

BACK IN THE GAME

by

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Chapter 1

Recent statistics show that fifty percent of marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce.

---Wake Up and Smell the Dirty Sheets: You Will Be Divorced

JESS

He said I'd never loved him.

He was probably right.

"I don't know why you married me in the first place."

"Matt," I replied wearily, "we've been through this before."

Matt laughed and it sounded bitter. "No, Jess, we haven't."

He was right again. We hadn't talked through anything, but I'd been asking myself that very question—why did I marry Matt Fromer in the first place?—since the day I started the affair that ended my marriage.

I am Jess Marlowe and I am an adulteress. My crime is of Biblical proportions.

"I'm sorry, Matt." I was. I still am. But I was tired and wanted Matt to hang up so that I could go to bed.

"I don't give a shit," he spat. Matt was drunk. Matt rarely drank even a beer; his inebriated state was clear evidence of just how badly I'd hurt him.

If you don't give a shit, I thought, you wouldn't have gotten drunk and called me. I said nothing. The divorce had been finalized that day. The papers to prove it lay next to the phone.

"What, you still have nothing to say?" he taunted. "I bet you had plenty to say to that kid, what's his name, Seth."

Matt was right, again. I had had plenty to say to Seth; he'd had a lot to say to me. Seth was only twenty-five but he had the toned, brilliant mind of a seasoned scholar. That's what attracted me to him in the first place, the words that came out of his mouth. The physical part just flowed from that.

It was inevitable.

It was wrong.

"You're really a bitch, you know?"

I had wronged Matt. But I didn't have to take this abuse. He was no longer my husband.

"I'm hanging up, Matt," I said. "I wish you the best."

Before he could reply with a scathing remark, I ended the call. I went directly to bed but couldn't sleep.

Guilt is a very noisy companion.

Chapter 2

Understand this: Approximately ninety percent of the sympathy you are shown is false. Your failure serves only to highlight another's snug sense of success.

---They're Talking About Me: Surviving Your Friends, Family, and Colleagues Post-Divorce

NELL

The day Richard and I got married it rained. Cats and dogs, my father said. The man loved a cliché.

The July sky opened up around three that afternoon and dumped rivers of rain on us until after midnight. When the reception was over, the rain finally stopped.

They say that rain on your wedding day is a good thing, a sign of luck, assurance of a blessed union.

For a little over twenty years our luck held, Richard's and mine. It held through good times and bad. It held through the birth of our two children, Clara, then two years later, Colin. It held through colds and chicken pox and scraped knees, through Richard's promotions and my ovarian cancer scare, and through the kids' graduations from high school. Our luck even held through the death of my parents in an awful car crash, and through Richard's mother's slow descent into Alzheimer's and then his father's fatal heart attack.

It held through the fabulous trip to Europe we took to celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary.

But, as my father was fond of saying, all good things come to an end. Our union, blessed for so long, fell apart in a spectacular way the night I found evidence of Richard's affair—the night he admitted to being in love with someone else.

A man named Bob Landry.

My life as I knew it exploded that night. Almost a year later, I'm still finding bloody shards in unlikely places.

Like in the U.S. mail.

I'd spent most of the early spring afternoon walking, wandering really, with no goal in mind other than to eventually wind my way home. I was tired when I got back to the apartment but it was a good tired, the kind you feel in your bones. I hoped I would sleep well that night; since the divorce, sleep has been a hit or miss activity.

I shuffled through the mail I'd retrieved from the box in the lobby. A few bills. A letter from a colleague on the MFA's Annual Fund committee. A letter from my doctor, confirming what the technician at the hospital had already told me, that my mammography was clean.

And then...I held the chunky envelope in fingers that were suddenly shaky.

Interestingly, some people still hadn't heard about Richard's emergency from a lifetime of secrecy and lies. Take, for example, the Smiths, a family who used to own an apartment in the building next door but who'd relocated to Connecticut five years earlier. Clearly they didn't know that Richard and I were no longer "man and wife" because there it was in my shaking hand, a wedding invitation addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Richard Allard.

Mrs. Richard Allard. The name mocked me; it mocked everything I had thought I had and was and would be until the end, until death parted Richard from me.

After the divorce I'd gone back to using my maiden name, Keats. Maiden name. An accurate term in my case as Richard was the first and only man I'd ever had sex with, and not really, not entirely, until after we were married. Until after the church sanctioned our union and

we promised to love and cherish each other and to accept children willingly from God. Not until after we were made to listen to all that other crap Richard's Catholic church demanded we listen to.

Nell Keats. I am once again who I was a long, long time ago. Except that now Nell Keats is a forty-two-year-old divorced woman, mother of twenty-year-old Clara and eighteen-year-old Colin, my children who still have their father's name, who in that way and more still belong to him. I could throw off the burden of Richard's name, the mark of his possession, but I couldn't ask my son and daughter to do the same.

Nell Keats. In what relation to I stand to those three Allards?

I tossed the wedding invitation from the Smiths on the hall table. It would have to be answered. I would have to explain yet again what I was tired of explaining. And then would come the inevitable questions.

How are you feeling?

Like hell.

Are you okay?

No.

Did Richard at least take care of you financially?

Oh, yes.

A wild thought came to me then. Upon learning that Richard and I were no longer married, would the Smiths choose my ex-husband and his lover over me? Would Richard and Bob be invited to the Smiths' yearly Summer Splash pool party? Would I be left off the guest list?

Stranger things had happened to me since the eye-opening night when I found the scrap of paper in Richard's pants pocket as I sorted the laundry for clothes to be taken to the dry cleaners. I unfolded the scrap, thinking it might have been a receipt Richard might need to record, and instead found a note in a man's handwriting—I can always tell a man's from a woman's—and what it said exactly modesty forbids me to repeat.

I sat heavily on the edge of the bed. Richard wasn't home; he said he was working late. When Richard walked into the apartment at almost eleven, I was still sitting on the edge of our bed, numb. It never occurred to me, not for one moment, that the note was a piece of trash Richard had picked up from outside the building. Richard was always tidying up. Somehow, I just knew this note was evidence of something far more unpleasant than trash.

Richard came into the bedroom, smiled, opened his mouth to say, "Hi, Nellie." But nothing came out. He saw the look on my face, saw the note that I held in my hand, and knew the game was over. Thankfully, he didn't deny his culpability.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He looked ill, scared.

I said nothing that night, I couldn't, but oh, by the next night the words were flying out of my mouth, questions, insults, protestations, cries for mercy.

Mercy. I felt like a victim, powerless, confused. Why me?

Eleven months later and I was still asking, why me?

I stared down at the Smiths' wedding invitation on the hall table. Let Richard handle it, I thought. Let Richard do the explaining.

I'm through.

Chapter 3

Everybody loves a victim. Be sure to embellish the tale of every domestic squabble to include his punching you in the nose.

--After the Divorce: Lies to tell Your Family, friends and Co-Workers

Laura

Candace. Yes, Candace was a good name for a girl. But wait, I thought. People will be tempted to call her Candy, and no daughter of mine was going to have a name that was better suited to a porn star.

No daughter of mine.

I wanted, I needed to find just the right names for my children. And I wasn't even pregnant, not even divorced from Duncan Costello, my husband of eight years, the man who refused to give me my children, little Annabelle or Leon.

"Mrs. Costello?"

I looked up at the lawyer, startled back to the moment.

"I'd prefer if you called me Ms. Keats," I said. "I'll be going back to my maiden name."

That is, until I get remarried. Then I'll be Mrs. Lumia or Mrs. Makepeace. I really hope I meet a guy with a good last name!

The lawyer nodded. She had a nice face and a nice office. I'd found her in the yellow pages. One of my colleagues at the business and computer training school where I work as an administrative assistant teased me for using the phone book and not the Internet to find a divorce lawyer. But in some ways, I'm kind of old-fashioned. I might

work for a school that trains people to build and repair computers, but that doesn't mean I want to build and repair them myself!

"Ms. Keats, then," she said. "Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this divorce? Because your husband will be served the papers today."

I thought about my babies, the babies Duncan said he didn't want, and said, "I'm sure."

I left her office a few minutes later and took the elevator to the lobby. I walked out into the afternoon. It was early April. The winter had been long and hard, with lots and lots of snow. But now that it was getting warmer you could feel people's excitement.

It was really happening. If Duncan came through on his promise not to be horrible, I could be officially divorced in a matter of months. On my own, single, back out there, back in the game and looking for love.

I stumbled. I suddenly felt really dizzy. What was I doing? Was getting a divorce worth it? Was it worth ending an eight year marriage to a nice guy, someone I had fallen in love with completely, someone I'd been pretty happy with until...

I took a deep breath and felt a little better.

A marriage I'd been pretty happy with until I hadn't been pretty happy with him. Until not long after the sudden death of my parents, until not long after my sister Nell's husband had announced that he was gay. That's when it dawned on me that what I wanted most in life was not Duncan but children. At least two children, hopefully a boy first and then a girl.

I took another deep breath and headed for the corner.

It isn't an unreasonable desire, you know. It's not like I'm crazy or something. I mean, every woman deserves a child even if it means leaving her husband to get one.

As I waited for the light to change to green, I ran through our past. Duncan's and mine, just to be sure I'd gotten things right, though I knew of course that I had.

Duncan and I met at a club. We liked each other right away and went on our first date the next night. Or was it the night after that? Anyway, we had a lot of fun and the next thing you know, we were an exclusive couple.

The subject of having a family didn't come up for the first six months of our relationship. I mean, we were having fun! And when the subject did come up, when one of Duncan's friends got his girlfriend pregnant and things got explosive, Duncan and I decided that neither of us really wanted children all that much. But neither of us rejected the idea completely. I mean, we just thought, what's the rush? We don't want kids now, so what's the point of talking about them?

I think Duncan and I had been together for almost a year and a half when we got married. It was a really fun wedding. I still remember how yummy the cake was and what really cool stuff the DJ played. My parents paid for most of it, which was really nice of them considering that Duncan wasn't making tons of money and I certainly wasn't!

But that was my parents. Always doing nice things for their daughters.

I guess about a year after our wedding the topic of kids came up again, this time when one of my colleagues was struggling through a messy divorce and battling her soon-to-be-ex for full custody of their little girl. Once again, Duncan and I agreed that we were still up in the air about the whole "kid thing." That's what we called it. The "kid thing."

I started to cross the broad street, from one side of Boylston to the other. I don't like the word "kid" anymore. I like the word "child" better. It seems nicer and more mature, doesn't it?

Anyway, before you know it we were celebrating our fifth anniversary. And then the subject of children started to come up every month. I'd get my period and say, "Still just you and me, honey." Duncan would wipe his brow with the back of his hand, say, "Whew!"

and we'd laugh. See, we weren't trying to get pregnant. We were trying to stay not pregnant.

And then it was year six. Duncan and I still hadn't come to any definite conclusion about the "kid thing." We'd end every conversation by saying things like, "let's think about it some more" and "Let's wait until after Christmas to decide.

We were both pretty happy.

And then my parents, Mary and Lucas Keats, married over forty years, were killed instantly when a suddenly out-of-control tractor-trailer smashed into their small Honda. They were on their way to Florida for a week's vacation at Disney World. They loved Disney World. They went there every year; I have a whole collection of pictures with my parents and Mickey Mouse.

Not long after that terrible crash, I knew. I told Duncan that I wanted children. I told him that I needed to have children. He said, "Let's think about it some more." I said, "No more thinking." And then he said, "I'm sorry, Laura. I can't.

Well, it was a little more complicated than that, of course. There were a lot of big fights and I even begged him, but nothing would change his mind. He wouldn't say yes to starting a family even though it meant losing me.

I came to a dead stop in the middle of the street. My heart hurt. I felt all dizzy again. I wondered if I was having a panic attack.

"Lady! Move it or lose it!"

I don't know why people have to be so rude.

The taxi driver's shout got my feet moving and I reached the sidewalk safely. I thought about going into Marshall's to browse the children's section. I remembered all the cute little outfits I'd bought for Nell's children when they were little. I love being the adoring aunt.

Nell is smart; she always has been. She had Colin and Clara in her early twenties. And now that a bad thing has happened, now that Richard, the love of her life, has left her for a man, the love of his life,

Nell still has Colin and Clara. She isn't alone, not really, the way I would be someday if I didn't hurry up and have a baby.

I turned left and hurried down the sidewalk to Marshall's.

Chapter 4

If love means always having to say you're sorry, divorce means finally getting to say, "It's all your fault, you idiot!"

--Looking on the Bright Side: One Hundred Great Things About Divorce

GRACE

My mother used to tell me that I was a pushover. "Grace," she'd scold, shaking her head, a look of keen disappointment on her face, "you're a pushover. You're just a ball of fluff being tossed around by the wind."

She was right. I was a spineless creature. I saw that about myself from the start.

My mother, however, didn't share my consciousness. As much as she hated my tendency to comply, she never saw the same tendency in herself. My mother, Eva Lynch Henley, was the classic pushover, the woman anyone, especially a man, could get around with nothing more than a smile, a caress, a puppy-dog look.

I should note that I never took advantage of her the way other people did, probably because even as a child I was always professionally pleasant.

But my mother, oh, she'd warn me that I would be hurt out there in the big bad world unless I toughened up. "Grace," she'd say, "where has your self-esteem gotten to?"

I never told her that my self-esteem hadn't bothered to show up in the first place.

And I never, even when I was in college and hating her, I never pointed out that my behavior was almost an exact copy of hers. I never pointed out that I had been her trainee.

I hated my mother but I was too nice to act on that hate. It seemed rude to remind her that my father, her husband, treated her like a dim-witted cleaning lady rather than a partner in life. It seemed rude to point out that she allowed his bad behavior, that she seemed to enjoy bending over backward when he brought over friends for dinner at the last minute. It seemed rude to point out that she didn't yell and scream when he spent their vacation money on a touring bike. It seemed rude to point out that she hadn't fought back when without consultation he installed his ailing mother in my mother's sewing room, forcing my mother to make the custom shirts my father preferred in a cramped corner of the garage he had always promised to clean and never did.

All those years I said nothing.

I'm not blaming my mother for making me into anything I wasn't already by accident of birth. Well, maybe I am blaming her, just a bit, but I keep my anger in this regard to myself. It's too late, anyway. It would be no good to say, "Thanks a lot, Mom, you set a really fine example" to a grave.

My mother died when I was twenty-one, just barely out of college, and since then I've mostly been doing her proud, first by falling in love with and then marrying a moody artist named Simon Trenouth, by putting up with his numerous affairs, by paying all of his bills. Yes, I did divorce charming Simon after too many years of his casual

abuse, but true to my mother and myself, I continued to “be there” for him, letting him sleep on the couch when his girlfriends threw him out, paying his rent when he forgot to, holding his hand when his artistic inspiration wasn’t there.

But the credit card bill was the final straw.

I looked down again at the blue sheet of paper. I felt the urge to scream but I didn’t. It might annoy the neighbors.

There had been other surprises on other credit card bills—clothing from the Armani store (a suit he never wore), caviar from a mail-order company (food he never ate)—but nothing like this, nothing so enormous, nothing from Rothman Brothers, an exclusive jeweler. Simon was in big trouble.

I didn’t even bother to question the purchase with the credit card company. Years of tending to a deeply immature man had given me a sixth sense, an ability to tell when he was at fault, and when I was going to have to pick up the pieces yet again.

I dialed Simon’s cell phone, wondering if he’d run out of minutes, remembering how he could never seem to keep track of such details. Simon answered; his voice sounded hoarse and I noted it wasn’t yet noon, his usual waking hour.

“What did you buy at Rothman Brothers?” I said.

“Gracie?”

Simon sighed the tortured sigh of the long-suffering artist. “Gift,” he said. “For Jane.”

“Who the hell is Jane?”

“Girlfriend. Nice kid. You’d like her, Gracie.”

“Return it,” I said. “Because I’m not paying for your girlfriend’s baubles. And if you ever use my credit card again, I will report you to the police.”

Simon made a gurgling sound of protest and I hung up.

What did I expect, really? I’d trained Simon all the years of our marriage to be helpless and irresponsible. Sure, he’d come to me

pretty much that way, but I'd helped mold an amateur slouch into a professional bum.

I could be mad at Simon, but I could never be madder at myself.

I took a deep breath, straightened the stack of opened mail, and thought of treating myself to a croissant at the bakery on the corner. I decided against it. Too expensive. Until Simon returned that bauble and my credit card bill was adjusted, I'd have to be very, very careful.

There was two-day-old bread in the kitchen. I ate that.

Chapter 5

So he left you for a younger, more beautiful woman. It's a fact; accept it. No one respects a whiner.

--What Now? How to Pick Up the Pieces and Save Your Pride

JESS

"Hi," I said, tossing my bag on an empty chair. "It's been ages. Why are we all so busy?"

Nell smirked. "Contemporary society tells us we have to be busy. If we're busy, our lives must be important. Busyness, I am told, helps fill the emotional and spiritual void most of us find ourselves condemned to. Hello, Jess."

"Aren't you in a chipper mood," I commented.

Nell just shrugged.

She'd arrived early at the restaurant before any of us; she's always just a bit early. She says she was punctual even as a little girl, punctual and in charge.

I met Nell a few years back at a charity event she was co-hosting. We hit it off when a particularly rude woman at our table was told off by the waiter she'd been abusing. Nell and I spontaneously applauded and met for lunch later that week. Though our lives were playing out very differently—Nell was married and I wasn't; Nell has kids and I don't; I teach sociology at Northeastern while Nell has chosen a more traditional manner of career as a full-time mother and volunteer—we had enough of the important things in common to make a friendship grow.

A love of reading, an interest in the arts, a sometimes wry approach to life, and a tendency to applaud when justice is served.

I never really got to know Richard, Nell's husband, the man she'd been with since college. I saw him rarely and my general impression was of a quiet, intelligent, well-mannered guy, a tiny bit hesitant or secretive, or maybe just private. It was clear to me from the start that Nell adored him; they were best friends, really, and for a brief time I was almost jealous of their union. I remember thinking: this is what marriage should be. Somehow Nell and Richard got it right.

Grace arrived in the restaurant just after I did and took the seat against the wall; she always does. She likes to people watch; she can hold an intense conversation with someone while at the same time noting minute details of passersby. I imagine this ability to focus on one thing and yet observe another is essential when you're a teacher of nine-and ten-year-olds

Grace and I met almost eleven years ago when I was seeing a guy names Carl, a jazz saxophone player. One night Carl introduced me to his friend Simon, and to Simon's wife, Grace. Simon was a painter, supposedly gifted—not that I would really know; I appreciate art but don't really know what I'm looking at—and sexy in that charming, bohemian kind of way. While Simon was charismatic, prone to dramatic gestures and a roaring laugh, his wife was more guarded in her behavior, self-contained. For a while I wondered if Grace was intimidated by her show-stopping husband, but when I learned she

taught art at a prestigious private middle school, I figured the discipline her job required informed every aspect of her life.

The long story short is that Grace and I became close and the guys didn't last. Carl and I broke up—he was far too carefree for me—and Grace, finally tired of Simon's infidelity and other costly antics, divorced him.

Around the time Grace filed for divorce, Nell invited me to a cocktail party at her beautifully appointed apartment on Marlborough Street. Temporarily single, I brought Grace along. That night we both met Nell's young sister Laura, and her husband, Duncan. Duncan seemed a nice enough guy and made a nice enough impression on me. Laura and Duncan seemed well suited, as did Nell and Richard.

Laura finally arrived at Café Alice. Her tendency to be late or to slip in just under the gate is only one of the ways in which she's different from her older sister.

Nell is tall and slim, aristocratic in her bearing, though certainly not in her attitude. She has a delicate beauty, with fine features, sapphire blue eyes, and sleek blonde hair. Laura also has blonde hair but it's thicker and darker than Nell's. She's a medium height and slightly plump in a way that might be a problem later but which suits her perfectly now. Laura's eyes are wide and blue green and somehow innocent.

Grace is small and slim. Her hair is dark, almost black, and she wears it in a bob reminiscent of Louise Brooks. Her eyes are brown and doelike; her style, urban sleek.

As for me, at five feet nine inches I tower over Grace. I've never been shy about my height; I like being tall, though it can be difficult finding pants that fit properly. The rest of me is unspectacular. Brown hair to my shoulders, brown eyes. End of story. Well, I have heard that I have a good smile.

"Well," Nell said when we had ordered a round of drinks. "I don't know about you gals, but I've had quite a week."

Nell told us about the wedding invitation from the Smiths.

“That’s awkward,” I said. “So, did you ask Richard to respond?”

“I didn’t ask him; I told him to respond. And to explain to Mr. & Mrs. Smith that he now prefers the company of men. Rather, that he has always preferred the company of men but was too scared to admit it. So, what’s new with you, Jess?”

I related the sad tale of my conversation with Matt.

“So, it’s official,” I said. “We’re divorced and I’m single and Matt is miserable.”

Nell, not terribly demonstrative, patted my hand. “I still think we should raise a glass to the whole nasty business being over.”

It had been a nasty divorce, though it could have been worse. Much worse. My lawyer was very good and very expensive. The settlement was fair and equitable; my personal finances hadn’t taken too bad a blow, but my insides, my heart and soul and sense of myself as a decent person felt crushed.

We raised a glass. The toast was restrained.

“Well, I’ve got some news,” Grace said then. “I’ve cut Simon off and before you say “again?” let me assure you that this time it’s for good. No more taking him back, no more lending him money, no more help of any kind.”

Laura frowned. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” she said. “Seriously, Grace, sometimes I think you’ll be dragging Simon around like a bad smell for the rest of your life.”

If Grace was stung by this remark, she didn’t show it. “You’ll see,” she said. “This time he went too far.” And she told us about the outrageous charge on her credit card.

“How did he get the card in the first place?” Nell asked.

Grace blushed. “I let him use it. Once. Maybe twice. I supposed he assumed he was free to use it any time he liked. It’s my fault, really--“

“No,” I said fiercely, “it’s not your fault! Simon is a bum!”

“How did he get away with it, anyway?” Nell asked. “What happened to security measures like a picture ID? Who would believe his name was Grace?”

“Simon is charming.” Grace smiled ruefully. “He always gets what he wants.”

Grace nodded at me. “Right. You know what the worst part is? The bauble he bought for his new girlfriend. I swear in all the years we were married he never spent even a fraction of that amount on me!”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Laura pronounced.

“Well, I wouldn’t call him rubbish---“

Laura cut Grace off with her own news update. “Duncan was served the divorce papers,” she said.

The three of us just sat there; even Nell, quick-witted Nell, had nothing say.

“Well, aren’t you happy for me?” Laura demanded.

Grace and I mumbled something incomprehensible; I certainly didn’t understand us.

“Well, I’m happy.” Laura looked pointedly at her sister. “Not happy like I’m jumping up and down, but I’m glad the divorce is moving along. The sooner I’m free, the sooner I can start my new life.

I thought for a moment that Nell would have to be restrained. It was no secret she thought her sister’s divorcing Duncan was a huge mistake. We all did.

Nell’s continued silence was bothering Laura.

“Do I have to explain it all again? she said plaintively. “It’s just that I see myself as a mother. It’s what I want more than anything. Why should I give up my dream? What do I get in return?”

Nell pretended to consider. “Well, let’s see. How about the love of a good man?”

“If Duncan loved me, he’d make me pregnant. He’d give me my baby.

“Laura,” I said, finally finding my voice, “if you loved Duncan, you wouldn’t force him to do something he didn’t want to do.”

“I didn’t force Duncan. I gave him an option. Either give me a baby or we’re through.”

“That’s harsh.” Grace shrugged. “I’m sorry. It strikes me as harsh.”

“Becoming a father isn’t like sitting through a chick flick,” I said. “The flick is over in two hours. The paternity lasts until the day he dies. Maybe Duncan just needed more time to think things through. Most people don’t respond well to ultimatums.”

Laura frowned down at her Cosmo. She always orders sweet, colorful drinks.

“I don’t know why you just didn’t get a dog,” Nell said. “You could have dressed him up in little outfits and carried him around with you. Besides, dogs are a lot cheaper than kids. No college tuition, for one.”

Laura looked up. “I don’t want to talk about Duncan and me anymore.”

“Fine,” I said, eager to restore some peace.

“So,” Nell said with false brightness, “here we are, four single women. Back in the game. Back on the market.”

Grace frowned. “We’re commodities?”

“Yes. Whether we like it or not, we’re commodities on the market and players in the game.”

“What ever happened to romance?” Laura mused.

I figured Duncan and Matt were probably thinking the very same thing.

“It died a slow and agonizing death some time around the turn of the nineteenth century.” Nell paused before adding, “Maybe earlier.”

“Romance is still alive,” I said, though I wasn’t entirely sure I believed what I was saying. Was romance just a pretty word for lust? If so, yes, romance was alive and I’d encountered it recently.

Nell finished her glass of wine in one long draught. “If I’d known my marriage would end the way it did,” she said then, “I would never have gotten married in the first place.”

Laura gripped her sister’s hand. “What about Colin and Clara? If you’d never married Richard, you never would have had the children.”

Nell removed her hand from Laura’s death grip. “I know, I know, I’m just venting. You always take everything so literally.”

“No one goes into marriage thinking, hey, what the hell, if it doesn’t work, I can get a divorce, no big deal. Not even me.” I laughed; no one laughed with me. “It’s so much work even to get to the point of talking about marriage, let alone planning a wedding and a life together. You have to believe that marriage is forever. You just have to, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.”

Nell smiled ruefully. “So, everyone who gets married is an idiot?”

“Blinded by visions of lacy veils and lush bouquets?” Grace suggested.

“Naïve?” Nell said.

Laura drained her Cosmo.

I shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe just hopeful. To be human means to be weak and hopeful. Though hope, I suppose is a sort of courage.”

“Weak, hopeful, and newly single. Or in my case, “Grace went on, “not so newly single. Just newly committed to getting on with my life post Simon.”

“You know,” Laura said suddenly, “divorced women with children are really at an advantage.”

Nell shook her head. “Excuse me?”

I hoped there weren’t any single mothers within earshot. But of course there weren’t. Single mothers were at home paying bills, cleaning the toilets, and helping the children with their homework.

“No, I mean it,” Laura said. “Because then you can meet divorced men with children through school activities and soccer practice and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Children are even better than dogs when it comes to attracting attention.”

“Maybe,” Grace said carefully. “But life isn’t exactly rosy for single parents of little kids. Even if they do manage to get re-married, there’s a good chance they’ll have to deal with a blended family. And that has to be exhausting.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Duh, remember *The Brady Bunch*? Blended families can work just fine.”

Really, at times I wondered if Laura's already tenuous grasp on reality wasn't beginning to weaken.

"Sure," Nell said, "on television anything can happen. Aliens can be fuzzy smart alecks and astronauts can keep genies in their living rooms."

"By the way," Grace added, "in real life the actor who played Mike Brady, all-American dad, was gay."

"You know, I always thought he was the only character on the show with half a brain." Nell turned to Laura. "So, as a single mother of college-aged kids, I'm out of luck?"

"Not necessarily," Laura said, missing, as she often did, her sister's sarcastic tone.

"Speaking of kids," I said to Nell, "how are they faring? I'm sure they have opinions about the divorce and their father's new life. And I'm sure they're not shy about voicing them. Kids that age don't seem to be shy about anything."

Nell shrugged. "Remarkably, both Colin and Clara have been pretty quiet about the whole thing. I know Richard's coming out and our divorce must have shaken them up, but so far, I haven't seen much fallout. We'll see. Maybe they're having a delayed reaction. Maybe when they're thirty or forty they'll go after Richard with an axe."

"Colin and Clara love the both of you," Laura protested. "They understand."

"Kids never understand their parents' divorce," Nell said. "Not really." "They have to blame someone. With my luck they'll probably decide I'm the one they hate for breaking up the family."

"But, Nell," Grace protested. "Richard is gay. He's in love with a man. You had no choice. You had to get divorced. You're not to blame."

Nell's face took on a hard look. It was a look I'd seen too often since Richard's bombshell. I looked forward to the day when it would go away for good.

“I could have figured things out a long time ago,” she said. “I could have been smarter. I can easily imagine my kids having no respect for me. I mean, what kind of an example did I set for them? Why would either of them ever want to get married after the debacle that was their parents’ marriage?”

“Richard was very deeply in the closet, Nell,” I said carefully. “You couldn’t have known.”

“I should have known,” Nell replied fiercely. “I was his wife, for God’s sake! How could I have not known? I was so wrapped up in my own life I never really saw the person on the other side of the bed. And yet, I loved Robert; I thought I was being his true partner.”

“You were his true partner,” Grace said. “Don’t blame yourself for his choice of secrecy.”

Nell ignored her and ranted on. “I swear I still don’t know when he was having all this anonymous sex because we spent almost every night together, from dinner through Jay Leno. Sure, sometimes, he had to work late, but when he came home, he never smelled of anyone else’s cologne! I’m furious with myself for being so blind. I’m furious with Richard for tricking me so thoroughly. And I’m furious for having wasted twenty years of my life as Mrs. Richard Allard. Who was she, anyway? Who was that sorry woman?”

I wished I had the answer to that question, something smart and also comforting, but I didn’t. Neither, it seemed, did Grace or Laura.

“Um, I have a date next weekend,” Laura said.

Grace rolled her eyes.

Nell poured more wine into her glass from the bottle on the table. “In spite of my sister’s freakish success in the dating game, she said, “I believe that the four of us are at a disadvantage. We’ve been off the market too long, and yes, I know I’m mixing metaphors. Single women our age who’ve never been married or who’ve never been in a long-term relationship know the rules. And you can bet they’re not going to share insider information with us. They’ll view the four of us

as an additional threat. We're swelling the already swollen population."

"Why thanks, Nell," I joked lamely. "You've really lifted my spirits."

"Sorry. Anyway, I have no interest in dating just yet. Not much interest, anyway. God, it's not like my dating someone is going to make Richard jealous!"

Grace looked troubled. "I've been wondering. What kind of man is available to women our age? And to women we're going to be in a few short years? Men in their thirties and forties—if we can find them—are either married or looking for younger women."

"Some younger men are really into dating older women," Laura said. "You know, because it's hip."

"Dating is the operative word," Nell pointed out. "Most young guys aren't going to stick around for marriage and menopause."

"And older men?" I said. The oldest man I'd ever been with was twenty years my senior. I was just out of college. I thought I was being terribly adult, about to embark on an affair with an "older man." Visions of foreign cigarettes and dry martinis and expensive lingerie danced in my head. And then we had sex and I discovered that the reality was far less interesting than the fantasy. He wore faded boxers. Alcohol made him break out in hives. His smart suit hid a significant roll of fat around his middle. When he called me a few days later, I told him I'd gotten back with an old boyfriend. It was a lie.

"Well, that depends on the man, I guess," Nell conceded. "If he's tired of life's nastiness, if he's learned the value of true companionship, he might be interested in meeting a contemporary."

"It's all so unfair." Laura pouted; it made her look about fifteen. "Women have the advantage for such a short time. The minute we hit thirty, we, like, stop being desirable to a huge part of the male population. Men grow into the advantage. A man in his fifties—even if he's not filthy rich—can still get a woman in her early thirties. If he is filthy rich he can get a woman in her twenties. It's ridiculous!"

I wondered how carefully Laura had considered this fact when she dumped Duncan.

“But, consider the mature man,” Grace said. “I mean, someone not looking for a trophy wife, someone looking for love. If I met a man in his fifties who wanted to go out with me, I’d say yes. Assuming, of course, he seemed nice. And had a job. And wasn’t an artist.”

Nell laughed. “Yes, you’ve had more than your share of the creative types. Still, think about the baggage an older man is sure to be lugging around. Like bitter ex-wives and greedy kids. And, if he’s been living alone for some time, nasty bachelor habits.”

“Everyone has baggage,” I said. “We’d be terribly boring if we didn’t.”

“True,” Nell agreed. “But with age come health problems. Once a man turns fifty the illnesses start coming on fast and thick. Heart problems are almost guaranteed. Weight gain. Prostrate troubles. Erectile dysfunction. Then a man reaches his sixties—if he reaches his sixties—and it just gets worse. Before you know it, you’re a forty-five-year-old with an invalid on your hands.”

“That’s not always true,” I protested. “The general population is healthier than ever.”

“Except for the obese,” Laura added, nodding none too discreetly toward a table at which sat a hefty couple. “There’s an epidemic, you know.”

“People live longer lives. Medical care is available.” Grace paused before adding: For those who can afford it.”

Nell shrugged. “I’m just trying to make a point. Sure, older men are appealing in a way, but in another way, they’re simply not.”

“Well, Laura said, “older men aren’t an option for me, anyway. I need a man who’s young and virile, someone who wants to start a family. I don’t want my children to have a doddering old man for a father.”

“Heaven forbid,” Grace muttered.

“He needs to be able to help with midnight feeding and take the kids to soccer practice. He can’t be falling asleep at the dinner table and in bed by eight.”

“Here’s a news flash, Laura.” Nell leaned close to her sister as if about to impart a vital piece of information. “All parents fall asleep at the dinner table and yearn desperately to be in bed by eight. You have no idea what you’re in for.”

Laura made a dismissive motion with her hand. I noticed her empty ring finger and wondered what she’d done with the set Duncan had worked so hard to afford.

“I remember when Colin and Clara were little,” she said. “It didn’t seem too bad.”

Grace and I shared a look. It was hard to know if Laura was truly dim or just besotted with the notion of having a cute, cuddly baby of her own.

“Because you went home at night and left the demons to me!” Nell laughed a bit harshly. “You were the fun, young aunt. I was on the front line; I was the mean, crabby mommy. I was the one who cleaned up vomit and went to boring teachers’ conferences and made the rules the demons struggled mightily not to follow.”

Laura looked deeply distressed. “How can you call Colin and Clara demons? They’re your pride and joy! Aren’t they?”

For a second, only a second, Nell’s eyes glimmered with tears. “My children,” she said, “are my life. Now that Richard isn’t.”

I called for the check.

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