, we were all quiet couples, discussing our lives in serious tones and wondering whether we should save room for dessert. I started to order our usual for both of us, but Michael stopped me and told the waiter, "I'll have the antipasto, instead."

"There's no need to impress me," I said.

Then he ordered a bottle of champagne.

"Don't tell me," I said. "They're going to bring you out in hardcover."

Michael laughed. "I wish."

Our waiter brought over an ice bucket and popped the cork, pouring a glass for each of us. When he had disappeared Michael cleared his throat.

"Well!" he said.

"Well," I said.

"I have something to tell you."

"Oh, really?"

"It's about Iris."

"Oh, really?"

"Iris and me." He was grasping the stem of his champagne flute with two hands, like it was a three pound goblet. He smiled tentatively.

"We got married."

I stared at him. Then I laughed. "No," I said.

"Yes," he said, laughing.

"No," I said, "no really."

"Yes really," he said.

I kept laughing and he kept laughing until finally we petered out into a couple of half-hearted snorts. Then it was silent.

"So you're not joking," I said.

"No," he said. "We did it in Vegas over the weekend. Just the two of us."

"Just you two, huh?"

"Yeah, just us two." He chuckled.

"How nice for you both."

"Yeah." He paused. "Iris had never been to Vegas before. She really liked the lights."

"Who wouldn't," I said.

"Really." He looked at me hard. I stared at his collar bone. "Are you upset?"

"Me? Upset?"

"Yeah. I know you've had a hard time adjusting to my relationship with Iris."

"Not at all," I said. "Just a figment of your imagination."

"Alright." He smiled. Our meals came and I moved my noodles around on my plate.

"You know, Jane, this doesn't have to change things between us."

"Ha. Okay."

"No, seriously. We can still do this." He gestured widely to include the whole restaurant.

"Without Iris?"

Michael shrugged and looked irritated. I put my fork down. "Okay, look," I said. "Let me tell you what's happened here. We've got two people who have been best friends for about four years, and now one of them has gotten married and the other one has to carry on alone. She'll find a new best friend, and he'll have a new wife and that's it. Okay? So don't bullshit me about everything staying the same, because frankly, if I were Iris, I'd be pissed if you spent time with another woman without me. Everyone's niceness has a limit, you know."

"Okay, okay! Just keep it down, will you? People are staring."

"I don't care."

He leaned in closer to me. "I just don't want you to be hurt."

"I'd rather you worry about not placating me." I downed my champagne and reached for the bottle. Michael grabbed it first.

"I'll get it."

"I can pour my own fucking champagne, thank you." I took the bottle away and filled my glass.

Michael looked helpless. "Jane, I don't want things to be like this between us. Let's talk about this."

I pushed my plate away and settled back in my chair with my glass.

"Okay," I said, "talk. Tell me what it is about Iris that made you want to mate for life all of a sudden. You've only known her for a month, which is practically an indecent amount of time. Just what is it you see in her?"

"Oh, boy," he said, and rubbed his forehead. "Jane, look..."

"She's got dark nipples, right? That's it, isn't it? I should have known from all your brunette heroines in your novels."

"Jane!"

"Sorry, but I can't think of anything else."

Michael took his glasses off and rubbed them with his napkin. "She happens to be a wonderful woman, and I'd appreciate it if you'd show her some respect."

I shrugged and looked out the window. A table of four was laughing so hard they knocked over a beer.

"Let me tell you something, Jane"--I closed my eyes--"Iris loves me the way I am. She respects my work. She doesn't think any less of me because I write romance. She gave her mother a whole set, signed, for her birthday. She doesn't use them for coasters, like you do." He was flushed and still rubbing his glasses.

"So," I sighed and swirled my champagne. "She makes you feel like a man, and I make you feel like a loser."

"Look," he said, putting his glasses on, "something came together for me when I met Iris. I've found my niche with her. It doesn't matter to me anymore how I stack up with other people. For once I feel like I have my priorities straight, Jane. There's a lot to be said for the traditional values of marriage and family."

"It sounds nice, Michael," I said, "really it does."

"I'm glad you see it that way," he said.

"Yes," I said. Then I started to cry. I tried not to be loud and obnoxious about it, but I didn't feel like I had any control over the situation. Michael was saying, "Jane, for God's sake, Jane." He handed me his napkin and tried to distract me by showing me a glass of water. "Drink this," he said, "you'll feel better." I waved it away, and then Michael asked for the check. I put his napkin over my face while he paid, and then I felt his hands on my shoulders.

"Come on, Jane, let's go."

I walked with my head on his shoulder, past all the people at the outdoor tables, and I wondered if they had stopped laughing to stare at me. I wondered what they thought. Maybe they thought Michael had cancer or AIDS and I had just found out. Or maybe they thought we were lovers and he had broken up with me. Or maybe they thought I had gone over my 1500 calorie limit for the day.

Or maybe they just dismissed us as a couple of weird people.

Chapter IV

Two days later, I was sorting through my mail in my bathrobe when I came across an invitation to Michael and Iris's wedding reception. Beat me when I'm down, I thought. This guy was full of surprises. He hadn't mentioned a thing about any reception. Perhaps he was trying to ease me into things slowly. But considering I used to know everything he did before he did it, I could have done without the easing.

The invitation said that the reception would take place at the Harbor Restaurant in Santa Barbara on October 28. That was in three weeks. Maybe I could adjust by then. Maybe I could stop feeling sorry for myself and get a social life. Maybe Iris could accidentally poison herself with some bad wheat germ and die. I felt a flicker of energy; I had something to hope for.

I hadn't been answering my phone since Michael had given me the bad news, so there were lots of calls from him on my machine begging me to stop my histrionics because, as he pointed out, it wasn't like anyone had died or anything, although it seemed to me he might as well have. There were also two calls from Iris that were concerned and nice and hopeful that we could all three be happy campers together. She didn't seem to realize that threesomes never worked out, which had been the

beauty of collecting weird people. It's much easier to get rid of one person than a couple.

Until the Saturday of the reception, I went through the motions of living. I saw films, I aerobized, I wrote my column, I argued with Dale, I ditched Clarisse, and I paid my bills. A few days before the party, I went to the Century City Market Place and bought the happy couple a pasta maker for a wedding gift and had their names engraved on it so they wouldn't be able to take it back, but that was the only exciting thing I did. Michael called to invite me over for dinner several times, but I always told him I was too busy. He didn't believe me, but I didn't care. He had shut me out of his life and I wasn't going to help him mend his conscience by pretending everything was okay. It wasn't for me.

The Saturday of the reception arrived and I drove to Santa Barbara in a pastel suit and parked on Stern's Wharf thirty minutes after the party was scheduled to start. The wind was strong and cold and any people seen on the pier were clutching their jackets and hurrying to various indoor destinations. None of the normal, strolling tourists were visible that day. I tiptoed to the entrance so that my heels wouldn't fall through the wooden planks of the pier, and I opened the door. The tables by the windows appeared to be reserved for the party since almost every one contained silver and white packages on them. Guests were laughing and clutching each others arms and suddenly I couldn't take the jollity. There were stairs to my left that led up to the bar so I deposited my gift on a table and went upstairs, found an empty stool at the counter and

ordered a vodka martini with three olives on the side. There was one couple off in a corner and a young waitress in a t-shirt and shorts with her chin in her hand staring out the window. I stared out at the empty tables on the balcony outside. No one was insane enough to brave the cold, even though it was a beautiful day. I felt utterly alone. I was remembering how Michael and I had come to the Harbor several times, and how we had sat outside with a basket of fried calamari and Coronas with limes talking about how we would buy a place on the water some day and schmooze with Jane Seymour and do our grocery shopping at Pierre La Fonde.

I was deep in my misty, water-colored memories when I noticed a man who looked rather ominous appear at the top of the outside stairs. He had on black biking shorts, a black and yellow windbreaker, and he carried a biking helmet in his hand. He had black hair and a beard, but barely a follicle moved in the wind as he strode across the balcony and sat at a table all by himself.

"Looks like you have a crazy person out there," I said to the bartender.

"Looks like," he said. He was watching a football game on the t.v. screen by on of the windows.

"How 'bout them Lakers," I said.

He turned to look at me and stared for almost a full minute. Then he looked back at the game and yelled, "Lisa! Deck customer."

Some people have absolutely zip in the humor department. "Hey," I

said, "I was just kidding. I know Lakers are basketball."

"Do you want another drink, or what?" he said. This guy was very serious.

"Sure," I said, "if it will make you happy." I had thought bartenders were supposed to be sympathetic and ready with comments like, "Hey, Mack, don't let it get you down," and "Hey, Bud, she's not worth it." Screw him. I turned to the lunatic outside. He was placing an order with the waitress in shorts as she hopped from one foot to the other. She ran inside on the balls of her tennies and said, "Ice cold Bass ale." And then she said, "I'm totally not even kidding."

The lunatic was slouched in his white plastic chair, arms and legs flung out straight, head tilted to the sun, and wind whipping over his body and not touching his hair. He looked like he was readying himself for crucifixion.

The bartender pushed my second martini towards me and went back to his game, and Lisa tiptoed quickly outside with an ale. This is what my life had come to: boozy afternoons with surly bartenders, perky barmaids, and crazy men with immovable hair. I felt I had no friends, no future, and no chance of getting and sustaining a pleasant buzz for the rest of my life. I took two quick and large gulps of my drink and stared at the neat compartments of condiments wondering if the nice Mr. Bartender would have a hemorrhage if I copped an olive.

I felt a cold draft of air and looked towards the door. The lunatic was heading my way. I noticed he had a pure white streak of hair from

his bottom lip to his chin; otherwise it was completely black.

"Excuse me, young lady, but do there happen to be any of those goldfish crackers around anywhere?"

I blinked. Did I look like waitstaff to him?

"Specifically the Pepperidge Farm variety. I think I'm correct in recalling I had some here once." He smiled pleasantly and obliviously.

I looked at him and then turned to the bartender. "Hey, Mack," I said, "you holding out on the Pepperidge Farm Goldfish?"

"Spicy nuts," he said without looking at us. "All I got are spicy nuts."

"All he got are spicy nuts," I said to the lunatic.

He paused to consider this, flicking his fingers through his beard beneath his chin. He looked to be in his late forties, early fifties. I caught a whiff of Paco Rabonne. He certainly had more style than Joe the hairdresser.

"Alrighty," he said, "that will do."

"That will do," I said to the bartender, who, with one hand, produced a bowl of nuts from beneath the counter and pushed them towards us without once taking his eyes from the screen.

"Your spicy nuts," I said. He looked very pleased, and I noticed that he was handsome the way dignified people are handsome. Like Omar Sharif and Raul Julia are handsome. Only really, if you look at them close enough, they're actually pretty ugly. I said, "You're not going to eat those outside, are you?"

He considered this, flicking his beard, and said, "Yes. Yes, I am. Would you like to join me?"

"No," I said. "Would you like to join me?" What the hell.

His eyes widened and then quickly narrowed. His black eyebrows, which grew together like a miniature feather boa, looked menacing. He bore a striking resemblance to Lucifer when he wasn't smiling.

"Alrighty," he said, and slipped outside to retrieve his Bass ale and his helmet. He sat on the stool to my left. I watched him line up his napkin so that it was parallel to the counter, place his drink gently on top, then choose one spicy nut and bite it in half with his front teeth. He held the remaining half poised in his hand and then he looked at me.

"My name is Vernon Osgood, but please, call me Barney." He put the half nut on his napkin and then extended his hand. He had a firm, dry grip, if somewhat cold. I was glad because if he had had a weak, clammy shake, I would have excused myself to the bathroom and would have never returned. My experience with the population, especially the weird variety, had been that the wimpier the shake, the more likely they were to be whiny within twenty minutes of your first conversation.

"I'm Jane Label," I said.

"Jane Label?" he considered. "Alrighty." He took a measured swallow of ale and then patted his mustache with a napkin. He appeared to be anally meticulous.

"You're not related to a Dale Riley, are you?" I asked.

"Ha!" he laughed. "No, no."

"What, do people ask you that all the time?"

"People often find I remind them of someone," he said. "It goes with the territory. I'm a psychologist, you see. You've heard of transference, no doubt?"

"No doubt," I said.

"Fine, then. You just engaged in it."

"Oh, really?" I shifted on my stool and tugged at my skirt so I could look at his shorts. Not everyone could wear Lycra and not have people throw up. I felt no nausea whatsoever.

"Psychologists have a certain aura. We're like priests in that way. You can spot one a mile off. You've subconsciously picked up on my profession, immediately you found some similarity to a person in your life and then asked me if indeed there were a connection in order to form one with me on your own." He sipped neatly at his beer, following with a pat of his napkin. "Obviously, this need to make me into someone I am not stems from stress in your life and, no doubt, there is something bothering you." He looked straight ahead and bit into another nut. "What might that be?"

"Good deduction," I said, "but any weenie could have thought of that. How many well-heeled women sit alone in an empty bar in the middle of an afternoon just because they're feeling particularly cheerful? You'll have to do better than that."

He turned to me and looked me up and down. It was a piercing objective gaze, with absolutely no sexual intent involved in it. I was

furious.

"Alrighty," he said. "I noticed what appears to be a wedding party taking place below us, given the semi-formally dressed customers and the plethora of silver wrapped gifts. You are attending, given the pastel-colored suit which most women with strong masculine streaks favor over frills and lace at these occasions. You are unhappy about this event because you are in a relationship with the groom, or possibly the bride, and you don't feel he or she has made a good choice. So you have escaped in two ways, physically, by removing yourself from the wounding parties involved, and emotionally, by drinking a martini, no doubt not your first."

This Barney person was unnerving. He defied slotting. Definitely he was weird in the best way--unaffected. But he was smart. Mostly, weird people were living on another planet, one with lesser life forms. This one was intelligent, and I relished the challenge.

"What did I get the happy couple for a wedding present?" I asked.

"Ha!" His laugh was a loud burst, similar to a horn on a mack truck. "That, young lady, is getting into psychic matters, a field which I personally do not have dealings with." He smiled at me happily. "Would you like another drink, Miss Label?"

"Yes, Mr. Barney," I said. He ordered me another martini. Not that I needed it.

I stirred my fresh drink with a swizel stick. "So that's it? You don't find any solutions to the problems you dig up?"

"The solution is within yourself," he said, narrowing his eyes and

peering at me, his feather boa brows bounding up and down on his forehead.

"You must not make much money," I said.

"Those who pay, get solutions," he said. "Today is my day off."

"Oh, so I can't tell you my woes."

"Go right ahead," he said, "but if you want a professional analysis, you must come see me."

Figured, I thought. It always came down to the pick up line.

"So this is where you suggest I give you my phone number."

"Oh no," he said, looking sincerely shocked. "That would be quite unethical. You have to call for an appointment." He pulled out his wallet from his jacket pocket and retrieved a card. "My business card. You can call twenty-four hours a day, but I only work Tuesday through Friday."

I looked at the card: "Vernon 'Barney' Osgood. Psychologist."

"This is in Century City," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"What makes you think I don't live in Santa Barbara?"

"Do you?"

"No."

"Well, then."

"You're too smug for your own good," I said, bolting my drink.

"Indeed," he said.

"I'm leaving."

"It's been a pleasure, Jane Label." He smiled quite sincerely for a

guy who looked like the antichrist. I shook his hand not wanting to flee and have him think he'd gotten the best of me. He seemed to be one of those people who are usually right, but never rub it in so it's impossible to hate them, but part of you does anyway.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, and I walked downstairs to face the party, putting the business card into my purse.

I surveyed the crowd wondering where I was going to sit and who I might possibly find interesting enough to talk to. Michael and Iris didn't seem to be around.

"If you're looking for a place card, don't bother."

I turned and found Michael's mother at my elbow. She was dressed in a knotty, pale blue suit with an orchid corsage pinned to her chest.

"Mrs. Adora," I said. Then I forced out, "Nice to see you again."

"Chaos," she said, ignoring me, "absolute chaos. I told Michael to group the guests into companionable parties, but he wouldn't have it. You wouldn't believe who I'm sitting with." She clasped a white purse to her stomach.

We heard loud laughter from a nearby table and a woman in a cock-eyed blond wig who looked slightly familiar, gave a whinnying laugh.

"She should be shot," said Mrs. Adora.

"Who is that?"

"My table partner." Mrs. Adora flared her nostrils in distaste.

"Beenie Kraus, mother of the bride."

"I thought I'd seen her before. Where's her husband?"

"Dead," said Mrs. Adora.

"Oh," I said. Mrs. Adora wasn't one for light conversation. "Jane! I've been waving to you for the past five minutes." Michael walked up to us looking a bit harried. He wore a black tux with a red cummerbund and bow tie.

"I thought you were a waiter," I said.

"I got stuck with that woman in the fruit hat. It looks like she dumped the contents of her refrigerator on her head. And Mother, you know we're not picking up the tab for the cocktails. The bartender said you're trying to put your Manhattans on my account."

"Well excuse me for thinking you would want to buy your own mother a drink at the wedding of her only offspring." Mrs. Adora held out her chin. "And don't be disrespectful to Mrs. Finch. She's my bridge partner, and I don't want her lousing up just to get back at me for your rude behavior."

Michael took off his glasses and began polishing them with his tux tail. "Give me some credit, Mother, I was as charming as I could be, under the circumstances."

"So I guess you're having a lot of fun," I said. I was relishing Michael's seeming absence of marital bliss.

"I thought we were getting rid of all this stress by eloping," said Michael. "Take my advice, Jane. If you ever get married, keep it a secret."

"I wasn't planning on telling you anyway," I said.

"Yeah," he said, but he was looking around the room and not listening to me. "There's Iris." He waved a tad maniacally at her, and when she caught sight of us, she came hurrying over.

"Jane! I thought you'd never get here!" She was dressed in a long white muslin nightgown, and on her head was a crown of dried flowers with blue ribbons falling down her back. With her heavy, black-framed glasses, she looked like a boy in drag. "I was afraid we'd have to leave before you came."

"Leave already? What's the rush?" I said.

"They're going to Solvang," said Mrs. Adora sarcastically.

"There's nothing wrong with Solvang, Mother," said Michael. "Just because you had a bad danish there once doesn't mean you have to write off the entire town."

Iris put her hand on my arm earnestly. "We have to get to bed early."

"Like I really want to know this," I said.

"We have to get up at four in the morning for a hot air balloon ride," said Michael, trying to gloss over my comment. "They only take off in the early morning hours."

"Michael gave me a new camera for a wedding present," said Iris. "I can't wait to try it out tomorrow. Can you imagine the view?"

"Take some Dramamine before you go," said Mrs. Adora. "I doubt they allow vomiting over the side."

"Thanks for the tip, Mother," said Michael.

"Jane," said Iris. "I want you to make sure you're here for the bouquet toss. The photographer wants to do it soon."

I felt the panic start. "No way, I hate that kind of thing. I'd be much happier tying beer cans to your bumper."

"Jane usually makes a beeline for the john at such tender moments," said Michael.

"You have to do it, Jane," said Iris. "You're single."

"So I have to be punished?" I said. "I'll do it if Mrs. Adora joins me." Mr. Adora, as his wife would have put it, was dead.

Mrs. Adora stiffened. "I see you haven't lost your smart mouth."

"Let's get you a Manhattan, Mother," Michael said quickly.

Just then, we heard an explosion of whinnying from the table Mrs. Adora had vacated.

"You have to meet my mother, Jane," said Iris. "I've told her so much about you."

"Does this mean I don't have to do the bouquet thing?" I said.

Iris laughed and pulled me towards the woman in the wig, leaving Michael to tend to Mrs. Adora. Iris's mother was laughing with a grey-haired man with a handlebar mustache from the next table, but as soon as we came up, she dismissed him with a wave of her hand and focused intently on us.

"Beenie," said Iris, "this is Jane Label, Michael's friend?"

"Hello, Jane dear, I'm so glad I'm finally meeting you." Beenie was

making a very loud fashion statement in a diaphanous dress made of yards of daisy-splashed fabric that fell to the tops of sunshiny yellow high heels. Her wig was solid and thick and done in a flip. Her wrists clanged with bangles. I tried backing away, but Iris was right behind me, and she gave me a firm nudge towards the empty chair.

"I'll let you two get to know each other."

"Thanks," I said and watched Iris move off to mingle with her guests.

Beenie patted my arm. "I think this calls for a toast, don't you, dear?"

"Why not," I said. "Except I happen to be drinkless at the moment."

"Take this glass here." She swiped a flute from the place setting in front of her even though a woman's coat was draped over the back of the chair. "Mrs. Adora's three sheets to the wind as it is."

"You misunderstand her," I said. "She's always that rude."

"That's a shame," said Beenie. She lifted her glass not seeming to think it was that much of a shame. "Here's to the bride and groom and all my future grandchildren." She took a sip of champagne.

"Do I have to drink to that?" I didn't want to be hypocritical. Having kids would lessen the chance for divorce.

"Oh dear," said Beenie, "Michael told me you hated her, but I didn't realize it was this bad." She leaned forward and grabbed my arm again, giving it a little squeeze. "You do hate Iris, don't you?"

I quickly reviewed my options. I could admit the truth to Iris's mother and say yes, with the risk that Beenie might snap my arm off, or

I could lie and say how much I enjoyed Iris's company, thereby spending the rest of the afternoon physically safe, if psychologically compromised.

I said, "I find Iris to be some of the most delightful company I've had in years."

"Good try, dear," said Beenie, squeezing my arm a little tighter and then releasing it, "but you don't have to lie to me."

I laughed lightly, as if Beenie had said something particularly witty. "That's always good to know."

"My daughter is not an extension of myself. Hate her all you want, it has no reflection on me." She smiled serenely and sipped more champagne. I wondered if she might not be three sheets to the wind herself.

"Okay," I said, but then I started really wondering about this. "Do you hate Iris?"

"Good heavens, no! She is my daughter, afterall. And contrary to you, I do find her to be delightful company. Such a kind soul."

"You're right there," I said just to soften my stance a bit. I started playing with a small net bag that held bird seed. It was tied with a white satin ribbon and had two wedding rings attached to it. Very precious.

"Iris tells me you're a famous film critic," said Beenie.

"Well," I said, trying to shrug nonchalantly, "I guess you could say I'm pretty well known."

"I'm surprised I've never heard of you," said Beenie. "But Michael,

oh my dear, when Iris told me who she was dating, I nearly fainted. The Heart series has been a favorite in our family for years."

"I'm sure," I said. I felt a medical need for another martini. "So what do you do during your spare time, Beenie? You know, when you're not reading the venerable Mr. Adora."

"You don't hide your grouchy moods well, dear, do you?" Beenie gave me a sympathetic look. "Let's see, now, what do I do. A little gardening, a little baking, lots of socializing, occasionally a little T'ai Chi. And I do write poetry, of course."

"A Renaissance woman," I said.

"I think," said Beenie, looking past me, "that they're getting ready for the bouquet toss."

I turned around and saw Michael trying to quiet the crowd, while Iris waved her bouquet in the air. "Can I have your attention please? Everyone? It's time for the bouquet toss. All single ladies outside."

How I hated these moments standing with a bunch of rejects displaying the fact that no one wanted to marry you, and all the while wondering what to do with your hands before the flowers were thrown. And when the flowers were thrown, you couldn't just not try to catch them, because then you looked like you were bitter, but then if you really tried to catch them, you looked desperate. I didn't want any part of this. I stood up.

"I've got to go to the little girls' room," I said. "I'll be back in fifteen."

"Dear, you can't miss the bouquet toss," said Beenie, standing up with me and taking a firm hold of my arm. I certainly was being grabbed a lot that day. "Hate my daughter all you like, but don't be a sore sport about it."

She pulled me into the crowd that was moving towards the door and never once let go of my arm. We passed Mrs. Adora on the way out, tightly sipping a Manhattan, and I decided I wouldn't go down alone. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her along with us.

"All single ladies, Mrs. Adora," I said, "and that means you."

"Let go of me, you maniac!" She was trying to get away from me and balance her drink at the same time.

"Oh, Mrs. Adora!" said Beenie, "I'm so glad I won't be the only old maid out there. Let's give the younger gals a run for their money, shall we?"

Mrs. Adora started looking a little panicky, but I had a good hold of her suit jacket, and I could see her weighing the social disgrace of struggling like a boor to get free, against standing foolishly yet composed in a crowd of women where she might possibly go unnoticed. She soon settled down and went fairly calmly.

Outside, Iris had stationed herself on the stairs that lead to the balcony. The female guests were forming a tight cluster at the base, trying to stay clear of the occasional car that slowly bounced its way down the pier. The wind seemed to have picked up even more, so everyone was trying to simultaneously hold down skirts and fold their arms against the

chill. Beenie stuck close and tried to pull us to the front, but I put my foot down.

"No, Been. I'll stand here, but I'm not standing in the front row. Besides, tall people are supposed to be in the back."

"Alright, dear, I was just getting a little carried away with all the excitement."

Mrs. Adora said icily, "You can unhand me any time, Jane."

I let her go and smiled at her just to show I wasn't going to acknowledge our hard feelings. She merely folded her arms tight across her stomach and sipped her Manhattan.

The three of us were on the outer fringes of the circle, although Beenie was trying to push in closer. Mrs. Adora and I stepped back a few steps and tried to look like we weren't doing what everyone knew we were doing.

"Chaos," said Mrs. Adora. "This is absolute chaos."

"Oh now, Mrs. Adora, you'll never catch anything with that attitude," said Beenie. "You're never too old to fall in love."

"You'd be too old if you knew what was good for you," she said.

"I have every intention of marrying again," said Beenie. "Having a man around is so cozy."

Mrs. Adora wrinkled her nose.

Iris was preparing to throw her flowers while a photographer was talking her through some positions for his pictures. Michael stood nearby beaming up at his vision of loveliness.

Just then, I heard my name.

"Jane Label!" There was a black Mercedes 350 SL that had stopped a few feet behind us. It was the crazy psychologist, and he was sticking his head out his window and waving at me. My chance for escape, I thought. I hurried over to him.

"Vernon 'Barney' Osgood," I said. "Where's your bike?" His helmet was placed on the passenger seat.

"I don't have one," he said. "I was wondering, would you happen to know where I could get plaster-of-paris busts of literary figures?"

"Not off the top of my head," I said.

"Alrighty," he said. "I don't want to disturb you. It looks like they've begun the festivities."

I looked up at Iris as she let her bouquet fly. It looked like it was heading straight for Mrs. Adora, whose arms were still wrapped around her body with only a minimum amount of flexibility allowing for her to be able to drink. All faces were upturned as we watched the bouquet fall lightly as if it were in slow motion. Even Mrs. Adora looked up although her face held an expression of horror. Just as it seemed she was doomed for love, a particularly strong gust of wind pushed the flowers a few feet further and they landed with a light ruffle at my feet.

"Brava, Jane!" said Barney, and he laughed heartily. I stared down at the small bundle of daisies and what looked like dill weed, bound together with a thin, yellow ribbon. Then I looked up at the crowd. The women were looking at me expectantly.

"Well go ahead and pick the damn thing up. We don't have all day," said Mrs. Adora, smirking at me.

I bent down and picked up the flowers. They drooped in my hands.

"Congratulations, Jane!" called Iris from the stairs. Then everyone started moving and talking and I was left to contemplate my victory on my own.

"You might want to put those in water as soon as possible," said Barney. "They look on the point of expiring." Then he waved and pulled away, and I noticed he had a bumper sticker on the back of his car that had a raven on a white background. It said "Where the hell is Annabel Lee?"

Then Beenie was beside me.

"Jane, how nice for you! And you didn't even want to play. Just think, if you had been in the bathroom, this never would have happened."

"Don't rub it in," I said.

"Come on, they're leaving now, we have to get our birdseed."

"Leaving? Already? I haven't even gotten a chance to talk to Michael."

"He's married now, dear. You might have to wait awhile."

Beenie rushed back inside for the birdseed, and I walked to the crowd that was assembled by the door, huddled and waiting for Michael and Iris to depart. A black limo had pulled up and was waiting for the wedding pair. So this was it. The end of the party, the end of the line. I felt as if Michael was leaving for good. In fact, he already had. The

Michael I knew was somewhere in my mind, joking with me, eating take-out with me on my living room floor, kicking me under the table when a weird person said something ridiculous. This new Michael was too healthy and polite for my taste.

Michael and Iris came out the door and were pelted with a flurry of birdseed. I saw Beenie on the other side laughing and flinging seed as if her daughter weren't leaving her for a married life where she would become the dreaded mother-in-law. The couple tried to shield themselves, and then stood by the car door laughing. Michael was waving his arm like a coked-up Miss America in a parade. When had he turned into a weird person? He was actually collectable, now. Everyone standing around me, shivering their well-dressed butts off was collectable. It all would have been very funny if I could have shared the joke with someone. If I could have nudged someone in the ribs and rolled my eyes and whispered witty insults to some partner in crime. I guess I was the only one to blame for not expanding my circle of friends. Michael had been the only one in my circle and he had just broken it.

I thought about the possibility of divorce. I guess you could say I was having an acceptance problem. What of it. There was entirely too much emphasis placed on the wedding pair. What about those friends and family members who were having their hearts wrenched out and stomped on at every doe-eyed glance? We were the forgotten people, we wedding guests. Oh yeah, the reception was for us. Uh-huh, then why wasn't there a free bar? And why did they force us to make fools of ourselves

by trying to catch flowers, while all the smug attached people stared on feeling sorry for us? And all the smug attached people didn't get off easy. They had to have it thrown in their faces that their marriages were not what they were when they had made their vows so many years ago. And yet, we were all forced to celebrate. Celebrate what? The poor choices of our loved ones? The plethora of hideous Llardo bride and groom statuettes lying in wait inside silver packages? The fact that half of us were yet again mateless and that the other half wished they were? That we got tiny pastel mints in miniature baskets that were so precious we wouldn't be able to throw them away but we would have no idea what to do with them so we would put them in shoe boxes with all our other wedding minutiae? What was there to celebrate? That people we loved were being wrenched from our lives? That they loved someone else better than us? Yippie. Pop another bottle of Andre, I'd like to toast to our future lives of misery and worthlessness.

"Wipe up," said Mrs. Adora. She was holding out a purse-sized packet of Kleenex. "You're ruining your face."

I shook myself. I hadn't realized I had let myself go.

"Thanks," I said, taking a tissue and wiping my eyes. Mrs. Adora was studying me.

"You don't like her," she announced.

I looked at her. "Who?"

"Don't play games with me," Mrs. Adora said. "Iris is the obvious topic here."

I gave a sarcastic laugh. "I guess I'm not hiding it too well."

"No, you're not. But you're not the only one who doesn't care for the girl." She clenched her jaws. "I certainly don't like her."

I questioned whether she liked anybody, but I said, "Well, there's strength in numbers."

"I don't like her," said Mrs. Adora as if I hadn't spoken, "but I think she's perfect for Michael."

"I don't see it," I said flatly.

"Of course you don't," she said, "You're not his mother. Michael needs someone to look up to him. All men do. Iris fills the bill nicely."

"What are you trying to say," I said.

"He's not making a mistake." She stood a little straighter, if that was possible, and sniffed the air. "It's cold," she said, like it had suddenly dropped twenty degrees. "Pull yourself together. We've got guests to entertain."

She walked briskly inside the restaurant along with the remainder of the crowd. I stared after her.

"Ma'am?"

I turned and saw the photographer. He was holding out Iris's bouquet.

"You dropped these."

I looked at the sad blooms dancing lethargically in the breeze.

"They're not mine," I said. "The whole thing was a mistake."

Then I walked inside to find my purse and begin the two hour drive

home to nothing.

Chapter V

To get the most pleasure out of a depression, I needed to put on my depression clothes. Clothes that looked really bad, but were comfortable and gave me a lot of room to sit unladylike on the floor and eat disgusting amounts of food. My depression clothes consisted of a baggy pair of plaid rayon pants from The Gap, an oversized t-shirt that was slightly discolored and had a few tell-tale depression stains on the front (hot sauce, chocolate syrup), fuzzy slippers from a New Zealand sheep, and, if I was cold, over the whole ensemble I'd throw a sky blue sweatshirt with a ferret insignia on the upper left breast that said "Royal Order of the Ferret Faces"--a gift from a couple of weird people Michael and I had collected who thought it would be fun to adopt the lowly ferret at the Folsom zoo and form a club around it. The sweatshirt had a vertical stain down the front. I think it was raspberry conserve.

I made the above fashion statement as soon as I got home from the reception. Immediately upon walking in the door, I went to my old clothes drawer with a vengeance, threw off my suit and slipped into depression almost with relief. If there's one thing that irks me to no end, it's being depressed and well-dressed at the same time.

I went into the kitchen and got to work. I poured Gallo chablis into

a large Donald Duck coffee mug. I cut up half a pound of Wisconsin very sharp cheddar cheese and arranged the squares on Triscuits (not the low salt variety). I chopped raw red onion wedges and placed them on top of the cheese. Then I dribbled Pico Pico hot sauce over each hors d'oeuvre. I brought the whole feast into the living room along with a jar of large green olives. Then I went to find a no-brainer novel to read. I had a stash of Michael's books in a Xerox paper box in my closet. Some of them I had read but there were quite a few I had not. I had always wanted to tell him not to keep giving me copies, but they were free and as long as I had space, I guess it didn't matter. I chose The Supine Heart. The back cover said it was about a woman named Dahlia who had never found her true love even though all these wonderfully handsome men wanted to marry her. So then this guy named Julian comes along and he's supposedly half-evil or something and naturally he awakens Dahlia's supine heart. The cover had a brunette on it with about a forty D cup, although it was obvious she'd forgotten to put on her bra that morning because her chest was pouring out of her ripped gown. Julian looked like a sexy criminal, and he reminded me a bit of that Barney Osgood fellow, only Julian's dark hair was certainly the worse for lack of mousse.

Anyway, I sat on the floor and ate from the coffee table and read The Supine Heart for about two hours. Then I found a really cheesy Barbara Eden movie on and watched it with a carton of Ben and Jerry's Rainbow Forest ice cream. At eleven p.m., I was sufficiently exhausted to go to bed. What a fun evening.

This went on for three weeks, although some nights I would switch to some of that white grenache yuppie crap, and maybe add a can of cocktail weenies. My depression ritual might have gone on forever if Beenie, of all people, hadn't taken a firm hand with me. I was at the Pavilions on Santa Monica Boulevard stocking up on supplies when I heard a "Yoo-hoo" close by. It was Beenie in a white pantsuit with a long-stemmed rose applique growing up her pant leg.

"How are you, Jane?" She looked sincerely glad to see me.

"Really marvelous," I said, glancing in the red basket over her arm. It contained bran cereal, an avocado, and two pears. What was the point of even eating?

"Giving a party?" she asked, peering into my wagon. I had decided to buy two weeks worth of groceries to cut down on my time outside of the house. It was too hard to find parking, and I was furious with those dogooders who accosted me at the entrances to give them my change or buy a can of Chunky Soup to contribute to Cans Across America or whatever. So anyway, I had eight cartons of Ben and Jerry's ice cream in my wagon. Also, five pounds of cheddar, three large boxes of Triscuits, ten cans of cocktail weenies, and a net bag of red onions.

"No," I said. "I thought I'd buy a little something extra for the homeless."

"Jane, really," Beenie said, wrinkling her nose at me. She gave me a very nerve-wracking look up and down, so that I almost expected her to say, "Turn around, missy." Then she said loudly, "You've gained weight."

"Thank you for noticing," I said. "It's so disheartening when you work really hard to get fat and no one says a word."

Beenie was not amused. "What's happening with you, dear?"

"Just a little high-caloric depression is all. I've promised myself I'll stop before I'm forty."

Beenie clucked her tongue and looked worried. "This is not good, dear. Not good."

I didn't often get embarrassed, but having my body fat discussed in the frozen food section of my local grocer's by a blond-wigged bran-eater was mortifying.

"It's alright, Been," I said, "I'm just kidding about the forty business."

"I don't think so," Beenie said. "I think you're upset about something and I would guess it's about Michael and Iris."

"What," I said, "is that written on my forehead or something?"

"Be reasonable, dear. Everyone has emotional problems. The thing to do is get help, not escape into high cholesterol binges." She set her basket down and began digging through her white shoulder bag. She handed me a business card that said "Dr. Vernon 'Barney' Osgood, Psychologist." "All my friends say he's extraordinary." And then she added, "And single."

I couldn't believe this. "You know this guy?"

"Oh no," Beenie said, looking offended, "I've never needed therapy, but all my friends have. They recommend Dr. Osgood highly. He's a big contributor to our Westwood Ladies' Sonnet Circle, you know. At last

month's luncheon, he donated a carrot cake in the shape of Edgar Allan Poe's head. It was very realistic. Did I mention he was single?"

"Yes, you did," I said. "So are you trying to set me up or psych me out?"

"Oh, you know," she said, "he's single by the by. Really, it's not important. What is important is that you call him and get this ice cream problem under control. I had a little depression problem myself once," she said lowering her voice. "It was after Iris's father passed on. I gained thirty pounds. Now I eat nutritiously, and you should too." She picked up her basket and seemed to lose interest, plucking at her wig and staring at her reflection in the glass doors, no doubt thinking about her bran and avocado dinner.

"Yeah, well," I said, "I know this guy, by the by, and I know he's pretty certifiable himself."

"Being a little crazy has nothing to do with mental health," Beenie said. "They say he's a breath of fresh air."

"That's really neat," I said, "but my ice cream is melting, and I've got to get home to my roaches before they worry. Thanks for the tip."

As I pushed past Beenie, she patted my arm and whispered conspiratorially, "Call him."

Standing in the checkout line, I considered therapy. Did I really need it? Unloading my eight ice cream cartons and my bag of onions onto the conveyer belt, I thought perhaps I did. On the other hand, everyone got depressed once in a while, did that mean everyone got therapy too?

Apparently Beenie had managed to lick her doldrums on her own steam. And what about this whacked-out therapist anyway? He liked sitting in the freezing cold drinking Bass ales, he had a penchant for Pepperidge Farm goldfish, he had a thing for edible literary figures, he wore biking clothes to drive a mercedes, and he talked to women in bars and didn't try to pick up on them. I found myself clenching me teeth. I wasn't vain, but when I considered a female like Iris, who looked like she put a bowl over her head to cut her hair, had just snagged a moderately handsome and employed man, life seemed vastly unfair. I wondered if Iris had been in that bar, whether or not the good doctor would have made a pass at her. That thought defied logic, but then, so had Michael marrying Iris. The world had turned upsidedown. Things like Cosmopolitan magazine were suddenly pointless. Why lose ten pounds in fourteen days? Why get rid of laugh lines once and for all? Why learn how to make your man marry you in less than two months? The bent of the world at that moment seemed to be to forget about your appearance, be inanely nice, and wear your brother's clothes. I wondered what Dr. Osgood would say about all this. I wondered if I cared.

"Looks like someone's having a party." The cashier had thick glasses like Iris, and when she smiled, she exposed a set of dull silver braces.

"Oh yes," I said, flicking my wrist at her, "my little Ashley turns five tomorrow, and do you know that already she has quite discerning taste buds? Why just yesterday I tried to slip some plain wrap ice cream by her and she simply refused to eat it."

The cashier said, "Wow," and she eyed the gangly box boy who had just come over to bag my order.

"I just bought her baby stirrup pants," I said. "They cost me an arm and a leg, but she looked so adorable in them I simply couldn't resist."

"She sounds so cute," said the cashier, pushing her glasses back. "That'll be sixty-four, twenty-three."

As I pulled out the money from my wallet, I noticed the cashier taking more peeks at the box boy. He looked up at her and puckered his lips sending her a kiss. She giggled and he swaggered over to the next station. I waited for my change and looked at her hard. Did I have to look like Poindexter now in order to be noticed? I definitely needed to talk this out.

"I hope Ashley enjoys her party," the cashier said, smiling.

"What?" I said as I grabbed my bags.

She looked uncertain. "Ashley? Your daughter?"

"Oh," I said, "yeah. Thanks." Ashley. My daughter. Please.

As soon as I walked in the door, the phone rang. I dumped the groceries on the floor and answered it.

"Yeah," I said.

"Jane?"

"Michael?"

"You're there." He sounded surprised.

"I've been here all along," I said. "You're the one on the honeymoon."

"I mean, it's 10:00. I thought you'd be at the gym."

I snorted. "So why'd you call, then?"

"I just needed to leave a message," he said, "I can't talk right now. I'm in the middle of revisions for my new book. My editor wants to get this thing on the shelves a.s.a.p. She thinks it's really going to send me. Hey, what do you think about Romance with Randy for a title?"

"What happened to the heart stuff?"

"This is new territory I'm blazing, Jane. It calls for something fresh. Well, think about it. I need to come up with something by the end of the week. Anyway, we wanted to invite you over for dinner this Saturday. We've got a ton of photos to show you. Also, it's sort of a housewarming, you know, since Iris has finally settled in here. Can you make it?"

"I don't know. Is Joe going to be there?"

"Is this a special request?" said Michael. "I'm sure he would love to come if I told him you were going to be there."

"Don't be a smart ass, I'm not in the mood. Hold on while I check my calendar." I held the phone away from my ear for a minute, then I said, "Yeah, looks like I've had a cancellation."

"Great. Around 7:30?"

"Fine."

"Alright, then, I need to get back to work. I'll see you Saturday."

"Wait," I said in a moment of delirium, "do you mind if I bring someone?"

Silence.

"No! No, not at all," said Michael.

"You sound surprised," I said.

"No, no, not at all. I'm just, you know. I didn't know you were seeing anybody."

"Are you saying I'm unattractive?"

"Man, you're touchy. I'm just saying, you know. I didn't know. So who is this guy?"

"No one you know," I said airily.

"Great, I'll look forward to meeting this Mr. Nobody then. Listen, I'll talk to you later, I've really got to go."

"Right," I said, "thanks for sparing me a few minutes of your time." But he had already hung up.

I put away my ice cream thinking about who this someone was I was bringing to Michael's. I hardly knew any men. There was Dale, but that would be humiliating to show up with him, not to mention I would rather die first. There was my gardener but I'd never seen him wear anything but a coverall, and I wouldn't want to chance him showing up in that. I shut the freezer and stood back staring at it. There was Vernon 'Barney' Osgood. Who said I had to call him for professional reasons? Beenie. But she did mention he was single. I started getting anxious and I paced the house weighing the consequences, creating imaginary conversations, planning my wardrobe. I could ask him to meet me for lunch to discuss the possibility of therapy. That way, I could take things off the professional level, but not appear to be too forward. Then at just the

right moment, I could casually invite him to dinner for Saturday, like I had just thought of it that second. I could wear a thigh-high skirt with a suit jacket. Sexy, yet businesslike. He would be attracted to me, but he would remain circumspect, not knowing whether this would blossom into a romance or a therapist/patient relationship. But definitely he would want me, all the more because I kept him guessing. The scent of my perfume would haunt him for days. He would put on his biking shorts and drive around Beverly Hills in his mercedes, thinking of me. In fact, he was probably having obsessive thoughts about me at that very moment. I dug out his business card and dialed the number. A woman answered.

"Dr. Vernon 'Barney' Osgood's office."

"Yes," I said, "I'd like to speak to Barney."

"This is his answering service," the woman said. "I can take a message. Dr. Osgood doesn't work on Mondays. Unless of course this is an emergency."

I considered this. It was for me. "Yes," I said, "this is an emergency."

"Alright," she said, "give me your number and don't do anything rash. Dr. Osgood will call you back within the next ten minutes."

"Fine," I said. I gave her my number, hung up and drummed the receiver with my fingers. I realized Vernon "Barney" Osgood could very well be pissed off at me for saying that this was an emergency. I thought maybe I should pretend I was suicidal. But then he probably wouldn't want to do lunch. Before I could think of a good lie, the phone rang.

"Yes?" I said.

"This is Dr. Osgood. Is Jane Label there?"

"Hi, doc. It's Jane. How are you?" I thought I'd try being casual right away to diffuse his worry.

"Just getting over a cold," he said. "How are you?"

"Couldn't be better," I said. Then, to clarify things, I asked, "Do you know who I am?"

"Indeed," he said. "You're the young lady who was harboring resentment over her friend's marriage."

"I'm the blond you met in the bar," I said.

"The very same," he said. "Are you in crisis?"

"Not really," I said.

"Alrighty. How can I be of service to you?"

"Well, I thought we could meet for lunch on Wednesday. You know, to discuss things. Maybe I want to start some therapy."

"And maybe you don't."

"Yeah, well," I said, "I want to discuss the matter."

"Well, Jane Label, I don't see my clients socially."

"I'm not a client yet," I said.

"Alrighty, then. Come at noon."

"Alrighty," I said. "Noon it is."

"Good-bye, Jane," he said and hung up.

That hadn't gone too badly. Still, I felt a little shaky. For a woman who had a career, a house, youth, looks, and a relatively firm ass, I sure

was sinking low. And all because my best friend had married a weirdo.

Chapter VI

On Wednesday, I drank too much coffee and had diarrhea all morning. I didn't generally get nervous like that, but something about this Osgood guy made me anxious. Not least because I had to discuss my personal life with him. Ostensibly, I did. I suppose it would have been easier if I was seeing him under honest circumstances. Say, if I was seriously suicidal or really manic depressive. But a date for Saturday night didn't constitute time with a therapist. At least I'm sure most professionals wouldn't think so. True, I did have a major dairy obsession to overcome, but I wouldn't have called a therapist in order to deal with it. At any rate, I put on my stockings with the seams up the back, just in case he didn't get the point of the miniskirt.

Barney had an office in Century City on the Avenue of the Stars, in a black mirrored building that looked ominous. I took the elevator to the eighth floor and wandered in the wrong direction twice before coming to the door that was marked "Dr. Vernon 'Barney' Osgood." I took a deep breath and opened the door. I found myself in a small waiting room with no receptionist and comfortable furniture. On the wall were a couple of framed photos of L.A. with blue sky. Probably sky from some other city. There were copies of the Smithsonian on the coffee table, along with

several newsletters with the masthead: The Southern California Chapter of the Edgar Allan Poe Society. There was one closed door on the left.

I looked around for instructions. Was I supposed to just open the door? What if I walked in on a patient? Not that anyone would be naked, but still, private is private. Was I supposed to knock? I sat down on the couch first, thinking that maybe some sort of flashing red light had gone off in the inner sanctum when I had opened the office door. I began straightening my nylons so the seam wouldn't be crooked, hoping something would happen soon, when I stopped abruptly. What if Barney had a secret camera that looked into the waiting room so he could see when a patient arrived? It would be just my luck to have a potential date spying on me while my hands were up my skirt. I stood up. I was not going to be manipulated. I went to the door and tried the knob. It was locked. I knocked loudly and waited. A moment later, Barney opened it.

"Jane Label," he said smiling. "You're only three minutes late. Come in."

"I wasn't late," I said. "I was waiting in the waiting room. I didn't want to disturb you in case you were with a patient."

"Client, Jane. We never call them patients."

He motioned me into his office. It was an expansive room done in black and chrome, the kind of place that had to be Windexed every two hours to wipe up fingerprints. A picture window gave an impressive view of the smog with a few highrises poking through. There were three boxes of tissues in black decorator dispensers on the glass coffee table, along

with a stuffed raven and a bust of Edgar Allan Poe.

"Are you trying to promote depression or is this just a fashion statement?"

"Come again?" Barney said. He was stroking the white streak in his beard.

"All this black, and this dead stuff on the table here. Don't you think it's a little much? I mean, I understand you want the business and all, but it looks to me like you're courting suicides. But what do I know, maybe that's where all the money is."

Barney laughed loudly. "Depression is relative, Jane." He stuck his hands in the pockets of a white lab coat that had eight pens protruding from the breast pocket.

"Depressing is depressing," I said. "So what's with the lab coat? Do you experiment on people or what?"

"It's psychologically more comforting to my clients to see a doctor that has the outward appearance of one rather than, say, a businessman." He bounced on the balls of his feet. "People are more apt to continue their therapy if they feel it has something to do with tangible health."

"You mean they'll keep forking out the dough," I said.

He threw back his head and barked a laugh. "Jane Label, you are biting."

Damn, I thought, biting was not good. I should try to be more pleasant. "Just kidding," I said. "Where do you want to go for lunch?"

"Here, I thought." He turned toward a small black cabinet which

turned out to be a refrigerator and began pulling out items and placing them on his desk. "You see, I always dine in since clients frequently need me during my lunch hour."

"Don't you have a beeper?" I asked wondering how he could have reached me so quickly on his day off without one.

"Of course," he said as he set two small bottles of Evian on the desk. "But I would rather not conduct business at a pay phone by the lavatories in some restaurant. I don't know if you can imagine how disturbing that can be."

I was beginning to think this was a mistake. Especially when he pulled a red and white checked table cloth from the desk.

"Would you mind getting Edgar and the raven out of the way? You can set them on my credenza. As you see, I was victorious in finding a shop that sells plaster-of-paris literary busts."

"Talk about luck."

I reluctantly moved the head and the bird and then dispensed with the tissues. I helped Barney spread the cloth over the coffee table, then stood back and watched while he moved a tall chrome vase containing lilies onto the middle of the table and arranged the food in a line. There was cocktail toast, cream cheese, caviar, a baguette of sour dough bread, a triangle of brie, two green apples, and two of those rectangular green-wrapped mints that the maids leave on your pillow at better hotels.

"I apologize for the paper plates," he said, as he set two black and white checked plates side by side with matching paper napkins. "I

completely forgot I had taken my china home for a thorough cleaning."

"What a shame," I said. I couldn't help thinking how much Michael would have enjoyed this guy. He was really one for the collection. If we had still been collecting.

"Please, Jane, have a seat," said Barney.

I sunk into the black leather couch and struggled to stay perched on the edge. He sat next to me and tore off a piece of baguette and cut a large slice of brie, smashing it onto the bread and holding it in place with his thumb. "It's rather aromatic, but it gives the sinuses a good workout. Please, help yourself."

I picked up a piece of cocktail toast. "You do this everyday?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he said. "I find it refreshing and such a treat. Life is short, as they say. Why eat p.b.and j.'s when you can have gourmet?"

"Why indeed," I said. I was anxiously silent while I spread cream cheese and caviar on my tiny bread. Asking Barney on a date seemed just a little more difficult than raising myself from the dead. He poured Evian water into two wine glasses with black stems, then sat hunched over the table with his elbows on his knees, constructing his hors d'oeuvres. Just before he popped a bread, brie, cream cheese and caviar concoction in his mouth, he said, "Why have you come, Jane?"

My mouth was stuffed with cream cheese and caviar. "What do you mean, why have I come?" I mumbled. "I told you on the phone I wanted to discuss possible therapy. Remember?"

"Hmmm," he said, considering this. "I thought perhaps you could

have done that on the phone."

"Oh," I said. This guy acted like a lobotomy on me. I grabbed an apple, even though I hated eating apples when I wore lipstick. It smeared all over the skin and made everything taste like a cosmetic counter.

"Obviously, you've come for something which requires some working up to," Barney said cheerily. "Am I correct?" The whole time he just kept looking at his gourmet picnic as if he weren't aware I was sitting right next to him.

"Am I that easy to read?" I asked in exasperation. "I've really had it with everyone reading me like a fucking neon sign."

"You're hostile," he noted.

"I am not."

"Women rarely use the 'F' word unless they're feeling hostile and repressing the nature of their true hostilities."

"Get with the decade," I said. "Women swear."

"No," said Barney politely, "men swear. Women speak modestly unless they are repressing the true nature of their hostilities."

"You must not have many female patients," I said.

"On the contrary," he said, "most of my clients are women."

I winced. I had competition. What if some other female patient had gotten to him first? I twisted my apple stem anxiously, thinking, A,B... I tried to make it come off on the B but it wouldn't. C, D. It came off. Great. I was destined to marry Dale.

"Now, Jane," Barney was saying, "please tell me what you've come to

say to me. I've heard everything. You can't possibly shock or offend me."

I started picking the hairs on my eyebrows. "Um." I looked past him at Edgar Allan Poe. I would have given anything to have traded places with him, just be a bust for an hour. I took a deep breath and let it all spill out in a rush. "Okay, you know that friend of mine whose wedding I disapproved of? He wants me to come over for dinner Saturday night so he and his wife can talk about their honeymoon, and I was wondering if you would go with me." I snuck a look at him to see how he was taking this. He looked very neutral. "This would be a great opportunity for you to check out Iris and let me know whether I have a right to hate her. This is not a date or anything. It's purely for clinical reasons. You know, for the good of my therapy and all." I grabbed the baguette and started shredding it.

He looked at me steadily, nodding his head and flipping his fingers through his beard. "For purely clinical reasons," he said, "I'll have to decline."

"No sweat," I said, standing up and showering the coffee table with bread crumbs. "I loved my cocktail toast. It was incredible. See ya."

Before I could make my getaway, Barney took hold of my arm. "Jane, please, sit down."

When I was trapped in the couch again, he continued.

"All I need to know for therapy, Jane, I can find out right here in this room." He smiled. "Which is why it won't be necessary for me to make analyses of your friend and his wife in person."

"Whatever," I said. He didn't need to run it into the ground. I was humiliated enough. I was already thinking ahead to how I would never go out of my house again and thanking God that Pavilions delivered.

"Are you interested in pursuing therapy with me, Jane?"

"Not at this time," I said. Not at this time? Please. I sounded like I was in court or something.

"Alrighty," said Barney, and his smile considerably widened. "Would it be too presumptuous of me to accept an invitation to dinner at your friend's home on a purely social level?"

"What?" I said, even though I had heard him perfectly.

"I would like to accompany you anyway, Jane Label, if you wouldn't mind too much. Purely for social reasons."

"No," I said, "I wouldn't mind." I was trying to appear indifferent, but I suddenly noticed I had destroyed a package of cocktail toast along with the baguette.

Barney looked at his watch. "I'm afraid our lovely repast has to end. A client is due for arrival in five minutes. I have your number, shall I call you to firm things up?"

"Sure." We stood up.

"I'm so very glad you called, Jane Label."

I shook his hand. "Bye Dr. Osgood."

"Call my Barney."

"Okay. Bye Barney."

"Bye Jane."

"See you," I said. I couldn't seem to get gracefully to the door without shouting a million farewells at him. "Okay, bye now," I said again at the door. Then I waved.

As soon as I was in the corridor, I headed directly to the bathroom to compose myself. I ran the hot water and began washing my hands. I had scored a real date, not some psychological pretense. I looked at my reflection in the mirror and found I was smiling. I also found a black caviar egg stuck between my two front teeth. I almost died.

But I managed to make it to Saturday.

Chapter VII

The last time I had been on a date was three years ago. Although personally this didn't bother me, publicly, it was an embarrassingly long dry spell to admit to. The kind of time frame that causes people to raise one eyebrow at you and wonder what sort of defect you're covering up. Something must be wrong with you if no one has asked you out in 1095 days. The only thing that was wrong with me was that I had been content with Michael, and I hadn't seen why I should waste my weekends with too-eager men who had odd personal habits and were only waiting to see if I would put out after they had spent \$15 of their hard-earned allowance on me. I preferred to spend my evenings with Michael, have a lot of yucks and not worry about whether my stomach was pulled in or my breath was fresh.

I did, however, go out on one date during our first year of best friendship, and it was a blind date at that. An acquaintance of Clarisse Parkins', of all people. She came barrelling over to my house at 6:30 one morning to meddle in my life.

"Jane! Thank goodness your home!" she said when I'd opened the door a bit bleary-eyed. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Oh no, I've been up for hours," I said. "Geez, Clarisse, it's six

fucking thirty. This better be good."

"It is," she said. "I met the perfect guy for you."

"And you have to tell me this at the break of dawn?"

"I had to catch you before you made other plans. Now listen. This guy is really a sweetheart. He's 6'1", has dark wavy hair, mustache, dimples, very masculine jaw line, and he looks almost exactly like that actor, who is he? You know who I'm talking about, Jane. That one, that Magnum person."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"That's unimportant," she said.

"No it's not. Where'd you meet him?"

"At a poetry reading."

"Wonderful. Catch a clue, Clarisse."

"I know what you're thinking, Jane, but just try to be open-minded. He read a lovely poem about his grandmother's snickerdoodle cookies. Such a small thing but such a grand concept."

"Are you finished?"

"He's a stockbroker during the day, he has a Jaguar, and he supports his widowed mother. He's also a Big Brother."

"A Jaguar, eh?"

"I told him all about you. I hope you don't mind that I gave him your number."

"Yes, I do mind," I said, but I didn't really. It saved me from asking Clarisse myself.

"Oh well, it's too late now," said Clarisse standing up. "I told him to call for Saturday night. I figured you be free."

"I do have a social life, you know," I said.

"Spending time with that male friend of yours doesn't count. If he hasn't asked you to marry him by now, what's the point?"

"I'll be sure to let Michael know he's pointless," I said.

Never again did I pay attention to Clarisse. This guy, Eddie Buck, looked no more like Magnum P.I. than Uncle Fester, and besides that, when I met him for dinner, he had his widowed mother with him, who was about one hundred years old and legally blind. We sat in a booth at Denny's for two hours while Eddie first, described my face in excruciating detail to Mrs. Buck, and second, decided to record the intimate moment in a poem which he composed on his napkin while Mrs. Buck and I threw in a suggestion or two. At the end of the evening, he promised to call me, but I told him not to bother.

I felt more at an advantage with my impending date with Barney, since I knew what I was dealing with ahead of time. Saturday afternoon found me fairly calm, sorting through my closet for something to wear. I decided on my little black dress until I remembered about the ice cream and Triscuits and the subsequent bodily protrusions. I settled for a manly outfit that looked very similar to a zoot suit, the key factor being the bagginess. That, with a black lace camisole under the jacket, gave it a decidedly erotic touch. Michael had told me I looked like I was confused

about my sexuality whenever I wore similar garb. I'd told him that if he was more in tune with reality, he'd know that the sexy underwear under the macho veneer was a turn on. But who was I kidding. I was trying to hide seven extra pounds.

Once dressed, I went at my face with black eye liner and a slutty red Chanel lipstick. Then I poured myself a martini and sat on the couch with a jar of green olives and sucked out the pimentos. When the doorbell rang, I ran to check my teeth. All clear. I opened the door.

Barney stood on my stoop wearing a crisp white dress shirt, a bow tie that had tiny mallards on it, and matching suspenders. I was relieved. It wasn't a biker's ensemble.

"Jane Label," he said.

"Vernon 'Barney' Osgood," I said. "Please come in."

It was then that he produced a handful of daisies from behind his back, arranged loosely and held together merely by his hand.

"Did you pick these in someone's garden?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. His face was beaming. "My own. They reminded me of your outstanding luck in securing the bridal bouquet."

"Something which I've been trying to forget," I said. "Do you want a drink before we get going?"

"Yes," he said. "Whatever you've been drinking."

"What makes you think I've been drinking?" I asked, thinking I had left an olive stuck on my finger.

"I can smell the gin."

"How lovely." I put my hand over my mouth.

"Don't worry," he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I like gin."

I ushered him to my couch and went to the kitchen to make him a martini. It was disconcerting to think that I had chosen a date from whom it was impossible to keep secrets.

"Here you go, Doc," I said. I went back to the kitchen for the flowers and brought them to the coffee table in a vase.

"No one has ever given me flowers before," I said, which was a lie. It was 1976, I was in high school and my best friend, Jody Foster, (not the famous Jodi Foster, but the unfamous one), got six roses from Jimmy McDowel whom she loathed, not least because he wore tights for Halloween as part of his Renaissance man costume. Jody was extraordinarily unhypocritical for her age, and she felt that she couldn't accept a gift from someone who repulsed her, so she gave the roses to me. I arranged them in a misshapen ceramic vase I had sculpted in art class, and that was the last time someone had given me flowers.

"Surely someone has given you flowers before," said Barney, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Okay, okay," I said. "So I was lying. But I was only thirteen. Geez, I can't get anything by you. Maybe I should just not talk, and you can read my mind."

Barney laughed in a big bellowing way. "You're a defensive one, Jane. I merely meant to suggest that with a pretty woman, it's generally assumed she receives flowers now and then."

"So what are you saying," I said, "I'm defensive?"

He only laughed again and fished an olive out of the jar.

We small talked our way through the next twenty minutes. I told Barney about Flick and my life as a columnist, dwelling in great detail on Dale, and how difficult it was to work with someone who hadn't had an original thought in his entire life.

"Any time I come up with helpful suggestions for revamping the movie-going experience, he refuses to even consider them. It's so trying for me."

"It certainly seems that way," said Barney.

Then he told me about his career as a psychologist, how he'd always been a discerning listener, but that he was hoping to retire in another five years so he could be free to garden and read.

"I'd also relish the challenge of establishing a Poe museum in L.A.," he said. "We're in sore need of one."

"Aren't we, though," I said.

I was not entirely comfortable chatting with this man. I distinctly felt he had the upper hand. He was weird, but he wasn't stupid, and I knew there wouldn't be much I could get past him. I just hoped that the evening would go smoothly, and that I would be able to recover some of my dignity where Michael was concerned. I couldn't stand the fact that he might think I was miserable without him. Even though that was the case.

Barney finished his drink, and we left. He opened the car door for

me, and once we got to Westwood, he made me wait until he could open the door for me to get out. Generally, just on sheer principle, I didn't go in for chivalry. For one thing, it was a gigantic waste of time when you added up all the minutes and seconds it took to wait until some guy opened the door for you, when you were fully capable of handling the task yourself. But a person could always change her mind. Supposedly, that's our prerogative.

Michael lived on the upper floor of a duplex near Wilshire Blvd. It had a turret and several trellises of bougainvillaea climbing along the facade. We found a parking space two blocks away and hoofed it to his front door in a silence that I found uncomfortable but that Barney appeared to enjoy. He took in the neighborhood, smiling often and breathing deeply, which I thought was a little dangerous, but I kept my opinion to myself.

"Okay," I said as I rang the buzzer. "Tell me if you don't think Iris is mad."

"This is social, Jane. Remember, I don't work outside the office."

"All you have to say is yes or no when I ask you if she's a wing nut."

Before he could respond, I heard the answering buzz and opened the door. We were faced with a flight of stairs, and at the top stood Michael, looking too happy for his own good.

"Come on up," he said. "We've been waiting for you."

When we reached the top of the stairs, Michael gave me a hug, something we rarely exchanged. I was surprised and embarrassed, and I

responded awkwardly. He didn't seem to notice. He extended a hand to Barney and said, "Michael Adora."

"Vernon Osgood," said Barney, "but please, call me Barney."

"This is Barney," I said, realizing too late that nervousness had made me stupid.

"Nice to meet you," Michael said. "Well, come on inside. Iris is in the kitchen making abelskeevers."

We followed him, and I mouthed to Barney, "See?" He only smiled.

The first things I noticed when I walked in the door were the pictures. On the far wall opposite the dining room table were the same photos that had occupied Iris's apartment, only here, they were crammed onto one surface. A variety of frame styles and sizes covered the entire wall from ceiling to baseboard. Many pictures belonged to Michael as well, only previously, they had been scattered around the apartment.

"I guess Iris is not into white space," I said.

"We call this the family room now," said Michael. "I really like it. Gives kind of a cozy feel to the place, don't you think?"

"It's delightful," said Barney, going over to inspect the pictures. "This reminds me of my grandmother's house. She was extremely fond of family photographs."

"What happened to the Edward Hopper print I gave you?" I asked.

"It's in the guest room," Michael said. "It goes better with the decor in there."

"Good," I said, "I'm glad you found a place where my present wouldn't

be an eyesore."

Barney raised an eyebrow at me.

"Just kidding," I murmured.

"Good," said Michael dryly. "I'm glad to know your sense of humor is returning."

The kitchen door on our right opened, and Iris stood there wiping her hands in a dish towel.

"Sorry! I was right in the middle of a batch of abelskeevers. If you don't watch them every second, they burn like crazy." She was wearing a wrap-around Indian print skirt and a gauze blouse with elastic wrists, both items of which I had exact duplicates when I was in junior high.

"Iris," said Michael, "this is Vernon Osgood, but he goes by Barney."

Barney looked at Iris with keen interest. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you," said Iris, blushing.

"I was just admiring your photo extravaganza. I'm quite taken with it."

"Thank you," said Iris, again. She looked pleased. "Well, I better get back to work, otherwise we'll be eating at midnight." She went back into the kitchen.

"Are we having abelskeevers as the main course?" I asked Michael. Normal people ate them for breakfast.

"It's dessert," he said. "We bought an abelskeever pan in Solvang. Iris wanted to try it out."

"I hope you like kohlrabi," Iris yelled from behind the door.

"If there are no rare slabs of beef," I said.

"We'll be sure to slaughter you something next time," said Michael.

"Barney? How about a drink."

"If you have any beer, I'd be appreciative."

"I'll have a martini," I said.

"I figured as much," said Michael. "Make yourselves at home." Then he disappeared through the kitchen door.

Barney and I went into the living room on the left and sat on the couch, which I noticed had been moved from where I had initially advised Michael to place it. The back of the couch was now toward the dining room so that the couch faced the street window that was part of the turret. This section of the room was rounded and was stuffed with big batik pillows and hanging and standing plants, none of which had been there before.

"The whole place has been destroyed," I said.

"It looks fine to me," said Barney.

"Trust me," I said. "It never looked like this before. She's changed everything. Hey, did you get a load of her outfit? What did I tell you. Crazy, right?"

"And what did I tell you, Jane Label? I'm not on duty."

"Talk about rigid," I said.

Michael came in with two Lowenbraus, a martini, a plate of cruditees, dip, and a jar of olives. I was glad that he had remembered the

latter. It gave me hope that he hadn't done away with every last trace of me. He pulled up a chair and beamed his honeymoon glow on us. "Try the dip. It's one of Iris's new creations."

Barney promptly scooped up the thick pink substance with a piece of bell pepper and took a bite. "Incredible," he said.

I did the same with a carrot stick. As soon as it was in my mouth, I wished it wasn't.

"What is it?" I mumbled.

"Creamed radishes and turnips," said Michael. "Iris calls it Vegetable Pudding."

"And just to clarify this," I said, "this is for humans, right?"

"Yeah, Jane," said Michael. "We tried to get you grease on crackers, but the store was fresh out."

"You're killing me," I said.

Barney was going for more dip, this time with a zucchini spear. He was smiling slightly. I wasn't quite sure how to read that, but I gathered he was amused at my expense.

"So where did you guys meet?" asked Michael, leaning back in his chair and sipping his beer.

"In Brentanno's," I said quickly. "We were both reaching for the same copy of Nietzsche." As I said this, I subtly applied pressure to Barney's shoe under the coffee table.

Barney smiled at me. "We met at your wedding reception, Michael. I was upstairs in the bar when Jane came in for a drink."

"Ohhh," said Michael, nodding, "so that's why you were so late. But I have to hand it to you, Jane, the Brentanno's story was a good one."

"Thanks," I said. I got busy fishing for an olive. It seemed like honesty was an epidemic lately.

"Where did you go for your honeymoon?" asked Barney.

"Solvang," said Michael. "Ever been? It's a Dutch village a couple hours north of here. I hadn't realized how much there was to do there, but Iris is a model tourist. We covered just about everything."

"Yeah, I hear you can spend an entire week in the clog factory," I said.

"I was in the Solvang area a year and a half ago," said Barney, ignoring me. "I did some excellent wine tasting in the Santa Ynez Valley."

"I'm afraid we skipped that outing. Iris is not a drinker. But we did plenty of food tasting, I can tell you that. I think I came back with ten extra pounds." He patted his stomach.

"Well you look healthy and happy regardless," said Barney.

"I am happy," Michael said.

"Good," I said, "enjoy it while it lasts."

Both men looked at me. Barney said, "Is she always this delightful?"

"Oh yeah," said Michael, "she's a regular ball of sunshine."

I could see that Michael was getting ready to polish his glasses, so I thought I better smooth things over.

"All I'm saying is that the honeymoon doesn't last."

They looked at me again.

"Well everyone says so," I said.

"Quit while you're ahead," said Michael.

Iris poked her head through the door. "Dinner's ready. Why don't you all come to the table now, and I'll be out in a minute." She disappeared again.

We took our places, Barney and I sitting opposite each other and Michael sitting at the head of the table facing the kitchen. The places were set with heavy earthenware dishes. Two small clay flowerpots overflowing with dill weed and cilantro served as a centerpiece.

Iris came out of the kitchen with a dish of something that looked like a garbage disposal back up.

"Dinner is served," she said, standing proudly by her creation. "If you like it, it's going in the cookbook."

"What if we don't," I said.

"I'm sure the meal will be lovely," said Barney.

Michael gave me a warning look, and I felt someone kick my foot, I wasn't sure who.

"I was just wondering what happens," I hastened to explain. "I mean, don't you think we have a lot of responsibility riding on our shoulders? If we nix this, people may never have a chance in their lives to taste...what is this, anyway, Iris?"

"Kohlrabi casserole."

"Kohlrabi casserole," I said. "We're about to determine the food Americans will eat." I looked around the table. "It's something to think

about." I held out my plate to Iris. "I, for one, am ready to take on my sacred duty."

"It's not really that big of a deal," said Iris, looking worried as she plopped casserole on my plate. "I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't worry, Iris," said Michael, "Jane's just trying to be witty."

"And failing, I think is the implication?" I said.

When Iris had finished serving, she watched us take our first bites of her experimental entree. It was fair, if you didn't look at it too long.

"Superb," said Barney.

"Great job, honey," said Michael.

"It kicks butt," I said.

Iris looked relieved. "I guess the votes are in." She took a bite herself. "A little more lemon grass, I think, but overall, satisfactory."

"When is your cookbook coming out," asked Barney.

"I have to find a publisher first," said Iris, "but Michael says it's a shoe in."

"Oh really?" I said. "I didn't know you were an expert on the homemaker market, Michael."

"It's been a secret obsession of mine for years," he said lightly. "Tell me, Barney, what is it you do?"

"I'm a psychologist."

"A psychologist!" said Iris. "Oh no."

Barney laughed.

"Don't worry," I said, "he won't analyze you unless you pay him. He's

got a lot of integrity that way."

"So is Jane your patient?" asked Iris.

Barney laughed again, but didn't say anything. I glared at him.

"No," I said, "I am not his patient." I stabbed at my kohlrabi. "And it's client, anyway."

They talked about psychology for awhile, and everyone commented on how interesting their college psych classes had been. It was news to me that Iris had a higher education. It wasn't like you could tell. I was too pissed to contribute much, and I only paid cursory attention after that. They talked about Michael's books, especially his new one coming out in the spring, and how it was going to knock everyone's socks off. Gentleman Barney queried Iris some more about her cookbook and seemed sincerely interested in vegetarian pasta dishes. Michael jumped in with his favorite pasta shapes and colors, and then all three of them planned a pasta party, with everyone bringing his or her favorite pasta dish for a sampling. They started talking free nights.

"When are you available?" Michael asked me.

"I don't have my date book with me," I said, as if that mattered. I could just see it. Everything we did would be in a foursome now--four for dinner at Louise's, four presents exchanged at Christmas, four place settings needed for dinner parties. No more meals for two, by-one-get-one-free frozen yogurts, two-serving popcorns, two-seater sports car rentals to drive to Santa Barbara. Everything would have to be quadrupled.

"How about next Saturday?" said Barney.

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly, except me, who shrugged non-committally.

"I'll see," I said.

It seemed about ten years until Iris saw fit to serve her abelskeevers. She placed three pastry balls on everyone's plate and set out powdered sugar and strawberry preserves. Personally, I liked syrup with my abelskeevers. Not like I ate them all the time, but they're as close to a pancake as a ball will get, so it only made sense to use syrup. I hated to ask for condiments at dinner. It made you look picky, and everyone stared at you like you were the world's biggest problem, when they were the ones who hadn't outfitted your meal properly.

"You two own any syrup?" I asked.

"Shoot," said Iris, "I should have thought to get some."

"They're quite good without it," said Barney. "Excellent job, Iris."

That burned me up. "It was just a question," I said, biting into the ball of pastry. "Exquisite," I said with my mouth full, and I flared my nostrils at Barney.

When dinner was over, we retired to the living room with cups of Postum, and Michael and Iris proceeded to tell us about their honeymoon.

"We stayed in the cutest place," said Iris. "It was called The Chimney Sweep Inn, and they had a garden out back that they called Narnia with huge chess pieces all over the place. It was like living in a fantasy world."

"I was partial to the beer gardens, myself," said Michael. "Those soft

pretzels did me in."

"Not to mention the beer," said Iris, smiling.

"You wouldn't think I was so charming without my faults," said Michael.

"Since when is drinking beer a fault?" I said.

Then Michael pulled out the honeymoon pictures, and he passed them to Barney first, as he and Iris explained settings and weather, and why Iris was laughing in this picture, and what Michael was trying to do with the blurry shot of the hot air balloons in that picture. Barney passed them onto me, occasionally saying, "Will you look at that, Jane?" or "I have a grandmother who's done that before," or "It would be nice to explore this area some time."

I managed to murmur a few "Oh, yes's" and quite a few "Uh-huh's," but I wasn't having a very good time. I didn't want to see how much fun Michael and Iris had had together.

We said goodnight after a while, and Michael, Iris and Barney promised to get in touch regarding the following Saturday. I was silent on the way to Barney's car and listened indifferently to his ravings about the evening, how unusual the meal was, how he would have to get himself an abelskeeper pan, how coincidental it was that Michael and Iris were both authors, of sorts, how much he was looking forward to the next week's culinary treats.

When we were on the road heading to my house, Barney said, "Did you have a good time, Jane?"

"What, you couldn't tell?" I said.

"I don't know you well enough to analyze your behavior."

"That's a surprise," I said. "I thought you were more astute than that."

Barney was silent for a minute. "Have I done something to anger you?"

"No," I lied. "I guess I'm just not in the best mood tonight."

Barney stroked the white streak in his beard thoughtfully and after a few minutes, he began talking. "Some years ago, I was seeing a woman whom I'd met at the spring conference of the SCEAPS--"

"The what?"

"Oh, sorry. That's the Southern California Chapter of the Edgar Allan Poe Society."

"Catchy acronym," I said. "Go on."

"Anyway, she was the only woman I'd ever known who could recite 'The Raven' by heart." He paused. "I don't suppose you can, can you?"

"Afraid not," I said.

"Alrighty. At any rate, we saw each other with great frequency. We weren't romantically involved, and I'm not entirely certain why, even to this day. She was extraordinarily attractive. She still is, as a matter of fact. I suppose we failed to make some sort of connection."

"It's either there or it isn't," I said. "I don't think you can explain it."

"You're correct, I think, Jane." He was silent for a moment, and I

began wondering whether that was the end of the story, but he continued. "One day while we were working in my garden--I was always having trouble with my lilies, and Katherine has the greenest thumb of anyone I know--she started talking about a man she had met at the library. She was a reference librarian, and this man had come in seeking information on Cattalai orchids. As she was talking, I gathered that she had been seeing him for quite some time without my knowledge. Of course, I was jealous, although I knew I didn't have any claims on her, nor did I really want any. I remember the look on her face. She looked so serene and content in a way I'd never seen her before. I remember how she stuck her trowel into the ground, took off her gardening gloves, sat back on her knees and said to me, 'Barney, we're getting married.'

"I hardly knew what to say. I wished her well and said I was looking forward to meeting her fiancé, etc. But things were never the same after that."

I looked at him. He seemed lost in thought and a little sad. "Do you still see her?"

"Yes," he said. "She lives in Santa Barbara now, and occasionally I get up to visit her and Joshua. We still have a good time, after a fashion."

"Were you visiting her when I met you?"

"I'd just come from brunch at their house," said Barney. And then he added, "They're going to have a baby."

I had to admit the parallels were uncanny, but I didn't know what

to say. He seemed so melancholy. We pulled onto my street, and Barney parked in the driveway behind my car.

"Would you like to come in for a drink?" I asked, afraid he might think I was coming on to him, but not wanting to slam the door in his face.

"I think not," said Barney, looking at me and smiling. "But I appreciate the offer and hope to accept some time soon. I must be off at the break of dawn tomorrow for Riverside. I'm officiating at an Edgar Allan Poe Dramatic Interpretation at St. Benedict High School."

"Sounds fun," I said.

He got out of the car, and I waited for him to come around and open my door. I figured it was the least I could do for him. He walked me to my stoop, and for a split second, I thought he was going to kiss me, but he didn't. He shook my hand, instead.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, Jane Label. I thoroughly enjoyed myself."

"Me too," I said.

He laughed. "I'm sure you did. Shall I call you regarding next Saturday?"

"Please do," I said.

"Alrighty. Goodnight."

I went inside and watched through the window as he left. I wasn't quite sure what to make of this man, but I knew that I liked him more than I had a few hours ago.

Chapter VIII

I wasn't looking forward to the following Saturday's pasta party. Although I did want to see Barney again, I wasn't sure I could handle Michael and Iris together. I knew Michael had been irritated with me, and he hadn't called me since our dinner. On the one hand, I was mad because he had booted me out of his life and expected me to be joyous because I'd been replaced. On the other hand, I felt despairing because I didn't see how I was ever going to be able to adjust to this new threesome. Or foursome, if I counted Barney. But even with him, things didn't seem better, since his presence had already made it painfully clear that I was the only one having a problem with Iris.

But despite my lousy moods, I began a round of socializing with Barney, Michael and Iris. We had the pasta party at which we sampled Barney's black linguini with calamari sauteed in chianti, my tortellini with artichokes and plum tomatoes, Michael's pink and green fettucini with shrimp in cream sauce, and Iris's whole wheat macaroni with lentils. During the evening, Iris giggled a tremendous amount, I tried not to sulk, and Michael and Barney discussed fine wines they had known. The three of them planned a wine tasting party, and Iris said she would provide the meal in lieu of contributing a bottle. I said I'd have to check my date

book, but that if I was free, I would bring my fair share. Michael commented on how quiet I was so I decided to humor the group with a story about Parkinson's Disease. They looked at me blankly. "You know," I said to Michael, "Clarisse Parkins?"

"That's right," he said, snapping his fingers. "Wow, the memory goes quick."

Does it ever.

The next week, I went to the wine tasting party accompanied by Barney. I tried to model myself after Iris and smile a lot, but I think the closest I came was a sneer. Michael and Barney talked about the merits of Texas-style chili as compared to the bastardized Southern California variety, and Iris said she liked anything as long as it was meatless. They couldn't agree on ingredients, so they planned a chili cook-off to let everyone's taste buds be the judge. No one asked me my opinion. In the meantime, my teeth and lips were turning purple from too much merlot, Iris served a hot arugula dip with no-salt melba toast, and Michael forgot to put out a jar of olives when I asked for my martini. I ate a carton of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey when I got home.

I went to the chili cook-off with Barney. Iris provided chili toppings of goat cheese and homemade sour cream that tasted more like plain yogurt that was past the date. We sampled for an hour, and Barney came out the winner with his grandmother's chili recipe that called for beer and sausage. It all tasted the same to me. We had coconut almond ice cream for dessert, and I was temporarily happy until Iris and Barney started in

on the merits of sushi over sashimi. I went into the bathroom twice for a small tantrum (the second time because no one noticed me missing the first time), and when I came back to the table, they had planned another dinner-for-four around a Japanese theme. I said I couldn't possibly think about anymore food at the moment, and that I had a nasty headache, so Barney drove me home, asked a million times after my health, and when I was finally alone, I went to bed with a bowl of pistachio nut instant pudding.

I had had it with the Our Gang stuff. For the past three weekends I'd had to submit myself to these social nightmares where I was obviously the outsider. Why, I wondered, could Michael and Iris not do something on their own? Not that I had suddenly accepted the fact that they were together, but I couldn't bear their togetherness thrown in my face. And why couldn't Michael do something with me? Lunch would have been nice, I wouldn't have asked for an intimate Saturday evening. And why did Barney have to see me only when his entourage was around? I didn't want to lose Michael for good, and I didn't want to give up on Barney yet, but I was at the end of my sanity with these group food fests.

I was getting steadily more despondent, and I didn't know what to do about it. My only decisive course of action was to keep frequenting Pavilions. Perhaps I could find enlightenment during an ice cream high. I was in the frozen food section a couple of days after the chili cook-off when I saw Beenie coming down the aisle. I tried to hide behind a fogged-up freezer door. It didn't work.

"Yoo-hoo! Jane dear. Still depressed, I see." She was wearing a long, gold skirt with a paisley blouse and gold sandals with fake plastic jewels decorating the straps.

"Oh, Beenie, I didn't see you."

She gave me a stern once-over and said, "Call Dr. Osgood, dear. He'll change your life."

"You're absolutely right," I said, dropping ten cartons of Ben and Jerry's into my wagon. "I've never been so depressed and alone in my entire life. It sure is a change from being happy."

"You're seeing him?" asked Beenie. Her hand fluttered over three rows of gold plastic beads at her neck.

"Yes," I said, "socially, not therapeutically."

"Well then, what's the problem, dear?" said Beenie. "Aren't you two getting along?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think he uses me as an excuse just to see Michael and Iris. I can't tell whether he likes me or not."

"That wouldn't be a problem, dear, providing your female antennae was up."

"Well, mine must be broken," I said. "He hasn't spent any time alone with me since we met. All we ever do is hang out with Michael and Iris." I began kicking the bottom of the freezer door. "And he hasn't even tried to kiss me."

Beenie laughed. "Is that all? Do you know nothing about men? You're like a prickly porcupine, dear. No wonder Dr. Osgood has never

initiated intimacy with you."

Now I was really pissed off. "Why is it always me who's the problem? Why can't it be someone else for a change?" A man tried to insert himself around me to get to the ice cream. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said.

"Get your own fucking ice cream," I said, "These shelves are taken."

He backed away hurriedly, sticking his hands in the air. "I didn't want any ice cream anyway," he said, raising his hands higher. "Please, I have preschoolers." Then he turned and ran down the aisle.

"Dear, I think you're lacking in charm," said Beenie. "It's just an observation. Take it or leave it, but my advice to you is: soften, soften, soften. No one cuddles porcupines." She began tugging at her wig and staring over my shoulder. She was only good for so much conversation before she petered out.

"Thanks for the animal behavior analysis," I said, trying to push past her. "I feel delicate already."

She grabbed my arm abruptly. "Invite him over for a romantic dinner, Jane. Show him your feminine side. There's nothing a man likes more than a home-cooked meal by a soft woman." Then she loosened her grip and walked dreamily down the aisle, as if she had just had a vision.

At the checkout station, I loaded my dairy stash onto the conveyor belt. "Porcupines," I muttered.

"Is it someone's birthday today?" asked the cashier in a voice that belonged on Romper Room.

"My daughter's," I said automatically. Then after a moment's thought, I added, "I'm depressed."

The cashier immediately looked nervous. "Seventy-six, twenty-seven," she said, without looking up.

I realized she thought I was bananas. "I'm only thirty-four," I explained. "It's always depressing when your children get older." After all, I did have to shop there again.

"Oh!" said the cashier, visibly relieved. "I know what you mean."

She smiled and handed me my change. "Have a nice day."

"Thanks," I said, realizing that the likelihood of that was pretty slim.

When I got home and put away my groceries, I went into my office and tried to work on that week's column. I made a few half-hearted notes and constructed a paragraph here and there, but my heart wasn't in it. I stared blankly outside at my fountain. I needed to snap out of this depression. I wondered if I should take Beenie's advice and invite Barney over for dinner. I felt inexperienced as far as the dating scene went, it had been so long. And come to think of it, I'd never had any longterm boyfriends. Maybe I did need to soften up some. Maybe Barney would see me in a different light if I showed him I was capable of being feminine. I supposed it was worth a shot, and if he said no to dinner, at least I'd know where I stood. What the hell, I couldn't get much lower. I picked up the phone and called him at his office. It was 12:30, and I knew he'd be lunching in.

"Dr. Osgood," he said.

"Hey, Barney, it's Jane," I said.

"Jane, what a surprise!" He sounded sincere enough.

"Yeah, well, anyway, do you want to come to my house for dinner sometime? Alone? I mean, just with me?" I couldn't have sounded lamer.

"I would love to dine with you. How wonderful of you to ask me."

"Great," I said, vastly relieved. "Well, I guess I'll see you, then. Have a nice day."

"Jane?"

"Yes?"

"Shall I just come whenever the spirit moves me, or would you like to set up a specific time?"

Oh man, I was losing it. "Ha, where is my head. You know how these magazine deadlines are. You get going so fast you forget to think. How does Friday sound? Seven thirty?"

"Alrighty, Friday it is."

"See you Friday then," I said. "Seven thirty, right? Okay, bye." I hung up. I banged my head on my computer. I sounded like an adolescent who'd never talked to a boy before. And now I had to learn how to soften in less than a week.

I hadn't given too many dinner-for-two parties. Dinners with Michael didn't count. I just wasn't the type to go all candle glowy while Baroque Favorites played in the background. But the more I thought about what

Beenie had said, the more it made sense to my rational side. I'd be damned if I would play a giggling, soupy-eyed admirer like Iris, but I could maybe show some more interest in Barney, maybe wear something pink, let him open a jar for me, sigh a couple of times.

Friday morning, I rushed through my meeting with Dale by giving in on most of the changes he wanted. He was so shocked by my relative agreeableness that he kept asking me whether or not I was sick. Then he wanted to take me to lunch, even more than usual, but I refused saying that he might be right about being sick because suddenly I wasn't feeling well. I left as quickly as possible. I knew I would need all the time I could to get this romantic dinner off the ground.

I decided to make eggplant parmesan, because I hated eggplant, which meant I wouldn't eat a lot, which meant I would look feminine and birdlike in my eating habits. I bought a bottle of Chianti in one of those baskets for that Old World Romantic Look. I set out my old china with the delicate rose pattern, so it would appear that I had just opened my hope chest and retrieved Granny's china for this special occasion. I chose rose-colored linen napkins and matching place mats. I laid a full silverware service to show off my knowledge of fine dining. I put Luciano Pavarotti on the CD player. I cut three overblown pink roses from my garden and put them in a crystal vase. I baked a fucking cake.

At 4:00, I slipped into a hot chin-level bath. I pretended I was in a Calgon bath bead ad. I shaved. I towelled off with a fluffy white towel I only put out for the occasional guest. I dusted myself with powder and

dabbed Shalimar at my pulse points. I sat in a silk kimono and painted my toenails Dusty Pink. At 5:00, I poured myself a glass of champagne and put on my make-up being careful to use a light hand so I didn't cover my natural glow. I chose a cotton candy pink lipstick. I brushed my hair a hundred strokes and wrapped it in a loose chignon at the nape of my neck and stuck baby's breath in it. I pulled on sheer pink stockings, and a silk, floral dress with a wide lace collar, slightly puffed sleeves, four big buttons down the front, and a hemline that went to my ankles, that had been a gift from a relative who thought she knew me. I slipped on rose-colored flats, and put on pearl earrings. I painted my nails Pink-a-Boo. When I was finally ready, I stood looking at myself in the full length mirror. I wished Beenie could have seen me. I looked like Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm.

"This better work," I told my reflection. "Because if it doesn't, you've turned into a pink powder puff for nothing."

At 7:30 exactly, the doorbell rang. "Here we go," I said. I opened the door. It was Michael. He was grinning like a goonball.

"Michael, what are you doing here?" For a split second, I was hopeful. Perhaps he had left Iris. Perhaps he had come over to tell me how cruel he'd been to me.

"Jane!" he said, pushing past me and taking a couple of turns around the couch. He stopped and then took me by the shoulders. "Jane!" he said, "I'm going to have a baby!"

My stomach dropped. "Some feat," I said softly.

"Iris is pregnant, Jane! I can't frigging believe this. Isn't this wonderful? She just called me from the doctor's office. She won't be home for another hour. I just couldn't keep this to myself. Can you believe this?" He skipped to my kitchen and back.

I couldn't speak. I stood with my arms at my sides staring at him. A baby. Michael was going to have a baby.

He stopped in front of me. "Jane, isn't this great?" He looked at me quizzically. "You're not speaking." Then he looked me up and down. "Wow! You look pretty!"

"What of it," I said.

"Well, nothing, I guess." He put his hands in his pockets. "But you know, your wearing a frou-frou dress."

"My feminine instincts kicked in today. I had to respond accordingly."

He looked at me, and then he caught sight of the dining room. "You're having company," he said, somewhat awestruck. "Is Barney coming over?"

"Yeah," I said and went to the couch and collapsed. Michael sat beside me. I noticed him studying my nails.

"Pink-a-Boo," I said, dully.

"Nice."

We sat for a few seconds, and then he said, "I guess I'll be going now." He smiled, but he didn't show his teeth, which meant that either he was sad or just being polite. He stood up.

"I just wanted you to be the first to know."

I didn't say anything. I didn't even look up.

"I'll just let myself out," he said. A moment later, I heard the door close behind me.

I would have given my Armani pumps if I could have cried, but I was too bereft of energy and feeling to do much of anything. I guess I had been majorly slow on the uptake. I could never fully convince myself that what Michael and Iris had was real. And now there was a little Michael or a little Iris in the works. I didn't even like kids.

The doorbell rang again. Barney. I can't go through with this, I thought, not now, not after this news. I tried to ignore the bell, and I would have let it ring if it hadn't been for the fact that Barney was shouting, "Jane Label, I know you're in there." The man had x-ray vision. I reluctantly opened the door. Barney was standing there in a bowtie covered with irises, of all things, and two tulips in his hands.

"You have to leave," I said before he could open his mouth.

"Jane! You look tremendous!" He beamed at me and held out the tulips. "You better place these in water immediately. They're a bit droopy, I'm afraid."

"You have to go home, Barney."

"Let me help you look for a vase," he said and pushed past me towards the kitchen.

"Go now. I'm serious."

"Ah, this will do nicely," he said, pulling down a long rectangular

patina vase.

"No, not that one. I hate that vase," I said. "Hey, seriously. Leave."

He filled the vase with water and placed the two bending red tulips in them. "Yes," he said, looking pleased with himself, "Sometimes I think I should have opened a flower shop." Then he gave his big barking laugh.

"Maybe you can go home and relive all your roads not taken, but right now, I have something to do."

"What?" he said, looking at me with sincere curiosity, with the innocence of a child, with the cunning of a shark-toothed psychologist.

"None of your beeswax," I said.

"Well, Jane, perhaps you can do it later, because you did invite me over for dinner, and I did pass up a screening of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' to be here."

I bit my pink lip. "Yes, well, something came up unexpectedly." I tried to look really sorry.

"Hmmm," he said, nodding at me, "you must be referring to the impending Adora baby."

I started. "What is it with you?" I said, "You're beginning to freak me out."

Barney threw his head back laughing. "Jane Label, you are a priceless young lady." Then he took me by the shoulders gently and looked into my eyes. I thought, It figures he's going to kiss me now, when all I want to do is curl up with some tapioca.

But he didn't kiss me.

"I met Michael coming down your walk," he said quietly. "He told me the good news. But he didn't look ecstatic, which caused me to believe that the two of you did not have a joyful discourse."

"Whatever," I said, shrugging to get out of his grasp. I just wanted to be left alone. But he didn't let go. Instead, he pulled me to the dining room table.

"Sit," he ordered. His tone surprised me so much that I did sit. In fact, if he had said, "Do the rumba," I would have. "I think, Jane, that it is time we talked." He hunkered down over his arms. His face was serious, no twinkle in his dark eyes, no smile twitching at his lips.

I looked at him morosely. "Go ahead. What do you want to talk about?"

"Let's discuss your relationship with Michael."

"Let's not."

"I really think we must. I'm afraid the situation has grown to crisis proportions."

"Hey, relax," I said, "things aren't as bad as you think. Maybe you need to see a therapist."

"This is no time for jollity, Jane. You're on the verge of causing irreparable damage to a friendship, and if you don't do something immediately, it will be too late."

"And just what do you suggest that I do, Dr. Osgood?"

"Try to adjust, for starters. No matter how much you loathe this situation, Michael does have a wife. You're very rude to Iris, you know."

"Well thanks for the analysis, Doc, but I'm not paying you for this, and I didn't ask."

"I know you didn't, and I'm not trying to play therapist with you, Jane. Don't you see that I understand what you're going through? I've been there myself, I know it's painful."

"Yeah, right, Katherine. She's a carbon copy of Michael. Listen, Barn, I know you mean well, but you're not my parent, okay? Just because you're old enough to be my father, doesn't mean you have to try and save me from all the mistakes you made."

Barney's face was white. "You misunderstand. You're the one who's making the mistake." He stood up. "You're going to be a very lonely woman, Jane. I'll see myself out." Before I realized what was happening, he was already out the door and getting into his car. I went into the kitchen and watched him from the window until he had pulled out of my driveway and had driven away.

I slowly turned around and looked at the eggplant parmesan on the counter. I looked at the chocolate cake with real icing, not store bought. I looked at the formal table setting. I looked at the roses in the centerpiece. I looked at the tulips bending in their vase. I blinked quickly a few times. How much rejection could a person take? I went to my knife block and selected a knife. Then I got a plate and a fork and cut myself a hefty piece of cake.

Chapter IX

For two weeks after my disastrous date with Barney, the line that kept re-occurring to me was, "You're going to be a very lonely woman, Jane." It more than re-occurred; it haunted me. It was there when I woke up to the soothing pop sounds of the Quiet Storm on my clock radio; it was there when I loofaed my cellulite in the shower; it was there when I ate half the Entemann's strawberry swirl pastry and read the morning obituaries; it was there when I was stuck in traffic on Sunset Boulevard and tried to terrorize the people with fish on their cars; it was there when I told Dale I couldn't do lunch with him because I had a breast implant appointment; it was there when I came home and ate Ho-Ho's with Cool Whip; it was there when I lay in bed, blinking at the dark and praying for sleep to obliterate me.

The weird thing was that you're-going-to-be-a-very-lonely-woman-Jane seemed to manifest itself in my life all of a sudden. Like, you know, it was true. Call it coincidence, call it enlightenment, whatever. All I knew was that I was a-very-lonely-woman-Jane; it wasn't some future event. It was now. Maybe that seemed obvious to the rest of the world, but it hadn't been to me. When I looked around, I didn't see anyone.

Naturally, that pissed me off. Why did I always have to be the one

changing my major character defects? Why was I always in the wrong? Why did I always have to be the one conforming to a polite society who only invaded my space anyway? Life definitely was not fair, but the facts were bombarding me, and I couldn't refute them.

The facts were as follows. Number one: nobody liked me. How did I know it as a fact and not as a manipulative self-pitying device? People told me. To my face.

First, it was Dale, of all people. It must have been the millionth time he had asked me to have lunch with him. I couldn't comprehend how a seemingly educated person could not get that his presence was like a canker sore to me.

"How about lunch, Jane," he said, after a particularly grueling editorial session.

"I have to wash my hair," I said, standing up.

Dale stood up too. "I'm just trying to be friendly. We do have to work together, if you haven't noticed."

"Yes," I said, "but we don't have to do lunch together."

He actually looked like he was clenching his teeth. He grabbed one of his pointed pencils and started to maniacally twirl it like a baton.

"You don't realize how difficult it is for me to have these meetings with you," he said. "Every other writer on this magazine manages to be polite, except you. I just thought that if we could work on our personal relationship, things might go smoother."

"You're too sensitive, Dale," I laughed. "Don't worry, I like you well

enough, you don't have to curry to me."

He cleared his throat.

"Have you ever considered," he said, "that I don't much like you, Jane? It might behoove you to try to curry to me a little bit." Then he sat down and shuffled his paperwork.

"Shut the door on your way out," he said.

I was speechless, but I did as I was told.

The second person to express their loathing for me was Clarisse. I could have sworn she was oblivious to me since she appeared to think solely of herself on a habitual basis, but she must have surfaced from her narcissism long enough to take in the fact that she wasn't my best friend. She knocked on my door one day right when I was in the middle of a cheddar cheese and red onion picnic in my living room. I had on my depression clothes and my hair was plastered on my head with bobby pins. But the ultimate embarrassment was that I was reading one of Michael's weighty tomes, The Bleeding Heart. You might say I wasn't expecting company.

"Janie! I know you're in there. It's me, Clarisse."

It was times like these that I wished I'd bought a gun.

"Jane's dead," I yelled. "This is your neighborhood slasher, and I'm not afraid to kill again."

"Ha, ha, Jane, very funny. Now would you please open this door? My God, we've got children around here."

"I'm serious, lady. I've got a meat mallet here, and I'm not afraid to use it."

"Jane, please, for heaven's sake, will you open this door? This is an emergency."

I put The Bleeding Heart under a chair cushion and shoved my food under the couch and opened the door.

"What, did Ashley pee on her Capezios?"

"She has better manners than that," Clarisse said. "Good God, what happened to you?"

"I just came back from the beauty salon. What do you think? It's called La Mort."

"Stop being so morbid." She pushed past me and walked into the living room. "It smells like onions in here."

"Oh that. It's just my sneakers."

"Sometimes you are so disgusting, Jane." She sat on my couch and smoothed out her skin tight stretch pants. To torture me, no doubt.

"I thought this was an emergency," I said, still standing by the open door.

"It is," she said. "Harry and I have tickets to Kenny G. Friday night."

"Oh please," I said, "can we get anymore yupped out? I'd rather eat my sushi without wasabi."

"Be my guest," said Clarisse. "We wanted to know if you'd watch Ashley."

I considered this with some surprise. Suddenly I wasn't good enough to spend an evening with, but I was good enough to babysit? Did I look like a nurturer?

"No," I said.

"Your busy."

"No," I said.

Clarisse looked at me as if I had started speaking Chinese or something. "No?"

"No," I said, "I won't babysit."

"But Jane," said Clarisse. She looked quite incredulous. "This is Ashley we're talking about."

"Precisely," I said, "how you do catch on. Now will you please get your tight little ass off my couch and don't ever use one of your self-serving personal crises to impinge on my privacy again."

Clarisse's eyes widened, and her face flushed. "Well," she said softly, avoiding my face. I had no idea it was so easy to knock the wind out of her. She stood up and walked to the door without looking at me, but just before she was safely over the threshold, she turned towards me, and I realized that she had gotten a hold of herself.

"I think you should know that I've always found you odd and perverse, and the only reason why I've ever extended the hand of friendship to you is because I felt sorry for you." She glared at me, and for a moment, I thought I was in physical danger. Then she looked me up and down. "And besides that, your personal habits are deplorable."

With that, she walked across my lawn with her tiny butt bobbing in the air. At least I wouldn't have to use my couch as a second pantry again. No more interruptions for me. Just peace and quiet. Or quiet, at least. Quite a bit of it.

The third person who freely admitted she hated me was Beenie. I mistakenly thought she was too big-hearted to hate anyone, but apparently not. It was, of course, in the frozen foods section of Pavilions that I was apprised of her feelings. I was getting my monthly fat supply, when I heard the inevitable greeting.

"Yoo-hoo! Jane, dear! Have you heard the news? I'm going to be a grandmother!"

I did not want to have this conversation, so I continued to place carton after carton of pint-sized containers in my wagon. "Oh dear, I see things are getting worse." She twirled her purple beaded necklace around her finger. She was wearing a violet maxi dress with white go-go boots.

"Worse? I always eat ice cream. Or haven't you noticed?"

"Yes, dear, it's a little hard not to, but you must have over thirty cartons in there. The last time, I could have sworn it was more like ten."

"I'm working on my tolerance level," I said.

Beenie just shook her head at me slowly and fingered the ends of her wig. "You aren't doing a thing to help yourself."

"That's not true," I said, fishing the last carton from the back of the freezer. "I saw Dr. Osgood, didn't I? And I took your advice about the

romantic dinner. Oh, and by the way, he hates me now."

Beenie dismissed this with a flick of her white frosted nails. "Psychologists don't hate people, Jane. They have too much schooling for that."

"Well maybe this one didn't graduate."

"Did you soften like I told you to?"

"I was about as frilly as they come. I've hardly seen him since. I'm ever so glad you suggested it."

Beenie considered this, furrowing her powdered brow and twirling her beads. "Something is very wrong here, dear. Very wrong. And I can't help but think it's you."

"Me!" I said. "Why does it always have to be me?"

"Well, dear, don't take this the wrong way, but it's very easy to dislike you."

I stared at her. "Et tu, Beenie?"

"Don't take that tone with me. Now there has to be a solution here. Have you tried making him something?"

"You mean slaving in the kitchen over eggplant and dressing like a bridesmaid wasn't enough? Just how far does this nice business have to go?" I was beginning to think human contact wasn't worth it.

"Perhaps," said Beenie fluffing the bangs of her wig, "perhaps you should try your hand at crafts. Let Dr. Osgood know you're willing to spend time on a labor of love for him. Reel him in with self-sacrifice." Beenie started to stare off at the dietary section, and I knew I didn't have

long before I lost her completely.

"Okay, okay, like what? What should I make? I need specifics here, Beenie, I'm a novice at this pleasantries business."

Beenie started to move by me, her red basket on her arm, a distant look in her eyes. It was as if some magnetic force was pulling her away. "You'll think of something, dear."

"But what?" I called after her. "What should I think of?" And why was I calling after some retro sixties woman like she was a guru? I was smart, I reasoned. I could think of something. Couldn't I?

I stood at the checkout station mulling it all over. Was I that loathsome to be around? I looked at my basket filled with melting pints of ice cream. I doubted I would be engaging in ice cream socials with myself if I had had someone to be with. It was no longer that I alone shunned certain people's company; they were shunning me. It hurt more that people like Dale and Clarisse had written me off. I hadn't thought they could afford to. And Beenie. Her telling me she practically hated my guts made me wonder whether or not our relationship would have graduated to something other than get-togethers at the freezer section if I had been more pleasant. And while I was on the subject, what the hell was more pleasant anyway? I started wondering about this and gazing abstractedly at the magazine rack when my eye was caught by a Ladies' Life magazine featuring a triple layer chocolate cake on the cover. On the lower right corner was a picture of a sweater and scarf set. "Knit Your Winter Wardrobe," it said. I picked up the magazine and flipped to the

knitting section. This was a perfect craft idea.

"Will you be taking the magazine as well?"

I looked up. "What?" It was the cashier with the Iris glasses and the boxboy lover. "Um, yeah. Yeah, I'll take it." I handed her the magazine.

"Another party?" she asked me, smiling. The boxboy was already bagging the cartons in white freezer bags.

"Yes," I said, and swallowed hard.

"That will be ninety-six eighty," she said. "I love children. You're so lucky."

I handed her a check. "Well," I said, "kids are a lot of work." My capacity for pretense was wearing thin, and I was no longer finding it amusing.

"But just think of all the life you have around you! I would kill for some little ones laughing and running around my apartment." She handed me my receipt. "It would be so much more fulfilling than the boob tube." She laughed.

"Sure," I said, "who wants to be alone?"

"Not me," she said, beginning to run the next customer's groceries over her scanner. I took the bags from the boxboy, one in each arm. Their weight depressed me. The Ladies' Life magazine brushed against my chin.

"Me either," I said and walked out the door. And even though I didn't give the young do-gooders lurking at the exit any money or ice

cream for the homeless, I did say, "Sorry, not today." That was a step in a nice direction, wasn't it?

Chapter X

I went to the Yarn Mart and picked up some claret-colored yarn, knitting needles, and an instruction book for beginners, since Ladies' Life assumed I knew what I was doing, and I didn't. I hadn't the faintest idea how to knit, so I decided to tackle just the scarf; it looked simple enough. I worked on it every day for a week, taking breaks only to work on my column. I even stopped aerobicizing. I wasn't looking so hot in my leotard anyway. My first couple of attempts were disastrous, because I kept dropping stitches, but finally I got good enough to knit without holes. By Friday, I was three-quarters of the way done. Hoping to get it in the mail before 5:00, I took my knitting bag with me to my meeting with Dale. While he talked, I knit.

"Jane, I wish you wouldn't do that in here. I feel like I'm talking to my grandmother."

"Sorry, Dale, but I'm working on a deadline. Now what was that about my paragraph on serving only bananas and other non-crunchy foods at the snack bar?"

By 4:00, I was done. I looked at my creation, spreading it on the dining room table. It curled rather badly at the edges, but at least there were no holes. It occurred to me that I might have put some fringe on

the ends, Barney might have enjoyed that, but I couldn't afford to let another week of silence go by while I learned how to do decorations. I wrapped the scarf in tissue, when I began wondering what the hell he would do with it. Then I figured it was the thought that counted, and that he probably went to Mammoth or Big Bear once every couple years, and even if he didn't, he could always wear it in Europe or somewhere.

I had bought a card that had a big black bird on it, hoping it was a raven. I wrote: "Just wanted to say I'm sorry. I hope I haven't done permanent damage. Sincerely, Jane." I paused, then I added: "P.S. It's a scarf." I went to the post office and mailed it first class. Then I spent the next three days hovering around my phone and baking seven layer bars. I was polishing off the first batch when Barney called.

"I just received your lovely scarf, Jane. I'm touched."

"Oh well, you know me. Always eager to throw ashes on my head when needed." I held my breath.

"It's quite a coincidence really that you should have given me a scarf."

"I made it. It's homemade. By me. I spent, you know, a lot of time on it."

"Yes, of course, and I do appreciate it. As I was saying, it is quite a coincidence, really, that you should have given me a scarf because I'm planning a trip to Virginia for our annual SCEAPS conference, and I'm afraid I'm rather shy on winter clothing."

"Virginia?" My heart sunk. He was going to leave me when I had

just humbled myself shamelessly?

"Yes," said Barney, "we thought we would tie in some Poe historical sites for a little added umph."

"How fun for you," I said. "When are you leaving and for how long?"

"Not for a couple of months," he said, "and it's only for two weeks, providing there are no emergencies on this end to call me back."

I could survive two weeks. What could happen in two weeks? That wasn't long enough for him to meet someone else, surely?

"Well, sounds like a ball," I said.

"I'm sure it will be," he said.

I paused. "So anyway, are you still mad at me?"

Barney chuckled a little. "No, Jane, I suppose I'm not."

"Good," I said, "because I really am sorry. I know you were just trying to help."

"Yes," he said.

This conversation was getting increasingly awkward. I grabbed wildly at something to say.

"So, how's your cat?"

"Cat? I don't have a cat, Jane."

"Oh, I thought you said you had a cat."

"No, I'm allergic to cats, as a matter of fact."

I laughed hollowly. "Guess it must have been someone else."

I should just be put away, I thought.

"Jane?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to a screening of 'The Pit and the Pendulum' Friday night, and I was wondering if perhaps you might like to join me?"

Finally, success. "Sure," I said, trying to sound suave. "I can probably get away."

"Why don't I pick you up at 7:00, then?"

"Fine," I said.

I thought how all those years of piano lessons had been wasted. Knitting was the true social skill.

That Friday night, Barney showed up exactly at 7:00. No flowers this time, and no bow tie. He looked quite somber, dressed entirely in black. I was wearing a flowered trapeze dress.

Barney looked concerned when I let him inside.

"Is that what you're planning on wearing?"

"What a subtle way of saying you don't like this."

"Forgive me, Jane, it's a fine dress, it's just that this is an Edgar Allan Poe movie." He was apologetic. "I should have mentioned the dress code, but you've always worn black when we've gone out."

I looked at him. Then I looked down at my dress. "Too cheery?"

"To put it mildly."

He was studying me intently, hands in his trouser pockets. I felt like this was a test of some sort.

"I could change," I offered.

He shook his head, "No, I have a black coat in the car that I think will do nicely. We don't have much time to dawdle."

"Whatever you say," I said.

We got in the car and headed west on Sunset Blvd.

"So what theater is this where they don't allow bright colors? I'm surprised I haven't heard of it."

"It's not a public theater. The SCEAPS converted an empty warehouse in Malibu into our headquarters, and we show movies there once a month. I think you'll find it fascinating."

"And everyone has to wear black," I said.

"It's not a rule," said Barney, "but I think you'll find the peer pressure quite strong. The first time I brought Katherine, she wore red. I didn't think much of it since blood figures prominently in Poe's stories, 'The Masque of the Red Death,' you know, but she was snubbed by more than one member. It wasn't the most comfortable of evenings."

"Thank goodness you carry around extra black clothing for just such an emergency," I said.

"I couldn't agree more," said Barney.

We turned right onto Pacific Coast Highway and followed it until we came to a two-story warehouse on the waterfront. Barney turned into a small asphalt parking lot on the left. There were other cars in the lot, most with Edgar Allan Poe bumper stickers: "I (heart) ravens," "Follow me to the Rue Morgue," and "My other personality is Roderick Usher." I looked around me. We were the only humans there. Barney helped me

into a black trenchcoat several sizes too big. I belted it and stuck my hands in the pockets.

"How do I look?"

"Like a foreign spy."

"I guess that's a compliment," I said.

We headed towards the warehouse. It was mostly stucco and grayish looking. The door had a plaque on it: S.C.C.E.A.P.S.

We entered a room that was spacious and drafty, with books covering the walls. Five long tables with chairs were set up in the center.

"Our library," said Barney. Then he motioned me over to a flight of wooden stairs directly in front of us. On a small table sat a raven from whose opened beak a lightbulb shown.

"Lovely," I said.

"Stewart makes them. He's an electrician from Sherman Oaks. He used to make ceiling fans, but found that he could exercise his creativity more by making these."

"Do you have one?"

"Of course."

A stack of programs had been place next to the lamp, and Barney handed me one, taking one for himself, as well. The cover showed a pendulum, and at the top were the words: "S.C.C.E.A.P.S. Presents: The Pit and the Pendulum." Inside was a lot of small writing.

"What is this, your secret oath or something?"

Barney laughed. "No, it's an analysis of the movie. No need to read

it now, but you might find it interesting to peruse later. Our founder, Grady O'Brien, writes one for every movie."

We started up the stairs.

"She must really be into this stuff," I said.

"You're quite right. She's getting a PhD in American Horror Studies. Her dissertation is on Poe's obsessive compulsive behavior."

"She sounds like a delightful individual," I said.

We were now at the top of the stairs. On our left was a closed wooden door. Barney was reaching for the crystal doorknob when I stopped him.

"Wait," I said, "are you sure I should be here? I mean, this all sounds pretty private and secret and everything. I don't want to piss anyone off, not being a member of your little cult."

He raised his black eyebrows at me.

"Jane, I would never do anything illegal. We're merely going to the movies. This is much more normal than you think."

"Okay, if you say so."

Just as we were about to enter, Barney said, "Oh, I think I should mention that there's no speaking whatsoever in this room."

I looked at him. "Right," I said. "No speaking."

We walked into a dark room lit only by candlelabras. There was a white screen on the far wall to our right and a projector to our left. Chairs of all kinds took up the rest of the space: wingbacked, barcaloungers, Louis XIV's, rolling desk chairs, a bean bag. Most of the

back section was occupied by people in black. No one was speaking, but you could hear the crash of waves on the rocks outside.

Barney held my arm firmly and guided me to a love seat in the second row that shown a dull red and appeared to be worn down velvet. As we sat, a woman in a beret in the Shaker chair in front of us, turned around revealing large-framed glasses that reflected the candlelight. At first I thought it was Iris, but then I noticed a black mole on her chin. She mouthed "hello" to Barney and grabbed his hand. Then she looked at me, and did the same thing. I mouthed "hello" back. When she had turned forward, I raised an eyebrow at Barney. He mouthed, "Grady." I nodded. Great. We were right behind the psycho.

I looked around at the other people. They were all sitting patiently in their seats, hands folded in their laps. Several of them held silent conversations, exaggeratedly mouthing simple words and phrases. A man two seats away from me caught my eye and mouthed, "Nice to see you." I wondered if he thought I was someone else. I smiled and nodded. He was sitting in a director's chair.

I couldn't believe I had thought Michael was crazy to marry one of our weird people, when there I was with the weirdest person I'd ever run across. And the worst part was, I wanted him to like me. If Michael at all wanted revenge, he certainly had it in this situation.

As I was pondering the bizarre depths to which I'd plunged, I felt Barney touch my knee. Immediately, I forgot issues of weirdness and thought that finally, the ball was rolling. I turned to him with a wide

grin, only to see him looking sternly at my leg. I looked down. A yellow daisy peered through the trenchcoat that had fallen away when I'd crossed my legs. I wrapped the coat over my leg and mouthed, "Sorry."

"Alrighty," he mouthed.

A man with a completely bald head went around to all the candles with a snuffer and put out the flames. As soon as the room was pitch dark, the projector began to roll. The film was grainy and silent with warbly music that was off-key. It must have been in high school when I'd last read "The Pit and the Pendulum," so the story wasn't exactly fresh in my mind, but once we were five minutes into the action, I remembered-it was about a pit and a pendulum. Probably not the screenplay of any filmmaker's dream. Even though I was a movie connoisseur, I resigned myself at that moment to a couple of hours of tedium. But before ten minutes had passed, I was fully engrossed. Maybe it was the hypnotic effect of the pendulum swinging back and forth. Maybe it was the swarming rats that kept me riveted. At any rate, I couldn't at first account for the fact that, until the credits rolled, I hadn't been aware that Barney's and my hips were touching. Then it occurred to me. There was nothing to distract me from the movie. No loud popcorn-chewers, no whisperers, no late arrivers, no gaspers or laughs or throat clearers or people with stuff in their noses that made them whistle. It felt like I was in complete darkness with only myself. No one even moved during the credits. I had found movie heaven.

When the film was shut off, I heard someone open the door, and light

from the hall dimly lit the room. We all stood and headed towards the exit and trooped down the stairs. No one spoke until we were in the library, and even then, the talk was low and sparse. I blinked in the fluorescent lights at the scene before me. As if by magic, food and drink covered the tables. Barney drew me over to the far corner of the room.

"What did you think of the movie?" he asked as he picked up two plastic cups of white wine and gave one to me.

"Wonderful," I said. "I've finally experienced the perfect movie atmosphere. Dale is going to hear about this. He thinks you can't get people to shut up, like it's their sacred right to talk whenever the mood strikes them."

"The SCEAPS feel you can't fully enjoy Poe unless you make a concentrated effort to immerse yourself in his world."

"Well it worked for me," I said, studying the hors d'oeuvres. "This is some operation you have here. Caviar? Rumaki? How is it you can have a spread like this, but your screening room looks like someone from the Salvation Army decorated it?"

"Folding metal chairs are so uncomfortable," said Barney. "That's when we decided to forego conformity and adopt eclecticism."

"I see," I said. "Can I ask you why more people were seated in the back than the front? That Grady woman was the only one in the front row."

"That's because she's been a member for thirteen years."

"Oh," I said. "So every year a member gets to move up a row."

"No," said Barney, "then everyone would be bunched in the front. Someone in the front section has to die first before the back section can move up."

I laughed. Barney looked at me curiously. "You're joking, right?" I said.

"Perhaps you can suggest a better solution?" said Barney.

"No," I said after digesting this for a moment. "You're right. Dying's good." This SCEAPS thing was starting to give me the creeps.

Barney waved at someone behind me. "We're in for a treat."

I turned around to find Grady coming towards us. She looked like a forty year old French school girl in a black pleated skirt, black tights, black penny loafers and a black cashmere sweater. Her beret was attached to her head with two bobby pins on the side. She smiled demurely at Barney.

"We meet again, Dr. Osgood." Her voice was low and guttural, and she sounded as if she was trying to imitate Greta Garbo. She held out her hand to Barney as if she meant for him to kiss it. He merely turned it over and gave it a good shake.

"As we do every month, Grady," he smiled broadly. "Allow me to introduce you to my guest, Jane Label. Jane, this is Grady O'Brien, the founder of the SCEAPS and a very loyal member of the society."

Grady gave a low chuckle that seemed largely affected. "Only slightly more loyal than you, Doctor." She turned to me. "Did you enjoy our little movie, Miss Label? Or should I say Mrs.?" she asked hopefully.

"You should say Jane," I said. "And yes, I enjoyed your little movie very much." She wasn't hiding her lust for Barney very well.

"Jane is a foreign film critic," said Barney. "She can appreciate these movies better than most."

"A film critic!" said Grady. "Well now, that is interesting. Tell me, Jane, did you happen to notice the obsessive compulsive bent of the film?"

"Oh sure," I said, "who wouldn't?"

Barney and I looked at each other, and I noticed he was trying to suppress a smile.

"You should bring more of her kind, Doctor. Finally, a kindred soul." She put her hand on my arm. "I'm doing my dissertation on the obsessive compulsive element in Poe. It's absolutely fraught with it, and no one has ever written a word on the subject. How could a person not notice the obsession? The compulsion? The repetitive movement of the pendulum alone makes it a veritable archetype of obsessive compulsive behavior."

"Don't I know it," I said. "but the rats were even more obvious, don't you think?"

"The rats?" Grady considered this, her brow furrowed.

"Oh yes," I said, "Repetition of image? Obsessive fear of rodents? Their obsessive compulsive eating habits? I mean, let's face it, if you start eating someone's clothes, you're an obsessive compulsive food addict."

"Oh yes, of course, I did notice," Grady said. She hesitated. "You wouldn't happen to be an obsessive compulsive yourself, would you?"

"Why yes!" I said, giving her a little tap on her shoulder. Grady

looked ecstatic. She announced with pride, "I am an obsessive compulsive, too." She smiled widely at us.

"You know, I believe Barney mentioned that."

Barney cut in. "I'm afraid we can't chat any longer, Grady. I need to get Jane home. She's very compulsive about her bedtime." Barney took my arm and urged me to the door.

"Nice meeting you, Grady," I said, fluttering a hand at her.

"Charmed," said Grady, about two octaves lower than she was previously speaking. "Love the coat."

Once outside, Barney started laughing.

"I knew you wouldn't disappoint me," he said, drawing my arm through his. "That was the most amusing few moments I've ever spent with Grady O'Brien."

"Really? I was afraid you'd be mad at me."

"Well, I see that didn't stop you," he said smiling at me. I smiled at him. We were at the car. I stood aside for him to open my door. Instead, he lifted my chin and kissed me. Then he pulled back and looked at me.

"You don't mind?" he asked.

"It's a little late for that question, don't you think, Dr. Osgood?"

He laughed and kissed me again. Did I mind? Was he crazy? It was about time he kissed me. After about seven or eight more kisses, he opened the car door for me.

"Perhaps we ought to go before we make spectacles of ourselves."

"I've always wanted to be a spectacle," I said, but I got in anyway. Barney got in on his side, and I marvelled at how confident and unruffled he looked. I was just happy I didn't have to operate heavy machinery.

As we pulled onto the highway, Barney said, "I expect Grady will want to put you in her book. Shall I tell her you're interested?"

"Right," I said. "Like I really want to spend time with that egghead. I take it she hasn't found very many sympathizers since she was so impressed with me."

"Unfortunately, my guests aren't usually so interactive with her."

Guests? There were others? I wasn't the only woman to rub buns with him in his privileged love seat?

"So," I said trying to sound casual, "do you often take guests with you to your secret movie house?"

"No, not often," said Barney.

"But you do take people," I said. "And you sit on that little love seat."

An almost imperceptible smile played at Barney's lips. "I haven't for a while, Jane."

"Oh," I said. I looked out at the ocean, and through my cracked window, I could hear the waves pounding. "Like, probably not for a month or so?"

"Quite a bit longer than that," said Barney softly. "Not since Katherine got married and moved to Santa Barbara. I believe it's been about a year." He paused, then went on. "Although, I did take a

psychiatrist who has the office next to mine, Dr. Jason Barn, and then for the 'Cask of Amontillado' two months ago, I took my neighbor's son, because he was doing a research paper on it for school." He looked at me. "But I don't believe those were the guests you were referring to."

I should have known better than to have tried to discreetly get information out of him. I didn't know what else to say so I just worked on a hang nail and stared straight ahead of me. We were back on Sunset Boulevard when Barney finally broke the silence.

"I've been rather reticent about getting involved with another woman since Katherine. I know I told you we weren't in love, but I'm sure you understand how distressing these matters can be, regardless."

"Of course," I said. "It sucks."

"Indeed," said Barney.

"One day they can't blow their noses without calling you up to come over and hold the Kleenex, and the next day they drop you like a bad habit."

Barney said, "Katherine wasn't like that. She still made a point to tend to our friendship. She was, and always has been, extraordinarily kind."

I felt like the wind had just been knocked out of me. Extraordinarily kind? If that's what I was up against, a sorry-looking scarf was not going to bring me up to extraordinarily kind. I wasn't even sure it brought me up to kind. I was so despondent, I couldn't even finish chewing my hangnail.

When we got to my house, things got worse because Barney didn't shut off his engine when he got out to open my door. I figured that meant he wasn't coming in for the proverbial drink. He walked me to my front door, and I opened it, but didn't step inside.

"Well," I said, "this has been quite an evening."

"Indeed it has." Barney just looked at me with his hands at his sides, apparently waiting for me to go inside.

"I seriously liked the movie," I said. "I really am going to tell Dale about that silence business. Maybe he won't think my ideas are so crazy."

Barney smiled. "I doubt that, Jane Label, but I'm glad you had a good movie experience with me."

"Me too." I paused. "Well, bye." I stood there.

"Good-bye," said Barney, and he turned and walked back to the car.

I went inside and shut the door leaning against it. I cupped my hand and breathed into it. Was it my breath? Was it something I'd said? Was I mean? Did he think I was a prickly porcupine? How could he, after I let him kiss me? Perhaps I was jumping to conclusions. Perhaps he'd just forgotten that he'd planted a half dozen kisses on me forty-five minutes earlier. Maybe he thought a half dozen kisses in one evening was enough. At least he had kissed me. I would just have to wait for him to call again and see what happened on the next date.

As I got ready for bed, I succeeded in entertaining lots of delusional thinking, but once the lights were out, and I lay in bed, I couldn't get to sleep. Something was wrong. And it didn't seem to me that another

knitted piece of clothing was going to solve anything.

Chapter XI

I waited for a week for Barney to phone me, and he never did. I made up excuses for him along the way. When he didn't call Monday, I figured it was too soon after Friday. When he didn't call Tuesday, I figured he didn't want to seem too eager and risk scaring me off. On Wednesday, I thought he might be thinking he had been too aggressive with me so he was giving me some extra breathing room. Thursday, I was sure he was busy and had forgotten how close to the weekend it was. Friday, I knew he was sick and probably in the hospital. Saturday, I thought he could have at least called me from the hospital. Sunday, I accepted the fact that he hated me because I wasn't as nice and perfect as ole Katherine. This called for further advice from my guru. I phoned Beenie.

"Hello?"

"Hey Been-ball, your plan backfired. I got a few kisses out of him, and now he's dumped me."

"Jane? Is that you?"

"Who else would it be raving over the line?"

"I thought it was an obscene phone call. Hold on dear, I'm washing a wig."

She came back a second later which gave me a chance to open a bag of fried pork rinds.

"I'm back!" she sang. "How are you, dear?"

"Frustrated," I said. "I wasted a whole week knitting him a frigging scarf, and all we've done is go to some cult gathering of Poe fanatics. I'm not getting anywhere."

"I thought you said he kissed you."

"He did, but it's like that part got erased from his memory. I haven't heard from him in nine days, Been."

"Dear, men don't operate on the same time schedule as we do. It takes them longer to realize they're in love."

"Yeah, well, I think I've got a problem there. There's this Katherine person who's got a hold of him like a leech."

"Oh no, he's seeing someone else?"

"No, she's married."

"Then what's the problem? You should be free and clear for take-off, dear. Are you being too rude again?"

"I didn't think so. But Beenie, this woman is nicer than I can ever hope to be. She probably does volunteer work, too. Barney hasn't seen anyone since she got married a year ago. I'm his test run, and I'm buckling under the pressure. Maybe I should take up needlepoint. She seems like a needlepoint person to me."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm? That's it? Don't dry up on me now, Been, I'm in crisis."

"I was just thinking. I had no idea volunteer work might be involved. We're up against something much bigger here."

"Great," I said, stuffing pork rinds in my mouth, "I can't believe I knitted a scarf for nothing."

"Jane, you can't expect the whole world to change simply because you've done one nice thing. Do you really think one act of kindness is enough?"

"Well, yeah."

"Dear, you're terribly screwed up."

"Gosh, Been," I said, "I can always count on you to perk me up." I opened a can of rootbeer.

"Barney is probably waiting to see if this nice business will stick or not. He's a psychologist. He knows one act of charity does not a saint make. Besides, we're up against some serious competition here. I think you need to branch out. Make something for someone else. Maybe you could knit Iris something for the baby. I'm going to be giving her a shower soon."

"Can't I just buy her something?"

"Well yes, but so can anyone else. The key is to let Barney know you're not out to snag him, but that you're really interested in overhauling your whole personality."

"Like that really sounds easy. And just how is Barney supposed to know that I've made Iris something?"

"Drop hints, dear. Perhaps you can accidentally leave a ball of yarn

in his car."

"I'm sure that will really get his curiosity up," I said. "Anyway, if he never calls again, I'll have precious little opportunity to even catch a glimpse of his car, let alone leave balls of yarn behind."

"Yes, dear." I was losing her. "Just remember: make sure he knows you're investing time in other people." And then she hung up.

Was this worth it? I didn't really have time to ponder this question. If I was going to make a baby gift, and if it was going to have a chance at swaying Barney, I needed to start immediately. Who knew how many other desperate women out there were knitting wardrobes for Barney as well as for those they hated? I would have to worry later about how to have him discover my act of kindness.

I went back to the Yarn Mart and picked up an instruction booklet for knitting baby paraphernalia. Booties seemed to be the classic craft item for kids. I thought maybe I'd throw in a hat as well, show Barney I was really serious. I chose seafoam green yarn, a nice sexless color, and some smaller needles.

This project proved to be much more difficult than the scarf. My booties did not look like they were made for human feet. Over and over again, I unravelled my work and gave it another try. The closest I could get was something that looked like a tube sock with pompoms. That would have to do. A week and a half had slipped by already. The hat proved to be just as hard. Each attempt gave me something that looked more like a placemat. But I wouldn't give up. My love life was riding on

baby clothes, and they had to be right.

I took my knitting with me everywhere. Dale was getting used to the domestic atmosphere of our meetings. He had been cold to me after our confrontation, but gradually he began to relax. Probably because I was concentrating so hard on not dropping stitches that I wasn't able to argue with him as heatedly.

"Jane," he said as I was busy counting my stitches, "I don't think it's fair to lock movie-goers out of the theater once the lights go down. The first ten minutes are always previews anyway."

"Like previews aren't important? Damn, what number was I on?"

"I don't know, forty?"

"This hat does not go up to forty, Dale. Okay, change that to locking the doors after the previews are over."

"Did you say you're knitting a hat? I thought it was a placemat?"

I glared at him.

I took my knitting to the Laemmle the next Sunday and tried to knit in the dark while I watched the movie. I sat on an aisle seat and occasionally held my work down by the tiny aisle lights to make sure I was on the right track. After about thirty minutes of my needles clicking away, the man in front of me turned around and said, "Would you please stop clicking your dentures?"

"I'm knitting, asshole."

He didn't say a word, but he did get up and move. They really

needed a separate, better-lighted area for overachieving craftspeople who couldn't afford to let their hands remain idle for two hours. It was a good idea and I planned to write about it in my next column.

Leaving the theater, my head was bent over my knitting as I tried to get one more row in. I was almost getting it. The hat was really starting to look like a hat, and I allowed myself to get elated, thinking this was one try I would not have to unravel, when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Jane, what are you doing?"

I looked up disoriented and blinked a few times in the sunlight.

"Michael, what are you doing here?"

"I just thought I'd catch you after the movie. See if you wanted to go for a beer or something." He didn't look uncomfortable but he didn't exactly look relaxed either.

"Hey, you weren't sitting in front of me, were you?"

"No, I just got here. Thought I'd catch you on the way out. So what are you doing anyway?" He inclined his head towards my knitting.

"Oh, you know, just knitting a little something." I stuffed everything into my purse. "Where's Iris?"

"She's at her mother's. They're planning a baby shower."

"Great," I said. I folded my arms.

"Yeah," Michael said looking up and down the street. "So do you want a beer?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging. I didn't want to appear too eager because

I was afraid Michael would change his mind, but this sure was weird. After two months, I was finally alone with the man who had, in a roundabout way, led me to my present crafts craze.

We decided to go to the Holiday Inn and sit at their roof top bar. We got a table by the window and ordered two Coronas and then gazed out at the ocean for a moment, pretending that this wasn't the awkwardest situation we'd been in that month.

My curiosity was getting the best of me so I decided to speak first.

"So, did you really just come by to see me, or were you in the area?"

He hesitated. "I came by to see you." Now he looked uncomfortable.

"Is there anything wrong?" I asked.

"No," he said emphatically, "everything is fine, Jane." Then he looked abruptly out the window and back at me. In that small amount of time, he had gotten irritated. "I wish you'd stop looking for problems between Iris and me."

I was stifled for the moment, as the waitress brought us our beers. She seemed to take forever to set down the napkins, then the bottles, then the glasses, and then the lime quarters. Finally, she was gone, and I said, "I wasn't looking for problems, Michael. Lighten up, will you? I haven't seen you without Iris in months and suddenly you show up without her, supposedly just to see me, and you expect me to act like this is normal?"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, but you know how you are. I don't think that I was so out of line to expect the worse." He sullenly took a swig of his

beer.

"Hey, you're the one who sought me out. If I'd known you just wanted to rag on me, I wouldn't have come along."

"Alright, I know. I'm sorry. Again." He looked frustrated and began to tear at his napkin.

"Apology accepted," I said. Then I thought I'd really make him feel bad. "And just so you know how wrong you are, this thing I'm knitting is a baby hat for Iris." I took a sip of beer and looked at Michael smugly.

"A baby hat?" he said, surprised.

"And booties," I said, "but I've already finished those."

Michael stared at me for a moment and then said, "But you hate kids."

I shrugged. "I'm rising above that."

"Just so we're on the same wave length, you're actually making something for a baby that Iris is having."

I tried to stay modest. "It's not that big of a deal, really. It's only taken me two weeks of working at it every day."

"I'll say it's a big deal," said Michael, warming to the situation. "I mean, you could have just bought something."

"Yes, but so can anyone else," I said.

Michael shook his head. "I can't believe this." He broke into a smile. "You actually like Iris."

"Well," I said, hesitating, "I might not choose those exact words."

He leaned forward. "To tell you the truth, Jane, I was afraid you'd

never like Iris. This is really great. We can actually start doing things together again. What finally turned you around?"

I moved uneasily on my bar stool. This was going a little too far. "Well," I said, "who can really say?" I looked out the window and feigned interest in nature.

"You just suddenly decided you liked her?" he said, confused.

"I didn't say I liked her," I said. "I'm just, you know, trying to be nice."

"Oh. I see." He poked at his lime floating in his glass. "Why are you suddenly trying to be nice?"

"It just seems like a good thing to be. Everyone's doing it. Might as well get on the band wagon." I laughed. Michael didn't. He took off his glasses and used his cocktail napkin to polish them.

Great, I thought, he's mad. I decided to be honest. What did I have to lose?

"Okay, this is what's really going on," I said. "I'm at the end of my rope with Barney, okay? I like the guy, but I think he's still stuck on this babe who's like Mother Teresa or something. It was your mother-in-law that suggested I try to knit my way into his heart." I paused and started to peel off my Corona label. "She thought Barney might come around if he saw I wasn't so mean."

I was afraid to look at Michael. I had pretty much just admitted to using his wife to get myself a boyfriend. After a moment, when he didn't say anything, I looked up. He was smiling, but he wasn't showing his

teeth.

"So you think you can knit a hat and Barney will fall into your lap? Not to be disrespectful to Beenie, but I think sincerity has to come into this at some point."

"Yeah, well, she did mention one gift wasn't going to do it. But geez, I've already knitted him a scarf. And by the way, do you need a sweater? You're next on my list."

Michael shook his head. "I don't need anymore sweaters. You buy me one every Christmas, remember? Listen, you're wasting your time if you think any of this is going to make a difference. Barney isn't going to care how many things you knit as long as you're still bitchy to people."

"Oh please, Michael, spare me the sermon. You act like we were never friends. I can't believe your memory is so bad that you can't remember how much fun you had at the expense of our weird people. I wasn't the only bitchy one, you know."

"You're right," said Michael putting his glasses back on, "but a person can change. It makes me sick to think that we tried to collect Iris, and now she's my wife. Doesn't that bother you, Jane?"

"Not really," I said. "If she doesn't know what we were up to, then what's the harm in it?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that Iris is not stupid? Just because she's above making fun of people doesn't mean she doesn't recognize when someone is making fun of her."

"I'm not making fun of her," I said. "I just don't care for her

personality."

"That's real obvious to both of us."

"What are you saying, she knows I don't like her?"

"How could she not know, Jane? You're always saying something sarcastic about her in front of her face as if she's had a lobotomy and can't figure out when she's being put down. Open your eyes, you just can't treat people like that and expect them not to notice."

I considered this for a moment. "Well, so what do you tell her?" I asked quietly, concentrating on my label.

Michael sighed. "I tell her you don't mean what you say. I tell her you just have a sarcastic wit, and she shouldn't take it personally."

Michael and I looked at each other.

"Thanks," I said.

He brushed that aside with his hand and took a big gulp.

I took a big breath figuring as long as we were being honest, I'd go for broke.

"Look, I'll admit I've been harsh, but you don't come out of this squeaky clean, you know. I was your best friend, Michael, and then suddenly I'm cast aside like I was nothing to you. You two have altered my life forever, and you're pissed because I can't instantaneously adjust to having someone I love throw it in my face that they don't need me anymore?" I paused and looked at him. "You didn't even tell me you were getting married, Michael. You didn't even fucking tell me."

I wasn't crying but I was damn near close to it. I figured Michael

would just get up and leave, but he didn't. He began tearing at his napkin again.

"I was afraid to tell you," he said. "I was afraid to tell you before I did it because I was afraid you would talk me out of it."

"Are you saying you could have been talked out of it?" I was surprised at this.

"I've been sort of noncommittal for most of my life. Thinking about marriage can really freak a person out."

"But you're not freaking out now," I said.

"No, I'm not freaking out now." He smiled. "It's the best thing I could have done."

"So what are you doing here with me, then."

"I just missed your charm and beauty."

"I suspected as much." I smiled at him. "So does this mean we have to be friends again?"

"I think that would be best, don't you?"

"I'd be willing to give you a second chance."

"Gee, Jane, really? I mean, don't put yourself out or anything."

"Shut up," I said and made like I was going to throw the ashtray at him.

We finished our beers and decided to take a walk along the boardwalk before going our separate ways. Michael wanted to know more about what was going on with Barney, so I gave him our meager history.

"I don't know what to do," I said, as we leaned over the railing and

looked out at the beach below us. "He's kind of weird, you know? But I like him. There's something real solid about the guy. I just don't know if he sees anything in me."

"If it will help, I'll put in a good word for you. Sort of praise you extensively every few minutes. Maybe mention this hat thing your knitting for Iris."

"Okay, but don't make it too obvious. I don't want him thinking I'm desperate."

"But you are, aren't you?"

"You are so hilarious. I don't know what Iris sees in you."

"She likes my manly physique."

"Oh, you mean your writer's ass? Yeah, it's a real nice spread."

He walked me back to my car, and we made fun of each other the whole way. I wasn't sure about Michael, but I was very glad we were back to normal.

Chapter XII

I finished the hat. It actually looked like one. I found an old Nordstrom's shirt box and some tissue paper and I wrapped the hat and the booties. I had received an invitation to Iris's shower from Beenie. The party was in three weeks at Michael and Iris's place. I was done way ahead of schedule.

Sometime later, I was sitting in Michael and Iris's living room at Iris's baby shower. I was in a foul mood because Barney hadn't called me for yet another week. And there I was with a bunch of fruitcakes, and he would never know the torture I was going through for him.

"Moo-moo."

"Moo-moo. Quack-quack."

"Moo-moo. Quack-quack. Oink-oink."

"Don't you have any beer?"

"Jane," said Beenie, "you're not playing right."

The Barnyard Game. Why did men get to drink beer and tell dirty jokes when they got together, but women had to drink HiC tropical punch and play games meant for first graders?

Lorine, a waitress from Groanola with spiky white hair and eight

earrings in one ear sat next to me, snapping her gum. "Moo-moo. Quack-quack. Oink-oink. Don't you have any beer? Don't you have any beer?" We all looked at her. "I'm a mina bird," she said shrugging.

"Good one," I said. "She seconds the motion."

"Beer is not good for the baby," Beenie said.

"So it could get a buzz through osmosis?" I said. "We're not all going to have babies. Unless, of course, I don't know something." I raised my eyebrow at Mrs. Adora who flared her nostrils at me and pursed her lips tighter.

"I knew we should have gotten beer, Beenie," said Iris. "Didn't I tell you Jane drank?"

"Thanks, Iris," I said, "you're so considerate.

"Jane can survive a couple hours without alcohol," Beenie said making a face at me.

"Actually," said Lorine, "hops are good for babies. It gives their hair more body."

"Do you have scientific proof?" challenged Mrs. Adora.

"Yeah," said Lorine, patting her spikes. "You're looking at it."

"Let's open gifts," said Beenie quickly.

"Oh let's," said Iris.

Beenie piled four gifts in front of Iris and settled back in her chair with a pad of paper and a pen. As if there were so many gifts to keep track of. We all turned to face Iris. Mrs. Adora, who was seated next to Iris on the couch, barely moved, she just tilted a stiff head in Iris's

direction keeping her hands folded in her lap. After a while, I was wondering if she was hiding something down there. Maybe she had copped some silverware or something. Lorine kept popping her gum, occasionally blowing a bubble in Iris's direction. I merely guided my slouch toward the pregnant lady.

"Okay," said Beenie brightly, "here's the first gift." She looked around at us expecting, no doubt, to see faces radiating enthusiasm, but looking at Mrs. Adora's mask and Lorine's bubbles and knowing my own tendency to sneer, I think ole Been-ball was disappointed. I wished I could have cooperated a little better in the Good Cheer Department, but I was too crabby to do much of anything except be surly.

Iris opened a card that had a teddy bear holding a parasol.

"Much happiness in your new life of motherhood," Iris read. "This is from Mrs. Adora." Mrs. Adora nodded stiffly, and I think she tried to smile, but it could have been a muscle spasm. The tight-assed thing about Mrs. Adora was that she made everyone call her Mrs. Adora, even her daughter-in-law. You couldn't even try to call her by her first name, because she wouldn't tell anyone what it was.

Iris held up three sleepers in yellow, white and blue with various small forest creatures decorating the breasts. "How cute!" she said.

"Oh, those are adorable!" Beenie said.

The rest of us were silent.

Beenie handed Iris another gift. It was from Lorine. The card was homemade and read, "From one health nut to another. Hope this baby is

not a hard one to crack." Lorine shrugged when Iris read the card, then she looked at me and said, "I made it up myself."

"You almost couldn't tell," I said.

Iris held up a couple of jars of mushy substances.

"It's baby food," said Lorine. "I made it myself. It's got lots of bran in it. It'll give the baby good stools."

"How thoughtful," said Iris.

"So healthy," said Beenie with approval.

Mrs. Adora pursed her lips. I could just tell she was thinking about botchilism.

"Okay, now, this present is from me," said Beenie.

"Beenie," protested Iris, "you've already given me tons of gifts."

"I know, I know, but I just couldn't resist. You know how hard it is to pass up the baby clothes department," she said to all of us. We all nodded vacantly.

Iris held up a fluffy pink dress with matching panties.

"It's beautiful," she said. Then she looked concerned. "But what if it's a boy?"

"Think positive," said Lorine, "and eat lots of garlic."

"We can always return it," said Beenie. "The dress, I mean."

Iris touched it carefully. "It's so beautiful, though. Maybe I'll keep it anyway, in case someone I know has a girl." Then she looked at me. I gritted my teeth. Beenie and Mrs. Adora raised their eyebrows.

"Please, Iris," I said, "The day I get married, let alone pregnant, will

be the day I lose my mind."

"My sister said that," said Lorine, "and she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Got married six months later." I glared at her. She shrugged and worked her gum on her front teeth.

"This present," said Iris, ignoring me, "is from Jane." She seemed to take forever to unwrap the paper. I folded my arms and began chewing my lip. I hoped Barney would be satisfied. I hoped they all would be satisfied.

Iris pulled the lid off the box slowly and dropped it on the floor.

"How cute!" She held up the small knit cap and booties. "Did you make these?" asked Iris, looking at me with surprise.

I nodded and could feel my face turning red.

"Well my goodness, Jane," said Beenie. She was grinning at me approvingly. "I knew you could do it."

"Is it a yarmulke?" asked Mrs. Adora.

"Hey, I didn't know you guys were Jews," said Lorine.

"It's a hat," I said, irritated. "Haven't you ever seen a hat before?" I was beginning to wish I'd never seen a knitting needle.

"Of course it's a hat. And Baby Adora will wear it every day," Iris said firmly.

"That's a good way for a child to get scalp crud," said Mrs. Adora.

"Oh nonsense," said Beenie. "If the child wants to wear a yarmulke, let him wear it."

"It's a hat," I said.

"I dated a Jew once," said Lorine. "Hey, Iris, remember that Maurice guy? If I never see the inside of Canter's again, I'll be happy."

"Thank you, Jane," said Iris, ignoring the others. "This means a lot to me. I know you must have spent a long time on this."

"Your welcome," I said. I thought I would die of embarrassment and I couldn't wait until we cut the cake and I could leave.

The next Friday, I showed up in Dale's office with my hands free.

"Where's your knitting?" Dale asked.

"I finished it," I said. "For the time being."

"I suppose that means no more smooth sailing." He was tapping a pin point pencil nervously on my article in front of him.

"What do you mean?"

"We'll see," was all he would say.

We went through my review. For the most part, things went fine. Dale did his usual anal editing, re-paragraphing pointlessly, changing semicolons to periods and dashes to semicolons. He questioned my spelling on a word and had to take fifteen minutes looking it up. I played with his hunk of amethyst that his secretary had given him from The Nature Company.

"Don't play with that, Jane, it's an expensive gift."

"Relax, babe, I've got plenty of rocks in my backyard if I drop this one."

"Right, Jane, I'm sure you have amethyst just lying all over your

yard." He snorted at me in an unattractive manner.

"Hey, you've never been to my backyard. What do you know?"

Finally, we got to the last two paragraphs. Dale grabbed another pencil and began tapping both of them on my manuscript.

"What," he said, "do you think you're trying to get away with at the end?" He was trying hard to look firm.

"Don't even start with me," I said. "It can be done. I lived through it."

"Jane, I don't think you can ask people to never talk in a movie theater ever. There's no point to it when the movie isn't running."

"When was the last time you went to a movie, Dale? Ever try to get into an intense drama when, just before the lights go down, some bag behind you is telling her friend about the last boil she had removed from her butt?"

"I think your problem is you're an eavesdropper, Jane."

"Oh really?" I said, tossing the amethyst as high as my head and catching it. Dale reached over and grabbed it from me.

"I think I liked you better when you were knitting."

"I didn't think you liked me at all."

"See? This is what I meant about no more smooth sailing." He stuck his rock in his desk drawer. "I'm lopping off the last two paragraphs."

"What? You can't just do that, Dale, I'm making some valid points."

"I can do whatever I want," said Dale. "I'm the editor and you're not."

They pay me to realize things like theaters shouldn't be run like small totalitarian governments."

"Well the public buys your stupid magazine to read things like my astute and hard-hitting column."

"Jane, we get more hate mail for you than we know what to do with. The letters editor has to make up positive responses to print, just to balance out all the negative ones."

I hesitated.

"What?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

"Well," said Dale, looking like he wished he hadn't spoken. "Some of the positive letters are real."

I stared at him. "Some?"

Dale cleared his throat. "We had three in the last six months." He smiled weakly. "That's pretty good, actually."

I was speechless.

"Jane, this can be a good thing. You know, 'Jane Label: the columnist the people love to hate.'"

"Wow," I said, "that makes me feel so much better."

"Good," said Dale, with false cheer. "Now about these last two paragraphs. Maybe we could tone them down somewhat."

I stood up. "Do whatever you want. Lop them off for all I care."

I left his office. I gave him credit for being perceptive enough not to call after me.

When I got home, I opened a can of beer nuts and an Orange Crush.

Then I called Michael. I felt some small comfort in knowing I could call him again. I just hoped Iris wouldn't answer.

She did.

"This is the Adora residence, how may I help you?"

"Iris, it's Jane. Is Michael there?"

"Oh hi, Jane! No, he's meeting with his editor. It looks like they're going to double his advertising allotment for Romance With Randy. His editor thinks it's going to--"

"I know, I know, knock everyone's socks off. Listen, when he gets back, would you have him call me? Tell him it's important."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," I said, trying to remember to be nice, so Iris wouldn't give a bad report on me to Michael.

"Oh," said Iris, "I just thought that something had to be the matter if it's so important."

"I didn't say anything is the matter. I just said it's important. That doesn't mean anything's the matter." I chomped loudly on a handful of nuts.

"Whatever you say, Jane, but you don't sound so good. Worse than usual."

"Oh really?" I said. "Thanks for the analysis."

"I didn't mean anything by that, Jane, it's just that if there's something wrong, you can tell me. Michael tells me everything anyway."

"Does he?" I said. "How thoughtful of him."

"Is it Barney?" persisted Iris. "Has he still not called?"

"No," I said, irritated. "It's not Barney, if you really must know. It's Dale, my editor, who, incidentally, does not think I'm knocking everyone's socks off."

"I'm sorry, Jane. Does he not care for your work?"

"It's more like the entire world doesn't care for my work."

"Now that's strange," said Iris. "I thought your last several pieces were very good. Your interpretation of the sibling rivalry as being a defense mechanism against inchoate incestuous desires in "Dario and Gino" was very perceptive. And of course, your grasp of the overthrow of the Pinochet regime in "A Force of Destiny" was incredible."

She paused.

"Jane? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, yeah. You're not channeling right now, are you?"

"What?"

"Never mind," I said. "I thought you never went to movies?"

"I don't. But Michael told me how entertaining your column is, so I thought I'd see for myself."

I was stunned.

"Well," said Iris, "I'll tell Michael to give you a call."

"Actually, Iris, don't bother. I don't really need to talk to him. I'll let you tell him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. And hey, thanks for reading my stuff."

"It's no trouble, Jane, I enjoy it."

I hung up the phone and stood there staring at my Orange Crush can and my beer nuts, trying to come to grips with what I had just realized. As Michael had pointed out to me, Iris wasn't stupid; she knew I didn't like her, and yet, she read my column. She liked my column. What's more, she seemed to have no qualms about telling me she liked my column. And at a time when I needed to hear that the most. It made my hat and booties look like nothing. I could just see Barney finding out that Iris read my stuff. What was knitting in the face of an act of kindness with no ulterior motive? I needed to do something bigger, I decided. I needed to make some grand gesture. But what? I'd never made any grand gestures. I decided to think about it for a while. In the mean time, a few more homemade items wouldn't hurt.

Iris herself supplied my grand gesture. It wouldn't have been my first choice, but grand gestures were hard to come by. Iris called me one day to ask me to lunch. She said she wanted to ask me something, but she wouldn't tell me what it was over the phone. I didn't have a good feeling about this, but I met her at The Source the next day. She looked like an elephant.

"You're huge," I observed as we took a seat by the window in an enclosed porch section. She was wearing a muslin mu-mu that had primary-colored embroidered flowers around the neckline. She had Birkenstocks on her feet and her toes were painted pink but her legs were

unshaven. I mean majorly unshaven like you wondered whether she had to use a creme rinse to get out the tangles.

"Thanks, Jane," said Iris. "I feel so otherworldly, you know?"

"Maybe because you're resembling a small planet," I said, and then I mentally kicked myself. "But, you know, a pretty planet. Like that one with the rings or whatever."

"Oh," said Iris. She looked confused.

"So anyway," I said, "How's the cookbook coming along?"

"I'm in the final stages," said Iris pushing her glasses back onto her face. "I'm revising right now, but with the baby coming and all, I'm a little distracted." She blushed as if she were talking about very indelicate matters.

"Uh-huh," I said, looking over the menu. "Hey, how are these omelettes? It's not that Eggbeater shit, is it?"

I heard the snap of gum over my head. "Everything's real here," said a young waitress with red hair and a diamond in her nose. "You ready?"

"I'll have the guacamole and cheese omelette," I said.

"And I'll have three potato pancakes and a large carrot juice," said Iris.

"Delish," I said.

"Right," the waitress said and walked away.

"That's Kiki," said Iris. "She dyes her hair."

"You know her? Why doesn't she say hi?"

"I'm a customer today," said Iris. "She doesn't want to remind me

that I used to work here."

"Oh," I said and looked around at the spider plants that surrounded the porch. "Nice plants."

Iris smiled at me. "Yes."

I smiled at her.

"Would you be my back up Lamaze coach, Jane?"

Silence.

"Come again, please?" I said staring at her.

Iris blushed. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I know it's a lot to ask, but you're the closest friend Michael and I have, and we don't want to ask just anyone." She fiddled nervously with her glasses.

I was having difficulty comprehending her words, but as I understood it, she was asking me to be there when she spread her legs and popped her kid. I thought I was going to pass out just thinking about it.

"You don't have to answer right now," said Iris quickly, no doubt seeing the horror wash over me. "Take all the time you want. But I kind of have to know by next Friday so you can get all the instruction required."

Kiki was not anywhere near us nor was she looking our way. I stood up and shouted, "Kiki! Martini, up, three olives on the side."

She looked up from an order she was writing and tilted her pen towards me. "Right."

I sat down. "Okay wait, Iris. What?"

"I want you to be the back-up coach..."

"I know, I know," I said, putting my hand to my forehead. "Why do you need another coach? Is Michael failing the class or something?"

"Oh no! He's doing beautifully. It's just that he has to go to New York for a romance writers' conference three weeks before the baby is due and in the event that the baby should arrive early, knock on wood, ha, ha," she rapped her knuckles on the metal table.

"Ha," I said.

"Then I would need to call on someone else."

"Oh," I said.

"It probably won't happen," said Iris, "but it's better for the baby if I have some peace of mind about this."

"Sure," I said. Where was my martini? "What about Beenie? She seems like the obvious choice being your mother and all."

"She faints at the sight of blood," said Iris, sadly. "We're just thankful she made it to menopause."

"What makes you think I don't faint at the sight of blood too?"

"Oh," said Iris looking worried. "Do you?"

"No," I said, "but things could change. You never know."

Kiki came with my martini. "Enjoy," she said.

I took a big gulp.

"I believe I've already mentioned that I hate children," I said."

Iris nodded solemnly. "You wouldn't have to touch it."

I stared at my martini and wondered how my life could have progressed to this point. There I was, an avid cholesterol consuming,

child-loather, sitting in a health food restaurant talking to a pregnant woman about coaching her through the birthing process. I tried to remember if I had dropped any acid at breakfast.

But I realized that this was my grand gesture. This was no knitting session. This was a real commitment to niceness. I doubted Katherine had ever delivered a baby. Coaching a delivery had it all over volunteer work.

"What would I have to do?" I asked.

"Just attend class with us every Friday night. All you'd have to do is watch." She looked at me hopefully.

"Alright, Iris," I said, finishing off my martini. "I'll do it, but just try to hold it in there until Michael comes back."

"Oh, I will, Jane, I will."

"And here." I took two packages out of my bag. "Potholders for you, a book jacket for Michael. I made them, but, you know. Whatever."

Chapter XIII

As soon as I walked into the room, I knew I had damaged any maternal instincts I might have ever had. Everywhere I looked were fat women lolling around on the floor, splayed over chairs, waddling to the refreshment table, straining to stand up or sit down. It was like a hippo ballet. Men were standing in tight little groups, hands in pockets, drinking coffee, chuckling masculinely, trying to appear blase and indifferent to the fact that they were in a woman's world, and no doubt feeling sensitive as hell because they were giving up their squash games in order to share this experience with their partners.

Obviously, I had no place there. As if he sensed my impulse to bolt, Michael pushed me forward into the room. It was the children's playroom at Our Lady of Guadalupe church. Everything was miniature except for a few metal folding chairs. There were little stools, little tables, a little drinking fountain, little bookshelves, little chalkboards.

"Where do we sit?" I whispered to Michael.

"On the floor in a circle. We all lie down to simulate the experience of birth. It's important for the coaches to get a feel for what the mothers will be going through."

"Well I'm just watching, right? Right, Iris? You said I wouldn't have

to touch anything."

But Iris was already waddling over to her other bulbous friends to talk about placenta or whatever the hell pregnant women talked about.

"You know," said Michael, "I can't believe you agreed to do this, but it means a lot to me, Jane. You've really blown me away."

"Yeah, well, just make sure you're not blown away when labor starts. I sure as hell don't want to actually have to do anything."

"I'll be here," he said. "For a small fee."

"I have to bribe you to stay with your wife?" I said. "You're a real prince."

"Opportunity was knocking," he said. "I have a family to support."

A lady who looked very much like Dear Abby stood on a little wooden chair and clapped her hands.

"Listen up, Mummies and Daddies. Let's take our places on the floor. Hippity-hop!" She was dressed in a navy blue suit, matching pumps, industrial strength pantyhose, and three ropes of pearls hung around her neck. Her hair was dark and wiggy-looking and it flipped up perkily at the ends.

"Definitely weird," I muttered to Michael as I followed him to a place on the floor near the toy chest.

"I'll tell her you want her over for dinner."

"Oh, goody," I said.

I shut the toy chest which was filled with mangled stuffed animals, dolls with no hair, blocks covered in teeth marks, and some semi-inflated

balls. Not a single Career Barbie or My Little Pony in the bunch. And the Catholic Church was supposed to have so much money. I sat on the chest with Michael in front of me on the floor, and Iris between his legs in front of him. Everyone else sat in the same manner forming a circle. Dear Abby folded up her nicely suited body and squatted onto a tiny chair. She looked like she was peeing in the woods.

She said, "Listen up, Daddies," then she looked at me. "And back-ups." She smiled. "Time is drawing nigh. Do we remember what to do first at the initial sign of Baby coming?"

"Drink heavily," said a ruddy jock-type wearing a Gold's Gym t-shirt. There was scattered male laughter. Dear Abby smiled in a strained manner.

"Wrong," she said. "Someone else?"

A man with thick glasses and an I.D. tag clipped to his short sleeved shirt raised his hand. "Call the hospital to tell them you're on your way. Then put the Mummy and her already packed suitcase in the car and go, go, go."

"Very good, Thomas!" said Dear Abby.

Thomas grinned and his wife, a woman in barrettes, patted his knee.

"Now we're going to practice our breathing exercises, Mummies. But this time, I'm not going to tell you what to do. Let's see if we can remember on our own. And Daddies, remember you're the coaches. None of us are passives here. Okay now, let's go, go, go!"

She clapped her hands and all the Mummies started breathing and

pushing and all the Daddies started telling them to breathe and push. Dear Abby strolled from one couple to the next, bending down and listening to see if they were remembering her instructions correctly. The couple to the right of Michael and Iris began bickering.

"Don't tell me what to do," the Mummy with red hair and a cosmetic counter face said to her partner.

"I'm supposed to tell you what to do," he said through clenched teeth. He had unmoving, feathered hair and manicured nails. "I'm the coach, remember?"

"That doesn't mean you have to act like Hitler," she said, tossing her red locks in his face.

"Oh for Pete's sake, Maryann, does everything have to be such a goddamned feminist issue with you?"

"Stop swearing, Larry, do you want to get us kicked out?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure," he muttered.

Just then, Dear Abby came over to them.

"Hi!" they said in unison, grinning their winning smiles up at her.

"My two star pupils!" she said with a finely executed laugh. "How are we doing tonight?"

"Couldn't be better!" said the Mummy.

"A-1!" said the Daddy.

"I didn't expect anything less from my two stars," she tittered and gave both of them shoulder squeezes.

I nudged Michael. "What makes those prima donnas so special?"

"They're famous," whispered Michael. "They're soap opera stars."

"Well dog gone it," I said. "I forgot my autograph book."

Dear Abby headed towards us.

"And who do we have here?" she asked, shining her well-coiffed head at me.

This is Jane," said Iris, between breaths. "She's our back-up."

"Don't hyperventilate, sweetie," said Dear Abby. She turned to me again. "Well, Jean, I hope you realize the seriousness of your role. I can't tell you how many times an unsuspecting back-up has been called on to be the coach at the last minute. So pay attention, Jean!" She wagged her finger at me in mock sternness. "Be sharp as a tack!"

"The name's Jane," I said.

"Yes, uh-huh," said Dear Abby already looking to the next couple. "Let's get on with it. Michael, Iris, let's go, lickety-split. We don't have all year." She laughed at this and walked on.

"A real social charmer," I said. "How'd she get into this line of business anyway?"

"She was looking for something to fill the gap after her children left home," said Iris.

"She has children?" I said. "I can't believe someone actually did it to her."

"Obviously someone did," said Michael. "Did I never explain to you the birds and the bees?"

"Her husband is very nice," said Iris. "We met him the first day of

class."

"The things nice people will do," I said.

I watched them practice and tried to commit the whole performance to memory. God help me if I ever had to actually do this. But if I did, what a brownie point that would be for me. I could just see Barney's face. The shock, the pride, the happiness, the lust. He would regret he hadn't spent more quality time with me. He would say, "I thought I'd never meet a nicer person than Katherine, but just look at you. You're extraordinarily kind. Please, allow me to spend all my free time with you. And Jane, I know how much you like being with Michael and Iris, but I can't bear to share you."

"Jane!"

"Huh?"

"Jane, it's time to go." Michael and Iris were standing above me.

"Oh, right," I said, getting up. "I was just committing all of this to memory."

"I'm sure you were," said Michael.

"I'm pumped," said Iris. Her eyes were shining. "Let's go out, okay?"

Michael put his arm around her. "She always gets like this after class. How 'bout it, Jane? The Living Room okay with you?"

"Sure," I said, "I guess a caffeine high wouldn't hurt me."

"Great," said Iris.

"And we can go over everything you zoned out on," said Michael.

How considerate of you," I said.

We drove together to The Living Room on La Brea. It was too crowded on the ground floor so we found a couple of empty Victorian couches in the balcony section, and Michael went to the counter to get two espressos and a decaf tea.

"You did very well, Jane," said Iris as we looked over the railing at Michael.

"I didn't do a thing," I said, "and I hope I won't have to."

"You'll do fine," she said, smiling. "Michael has always commented on your loyalty and trustworthiness."

"I sound like a boyscout." I studied Iris for a moment. She looked happy and serene. "Are you scared?" I asked.

She laughed. The light caught her lenses, blocking her eyes and making her look like a huge insect. "A little, but mostly I'm too excited to be scared."

"You know," I said, "you should think about getting some contacts. You could be a real knock out. Probably."

"You think?" she asked, tentatively touching her glasses.

Michael came with our cups. "Ladies," he said. He sat beside Iris.

"I propose a toast," he said, raising his heavy white coffee cup. "To Iris, a soon-to-be mommy."

"That's mummy," I said raising my cup.

We drank. Then Iris said, "Alright, now I get to make one. To my two coaches. The best ones any woman could ever have."

"Maybe you should wait until after this thing is born before you give

us such high praise," I said.

"Oh no," said Iris, "I already know you'll be good."

"Michael," I said, "it's Michael who will be good."

"Now you give a toast, Jane," said Iris.

"Alright," I said. "Bottoms up."

We drank in silence for a moment, and then Iris asked, "When is Barney coming back from his conference, Jane?"

"A week from today," I said. And none too soon, I thought. I wasn't exactly doing this crap for my health.

"Has he called from Virginia?" asked Michael.

"Not exactly," I said.

"I think he likes you," said Iris in a conspiratorial tone.

"Yeah, well," I said, "I'm not sure I like him. He's a bit too eccentric, if you ask me. Did you know he dresses in biking shorts and he doesn't even ride a bike? I don't know. I'm still lukewarm. I mean, he's a nice guy and all, but you know. Whatever." I was staring at the people below in what I thought was a very indifferent manner.

"You're in love," said Michael.

"Yes, Michael," said Iris, "I think you're right."

I looked at them. Michael was grinning like the town idiot. Iris was smiling at me in a very understanding motherly way.

"Oh please," I said turning toward the people below again. "Where's the bucket. We have absolutely nothing in common. Plus, who wants to be psychoanalyzed their whole life? And like I just said, he's so weird,

you know? He's..." My stomach seemed to drop to the floor below as I saw Barney walk through the door with a stunning brunette and take a small table in the window..."an asshole," I said quietly.

"Oh!" I heard Iris say, "It's..." But then she stopped.

I watched Barney and the brunette clasp hands over the table. Michael made a lot of noise with his cup and saucer. "He must have gotten back early," he said, clearing his throat.

They were both hunched over on the table and very close to each other. My face felt hot.

"Maybe we should leave," said Iris.

"No!" I said quickly and my voice came out like a croak. "No, really. Just, let's finish our coffee." I tried to look at Michael and Iris and appear normal like my life hadn't just snapped in two in front of my eyes. Barney was talking to the brunette in an earnest manner, but she kept her head down. She looked upset, although I couldn't see her face since her long hair fell over it. She did, however, have incredible legs in sheer black stockings, a smart above-the-knee Claiborne suit and very nice pumps.

"She's probably just a hooker," I said, stirring my lukewarm coffee robotically with a swivel stick. "She probably approached Barney, and now he's trying to convince her to see a therapist."

"That's thoughtful of him," said Iris uncertainly.

"I always wondered how those guys got clients," said Michael.

"They're always on the look-out for business," I said.

"It seems like they'd have to be," said Iris. "They've got to replace all those patients they've cured."

"Clients," I said. "They're called clients."

The brunette reached behind her chair to retrieve her purse. Barney stopped her and handed her a handkerchief from his breast pocket.

"She certainly is busty," I observed despondently.

"Perhaps they're not real," said Iris. She patted my arm.

"Of course they're not real," said Michael. "Anyone can see they're fake from a mile away."

Barney swept her bangs out of her eyes.

"Do you think that's a wig?" said Michael.

"Beenie would know for sure," said Iris.

"It's either that or too much coloring," I said. "It looks like straw."

"Doesn't it though," said Michael.

"Yours looks much more natural, Jane," said Iris.

"Thank you, Iris," I said.

The brunette appeared to be getting more upset. They stood up.

"They're leaving," said Iris.

"And they didn't even have the courtesy to buy a cup of coffee," said Michael.

"She looks upset," said Iris.

"He probably just told her he doesn't give solutions on his time off," I said.

"Psychologists," Iris said, shaking her head.

"Men," I said, throwing my swivel stick in Barney's direction. It landed on a table below us. I moved out of sight and sat back on the couch.

"Hookers," Michael said. He looked somber.

We sat in silence for a moment. Then Iris said, "Michael? Perhaps Jane would like another coffee."

"There you go," said Michael. "How about another coffee, Jane? It's on me."

"No thanks," I said, "I can't drink any more."

I could barely breathe anymore. I looked at Iris and Michael. They were looking at me tentatively, Iris with her hands in her lap, like a school girl, and Michael with his hands on his knees tapping them nervously. I knew they didn't know what to say.

"You guys ready to blow this joint?" I asked, aiming for a lighthearted tone.

"Sure," they said in unison.

On the way back to Michael and Iris's place to get my car, not much was said. Michael attempted a wise crack about the soap opera stars in the Lamaze class, and we laughed weakly. Iris commented on how well or poorly the other people in the class were doing. I stared out the backseat window at the prostitutes and the occasional man in leather chaps strutting Santa Monica Blvd. I was embarrassed to be so silent. It was an admission that I had taken this thing badly. But it felt better to just sit and stare and let someone else worry about the uncomfortable

silences.

When we pulled up to the curb in front of their apartment, Iris said, "Michael, would you please go inside? I want to talk to Jane."

Michael looked surprised but then he said, "Sure." He turned around in his seat and looked at me. "Call us anytime, Jane. I mean it. Any time." Then he got out of the car. Iris got out too, moved her seat forward and cumbersomely crawled into the back seat with me.

I looked at her. The light from the street lamp was reflected in her glasses. She looked solemn.

She said, "You are not a loser, Jane."

I blinked quickly at her.

"You are not a loser, but I know that's what you're feeling now. Believe me," she laughed lightly, "I've felt like that more times than I'd like to remember."

She was silent for a moment. I stared at the tie die on her chest. "I've gotten my heart broken every time. Except of course, with Michael," she said. "And every time, I thought there was something wrong with me that men wouldn't stay with me. But Beenie always told me that if they couldn't appreciate me for how I am, then they weren't worth it." Iris took my hand. "So I just wanted to say the same thing to you because I know you're probably questioning yourself." She patted my hand. "Would you like some liquor or something?"

I smiled. "No thanks. I think I'll go."

We got out of the car, and Iris walked me over to mine.

"Call me, Jane. If you need to talk just call."

I nodded and got into the driver's seat and rolled down the window. I started up the car and let it idle for a moment. I swallowed hard.

"Hey, Iris," I said. But then I couldn't say anymore.

Iris smiled. "Don't worry about it, Jane."

I nodded and put the car into first gear. Iris waved. I waved back. I drove down their street and turned onto Sunset and for the rest of the drive home, I cried.

Chapter XIV

The enormity of my distress was measured in the fact that I couldn't even eat Ben and Jerry's. My throat was in a consistently closed position; I would have needed a food bong to get anything down. When I got home the night of the big discovery, I went directly to bed with all my clothes on and laid there and chanted, "I'm not a loser, I'm not a loser, he's such an asshole, I'm not a loser." I could not think beyond those couple of information bites, but the next morning, Saturday, I had the full day to torture myself with the incident. I didn't move from my bed and I didn't bother changing my clothes, let alone take a shower. I didn't open my leveler blinds, I didn't make any protein breakfast shakes with ice cream, I didn't answer my phone. But I could hear the concerned voices of Iris and Michael as they took turns calling me to pretend that nothing was wrong but to make sure in a roundabout way that I hadn't hung myself. And all I could do was turn the whole humiliating mess over in my mind, from the day I first met him at the Harbor Restaurant and I was miffed because he hadn't tried to pick up on me, to last night's secret tete-a-tete. Why had I ever thought he would fall in love with me? I wasn't his type. So what was he doing leading me on? Did he think I was just a plaything? Did he think that just because I was a heartless bitch I didn't

have any feelings? I knitted the man a scarf, for heaven's sake.

I went on like this until Sunday morning at which time I was exhausted from trying to figure everything out. I showered and took a stab at grooming myself, made a pot of coffee and called Michael and Iris.

"Hello?"

"Michael, it's me."

"Jane! How are you?" He sounded extremely worried which embarrassed me. Afterall, it wasn't like Barney had died or anything. Although at that point, I kind of wished he had.

"I'm terrific," I said. "I just wanted to say hi, since you called twenty times yesterday."

"Oh yeah, well, we were just getting bored with each other and wanted some other company. You know how that can get, being with the same person twenty-four hours a day." He stopped. "Well, you know, anyway." I could hear Iris in the background saying, "Is it Jane? How is she? Tell her to come over. Ask her if she wants us to come over." Then she got on the phone.

"Jane? It's Iris. How are you? Do you need us to come over?"

"No, no, Iris, I'm fine. I'm just calling to say hi."

"Oh," she said. "Are you sure."

"Quite sure."

Iris paused for a moment. Then she said, "You're lying, Jane. Do you want me to bring you over some dinner?" I heard Michael in the background saying, "Iris!"

"No, Iris," I said. "Put Michael back on."

"That Iris," Michael said, laughing lightly. "What a character."

"Look," I said, "tell her not to wig out so much. I'm fine, really. I just wanted to thank you for checking up on me, not generate a wake."

"Sure, Jane." He paused. "Listen, you deserve better. He's not worth it."

"Thanks," I said. "If you think of anymore cliches, let me know. I gotta go now."

"Alright," said Michael. "Hey, what about, 'He's not the only fish in the sea'."

"You're good," I said. "I'm going straight to my diary to write down this treasury of comfort."

"You do that."

"Thanks, Michael."

"Any time."

We hung up.

I stood in the middle of my kitchen with my cup of coffee, holding it with two hands and taking bird-like sips. I felt like I had just had open heart surgery: weak, tender, and slow-moving. I was afraid to do anything in a big way for fear of falling to pieces.

I shuffled to my sunroom with my coffee and the Sunday Times and eased myself onto my couch. The sun was streaming in the French doors and dappling my arms and legs and newspaper. I looked out into my small yard at the roses and the bougainvillaea climbing the back fence and

my fountain. It was comforting in this room. I thought perhaps I wouldn't move for several months.

For the next couple of hours I alternated between reading the paper and thinking about the past year. The paper was definitely more interesting. But my life I couldn't avoid, although I had tried my hardest to. I wasn't a person who got enthusiastic about introspection. It usually led to horror. But I felt I needed to think through a few things. One being my relationship with Michael and Iris, and two being my relationship with people in general. I knew that with Michael and Iris, I had a second chance; in fact, I probably had infinite chances with them, but I wasn't anxious to push it. They were all I had at the moment, and while I had started to make amends by agreeing to be Iris's Lamaze coach in an emergency, I had done it for superficial reasons. For Barney. Well, now that he was kaput, I either had to bow out of the baby thing, or do it for Iris in a real way. What could I lose? As far as I could see, I would only be gaining, i.e. two friends instead of none. I decided somewhere between my horoscope ("You will have dealings with a relative") and the book review that I would be the frigging Lamaze coach no matter what.

Thinking about people in general was a little tougher. Especially since there weren't too many people I much cared about. Clarisse, Dale, Beenie, and, of course, Barney. Not that I cared about all of those on my list. At any rate, I knew that I had to do something about the first three, Barney being a wash. Scanning Dear Abby, I had this sudden fear that

twenty years from then, little Ashley would be writing in for advice on what to do about her pesky spinster neighbor whom all the children in the neighborhood called witch and were scared of. And Dear Abby would reply that they should make the scary witch spinster some gooey chocolate chip cookies and try to be neighborly. How pitiful. I was getting older. I had to watch for these hag-like tendencies. Now I was merely a bitch, but at what age did one cross over to a spinster? I supposed it wouldn't kill me to put a lid on the sarcasm once in a while when Clarisse wanted to show off her offspring. What if something tragic happened to me, like I sprained both ankles in my fat burners class and I was confined to my bed and Clarisse refused to feed me because I had snubbed her one too many times? Spinsters had to think about these things. It was clear to me that I had to stop being so picky. Pickiness had gotten me one friend and he had other interests now. I was reminded of the women in the olden days who had lots of babies because most of them would die and they wanted to ensure they had at least one kid who made it to adulthood. I hadn't planned so wisely. I had put all my eggs in one basket and now all I was left with was ice cream and onions. Well, I did still have Michael and Iris, and I possibly still had Clarisse, and if I really put my pickiness aside, I could maybe retrieve Dale. Having a co-worker who hated you did not exactly produce a stress free work environment. Man, was I going to have to eat words. But at that moment, slouching pitifully in my sunroom, carefully reading the obituaries with no one to share them with, Dale started to look pretty good.

I would go on, I told myself. Sure, I felt like an idiot, but I had finished the newspaper and my self-analysis so what were my alternatives? Stagnate and in twenty years be scraping egg off my windows from the neighborhood youth, or move on to a fulfilling life of loving friends and generous acts?

Thank God I didn't keep any medications around that I could accidentally lethally overdose on.

From that sunroom epiphany until Wednesday night, I worked on changing my life. The first thing I did was clean out my refrigerator and cupboards. I took the xerox box containing Michael's romance novels, dumped them on my bed, and then started emptying my cupboards into it. I filled it with five boxes of Triscuits, ten cans of cocktail weenies, a half-used bag of onions, two bags of Frito's corn chips, three packages of Pepperidge Farm Sausalito cookies and one of goldfish, a box of Hostess snowballs, a six-pack of Snicker's bars, a bag of fried pork rinds and a liter bottle of Gallo chablis. I put this box in the trunk of my car. Then I loaded two plastic bags with a five pound wheel of cheddar cheese, and Ben and Jerry's ice cream: Heath Bar Crunch, Rainbow Forest, Chunky Monkey, Chocolate Fudge Brownie. I hesitated over the Cookie Dough, but finally tossed that in the bag too. Then I walked across to Clarisse's and rang the bell.

"Jane!" She looked surprised. Of all the five years we've been next door neighbors, never once have I voluntarily shown up on Clarisse's doorstep. Then she said coldly, "What do you want?"

"I was cleaning out my fridge," I said. "I thought you might want some ice cream and cheese. Otherwise I'm junking it." I swallowed. Then I added, "How are you, Clarisse? Isn't it a nice day?" We were, in fact, having a first stage smog alert, but I hoped she would overlook that and remember that it was the thought that counted.

Clarisse said, "Is this one of your jokes, Jane?" She nervously looked over my shoulder. "You're not filming this, are you?"

Did she really think I was capable of such childish ventures? But more importantly, what would I do with a video tape of Clarisse?

"Seriously, Clarisse, you can trust me on this one."

She bit her lip as if considering whether or not this was true.

"Alright," I said, "I'm just going to set these bags down slowly and back away. If you want them, take them. If you don't, trash them. But you better decide soon before the ice cream melts." I set the bags on the stoop.

"Is everything alright, Jane?" Clarisse looked like she was about ready to feel my forehead.

"Yeah," I said. "Can't a person clean her refrigerator?"

"I suppose so," said Clarisse stooping down to peek into one bag. "These don't have freezer burn, do they?"

I could just see her little mind looking for answers to this unheralded act of mine which looked so suspiciously sincere.

"No," I said, "I just bought them on Thursday. And they don't have cyanide in them either."

Clarisse straightened up and laughed stiffly. "Well," she said, "Ashley will be happy." She smiled, but in a guarded way. I guess I couldn't really blame her.

"Great," I said. And then, just as I was ready to say good-bye and go back to my house, I decided to see how much shock Clarisse could stand without fainting. I said, "Hey, how would you and Harry like to come over for dinner sometime? I make a great jambalaya."

Clarisse's hand fluttered to her mouth and with her other hand, she steadied herself on the door jamb.

"You think about it," I said, "and let me know." I smiled big. "See ya!"

Clarisse didn't say a word, but three minutes later when I got into my car, I noticed the bags were no longer on her stoop. I hoped she was keeping them.

Next I drove to Pavilions and pulled up in the fire lane right in front of the store. As always, the do-gooders were in full force. I walked up to a man and woman team, both sporting white t-shirts that said "Feed Hollywood's Homeless."

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," they said.

"Beautiful day," I said.

They looked at each other. Then the man said, "Sure."

"Listen," I said, "I have a box of food in my trunk that I thought I'd donate. If you can't use it, like for health reasons or something, eat it

yourselves, but I don't want it."

"Great," they said. The man unloaded the box for me.

"Let me give you a receipt," he said.

"No thanks," I said, "it's enough for me to know I've helped Hollywood's homeless."

"Sure," they said looking at each other.

Then I re-parked my car and went inside to shop. I filled my basket with kohlrabi, romaine lettuce, red peppers, alfalfa sprouts, Paul Newman's Italian dressing, two ounces of edible flowers, filleted chicken breasts, whole wheat multi-grain bakery bread, Evian water, lean no-fat low cholesterol Monterey Jack cheese, Golden Delicious apples, cans of tuna packed in water, low-fat mayonnaise, five Lean Cuisines, two boxes of All Bran cereal and a gallon of skim milk. I ran into Beenie in the Diet and Health Food aisle.

"Been," I said. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Beenie looked up startled, her wig slightly askewed. She wore a leopard patterned caftan with gold sandals.

"Jane? Why aren't you in the frozen food section? Aren't you out of your element?"

"I'm turning over a new leaf," I said. "Making a fresh start."

Beenie nodded knowingly and smiled. "Didn't I tell you Dr. Osgood would help you?"

My face fell. Perhaps I did need a trip to frozen foods. "He has nothing to do with this," I said, trying to unball my fists.

"Jane? What happened, dear? Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened," I said. "Absolutely nothing."

"Hmm," she said tapping her lips with an orange lacquered nail.

"This calls for different tactics."

"No, Been," I said, "no more tactics. Not that I don't appreciate what you've done for me, but there's nothing to salvage. I'm moving on."

Beenie considered this, hiking her red basket further up her arm. I noticed she had chosen the same brand of bran as I had. I felt victorious. "It sounds like you've got quite a grip on yourself, dear," she said. She was already looking over my shoulder to distances unknown. "If you didn't catch the man, at least you've gotten rid of the ice cream." And with that, she patted my arm and she walked past me, heading towards the sugarless cookies.

I paid for my food and I didn't get one comment about having a party. In fact, I got no comments whatsoever. A health nut in Hollywood was not worth a raised eyebrow.

I drove home, put away my groceries, and then began chopping vegetables for soup. While it was simmering on the stove, I went into my bedroom and surveyed the pile of books on my bed. The Fickle Heart, The Torn Heart, The Bedeviled Heart, The Scorned Heart--they all lay in a jumble, about twenty-five in all. I scooped up an armload and brought them into the living room, dumped them on the sofa and went back for the rest. I went over to my bookcase, cleared the bottom shelf of Mirabellas, Interviews, and Vanity Fairs, moved the top shelf of books to

the bottom, and arranged Michael's paperbacks on that first shelf in neat, alphabetic order. Why should I care what people thought about my taste in books? I never had anyone over anyway.

When I was done, I felt cleansed, but I also felt empty. I sat on my couch and looked at all my things and tried to arouse some interest, but to tell you the truth, I really wanted some Ben and Jerry's.

I went on being responsible and nice and it wasn't all that bad. It was actually pretty humorous at times considering the shock I caused people. But, you know, humorous in a bitter way. It made me wonder just how much of a monster I had been. Take Dale, for instance. You would have thought I had flashed him. Monday morning I went up to his desk.

"Hey, Dale," I said.

He looked up and immediately assumed a defensive position, crossing his arms over his chest. "The copy is on your desk," he said snottily. "I put it there at exactly 8:03 this morning. Here," he grabbed his Daytimer and held it out for me to see, "I documented it. See? 8:03."

"I know," I said, "I've already gone over it."

"Well there can't be anything wrong with it," he said. "I did exactly what you told me to do." He dared to look defiant and then his shoulders drooped. "Didn't I?" he asked.

"It's fine, Dale."

"Oh," he said looking flustered. "Then what's the problem?"

"Nothing," I said. Then I picked up a paperweight he had on his desk. It was one of those Nature Company quartz rocks that were supposed to be very cool and very expensive, but they were just one step beyond pet rocks, if you asked me. I tossed it from one hand to the other.

"Hey!" Dale said getting halfway out of his chair. "Careful with that, it's quartz!"

"No kidding?" I said placing it back on a pile of pink memos. "You should probably have a sign or something."

"Ha, ha, very funny, Jane." He straightened the rock a fraction, as if it mattered. "If you don't mind, I have work to do."

I hated that snooty, tight-assed, whiny attitude of his. I said, "How about lunch today?"

"What?" he said looking shocked, but then quickly recovered. "I know you," he said, giving a little snort, "you're messing with me now, you're just messing with me, right?"

"No," I said. "Do you want to have lunch or don't you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Why do you want to have lunch with me?"

"For the sheer pleasure of it," I said.

He laughed uncertainly. "Okay," he said, like he was wising up, "okay, I know what's going on, now. This is a trick, right? Like I'm going to say, 'Sure, lunch would be fine' and then you'll say, 'Great, have a good time' or something. Right?" He stood up and was slowly backing up against his file cabinet.

"No, Dale," I said. "I just thought if you weren't doing anything, you

might want to join me. No jokes."

"You're quitting, right? That's it, isn't it?" He was starting to sweat.

I sighed. "I'm going over to The Hamburger Hamlet in fifteen minutes. If you want to go, fine, if you don't, maybe some other time."

I walked away and he called after me.

"We should get two weeks notice. It's the only decent thing to do."

I had a hard time not enjoying that.

Wednesday night I was at my kitchen table, drinking a protein shake and updating my birthday reminder book and writing birthday cards ahead of time, when I got a call from Barney. Talk about falling off a self-righteous high.

"Jane Label. This is Barney. How are you?"

"Who?" I said. Did he think he could just wheedle his way back into my life without so much as a token grovel?

"Barney Osgood, Jane."

"Oh," I said, "yeah, I remember, now. The shrink."

Barney bellowed a laugh. "How have you been fairing since I've been gone?"

"Peachy," I said. "Although, I'm sure I haven't had as much fun as you, Barney."

"You might be right, Jane. The society was in rare form. We had a whopping good lecture on Poe's codependent relationships being springboards for his poetry. Fascinating."

"Sounds riveting," I said. "I'm sick to death I wasn't there."

He gave a light laugh. "Ah well, Jane, I see in this one respect we don't hold the same opinion. One day I'll convince you of the joys of this dark artist."

Then you woke up, I thought.

"Well, Jane Label," he said cheerily, "I was wondering if you might be free Friday night to join me at an animation festival at the Nu-Art."

"I can't," I said.

"I'm disappointed," he said, "May I ask who or what has a claim on your time?"

"I'm going to Iris's Lamaze class," I said. "I'm the back-up coach."

Silence. For once I rendered the man speechless. I just wished I could have seen his face.

"Jane," he said softly, "is this true?"

"Of course," I said.

Silence again.

"I hardly know what to say, Jane. This is a wonderful thing you've done. You should be very proud of yourself."

I could feel him beaming over my phone. This had been what I wanted. I had lived for his approval. But now, his cheery enthusiasm made me want to slap him silly. How could he be so self-righteous? So absolutely guilt-free? The bastard led me on and he was thrilled that I had improved my character? He was a liar and a hypocrite and a weirdo besides. I was better off without him.

"Yeah, yeah, so anyway," I said, "bye."

"Wait, Jane. This is not to be taken lightly. You've made some astounding growth. Allow yourself to revel in it. Most people refuse to change."

"Well thanks for the analysis, Doc, but you're not my therapist, remember? Anyway, I gotta go. The Retarded Children's Fund is at my door and I have to donate all my old Adrienne Vitadini suits. Have a nice life."

"Wait, Jane! Please. Is there something wrong? I sense a lot of hostility from you."

"Wow, Doc, how very astute of you. And I didn't even use the 'F' word."

"Jane, what's happening here?"

"Nothing," I said, "absolutely nothing is happening."

I heard him sigh. Good. I'd frustrated the little skunk.

"We need to talk about this, Jane. When may I see you?"

"Never," I said, "never may you see me, Dr. Vernon Osgood. Don't call me again."

"Are you free tonight? I'm concerned, Jane. I think we should communicate as soon as possible."

"Open your ears," I said. "That wasn't an invitation."

"Alright, Jane, just tell me what it is I've done to distress you."

"You're not worth the time," I said. Then I hung up.

Well, I thought, good riddance to bad rubbish. Then I put my head

on the table and cried.

Chapter XV

I didn't have much time to go into histrionics, unfortunately. It was becoming my favorite pastime, and I noticed how ironic it was that the nicer I became, the more I cried. But I could see what people saw in it. There was enough melodrama to it so that I could feel like I was in a movie.

After thirty minutes of indulging myself, I went into the bathroom to blow my nose and fix my face. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was looking scary. Red, blotchy skin, drab hair, circles under the eyes. What had become of me? Then it hit me, the horrifying dichotomy, the ultimate sacrifice: the bitches were beautiful, the saints were not. I surveyed the evidence. Everyone I knew that looked pulled together, fashionable, hot, was ultimately a selfish bitch. But people like Iris, nice, kind, willing to die for you, were plain-to-homely. And looking at myself in the mirror, I realized that the nicer I became, the uglier I was getting. I guessed it wasn't helping much that I was crying all the time. I was going to have to change my foundation.

I was making a stab at powdering my nose, when the phone rang and I heard a knock at my door. How I loved company when I was looking my best. At least I had been bathing regularly. I ran to the door first

and flung it open. It was Barney, bouncing on his toes with his hands in his pockets and a daisy bowtie slightly askew.

"Hello, Jane Label."

"Hello, Vernon 'Barney' Osgood."

I slammed the door in his face and ran for the phone.

"Jane! Oh my God, Jane! Thank God you're there."

"Iris?" I said.

"It's time, Jane. Oh my God, it's time!"

I heard the front door open and Barney call, "Jane, let's discuss this like mature adults."

"Slow down, Iris," I said. "What do you mean it's time?"

"The baby, Jane. Yikes!" I heard the phone clatter as if she'd dropped it.

Barney came into the kitchen.

"You'll not get rid of me until we discuss whatever it is we're having a crisis over."

"Get your pompous ass out the door," I said.

"Alright, Jane," said Iris.

"Not you, Iris," I said. "Listen, where's Michael? He's not supposed to have left for that conference yet." Barney was standing in front of me with his arms folded.

"He's at an Impending Fatherhood Intimacy Workshop. He won't be back for a couple of hours, but I don't think I can wait that long. Ow!"

"Okay, okay," I said, "just don't do anything rash. I'll be right there."

I heard Iris squeak something unintelligible into the phone and then I heard the dial tone.

"Great," I said, "I haven't even graduated from my Lamaze class. I can't believe she's doing this to me."

"Iris is in labor?" asked Barney.

"No, she just found another stretchmark and she wants someone to commiserate with. And what are you still doing here?" I pushed passed him and ran for my purse and keys.

"I'm going with you," said Barney.

"No you're not," I said.

"I must." He followed me out to my car.

"You're not getting in this car, Barney Osgood," I said as I flung open my car door.

"Alrighty, I'll hang off your bumper then."

"Fine," I said, "just don't get any blood on my car." I slammed my door and started the engine. Barney tried the passenger side door but it was locked. He ran for his car, motioning with exaggerated gestures that he was going to follow me. I backed out of my driveway at a dangerous speed, shifted into first and pealed out. Barney had caught up to me by the time I was ready to turn onto Sunset Boulevard. I was stopped in the left hand turn lane waiting impatiently for the light to turn green. I looked in my rearview mirror. Barney was waving. Wave all you want, I thought, I'm not interested.

I pulled onto Sunset and tried not to go too far over the speed limit.

I was hoping I could remember what little I'd learned in Lamaze. What if Iris was passed out? I was kicking myself for not taking a CPR class at The Sports Connection. At the time, I had no interest in kissing a female dummy whose mouth was worn away from being swabbed with alcohol too many times. Then my car phone rang. Oh no, I thought, it was the coroner's. Iris had died on her way out the door and the mailman had seen her and called the paramedics who found her lying in a pool of blood.

"Hello, Jane Label."

My recurring nightmare.

"What do you want."

"We must talk, Jane. This situation is getting out of hand."

"They must not teach you anything about timing in shrink school."

"There's no time like the present, Jane."

"Wow, nice comeback. Who said that? Edgar Allan Poe?"

"Unfortunately, no. Watch that Miata on your right. He looks like he's about to cut you off without the necessary signal."

"I can drive, thank you. But while we're on the subject, why don't you stop tailing me?"

"Not until you tell me why you're so angry with me. Red light ahead. You better start slowing."

"I'm not color blind. And if you quit this pretense, you'll know why I'm angry. Or was angry. At this point, I couldn't care less."

"What pretense might this be, Jane?"

"I never knew you were this sadistic," I said, "trying to make me say it myself."

"Well, since I don't know what you're talking about, saying it yourself might be the best idea."

I had to give him credit. This guy was good. I half believed he was telling the truth.

I was at Iris's street and Barney was right behind me. I slowed as I neared her place.

I said, "Last Friday night Michael, Iris and I were in The Living Room. You were supposedly in Virginia, but we saw you walk in with a brunette. End of story." I hung up and glanced in my rearview mirror. Barney was slapping his forehead, like, "Oh yeah, I forgot I had an affair."

I parked my car and ran to the door, which was opened, bolted up the stairs and burst into the apartment.

"Jane!" Iris was sitting spread eagle on some Indian print pillows. A small blue suitcase with a green daisy sticker on it sat beside her. Sounds of seagulls and waves crashing came from the stereo.

"You're going to make yourself seasick," I said, going to her. "How're you doing?"

"Fine," she said. But her face looked slightly sweaty and she made no move to get up. Just then, Barney came in.

"Jane! Iris!" He came and knelt down beside Iris. "How are you?" He was all concern and compassion. I knew he was going to try to take over and save the day. I was having none of that.

"It's okay, doctor," I said, pushing his hand away from Iris. "I'm the one who had the class in this stuff. You can go home now."

"Nonsense. It will take two of us to get her into the car."

"Are you trying to say I'm weak? You operate under so many stereotypes, it's a wonder you ever got your psycho license."

"I know very well you're strong, Jane. I've noticed your well-defined upper arm muscles, but in the interests of Iris's safety, I feel two would be better insurance against a fall." He grabbed Iris's left arm. "Come on, Iris, just one little heave and you'll be on your feet."

I grabbed Iris's right arm. "She's mine," I hissed. "Do you have to take everything away from me? You already have my dignity."

"Good heavens, Jane, I'm beginning to think you should have been a patient afterall."

"Client," I said.

"Yoww!" Iris cried.

"It's okay, Iris," I said, "we'll get you to the hospital in no time. Come on, Osgood, don't just sit there, help the lady up."

We pulled Iris to her feet and Barney grabbed her suitcase.

"I forgot to leave a note for Michael," Iris said.

"No problem," I said. "Wait right here." I tore off a piece of paper from a telephone pad by the phone. It said "From the kitchen of Iris" at the top. I wrote, "Michael: Iris is having a baby. Love, Jane."

"Okay, let's move."

We got Iris into the front seat of my car and buckled her in. I closed

her door.

"Wait, I'm going with you," said Barney.

"Sure you are," I said and got into the driver's side slamming the door. "Hold tight, honey," I said to Iris, "and try not to get anything on the upholstery, I just had it cleaned."

I drove down to Melrose and made a right. Then my car phone rang.

"Hello, Jane Label."

"Barney. Haven't you gotten a life yet? Best not to let these things go too long. People might say you're a pest."

"That was my sister, Jane."

"Your sister."

"Yes, the brunette in The Living Room was my sister."

"Nobody's sister looks like that," I said, "but nice try anyway."

"Jane, please. I had no idea you were in there. If I had, I would have given you a full explanation, but as it was, Claudia asked me not to tell anyone."

"What, that you two are related? So it's incest, is it?"

"Good God, Jane, but you are a frustrating one. Claudia just left her husband. She called me in Virginia and she was so upset, I feared for her safety so I came back early and spent the time with her. I felt I would have been betraying Claudia's trust if I had told you why I was home early. Please believe me, Jane. It's ridiculous to get distressed over something that's not even true."

"Ridiculous? You are ridiculous. And why should I trust you anyway? You've been deceiving me the entire time. Don't bother calling again. I've got a life ready to bust out all over my front seat and I don't have time for your clever stories." I hung up. Iris was staring at me.

"Alrighty," I said, "are we supposed to be breathing now or something?"

"Jane, that woman was Barney's sister?"

"I highly doubt that. He's just trying to cover his ass. Come on now, hee-hee-whoo, hee-hee-who."

Iris was quiet for a moment and then she said, "He doesn't strike me as the ass-covering type."

The car phone rang again. I slowed for a red light and didn't bother to answer it. In my mirror, I could see Barney gesturing for me to pick up my phone.

"You don't think he's lying?" I said, moving through the intersection.

"No," said Iris and then she started up this half-yell which freaked me out so I turned on the radio really loud.

"Hope you don't mind," I said. "It should relax you." I made a left onto La Cienega while the light was yellow and I noticed, triumphantly that Barney got stuck at the light. Cedar Sinai Hospital was just up ahead. "Hold on, Iris, we're almost there."

"I don't like rap music," Iris yelled. I could feel the steering wheel vibrate from the beat.

"Well sorry," I said, "but I don't think anyone plays ocean music these

days." But I turned it down.

We pulled up to the front of the hospital and I helped Iris out and leaned her against a potted outdoor plant while I whipped my car into a handicapped space. I looked around. Still no sign of the good doctor. We waddled into the hospital and checked in. Just as a nurse was coming with a wheelchair for Iris, Barney came bursting through the double doors.

"Geez, you're just like herpes," I said as he came over to us, "I can't seem to get rid of you."

"If you had waited, I could have helped you with Iris." He looked slightly put out and the way his hair was sticking out at the sides, it appeared he had recently been pulling it.

"I believe I already made it clear that I don't need your help."

"Mrs. Adora?" said the nurse. "Have a seat."

"I'll help you," I said.

"Allow me," Barney said.

"Bug off, Prince Charming."

"Ow!" yowled Iris.

"See what you're doing?" I seethed.

The three of us managed to half-lift Iris into the wheelchair. The nurse said, "Are you family?" with one of those phoney smiles which meant she was trying not to be rude in case we were important.

"Yes," I said.

"No," Barney said.

"Well, practically," I said. "I'm the coach."

"And I'm the coach's boyfriend."

"What!" I said. "Since when, I'd like to know."

"We'll take you to the labor room now, Mrs. Adora."

Iris nodded between breaths.

"I thought we had an understanding," said Barney.

"A misunderstanding is more like it," I said, following the nurse who was pushing a limp Iris. Barney stuck close behind me. "And no one says 'boyfriend' anymore anyway. Hee-hee-who, Iris. Hee-hee-who."

"I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned," said Barney. "I don't know what else to call you. I consider you more than a friend."

"Oh really?" I said. "I don't consider you at all."

We got to the labor room. The nurse turned to Barney.

"I'm going to have to ask you to stay outside while we get Mrs. Adora ready, sir. I'll call you when you can come in."

"I'll be waiting," said Barney, folding his arms.

"Don't bother," I said.

The nurse and I helped change Iris into a hospital gown and got her as comfortable as possible in bed. Occasionally Iris would start up a yell and I would tell her to breathe, all the while feeling like an idiot. Who cares about saying "hee-hee-who" when their privates are being ripped open? But she was being a good sport, even managing to give me a bit of advice between contractions.

"He's in love with you, Jane."

"Shut up and breathe, Iris. You think so?"

"Hee-hee-who. Yes, Jane. He drove through a lot of traffic for you. And why would he lie to you? Ow!"

"Oh no, don't you have a radio in here, nurse?"

"Sorry. The doctor should be in shortly to check on you, Mrs. Adora." Then she turned to me. "I'll tell your boyfriend he can come in now."

"He's not my boyfriend," I said, but she was already out the door.

"Don't you want him to be your boyfriend, Jane?"

"Absolutely not. I hate him."

Iris's face began screwing up in pain. "Well you wouldn't hate him so much if you didn't love him."

"You're right," I said. "Hee-hee-who. But I can always get over it."

Barney came in and stood on Iris's left, while I stayed on the right.

"How are you, Iris," he said, taking her hand. "Can I get you anything?"

"Some drugs, maybe," said Iris. She looked pale and sweaty and very small behind her glasses.

"We'll tell the doctor when he gets here," I said. "I can handle this, Barney."

"I'm not implying that you can't, Jane, I simply want to help Iris."

"Well we can't always get what we want," I said.

"Jane, I wish you would suspend your hate for me for two minutes and just try to believe me."

"Why should I believe you? Ever since we met you've been deceiving me. Leading me on with your little flirtatious ways and then dropping me

cold for a brunette with an exaggerated silicone job."

"Oh my God!" cried Iris.

Barney and I said, "Hee-hee-who, hee-hee-who."

"That is my sister you're defaming, Jane Label," said Barney, "and she does not have a silicone job. The women in my family happen to be extraordinarily well-endowed."

"So, what? Am I supposed to be jealous?"

"Oh dear," moaned Iris, "these hee-hee-whos are not working. Is there any morphine in here, Jane?"

"The doctor will be here soon, Iris. Come on, hee-hee."

"And when have I ever falsely led you on?" asked Barney, patting Iris's head.

"When? When have you not. I don't know a whole hell of a lot of women who have men tell them they're intoxicating and then never do anything about it. I mean, geez, Barney, you never even kissed me. It got so I was hoping you'd at least sock me in the arm or something."

He looked uncomfortable and began shifting from foot to foot. "Well, there was a reason I never kissed you."

"Too much plaque on my teeth? Hee-hee-who, Iris. Just a little longer."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way," said Barney who was still stroking Iris's head. "But you're rather intimidating."

"Intimidating."

"Yes. I was quite sure I'd be socked in the mouth if I tried any

funny business."

"I just wanted a kiss, not some perverse sexual act."

"It's very hard to discern these things nowadays."

"Oh, so you're saying I look like I'd go in for funny business?"

"Shut up!" It was Iris. Barney and I both stared at her. She looked at us wildly. "I can't listen to this bickering anymore. Jane, the man loves you and it's as plain as day. What do you want? A contract? And Barney, just kiss her, will you? It's not going to kill you. All of you just shit or get off the pot. And while you're at it, GET ME SOME DRUGS!"

Barney ran out to find the doctor and I tried to lamely calm Iris down. I was making a horrible mess of what could have been a special moment. Then again, how special can a moment be when one of the parties keeps on screaming every five minutes?

Barney came in with a doctor.

"You're not my doctor," said Iris, on the edge of hysteria.

"I knew that," said the doctor, smiling broadly. "I'm Dr. Dave Gibson, but everyone calls me Sparky."

"Oh no," I said, "not another one."

Barney stuck out his hand. "Dr. Vernon Osgood. But call me Barney." They shook hands beaming at each other.

"Ah," said Sparky, "blood brothers, so to speak." He snorted a laugh.

"Dr. Gibson," said Iris weakly, "I think I need some drugs now, but try to pick something natural. I'm a vegetarian."

"Sparky, call me Sparky. We'll see what we can do. Now," he turned

to me and then to Barney. "If you'll be so kind as to wait outside, I need to check out the lay of the land, so to speak." He laughed.

Barney and I left and walked down the hall to the waiting room. It was deserted, unfortunately. I was not looking forward to furthering my conversation with Barney. I was too confused. I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to be happy or not. I walked to the furthest end of a green vinyl couch and slumped down. Barney sat next to me.

"Do you still not believe me, Jane?"

"I don't know," I said. I stared at his suspenders which had tiny carrots and tomatoes on them. "Where do you buy your clothes?"

"I've told Claudia so much about you. In fact, she's suggested more than once that I bring you over for dinner."

"So why didn't you ask me?"

Barney was silent for a moment. "Claudia is my only remaining relative. I only take people to meet her who are very important to me." He picked up my hand and studied it. I was relieved I had given myself a manicure the night before. "Although you are very important to me, I've never been quite sure if the feelings were mutual."

"So, you're saying you were afraid I would kill off your only family member?" He looked up at me and I smiled. He let out a booming laugh.

"Jane Label, you are a card."

"It's my best feature," I said. "And now I know you can't read minds. Because I've been hot for your person ever since I laid eyes on you."

"Really, Jane?"

"Well, no. Actually, it was about fifteen minutes after I first laid eyes on you. I had to get to know you first." Barney laughed and then he looked into my eyes in a really meaningful way, and I thought, this is it, the moment we've all been waiting for, but then Sparky had to come in and ruin it all.

"Sorry to disturb this little tete-a-tete," he chuckled.

"No harm done," said Barney, cheerily, which made me wonder whether he had actually been planning on kissing me or not. I was beginning to wonder whether the confusion was worth it.

Sparky sat on top of the Newsweeks on the coffee table and leaned on his knees. "Do we know where Mr. Adora is?"

"He's at some workshop," I said, "but don't worry. I'm the back-up coach."

"I see," said Sparky, and he appeared to be worried anyway. "Is there any way to get a hold of him?"

Barney and I looked at each other.

"There's nothing wrong, I hope," said Barney. I hoped not either. I wasn't prepared to do anything except breathe.

"We shouldn't worry prematurely," said Sparky, "but Mrs. Adora's due date is a month away so there's a good chance the baby won't have dropped into place."

"Meaning?" I said.

"Meaning the baby might not be head first."

"Meaning?" I said.

"Meaning we'd have to do a Caesarean section."

"Oh great," I said, feeling the panic coming on, "like I really know how to do that."

"You wouldn't have to do a thing," Sparky said, patting my knee, "just wait here and keep your boyfriend company."

I started to protest but then gave up the fight. "So what do I do now?"

"Have a cup of coffee. Read a magazine. Sample our exquisite delicacies in the hospital cafeteria." Sparky snorted and stood up. "I'll call you if I need you. But we mustn't worry." He headed back down the hall.

I stood up and began pacing. "Great. My one chance to redeem myself and Iris has to have a twisted kid."

"I'm sure Iris is grateful for what you've done thus far," said Barney. "You did what you could."

"I guess," I said.

I continued pacing and Barney flipped through magazine after magazine. We didn't speak. Talking about anything other than Iris seemed wrong right then, and I didn't feel like voicing my fears. If anything happened to Iris or the baby, I would blame myself, however irrational that might have been. I didn't want to think about a life of guilt.

We had been occupied with our own thoughts for about thirty minutes when Michael came running down the hall.

"Michael!"

"Jane! What's happening? Where is she? Did I miss anything?"

Just then, the nurse showed up. "Are you Mr. Adora?"

"Yes."

"The doctor says you may coach now. Your wife is in the delivery room and everything looks fine. If you'll follow me, I'll give you some greens to put on."

"Wait just one second," I said, "I've been going through hell these passed couple of hours. I think I should be the one to coach."

"Jane! I'm her husband."

"Well I found her first. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even have a wife."

Michael hesitated. "How about two coaches?" he asked the nurse.

"That will be fine."

"Cool," I said. "Later, Barn." Michael and I followed the nurse down the hall.

"I'll be waiting right here for you," Barney called after us.

Michael and I put on our gowns and masks. I balked at the shower cap, but put it on after a sharp reprimand from Michael. We followed the nurse to the delivery room and right before we entered, I grabbed Michael by the arm.

"Hey," I said, "I just wanted you to know I'm happy for you."

"Finally," he said, and he let me go through the door first.

What I saw was frightening. Everything looked so much like surgery.

I was very afraid I'd do something wrong like accidentally step on a tube and cut off someone's oxygen or trip over a plug and shut down Iris's anesthetic. Who wouldn't be pissed over that? But the nurse stationed me on Iris's right and Michael on her left and told us to just talk to Iris and help her breathe and push, so I thought I had it covered.

"Hi, Iris," I said.

"Jane! Michael! I'm in such a great mood! I can't feel a thing. You should try this, Jane."

"Sure," I said, "maybe tomorrow."

Iris laughed, and Michael was trying to laugh too, but he was getting too sentimental and I knew he would start crying any second, so I tried to distract Iris, since I was afraid she would get scared and think she was dying.

"Iris," I said, "look at the mirror. You can see yourself." Oh my, God, could you. I finally realized what I was looking at and what humongous object was trying to come out of such a minuscule opening, and all the time Sparky was saying, "You're doing fine, Iris, just fine. Push a little more, there we go, we've got it now, one more push and we'll have a little monster on our hands. Just a term of speech, ha ha." While he was snorting away, I took particular notice of the high amounts of blood that were involved in birth.

"Jane," said Michael, "are you okay?"

"Sure," I said. And then I heard someone say, "She's going down," and that was the last I saw of the Adora baby birth.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking up into a mass of dark hair. Uh-oh, I thought, a wolf. But I reasoned if I died then, I wouldn't have to worry about gaining more weight, or losing it for that matter. Then my eyes focussed more, and I saw the white strip of hair and I thought, A skunk. Great. No dry cleaners were going to take my clothes now.

"Jane Label," the skunk said, "it's Barney."

"What?" I tried to sit up.

"Just lie down," he said, "you've had a bit of a shock."

"Oh my God," I said, "what did we do?"

Barney laughed. "You fainted in the delivery room."

"That's impossible. Only women faint."

"Perhaps you've got a bit more woman in you than you think."

"How disconcerting," I said. "When can I get up and start leading a normal life."

"Perhaps we should wait until the color returns to your face."

"Great. I look like death. Too bad I didn't bring my camera. So what did I miss? Or are you not telling me something for a reason?"

"You missed the birth of a beautiful, flawless little girl. The proud parents are oggling her at this very moment."

I smiled. "What a relief. I don't have to flagellate myself for the rest of my life."

"The fates were with you."

I smiled at Barney and he smiled at me. There I was, helpless and

vulnerable, lying in a hospital bed. I was prime kissing material. He took my hand and patted it. Bad sign. Way too paternal.

Sparky came in. "Well, well, Ms. Label, how are we?"

"Fine," I said. "Sorry about this. I feel slightly humiliated."

"Nothing to worry about, we all feel woozy now and then."

"Can I leave now?" I felt so foolish acting like a patient when there was nothing wrong with me.

"Your color still looks bad," Sparky said. "Don't you think so, Barney?"

"Yes, Sparky, she's still a bit pale."

"Fifteen more minutes," said Sparky and he trounced out the door.

"That man has horrendous timing," said Barney and he leaned over and kissed me firmly and for quite a few seconds on the lips.

"There now, Jane Label, you've got quite a bit of color in your cheeks." He barked a laugh.

I hadn't the faintest idea what to say to that, so I merely whispered, "Again, please."

And Barney leaned over me and said, "Alrighty."

THE END

Vita

