

# LIVING SINGLE

by

[Holly Chamberlin](#)

## PROLOGUE

This is the story of a year in the life of a thirty-two-year old single woman. It's my story and I'm telling it because I need to tell it. Also, because I want to.

Consider it a cautionary tale. Consider it a good laugh. Consider it a little of both.

My name is Erin Weston. I recently celebrated—a slightly optimistic way of putting it—my thirty-third birthday.

Jesus Christ was crucified at the age of thirty-three. Not being a rabble-rouser, I'm hoping for a far less spectacularly troublesome year. After last year, I could use a rest.

Anyway, I made it out alive and yes, even well. Imagine that.

Overall, life's been good to me, though on occasion its macabre sense of humor is distressing.

But enough summarizing. My story begins January, exactly a year ago to this day.

I hope you like it.

## CHAPTER 1

January, Boston

January in Boston is probably like January everywhere in America. At least in the sense of its being a month of grand resolutions and well-meant gestures—as well as a month of postholiday disappointment and incipient depression as the resolutions and gestures begin to break down.

Nice time of the year to be born.

I'd just turned thirty-two. And I was a workaholic.

Not really. Though sometimes, especially in those days when I was the only one left in my downtown Boston office after six-thirty, I'd get all panicky and think that if I wasn't very careful I could easily slip over the line and go from being your typical hardworking single woman to being a painfully skinny spinster, scarily devoted to her filing system and not so secretly in love with her abusive, Scotch-swilling boss.

Or, maybe I would go the other way. Maybe I would wind up a coldhearted, hard-assed, too-tanned, slave-driver type female executive with helmet hair, no husband, and surprisingly few girlfriends.

But I was determined not to allow that slippage to occur, either way. Absolutely not. Because I'd decided I wanted something significantly different for my life.

I wanted legitimacy. The kind that, for a woman, doesn't even come with a solid career.

And my career was solid. In fact, my annual review was scheduled for the following day. If it went well, there was a chance—slim, but I was hoping—that I would be named a senior account

executive at East Wind Communications. That's the marketing/PR firm where I'd worked for the past five years. It's a smallish firm, owned by a guy named Terry Bolinger, and its work focuses on nonprofits and organizations that barely make a profit.

I like being at East Wind.

More information. I lived—and till live—in the South End, officially an historic district of Boston. I own a condo on what was once, way back in the nineteenth century, a single-family brick house. Think New York brownstones but brick. Thanks to the building department's controls, the structure is still charming, as is the entire block, with its brick sidewalks, huge old trees, and lovely, well-tended front gardens.

I had—and still have—a cat named Fuzzer. And yes, on occasion I was definitely frightened of becoming a looney cat lady. Especially if the single situation persisted for much longer.

Which, I vowed upon turning thirty-two, it wouldn't. It couldn't. Because things were going to change. Five, ten, twenty years ahead when I looked back on my life, I was going to refer to this as The Year. The year I met my husband, the man of my dreams.

Tall or medium height, it didn't matter. Neither did hair or eye color. He'd have a fine intelligence and a large sense of humor, i.e., he would appreciate the Three Stooges as well as Jerry Seinfeld, and Margaret Cho as well as Monty Python's Flying Circus. He would be kind and loving and he'd be a hardworking man, as laziness is, for me, the ultimate turnoff. Above all he would have a huge capacity for love and devotion and treat me like a great gift and be respectful of my parents and tolerate with grace—if not really like—my more difficult friends and family members.

The man of my dreams.

Well. That was the hope, anyway. That I'd meet my husband in the very near future. I didn't have much of a plan. I didn't even make an official resolution. I'd never gotten very far with resolutions. In fact, the last official resolution I'd made—at least, the last resolution I'd remembered making—was during my sophomore year in college

when for some unaccountable reason I was dating a born-again Christian and inspired by lust I resolved to spend my life as a missionary in some “godless savage land.” Those were his words.

Okay, I knew why I was dating the guy. He was gorgeous. Extremely disturbed, but very, very nice to look at. Which is pretty much all I got to do because, you know, those born-again Christian types aren’t into premarital sex. Catholics aren’t either, but we all cheat. We’re all going to Hell, but it just might be worth it.

Anyway, though my common sense and my experience in the dating trenches and my recently acquired cynicism about everything romantic told me I was nuts to be thinking in terms of finally meeting Mr. Right, my heart, that disturbingly powerful organ, told me otherwise. It told me that if I just approached it with openness, I would, indeed, meet my very own hero.

Okay, sure, delude yourself. Knock yourself out. It’s your funeral, Erin.

That was Reason. It spoke to me several times a day. Often, it interrupted my sleep. It just had to share its opinions; it just had to pass judgment.

It was one of those workaholic days.

The phone rang just as I was about to pack up for the fifteen-minute walk home. I debated whether to answer it. I checked my watch. Six-forty-five. Not an unheard-of time for a disgruntled client to call and lodge a lengthy complaint. Then again, maybe it was bad karma not to take the call, being on the verge—possibly—of becoming a senior account executive. I was—am—nothing if not responsible.

I picked up on the fourth ring.

“Erin Weston.”

“Hi. It’s me, Abby.”

Relief.

“Hi. I wasn’t going to pick up the phone. After-hours cranky clients.”

Abby laughed. “Tell me about it.”

Abby worked—and still does—as a fund raiser for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. A career in development or, if you like, advancement, sounds all sophisticated and civilized until you hear stories about the people Abby has to deal with on a daily basis. Mainly, the outrageously childish women of the Brahman set. My take on the situation is that these women have far too much money and far too much free time on their hands. My Grandmother Morelli had a favorite saying, one she usually delivered with an ominous look at my habitually out-of-work cousin Buster: “The devil finds work for idle hands.”

Anyway, how Abby hadn’t already put one of those vicious, gossipy, nastily meddling ladies—potential donors, all—out of her misery, I just didn’t know.

Well, I did know. Abby was genuinely nice. The genuinely nice person is a rarity. I am nice but perhaps not genuinely. I mean, I’d never laugh openly at someone with a silly walk but you can be sure I’m guffawing inside.

“What’s up?” I said.

“I thought you might want to have dinner. I know it’s last minute, but...”

“I’d love to,” I said and I meant it. Spending time with Abby would be a great way to ignore my mounting nervousness about the next day’s review. It also would be a chance to talk about my mother and her latest escapades. Selfish reasons, mostly, for wanting to get together with a friend, but understandable.

“Great,” she said. “I was thinking Biba. Is that okay?”

It was. I agreed to meet Abby in half an hour—she was cabbing over to Boylston Street from Huntington and Massachusetts Avenue—and hung up.

From my office on Boylston Street, Biba was only a three-minute walk. I decided that instead of hanging around the deserted office, I’d take a brisk walk through the Common. Not that my office was in any way unpleasant. The entire East Wind Communications floor had been redesigned about a year earlier. The space was well-lit and nicely

decorated in calming beige and taupe with artful splashes of warm colors, deep reds and yellows. My own office boasted a hypermodern beechwood and black leather couch and two matching chairs for clients. And I had a large south-facing window with a ficus jungle in colorful Aztec-influenced pots.

Still, I was a big fan of walking, not as much for the exercise as for the stimulation of urban sights and sounds. Plus, the Common is such a beautiful place to walk, rich with history. Back in colonial seventeenth century, the land was the common grazing ground for local farmers. As Boston grew and became less rural, more urban, somebody had the wisdom to preserve the land as a public park. Now, it's laced with tree-lined paths, scattered with monuments to the heroes of liberty, and largely safe at night.

I bundled into my brown mouton coat, a piece I'd bought ten years before in The Antique Boutique in New York. The coat, which I call the Bear, is the warmest coat on the face of this Earth. Over the years I'd managed to find an almost perfectly matching hat. A cream-colored wool scarf, brown leather gloves, and I was ready.

The air was cold and clear, and even though the holiday lights had been removed from the trees, and the annual ice sculptures had melted or been chipped away by bored kids, there lingered the scent of celebration. And the enticing, romantic scent of smoke from the fireplaces in the homes along Beacon Street. It's one of the few joys of winter in Boston: A lungful of cold, crisp air laced with a hint of cozy hearth.

I was not alone in enjoying the evening. It seemed lots of people had chosen to cut through the Common on their way home or to meet friends. In spite of the freezing weather, a couple embraced on the little bridge. In the spring and summer, tourists ride the stately swan boats back and forth under that bridge. I imagined for a moment that the scene was frozen on canvas. I even gave the painting a title: *The Dream.*"

Sentimental? Sure.

Then—I heard excited shouts and laughter coming from the Frog Pond, frozen over for late fall and winter. It's the city's most popular and picturesque skating venue, a brainchild of our mayor.

I decided to watch the skaters for a few minutes. It had been a long time since I'd worn skates—white with rabbit fur pom-poms—and it would probably be a long time before I ever wore them again. When it comes to most sports, I am strictly a spectator. I do après ski quite skillfully.

The Frog Pond was jammed with skaters. Lots of couples. Mostly young, one probably in their seventies, looking spry and healthy, typical hardy New Englanders. A boy about twelve, wearing a striped Dr. Seuss Cat-in-the-Hat hat, shot around the slower skaters, zipping backward, then forward again, making loop-the-loops. A girl about ten in a fancy red velvet skating costume, trimmed in white fur, did careful pirouettes at the exact center of the rink. A group of teenagers, baggy pants wet from trailing on the ice, hauled each other around the rink by the hand. Fell on each other. Screamed and hooted with hormonal glee.

It made me smile. Fun is catching. Two golden retrievers bounded around and around the frozen pond, barking excitedly, agreeing with me.

Then I spotted a family of four. Father, mother, two little kids, maybe five and seven. All member of the same team, all bundled to the teeth in shiny ski jackets and mile-long scarfs and fuzzy woolen mittens and goofy, brightly colored knit hats. Laughing. Hanging on to each other, grabbing arms and legs. The father catching the mother as she slipped, kissing her on the nose.

And suddenly, I didn't feel like smiling anymore. This happy family had so much. I didn't begrudge them their riches. I just...

So simple. It should have been so simple to fall in love, marry, build a family. But sometimes it seemed so impossible, such a far-away dream. How did you start the process? Was there a magic word or ritual? Did you just have to want it badly enough?

Would it be too insane, I wondered, to go up to the wife/mother of that happy family and ask her for some pointers?

Reason told me, Sure. Go ahead. Make a jerk of yourself.

Here's the bitch of it. At twenty-two, the dream—husband, family, a lovely house with a dog in the yard, a cat on the hearth, an antique mirror over the beautifully upholstered couch—seemed too mundane and dead-end to consider.

I was different.

It wasn't something I could explain very easily. I just wanted something—else.

That dream of husband and house seemed so easy to acquire, so unquestioned, everybody did it. Why would I want what everybody else had? Wasn't I glad to be different, to go my own way, make my own life, all independent?

Okay, I was young. I thought I'd chart a new course. I thought I'd be some kind of a new woman. I thought too many women fell for the dream that started with the white gown, princess for a day, and ended bitterly in divorce court. Didn't almost all women fall into marriage and family, only to learn that the dream's daily trappings were stifling to the self and the soul?

Yes, maybe my mother taught that to me, often, though obliquely, hinting that this was the case with her. She'd married at twenty-one and I'd never seen her happy, only put upon, and used up. Or, it occurred to me, much, much later, acting that way.

Okay. So I had made my own way, built a career, traveled, dated a fair share of exciting, interesting men. In retrospect: self-centered artists; self-absorbed Internet gurus; self-aggrandizing brokers—none with an ounce of energy for anyone but themselves.

And then I'd turned twenty-eight. And the pangs began. Mild yearnings at first, for what exactly, I couldn't even name.

Just something—else.

Suddenly, going to a friend's wedding dateless didn't seem like striking a blow for the happy, independent woman.

It just seemed lonely.

Lacy white gown and sparkling headpieces are fun!

That was Romance speaking up. It was new in town. Reason had tried to shut it down. But the yearning was big and clear and specific and Romance would not be silenced. It had appeared to remind me that I wanted to be married to that intelligent, funny, kind, and hardworking man. Okay, with brown eyes. It had appeared to remind me that I wanted to have children. Two, maybe three, healthy and happy and bright-cheeked. It had appeared to remind me I wanted a big Victorian-style house on a tree-lined street, with a backyard big enough for a picnic table and a swig set and, of course, a barbecue. It had appeared to remind me I wanted there to be a little white church in the center of town—not Catholic—where my beautiful husband and children and I would attend Christmas Eve services. It had appeared to remind me I even wanted to be a soccer mom—as long as I didn't actually have to play.

But Reason mocked me. There's just one little problem, Erin, it would say. Time's running out. Your biological clock is ticking away. Did you know that a woman who gives birth at the age of thirty-five and older is considered to be of Advanced Maternal age? AMA. And therefore she and her baby are at much greater risk for all sorts of calamities than, say, a twenty-five year-old and her baby. So get a grip. Accept the reality. The door's just about to close.

I looked at the mother/wife and her brood. It was hard to tell at that distance, with her face mostly covered by her scarf, but when she laughed her voice sounded so young and clear. I guessed she was about my age, Give or take a year. Which meant that she'd had her children in her twenties.

Let's face it, Erin. Reason again. If a man can date a twenty-five-year-old, he will. Even if the twenty-five-year-old makes less money and has less experience than the thirty-two-year-old he thought he might like to ask out. Until the twenty-five-year-old came along. Oh, sure, in the man's mind, the thirty-two-year-old woman definitely has something that the twenty-five-year-old doesn't. Wear and tear.

I didn't want to feel bitter, really.

And I couldn't even blame anyone for my being in that place. I'd made the decisions all along the way. The decisions that got me where I was—thirty-two, single, and with no good prospect on the horizon.

I loved my job and I was proud of my career and my condo and my travels. But at the same time, I wanted what I suspected it might have been too late for me to have.

I wanted to fall in love. I wanted it to be real. And I wanted it to last forever.

I watched as the skating family tumbled off the ice. For a moment, I listened to the laughter and shouts of the other skaters, to the excited barking of the dogs.

Then I pulled my coat closer around me and walked on.

## CHAPTER 2

"I don't know what to order."

"Abby, you never know what to order," I pointed out. "But you always wind up liking what you choose."

"That's true. So why do I spend so much time agonizing over the menu?" When the waiter comes I should just close my eyes and point."

"Wait. What if you point to mussels? You're allergic."

"Oh, right." Abby sighed. "Maybe I'd just better..."

"Ladies? Can I take your order?"

I shot a look of minor panic at Abby.

"Uh, just a few more minutes," I said apologetically.

"Thank you," Abby added. "I promise we'll be ready."

The waiter smiled, said, "No problem," and walked away."

"He's nice," I said, returning to the menu.

My friend JoAnne hates when I do that. “You’re paying him,” she says. “He’s working for you. Why are you apologizing? Why is he “nice” because he’s doing his job? That’s what people are supposed to do. Their jobs.”

On general principle, JoAnne takes no prisoners.

“Okay, I think I’m going to have the...No wait. Yes, definitely the chicken.”

“I have my annual review tomorrow,” I said.

Abby looked up from her menu and smiled. “I’m sure it’ll go wonderfully.”

“How can you be sure? I can’t even be sure,” I said. Wanting Abby to be right. Wanting her to reassure me.

“Easy. History has proven that every single time you’re sure you’re going to be fired, you’re not. Instead, you’re given a bigger expense account or new company car or whatever else people who work for profit-making companies are rewarded with. A nicer office.”

“Still, anything could happen,” I argued. But I felt better already.

Abby nodded. “You’re absolutely right. Anything could happen, at any time, with no warning. Which means something good as well as something bad. For example, maybe tonight’s the night you’ll meet Mr. Right.”

I laughed. “Now that would be something!”

Wouldn’t it? I don’t know, maybe it was watching that skating family earlier, the thoughts and feelings they stirred up, but when I walked into the busy restaurant, for a fleeting moment a thrill had run through me. A physical thrill, a big flutter or tingle, like something important was about to happen, something amazing,

Like meeting that someone special?

Not impossible, I thought, given the fact that Biba was a Boston hot-spot and that the room was filled with a fair number of twenty-to-forty-something, well-dressed, good-looking, financially successful men. Okay, there were also a fair number of twenty-to-thirty something, well-dressed, good-looking, financially successful women, including Abby and me, so the competition was a bit stiff. But I

wasn't totally without confidence. Cupid had been known to strike in much stranger places.

Reason snorted derisively. Get a life, Erin, it said.

Romance countered. Abby is right. Anything can happen—if you just want it badly enough. If you just believe!

It was a Thursday, a seriously busy restaurant night in Boston, as it is in most cities these days. Maybe the busiest, with the possible exception of Saturday. But Thursdays were more about singles and people who lived and worked in town than Saturdays, when married couples and people from the suburbs took over.

I preferred eating out on Thursdays. Far more opportunity to meet the intelligent, funny, kind, and hardworking man of my dreams and get going on the mortgage for that Victorian house.

The waiter returned.

Abby ordered the pasta special, not the chicken, something with butternut squash, which seems to be the hot vegetable right now. I ordered the steak frite, rare.

The waiter went off to place our orders. Abby and I sat back to sip our wine, talk, and take in the restaurant's ambiance. With slightly spooly hand-crafted modern light fixtures, a bar made out of concrete, and floors striped in alternate panels of oak and chocolate-colored walnut, it was a unique and funky salute to the Crafts-movement chic, with a distinctly new millennium twist.

"I love your suit, Erin," Abby said.

I laughed. "Thanks, so do I." I'd bought the suit on a trip to Ireland the year before. This was the first time I'd worn it. A long, slim-fitting, single-breasted jacket with a high closure. Slim-fitting pants, cuffed. All wool, in a beautiful shade of deep rose, almost red, that complimented my pale skin, blue eyes, and ash blonde hair.

I'm not vain, but I know I'm, not exactly hideous.

"Don't you know that man?" Abby said, nodding toward the front of the restaurant. "The tall one, dark hair, in the three-button suit?"

"Where?"

“He just came in. At the end of the bar. He’s with another man. A guy with a camel coat. Oh, he just took it off. And a woman in a red coat and an odd fuzzy hat.

I glanced over my shoulder. The bar area was crowded with people stopping by for an after-work drink with a friend or conversation with a colleague, with people waiting for tables with their dates. At first I couldn’t pick out the man in the three-button suit. How could Abby even see such a detail from this far away, through a dark and busy restaurant? And there had to be more than one man with a three-button suit...

Then the crowd at the end of the bar parted as the hostess led two women to a table and I spotted the red coat.

Behind Red Coat woman, Three-Button. Yes. I knew him. Jack Nugent. He worked for a big marketing/PT agency named Trident. I’d met him at various times during my career at East Wind. I liked him. Jack was nice, a family man, decent, and very good at his job. I admired him even.

But it wasn’t Jack Nugent that riveted my attention. It was the man with Jack and the woman in the red coat and odd fuzzy hat. The man with the camel coat over his left arm. The man with the air about him of nonchalance and confidence. Not arrogance, something subtler and sexier. A man at ease with himself.

I’d never seen Camel Coat before, I would have remembered. Even at this distance of about thirty feet I knew I was seeing this man for the first time. Somehow, I knew it would not be the last.

The thrill ran through me again, familiar now but more powerful, and nestled deep inside me.

“Erin?”

“Huh?” Reluctantly, I turned back to Abby.

“What’s wrong? You do know that man, right? The tall one?”

But there wasn’t a need to answer because Abby’s raised eyes and perfect social smile told me Jack had spotted me staring—how could he have not?—and was coming over to say hello.

“Erin?”

“Jack, hi! How are you?” I said brightly. Ignoring Camel Coat at his side. Red Coat woman had disappeared.

“Fine, great. Glad the holidays are over, though. Too many parties and too many relatives.”

Jack smiled to show he didn’t really mean any of it. Jack was a guy who actually arranged family picnics and barbecues. A patriarch-in-training.

Camel Coat looked at me. For a moment I was sure he was going to say, “I know you.” Like he recognized me, like he’d known me at some distant point in his life. It was a look that seemed to want to place me, identify me, remember me. Take me home.

And I looked at him, betraying all those questions and feelings and desired.

He smiled a smile—amused, triumphant, predatory—that acknowledged he’d seen the need and desire and urgency in my eyes.

I wanted to die with shame. I wanted to press my body against his.

Just then Reason chimed in. Don’t make an ass of yourself, Erin. Get a grip!

Smile brighter, Erin, Romance countered. He’s very attractive!

Ignoring both, I smoothly carried out my social duty.

I smiled back blandly, told my eyes to go blank. Then I turned to Jack.

“Jack, this is Abigail Walker. She works in development at the BSO.”

Jack greeted Abby with an open, socially acceptable smile and a brief handshake.

“And this is Doug Spears,” he said. “Doug, Abigail Walker and Erin Weston. Erin is at East Wind Communications. Erin, Doug just joined Trident from IdeaONE.”

Doug Spears shook Abby’s hand first. He leaned in closer to do so. My eyes focused on him like laser-guided heat-seeking missiles. His face was Harrison Ford-like, uneven, manly, with both smile and frown lines, unbearably sexy. His face told me that he was not a

young man. But he wasn't old, either. Maybe somewhere between forty and fifty.

His hands looked strong, like he was used to physical labor or some skilled craft, maybe performed out in the sun, wind, and rain. He wore a gold link watch, not as fancy as a Rolex but well designed not inexpensive, maybe a Tagheuer. His hair was thick and brown but might once have been honey-blond. The short cut didn't conceal a slight natural wave. He was not very tall, shorter than Jack, maybe five-foot-eleven. Perfect for my five-six. His shoulders were broad. He wasn't skinny, but in no way fat. He gave the impression of compactness, of bottled energy, nothing wasted. He gave the impression of focus and strength.

Doug Spears turned to me. Almost unaware, I put out my hand to be shaken.

"Nice to meet you, Doug," I said. Trying to sound bland and blank, no more than a passing business acquaintance. "I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with IdeaONE."

Doug Spears took my hand and held it just a second longer than necessary. His eyes were an odd and compelling shade of golden brown. Like a lion's or...

"It was my own firm," he said, releasing me. "I sold the business to Trident and came on board as Senior VP of branding."

"We've been trying to get Doug in-house for years," Jack explained.

"What made you sell?" I blurted, and immediately regretted asking such a personal question.

Reason sputtered wildly.

But Doug Spears didn't seem to mind.

"Money comes in handy," he said. Looking only at me. "But mostly, it was probably boredom. I needed a change."

"And are you happy now?"

Another inappropriate question for one stranger to ask another. Except that Doug Spears somehow was not a stranger. He couldn't be. I'd recognized him somehow...hadn't I?

Reason found its voice. Have you gone insane! It demanded. Do you realize you're behaving like a lovesick teenager?

Doug Spears looked more deeply into my eyes. Everything—even Reason—fell away at the sound of Doug Spears's voice.

"Oh, I think I might be," he said. Provocatively. Teasingly.

I would make you happy, I thought. I...

"Sir? Your table is ready?"

I started. The universe expanded back to its normal size. I stumbled back into consciousness of a world inhabited by more than just me and Doug Spears.

The hostess. A loud burst of laughter from the bar. The sound system playing Diana Krall. Abby. Jack.

Jack smiled again. Had he seen? Had he sensed what was happening between Doug Speaks and me?

"Good running into you, Erin," he said easily. No. He'd noticed nothing. I was sure of it. "And good meeting you, Abigail. Enjoy your dinner."

"Thanks, Jack," I said. "You, too."

At least, I think I said that. I know I was thinking, This can't end yet. Please let him say something. Don't let him walk away. Maybe I should...

Reason growled. Keep your mouth shut, Erin.

Romance said, Give him your card, at least!

Doug Spears nodded at Abby. To me he said, "Until next time."

I looked up into his fabulous eyes and promised that yes, there would be a next time. With a smile, I promised other things, too. And begged him to promise me back.

Doug Spears began to walk away. As he did he shifted his coat from his left arm to his right.

And I saw the wedding band.

"Erin?" Abby said quietly, as Doug Spears faded into the boisterous crowd.

“Yeah?” I said, avoiding his eyes. Knowing she’d seen it, too. Hoping we’d both mistaken a school ring for something more important.

“Don’t even think about it.”

### CHAPTER 3

The very last thing I needed on the morning of my review was a postcard from my mother. The very last thing I needed the morning after meeting the love of my life and two minutes later finding out he was married was a postcard from my mother.

All right, maybe not the very last thing. The very last thing I needed would have been something like a lousy case of the flu.

But it certainly wasn’t a good thing, a postcard from my prodigal mother. Because with a mere twenty words or so, spoken or scrawled on a piece of paper, my mother could knock me flat. Just knock me down, deflate me, make me crawl back into bed and pull the covers over my head. For a week.

She was a powerful person, my mother. Though her motives have always been somewhat unclear to me, puzzling, from the beginning I’ve admitted her power to crush and strangle. And then to graciously offer to help her victim stand. It’s a strange and vicious cycle. And I fell for it every time because in spite of all, I loved her, which meant I always opened up to her—just before she zinged me again.

So I did not need a postcard from her, that day of all days. The day that I was sure I would be fired. Which event would lead rapidly and assuredly to my losing my apartment and being thrown out onto the street. Where, no doubt, I would be killed by a pack of rabid squirrels within a week. My rotting body not found for months.

Review day was not a favorite day of mine.

Despite the fact that, yes, thus far in my career review day had always resulted in a raise and quite often a promotion. (Or a bonus. Sometimes all three.) Despite the fact that by the time I'd gone to bed the night before I'd managed to work up a pretty good supply of confidence. But I think that might have been due to the wine. Wine and lust and an unbelievably ridiculous determination to win Doug Spears away from his no-doubt nasty wife.

And then the morning had come. The glaring light of day. And with the return of consciousness, Reason awoke and reminded me just how dangerous it was to be thinking romantic thoughts about a married man. And, it added, it's ridiculous and a major waste of time to judge someone—his wife—without even knowing her.

And then Reason's nasty cousin Negativity slipped into the room and took over. Negativity tends to sound like a sonorous, Old Testament prophet of doom. Or a ranting, decrepit oracle.

Pride goeth before a fall, Negativity cried. Things can change at any time. You never know what will happen. You can count on nothing. And never, ever rest on your laurels!

You're only as good as your last win, Reason added, unnecessarily.

Everyone is replaceable, Negativity added.

Even a wife? I asked

Neither responded.

I found the postcard when I opened the door to leave for work. It sat on the cheery WELCOME! mat I had put down on the first day I'd moved into this apartment, a first-time home owner. A sanitary, hospitable measure I'd picked up from my mother. Back in the days when she cared about things like sanitation and hospitality. And home. And family.

The mailman must have put the postcard in my neighbor's box again. This was common enough. Ike, the mailman, was a nice guy. He always had a chatty comment to make about the weather or an opinion to express regarding the failed marriages and impending tragic breakups of Hollywood couples. According to Ike, Brad and

Jennifer had four years, tops. I tended to agree. Ike had called the Meg Ryan-Dennis Quaid breakup, an event I had not at all seen coming.

But in spite of his likeable personality, Ike was no rocket scientist. In fact, I wasn't a hundred percent certain Ike could read. Which would be a tricky sort of handicap for a mailman to work around.

Anyway, there it was. A postcard from my mother, Marie Weston. Fifty-six years old. Divorced after thirty-five years of marriage to my father, John. Currently living in an Unidentified South American Country. See, since she'd gotten on a plane and headed south, it had been difficult to keep track of her whereabouts. She moved from here to there, only occasionally sending a scribbled line or two. Once, I'd tried to contact her at the address on the back of a card, some small, slapdash resort. The snakey proprietor told me she'd left weeks before. With some guy from the town. And asked me when I'd be coming to enjoy the pleasures of Villa Loco.

The brightly colored photo of a brightly colored bird on the front of the postcard was somehow offensive. Clearly, the photo had been taken on a hot and sunny day. This fact annoyed me. Along with the fact that my mother currently lived in a year-round warm climate.

I did not. January in Boston, Massachusetts, is not a whole lot of fun. It was cold, twelve degrees with a wind-chill factor of minus two at 7:30 A.M., according to the telephone service weatherman. Not unusual weather for the Northeast coast.

There was ice on the ground, too, the extremely tricky, all but invisible black ice which forced me to walk like the very frail and nervous ninety-year old woman I will be in exactly fifty-eight years. Shuffle, really. And look constantly for something to hang on to. A signpost. A mailbox. A stranger's arm.

On icy days I was not in the habit of actually lifting my feet off the sidewalk. No one has ever accused me of being physically reckless.

I was dressed for the bitter winter weather in a smart, wool-blend, gray pin-striped pantsuit; and ankle-length black wool coat I'd

bought at Banana Republic the year before; a black beret and black, slim-fitting leather gloves.; and a gorgeous gray cashmere scarf, a present from my father two Christmases ago. And I was beginning to sweat, standing in an overheated hallway, staring down at a picture of some stupid tropical bird. I didn't even like birds. They frightened me.

My mother used to know that.

Okay. Several options faced me. I could pick up the card, I thought. Verify it was indeed from my mother. Though who else did I know in South America? Who else would be sending me a photo of an undoubtedly smelly, beady-eyed, flea-infested, claw-footed creature?

Option number two. With my booted foot, I could slide the postcard under the WELCOME! mat. Pretend I never got it. "Oh, my God, Mom! Really? Wow, I never got that one! Gee, I'm sorry. That's too bad."

The guilt would haunt, then kill me.

Back to option number one. I could pick up the postcard and walk directly to the trash can under the kitchen sink. Alternately, I could pick up the postcard, tear it into many little pieces, and walk directly to the trash can under the kitchen sink.

Another thought occurred to me. I could go off to work, leaving the postcard where it was on the WELCOME! mat. See if it was still there when I got home. Might be. Might not be.

Still another idea. My imagination is fecund. I could pick up the postcard and put it, unread, on the kitchen table for that evening's reading adventure. Which last two plans, I immediately realized, meant that all day long I would be dreading the moment when I had to face the thing again. Dreading and dwelling, going crazy with curiosity and driving myself insane with worry.

Reason and Negativity have a stepcousin named Panic.

Because what if the postcard is a cry for help? Panic asked. Good question. What if my mother was withering in a horrid, dank, rat-ridden jail cell in the Unidentified South American Country? What if she needed my help, now?

I could make it to the USAC's embassy in half an hour. Provided the USAC had an embassy in Boston. I would call a lawyer. Yes, my father was a lawyer, perfect! Maybe Mom had sent him a postcard, too. He could rescue her and she'd be so grateful she'd declare him her hero and beg him to take her back...

Wait! Reason shouted. Just back it up, Erin.

I took a deep breath. Okay, how likely was it for South American jailors to allow their North American female prisoners to purchase colorful postcards with the word "Hola!" printed in yellow on the front? How likely was it for them to allow their prisoners to send such cards to their families and friends back home, scribbled with word like "starving" and "putrifying" and phrases like "lice-infested" and "water torture"? And when had my mother ever been in serious danger before?

I sighed. Felt a drop of sweat trickle down my neck. I was screwed. No matter what I decided to do I'd feel regret. Probably shame. Inevitably, I'd feel like a very bad daughter.

There was no winning with her. There never had been.

I picked up the postcard. I read it.

E—having a fabulous time with Roberto. Latino men are simply the most wonderful lovers! Our work with the villagers was unexpectedly halted when one of the young girls accused Roberto of... Well, anyway, we're on our way—somewhere!—so won't be in touch for a while. Oh, hope the holidays were fun! M.

P.S. I chose this card because I know how much you love birds!

## CHAPTER 4

By eleven o'clock that morning I was senior account executive.

I figured it was probably all luck, though Terry, my boss and East Wind's owner and founder, said otherwise.

And since waking that morning I'd only thought of Doug Spears once. Every hour.

That night, Friday, while most of Boston's single people were out celebrating the start of their forty-eight hours of freedom, I brought in some Thai food and settled on the couch with Fuzzer to watch *Providence*—which only sometimes annoys me with its goody-goody heroine—and then to pop in a tape of a movie I'd rented on the way home. *Butterfield 8*, with Elizabeth Taylor and Lawrence Harvey. It was one of my all time favorites. John O'Hara wrote the book and for some reason I've never gotten around to reading it.

But the movie is brilliant enough—Taylor's performance won her her first Oscar as Best Actress. That night, I was particularly compelled and haunted by Taylor's character, Gloria, a self-employed, high-class call girl who falls in love with one of her married escorts. Tragically, of course.

My interest in the movie that particular weekend had nothing at all to do with my brief encounter with Doug Spears. In spite of what Reason made sure to point out to me.

Saturday morning, I cleaned the bathroom and kitchen, did two loads of laundry, waited for the grocery delivery. The usual. At one o'clock I met my father for lunch at Joe's American Bar and Grill on Newbury Street, one of my father's favorite lunch places. We had hamburgers and beer and I tried to cheer him up by being funny and light-hearted but the sadness in his eyes just didn't budge.

We talked about our jobs. Dad told me about an interesting new case the firm had just taken on. I told him about my promotion. After that there was a lull in the conversation.

“Have you heard from your mother?” Dad asked abruptly.

“Actually, I just got a postcard from her,” I said neutrally.

Dad nodded. I knew he didn’t want to ask if she was okay and happy. I also knew he really did want to know.

“She seems fine,” I said. “She didn’t say much; you know Mom. She said she hoped we enjoyed he holidays.”

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