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Real Life & Liars

Kristina Riggle

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*To my husband, Bruce
You made me believe, then you made it possible*

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
FROM *Anna Karenina* BY LEO TOLSTOY

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[PART 1](#)

HOME COMING

CHAPTER 1

Mirabelle

MY TEA TASTES SO FRESH, AND THIS JOINT IS SO FINE, I MIGHT MELT right into the red-velvet cushion and run down the walls into a silvery pool on the floor.

Sure, I'm a little old to be toking up. Five years north of sixty. So sue me. It's been a rough couple weeks around here.

The kids—actually, just my oldest, the other two are dragged along under the wheels of her train—are throwing us an anniversary party. By tomorrow night they will all be here, with spouses, children, suitcases, plus the usual petty arguments and festering resentments.

And I thought my being a hippie would free them of all that crap. The joke's on me.

"Mira!" calls my husband from the kitchen. "Mira?" he says a second time, maybe realizing how frantic he sounded.

"In here!" I know he will follow my voice and check on me, and ask me some ludicrous question like where the spatula is when he knows darn well. Lately, he can't let me out of his sight for very long. It's like living with a toddler again. I'm surprised he doesn't come into the bathroom while I'm taking a dump.

But then, didn't I long for this, his fervent attention? As they say, be careful what you wish for. It's like some sort of medieval fable, where a wish has been granted with a horrible catch in the bargain.

In the echo of all this deference rings that horrible fight, when he turned into someone else, something alien possessing him such that I've never seen in forty years. I take a deep drag from the joint and shake my head a little, shaking away the memory.

Max pokes his head into the study, and I place my joint carefully in the ashtray on the seat next to me. He's got Einstein hair this morning. His sandy-colored curly mop sticks up on each side, but he's bald in the middle. His spectacles are on top of his head, and his ratty red bathrobe hangs open over his boxers and T-shirt. He doesn't mention the marijuana smell or the joint smoldering next to me.

"Honey, are you all right? Where's the egg beater?" he asks.

I turn my head to the side and blow out a stream of smoke, slowly. "We don't have one. Use the whisk."

Max comes over and plants an urgent kiss on my cheek, and another on my lips, before heading back out to the kitchen.

The phone rings, and I unfold myself to answer it. Max is likely so involved in beating eggs or

a whisk reconnaissance that he doesn't even hear it. Ah, the absentminded *artiste*.

“Hello?”

“Mom! Good, I caught you. It's not too early, is it? Great, listen I wanted to ask you about the flower arrangements, he said he doesn't have enough lilies if you can believe that nonsense so I wondered...”

And so on. I couldn't give a goddamn. I pick up the joint and breathe in again, smooth and deep preferred daisies for the party, but Katya said they were too common, practically weeds.

Heaven forbid I love a weed. I should make myself a bouquet of dandelions. No, a crown of dandelions, better yet.

“Mom? Are you listening? I asked you about the freesia.”

Exhale. “Sure, sweetie. That sounds nice. So, are you sure you want to stay in a hotel? We can put sleeping bags on the floor, and the kids would be just fine.”

“No, I don't want to trouble you,” she says, which I translate to mean, No, my kids hate staying at your house because you don't have cable.

“If you insist. Love you, see you tonight.”

How did my eldest daughter get so wrapped up in material things? Freesia, lilies, twinkle lights wrapped around fake trees, and crystal goblets. Why does she give a damn?

Myself, I shopped at thrift stores, wore clothes my best friend Patty sewed for me. The same for the kids, though Katya never let me forget the great torment she suffered as a result of wearing something that wasn't—oh, the humanity—brand-new.

Katya never saw me obsess about looks. She didn't see glossy fashion magazines with starving models languishing on sun-bleached beaches. I never competed with the neighbors for bigger, newer, better.

We all have the best-laid plans for our children, and they go and ruin it all by growing up anyway they want to. What the hell was it all for, then?

At least she's healthy. They all are, thank goodness for that. My sweet, misunderstood Ivan, and Irina, my butterfly, flitting through life.

The morning sun slips over the houses across the street and pours into my study, setting my maple rolltop desk in a halo, glinting off the brass nameplate that Max bought me when I landed my teaching job at the college. I had it in my office at first, but it looked so grand and pretentious in my tiny cubbyhole that I brought it home to my rolltop, where it's been ever since.

MIRABELLE ZIELINSKI, it says. I would have preferred to use my full, legal, hyphenated name, but I'm sure *Mirabelle Delouvois-Zielinski* would never have fit.

When I started that job, full of vigor and bright-eyed with promise, I could not have reckoned that more than thirty years later they'd be trying to hustle me out the door like a drunken party guest who stayed too late.

The soft morning light illuminates my filing system of piles all over the place. Each pile has a specific purpose, mind you. Maybe I should start real files. Someone else, someday, maybe soon, will have to sort through all this. I should do it myself. Throw everything away that's unnecessary, which is to say, everything.

The sun brightens the wine-colored walls to a sassy red, like stripper lipstick. I sip some more of my tea and enjoy soaking in the memories locked in the framed photos. I hate studio portraits. I put those up in the hallway for strangers to admire: my grandson Taylor standing next to a big plastic number two in a miniature suit with a clip-on tie. Granddaughter Katherine with an Easter basket wearing a dress that is so fussy I itch just looking at it. Visitors say, “Oh, what a beautiful family you have,” and I do, but their beauty is not in these created moments.

I much prefer that photo, there, of Taylor with his finger up his nose and his eyes crossed. It gives

me a warm buzz to recall that moment when he did it, and I almost peed myself with laughter. And suits him even now, because he can't quite get serious. I hope he never does. And there's my little Ki up to her knees in mud in my backyard, mud on her hands, arms splayed out, missing a front tooth. Katya sits in a lawn chair nearby, knees pressed together primly.

Maybe I should get a portrait taken, before I die.

Max won't say the word "die." As if he's terrified that speaking the word aloud would be some kind of totem and cause that fate to fall on me like an ax. But I know those ravenous cancer cells don't care what we say; they will do as they please.

How oddly like grown children.

I stub out the roach, then climb out of my window seat and stretch. I step over Bartleby on my way to the bathroom for my morning shower. She meows at me, her gray tabby tail straight up and indignant. "Oh, hush. Max already filled your bowl." Another meow. "For heaven's sake, it's not different when I do it, you fussy old brat."

She storms off, inasmuch as a thirteen-year-old tabby can storm.

Max wanted to name her *Savoir Faire* after the villainess in the book he was writing at the time. I said the cat would just get called Savvy, and he wrinkled his squishy nose and let me name her. So she became Bartleby, after Melville's famous scrivener, who simply "prefers not to" do anything at all. So she's a feline, that attitude.

I pass through the kitchen, the screened-in porch, and out the back door to test the feeling of the air. It's the only kind of weather forecast I bother with. I'm not one of those people who have to know the humidity or discuss the barometric pressure, like Katya. She can't leave the house without listening to all three local weather forecasts, watching the Weather Channel "Local on the 8s," and now that she has the Internet on her phone, she checks it all day long, too. She even knows what dew point is, and can tell you all about it, if you ask her, which I don't.

It's early, but the sun is strong, the air already feeling like summer. The tulips haven't even turned brown yet. Seems like just last week the forsythia bloomed.

I walk to the front of the house, glancing at my flower beds as I go, on my way to say hello to the Big Tree.

It's a maple, and just as tall as the house. Maybe taller, but who can tell from my vantage point? It's been known as the Big Tree since Katya was old enough to form the words. We've had picnics under it, taken family portraits in front of it—Max running to get back in the frame, the camera on a tripod with a timer—and it was our family meeting place if we ever had to flee a fire. It was "safe" tag, where the kids closed their eyes and counted for hide-and-seek. Max did hang a tire swing from it once, but the rope was so long, and the tree so close to the sidewalk, the kids kept whapping pedestrians.

No kids play around it now. This old tree stands stately and alone these days. So I make it a habit to come out every morning, just so she doesn't feel lonely. I brush my hand across her cracked and peeling bark and walk around her trunk until I find it: the one time any of the kids ever carved in the tree. It was Ivan. "IZ and PT" inside a heart. I don't remember now who "PT" was. I do remember scolding him for defacing the tree, then regretting it immediately, as his face crumpled up in shame. Love makes a person do stupid things.

Well, it's time to get dressed. We're having company today.

In the shower, when I scrub my breasts, I remember Dr. Graham telling me I have to get one lopped off. The left one. The sinister one. She didn't say "lopped off," of course. She said they would probably need to "take the whole breast," and I puzzled over the meaning of that for a moment until I felt the word "mastectomy" like a battering ram to my gut. The tumor is too large for my little boob and right behind the nipple, too, so the whole wicked thing has to come off. I gathered that much

before I backed out of the office, hand over my heart as if she were ready to leap across her desk with a scalpel right then. I think that was only ten days ago, but it might have been ten years, or maybe ten minutes. Time goes slippery on me when I'm high.

Yep, there it is. The lump I found over at Patty's house. Patty's newest grandson was there, little baby Sam. I gathered him up to my bosom in the instinctual way all mothers do, and when he squirmed against me, I thought, *ouch*, and then, *that's odd*. It stayed merely "odd" until I dared probe that spot, alone in our bedroom, my eyes following a crack in the ceiling. Still I left it alone, until I noticed the other one like a marble under the skin in my armpit.

That'll teach me to neglect those mammograms. Not only is cancer eating up one breast, it's the "invasive" kind, with "poorly differentiated" edges, which, I think, is bad. That lump in my armpit is a bad sign, too. Cancer cells could be racing through my body even now.

I step out of the shower, towel off, and grab my fluffy, purple robe off the hook. I towel-dry my long hair and finger-comb it. That's all the attention I'll give it today. Anyway, Max likes it long and loose like this.

I go to our bedroom and pull open the enormous wooden wardrobe, like right out of that C. Lewis book. I choose my favorite summer dress, an olive green thing with shiny metal beads sewn around the neckline. It hangs like a sack and feels so good, it's like being naked.

I should ask to be buried in this. Katya would be horrified, because it's not at all appropriate. Ivan wouldn't want any part of that decision, nor would Max. Death and fashion together—not a marriage specialty. Irina would argue with Katya just out of habit.

No, it would be selfish for me to dictate what happens after I'm dead, when it couldn't possibly matter to me. I'm being greedy enough by daring to set the agenda of my own demise.

If I have to go down, fine. But I'm going down with both tits swinging.

CHAPTER 2

Katya

SHE BENDS THE WHEEL GINGERLY TO THE LEFT, AS IF TO MAKE THE Escalade sneak around the corner.

“Mom?” asks Chip from the backseat. “Where are we going?”

Damn. Katya squirms and chews on her lip. “What?” she says, pretending not to hear, buying herself another moment to come up with a suitable lie. Since when do the boys peel their eyes off the Game Boys?

“This isn’t the way to the grocery store.”

“Just a wrong turn,” Katya answers. “Would you like a snack?” One eye on the road, the other on the passenger seat, she fishes her emergency snack provisions out of her giant Coach bag and stretches her arm back to toss the boys a packet of cheese and crackers. As Chip and Taylor take the bribe-and-distraction treat, eyes back on their Game Boys, Katya feels her SUV swerve alarmingly right, and she yanks it back into the lane.

Katya thinks this is a wrong turn, after a fashion, to be driving down her old boyfriend’s street. Wrong as in stupid, not to mention, pathetic.

And still she keeps going.

After all, it’s not like Charles could take the moral high ground while underneath his secretary.

She’s lost track of the times she’s done this, accidentally on purpose swinging by Tom’s house. First it was just curiosity: Was the rumor really true that he’d moved into her town, right into her subdivision? The first time, she hadn’t seen any clues on just a casual drive past about who was living there at all.

So, she’d had to drive by three more times before she caught a glimpse of him trimming the hedges out front, have mercy, shirtless.

Now that the boys have started actually paying attention, she would have to avoid Tom’s street unless they were all in school. And with summer fast approaching, that meant she’d soon have all three of the children home.

Why did that thought make her chest constrict and her pulse race? Hadn’t she been juggling her graphic-design business in her home office since Chip was pulling up to stand, long before they were all in school all week for most of the year? With children old enough—mostly old enough—to be shooed away while she was working, summer should be Easy Street, compared to breast-feeding Baby Tay while Chip took a crap in his training pants and she wooed a client on the phone, pregnant with Kit already.

Her cell phone goes off, sparking snorts and muffled giggles from the backseat. It blares, *Don't you wish your girlfriend was a freak like me...* Katya throws a fiery glare at her boys while she answers the phone. They are always changing her phone's ring tone, and she doesn't know how to change it back. She'll have to wait for Charles to get home.

"Kat's Cradle Design, Kat speaking."

"Yes, Mrs. Peterson, this is Forever Floral calling..."

Katya barely listens as she rounds onto Tom's street and stares at his two-story home, designed to look like a Swiss chalet, but with a two-car garage stuck onto the side. Her breath catches in her throat when she spies a dark figure in an upstairs window pull back the curtains to look right at her car.

She barks at the florist, "Look, just get the damn freesia, they're not that expensive, and I don't really care if it's more than what we talked about. Get it done."

She throws the cell phone on the floor of the passenger seat and guns the motor away from Tom's house, and maybe away from Tom himself, staring out the window to see his old girlfriend idling past.

She glares at the boys again through the rearview. "If you mess with my cell phone one more time, I'm taking a hammer to both of yours, I swear to God."

The boys smirk and roll their eyes. Katya's shoulders slump, because she knows they've heard "one more time" a dozen times a day for their entire lives.

Katya is always holding out hope they'll behave, just this once.

The boys thunder through the front door of her home, casting off backpacks and rancid sneakers like shedding a layer of skin. They rumble off to their bedrooms, no doubt to immediately boot up their laptops and instant message all their friends about God only knows what.

Katya looks with dismay at their beefy retreating backs, knowing she should feed them healthy food, knowing she should make them exercise, and knowing that despite Charles's protests to the contrary, they are not big-boned. In fact, as toddlers, they were slim, pinballing around the house from one disaster to another.

She stoops to grab up the things they've dropped, and curses at yet another scratch in the hardwood from a backpack zipper. She checks the family organizer dry erase board on the refrigerator. Kit isn't due to be dropped off for another twenty minutes. Just enough time to check her messages and return calls.

Message one, from Charles. "Hi, honey, I'm running late tonight and probably won't make home on time. Oh, and I'm golfing with Roger tomorrow, just so you know. Bye."

Katya jams her thumb into the machine's *DELETE* button. He knows damn well it's her parents' anniversary party weekend, or he bloody well should. It's all she's been talking about for weeks. Shows how well he listens. Just like the kids.

Message two, from Irina: "Hey, Kat? It's me. Um, I have to, um. I wanted to talk to you, but you're not home, and I'm out of town, so never mind. I guess I'll see you at Mom's. Hope you're OK."

Messages three and four are from clients, demanding changes that are out of scope of the original contracts. These return calls will require a minimum of a half hour each, as Katya will effect her most persuasive purr to convince them to cough up the money or shut the hell up.

Message five, from her brother, Ivan. "Hi, Kat. Just wanted to ask if I was supposed to bring anything to the party. I can't find my notes. Oh, and just so you know, Barbara's not coming. Don't ask."

No, Ivan, Katya thinks, I know better than to ask a man to do anything even vaguely related to a social obligation. Some of her friends didn't speak to her for weeks after the one year she let Charles handle the Christmas cards. And one of those few he did send out went to the Goldsteins, with a trumpeting angel and a manger, no less. She'd told him about the special card for them, with

snowman and innocuous “Seasons Greetings” at the top of the pile. Katya seems to remember he sent that one to his own parents, who strongly disapproved of such a secular card on such a holy day.

In other words, don't trust men to do the slightest thing right.

Katya kicks off her mules and scowls at her chipped pedicure. How did that happen with her wearing shoes all day? She turns to attack the dishes she left over from her own lunch, when she gotten ambitious and whipped up a salad. She pulls open the dishwasher and curses out loud. It's full of sparkly clean glasses and her elegant plates, and a fork smeared with peanut butter had contaminated all its nearby flatware. “You'd think a man who runs his own successful corporation could recognize clean dishes,” she mumbles. Katya knows it's too much to ask that he empty the bleeding thing.

She stacks the dishes much harder than necessary. The peanut butter knife galls her more because it's the one thing awry in her kitchen. Her granite countertops gleam, her stainless-steel refrigerator reflects the afternoon sun coming in from the breakfast nook, and if she were prone to do such things her utensils and pots hanging from the rack above the center island would sound like wind chimes as she brushed them with her hand.

Once, she saw a refrigerator magnet at her mother's house that said, “Boring women have clean kitchens.” Katya was deeply insulted.

Katya winces as the front door bangs open into the wall behind it. She refuses to put one of those ugly doorknob cushions on her ivory wall with the gold sponge-paint effect that she slaved over for a week.

“Mom! I'm home!” Kit saunters in, hips swaying much more dramatically than they should for a girl of eleven. Katya rebukes herself again for ever letting her watch MTV. And when she gave in to her plea to wear “only lip gloss,” it somehow crept into blush and eye shadow, too.

Katya slams the dishwasher shut with her hip. She knows what the other mothers say about her daughter, but they don't know how strong-willed the girl is, and if Kit had her way, she'd be in hip huggers and crop tops. She got all her grandmother's determination with none of her hippie values about wearing no makeup and growing out your leg hair.

Kit pops one hip out to the side and blows a bubble with her gum.

“How was your day, dear?” Katya asks, hoping Kit won't answer.

“Oh my God, Bella was so mean to Emma, and I thought Emma deserved it...”

Katya starts dinner preparations, making commiserating noises and not listening, keeping one eye on the television, where she has turned the Weather Channel on with the sound muted. She can't keep track of this grade-school drama, and she can't quite believe it has started so soon. Bella, Emma. Another of her friends is named Imogene. Katya tried to give her a perfectly normal name, and called her Katherine. Everyone wanted to call her Kat, but Katya already used that name, so Little Katherine became Kitten became simply Kit, which makes Katya think of that stupid TV show with the talking car.

What would have been wrong with Kate? But one and all, friends and family simply refused to call her that. Like everything else in her life when it came to her children, Katya caved in.

Pick your battles, she'd tell herself, and her friends in her mommy group. Trouble is, she hadn't gotten around to those battles just yet.

She'd wanted Kit to have a normal name because she hated being a white-bread American name. Katya Zielinski. As if the clunky, impossible-to-spell Polish surname was not enough, she'd had the misfortune to be conceived during her mother's infatuation with Russian film and literature. In the Cold War, too, thank you, Mom. Thank goodness for the fall of the Berlin Wall.

At least she'd married a sensible Mr. Peterson, and could thus become Kat Peterson, graphic designer and very reasonable woman, thank you.

The other siblings had been victim of Mirabelle's consistency in her naming convention. ~~Anyway, her mother loved talking about their names, when anyone asked, and someone always did.~~

Katya fires up the skillet for the stir-fry, as Kit winds down her story and flounces from the room, probably to get out her laptop and start instant messaging, or maybe she would just text from her phone. The girl has the most agile thumbs of any grade-schooler she's seen.

The phone rings, and everyone ignores it. The kids all have their own phones, so no one ever calls the house phone looking for them. Charles had already left a message, and Katya doesn't care to talk to him anyway. Clients will have to wait just a bit longer, as she is stir-frying dinner and doesn't want to burn it.

Her answering machine kicks on: *You've reached Kat's Cradle Design and the home of the Petersons. Please leave a message after the tone.*"

"Katya? It's Mom, listen I just got a strange message here for you. Someone named Tom Petrocelli? Didn't you used to see him in high school? He says, it's the craziest thing, that he thought he saw you drive by his house today..."

Katya is cemented to her kitchen floor and burns her baby corn.

The boys are upstairs, supposedly asleep, and probably listening to their iPods under the covers, and Kit is all tucked into her fairy-princess canopy bed with the lavender-dragonfly motif.

Charles said he'd left some files of his at the office, and he's gone off to get them. That leaves Katya alone in the sunken family room with the flat-screen television and a bottle of Shiraz. That night she's watching *Sex and the City*, at turns jealous of these New York single gals, feeling superior because she's already got a husband, thank you, and unnerved by how much Kit already resembles these so-called grown-ups. Just the other day, Katya spotted her pretending to smoke a cigarette, using a colored pencil as a prop. She had walked past her room, and Kit was lounging in her bean bag chair, laughing on the phone with whomever. Her legs were stretched out in front of her, and she was wearing only her little girl underwear and a tank top, sprigged with pink roses. But something about her pose was alarmingly adult, and Katya did not like the practiced way she sucked on the end of the pencil, blowing out imaginary plumes of smoke. Then in a moment, Kit had tossed the pencil away and curled her legs underneath her, and just like that, she was a little girl again.

Katya refills her wineglass, leaving the bottle on the oak end table next to her. She sighs along with that inner unspooling she always feels with the aid of a little wine, or if she hasn't been to the store, some of Charles's beer. Mira probably achieves this state of deep relaxation with meditation or something, but whatever genes she had to help her feel happy and carefree, despite the ugly mess that is life, didn't make it into the Katya zygote.

She hears Charles's heavy feet come in through the front door. He must have had to hunt for those files because he's been gone an hour and a half, and the drive is only twenty minutes. Katya suspects—no, believes with a cold, tomblike certainty—that his long absence has something to do with Tara.

He clumps down into the family room, and Katya notes—but at the moment does not much care—that he has tracked in leaves and grass clippings onto her ivory carpet.

"Hitting the wine already?" he asks, not looking at her, as he pages through the Caller ID on the home phone.

"I'm not *hitting* it. I'm having a glass to relax. I had a hard day."

"Every day is a hard day," he answers, without emotion, and walks back up the three steps to the main floor of the house. "I'm going to bed," he calls over his shoulder.

Katya gives herself another refill as the credits roll on *Sex and the City*. Every day is a hard day

What of it?

CHAPTER 3

Ivan

IVAN LIES NAKED AND SPREAD-EAGLED ON HIS SOUR-SMELLING, threadbare sheets—sadly, unfortunately, and pathetically alone. He suffered a critical loss of energy midway through his getting-dressed routine—core meltdown, even—and thus he finds himself staring at the ceiling, thinking of the Elephant People who live upstairs.

The upstairs neighbors on a several-times-daily basis create a mysterious havoc on their floor, h the ceiling, and when Van finds himself too burdened by the tedium of his lonely life, he tries to puzzle out the source of the aural emanations.

Jogging? How heavy would they have to be, to rattle the massive change jar on his dresser, which is half-filled with pennies and must weigh a metric ton by now? And who jogs at 4 A.M.? Likewise with his theory that they dropped free weights on the floor every day. Also, the thuds sometimes come in clusters: *thudthudthudBAM*. How many weights could they be dropping?

Sex? What kind of sex could they be having to cause such non-rhythmic, galumphing wallops on the floor?

Sex makes Van think of Barbara, and the sex she's probably having with someone else, someone hipper and more fun, someone who might cheat on her or ruin her credit, but still is mysteriously preferable to Van.

All men, it seems, are mysteriously preferable to Van.

He finally grows disgusted enough with the stench of his sheets to roll himself up and resume getting dressed for a day listening to high-school freshmen butcher Sousa marches on rented borrowed trumpets.

Then he will have the distinct pleasure of coaxing his rattly VW three hours up the highway to his mother's place in Charlevoix, where he'll sleep in his childhood room, where he never got laid either and attend the anniversary party, where he'll endure his older sister's varnished domesticity and his younger sister's bragging about her parties and her dates. Oh, and give a toast, which Van can't believe he agreed to do. But refusing Katya is like holding back a tidal wave with the flat of your hand. "You write songs," she'd said. "You're good with words."

It would have been grand to squire Barbara around at the party. She's far and away the most beautiful woman he's ever dated, with her cascading auburn hair—the lyricist inside him berates him for the cliché, but hell, it *does* cascade—and eyes so verdant green they're like a...All Van can think of is "golf course." No wonder no one wants to record his songs.

Van pulls on his boxer shorts, which have a stain of mysterious origin, but he doesn't care because ~~no one will see them, except maybe paramedics if he gets run over by a semi on the way to school~~, but even then he can't muster enough concern to find a different pair.

His phone rings, and Van doesn't even flick his eyes toward the Caller ID. No one worth speaking to would call him on his way to Death March High, as he's taken to thinking of his place of employment. It's actually named Dexter Milford High, after some illustrious graduate of generation before who isolated some kind of chemical. It was probably Agent Orange, thinks Van ruefully, and the thought brings a twisted smile to his lips.

He'll get his enjoyment where he can.

The answering machine kicks on at last, and rather than the robotic faux-human voice offering him a lower interest rate, he hears Jenny. "Hi, Van. Wondering what you're doing tonight, if you wanted to watch a movie or get a pizza. Anyway, call me if you're free."

Van knots his tie. Making fun of an action flick with Jenny and a Pizza Hut Cheese Lover sounds infinitely more fun, but family obligations beckon. A year ago, he would have high-fived Jenny as she whizzed to the staff lounge between her classes of high-school French, but then she's gotten a new job at a fancy magnet school with an emphasis on liberal education and college prep.

Van dearly missed those times they graded papers together in the school lounge on their brief lunch breaks, cracking up at his students' freshman essays, and her students' mangled French.

Ah well, he thinks to himself, grabbing his blazer with patches on the elbows—not to look professorial, but out of an actual need to cover worn sleeves—as Jenny would say: *C'est la vie*.

CHAPTER 4

Irina

“SHIT.”

Irina yanks on her pants zipper and yanks again. The third yank rips the zipper right off her pants, the momentum sending her backward onto the Vegas hotel bedspread.

“Shit!” she cries, clenching her teeth. She whips the zipper overhand across the room like a major league pitcher.

“It’s just a zipper.” Darius props her back up and starts rubbing her shoulders from behind, sitting next to her on the bed. He leans in and flicks her earlobe with his tongue.

Irina shoves him hard over. “Not now.” She adds to herself, *We’ve gotten ourselves in enough trouble already.*

Darius sits himself back up. “Why don’t you take a nap and rest a bit. I’ll take a shower and maybe we’ll both be feeling”—he raises his eyebrows—“refreshed.”

Irina rolls over and burrows into the sheets, which still smell like sex and sweat. She wiggles out of the jeans and kicks them onto the floor. Could she be showing already? It can’t be from overeating. Ever since her wedding—if you could call it that—she hasn’t eaten a thing.

Her cell phone chimes for a new message. It’s a picture from C. J., flashing her midriff, a guy puckering lips in the frame near her navel, his face out of frame. The message says, “at aftershock miss u, r.u. havin fun.”

Aftershock, the club back home where all her friends are dancing and hooking up and enjoying the fact they don’t have a care in the world.

Is she having fun? Oh, yeah. A freakin’ blast.

She puts a hand over her belly. She shouldn’t have waited so long to get to a clinic, she thinks. She shouldn’t have dithered and pondered, she shouldn’t have fondled those tiny pink socks at Baby Gap. In her indecision, along comes Darius and like Newton’s Laws, he goes to work on her. An object at rest tends to stay at rest until an overeager wannabe daddy rushes you to some cheesy Vegas chaperone.

Out the expansive picture window, she can see down to the pool, where svelte, nonpregnant honeymooners are roasting themselves in fine form.

Weeks ago, before her missed period, she would have loved this vacation, Irina thinks: a week of eating, drinking, gambling, and sex? Sign me up. But Darius had been so hot and cold before now. She’d never have pegged him for the daddy type, or she wouldn’t have slept with him in the first place. She once watched an old boyfriend change his nephew’s diaper, and she could never bring

herself to have sex with him again.

~~Irina turns away from the pool. She didn't even have champagne at her own wedding. She'd go to take a sip, and Darius snatched the glass right out of her hand. "Not for my little baby," he declared, grinning a little, but Irina knew he was serious.~~

So they kissed instead, and the justice of the peace or whateverthehell took the picture himself, but Irina opened her eyes too soon, so it looks like she's giving Darius mouth-to-mouth. Not exactly your typical soft-focus romantic wedding-day photo. Instead of a gauzy gown and veil, she wore a tacky white beaded dress from a consignment shop, which some teenager probably wore to the prom, and a fake white rose pinned in her short black hair. Darius sported a bolo tie and carnation stuck in his sport-coat lapel.

Irina believes that she will remember what she was thinking in that photo for the rest of her life.

What the hell did I just do?

Darius wakes her from a doze. The sun is lower in the sky. He's wearing his glasses with the tortoiseshell frames, a textbook in one hand. The glasses remind her of her father.

"Hungry?" he asks her, and she's relieved to see that he really means food this time.

"A little," Irina ventures weakly, laying the groundwork for her after-dinner bout of fake queasiness so she can have one night's peaceful sleep. Darius's romantic intentions have been undeterred by her delicate state.

"We could order in?" he suggests. He puts down the book and folds his glasses on the nightstand.

"No...I'd like to get up and around a bit."

"Sure, baby. Whatever you like." Darius is pulling on a fresh knit shirt over his muscled chest.

"So, have you called your parents yet?"

Irina pulls the covers over her head. "I can't tell them all this over the phone."

"So you're going to spring me on them?"

"It's going to be 'springing' no matter how or when I do it. They've never heard of you, and suddenly you're not only a son-in-law, but I'm having your baby? There's no good way to do it. So I'll do it in person."

"If you say so."

"Yes, I say so," Irina snaps. She's heard Katya say that to her a zillion times in their lives, and from her big sister it means, *You're an idiot, but whatever*. Now she thinks, *I better not have married my sister. I might have to kill myself*.

Darius says, "Are you at least going to tell them I'm black?"

"Trust me, it will be perfectly obvious."

"Have you ever dated a black man before?"

"Course I have. All kinds."

"OK, let me ask that another way. You ever brought a black man home before?"

"No, but don't worry about it. My mother is the original flower child who will probably be thrilled to death. My dad is so out of it that you'll be lucky he even follows the conversation."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's a writer."

"Oh? What does he write?"

Irina rolls out of bed, having had this conversation six hundred times before. "Nothing you've read, I guarantee it. I'm getting dressed." *That is*, she thought, *if I can find pants that fit*.

It won't be Mom or Dad who care about Darius being black, and in fact no one in her careful PC family would dare mention it. It will be Katya and her snooty-ass husband, she predicts, who will find subtle ways to broadcast disapproval, at least until they learn that Darius makes an excellent salary selling high-end new cars, and is taking classes at night toward an MBA. Then he'll pay

muster. Barely.

~~In any case, she knows they'll find fault with him somewhere. The very fact he married her must be enough of a flaw.~~

Irina digs a loose-waisted sundress out of her suitcase. She'll have to get Darius to take her shopping.

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