

YOU

a novel

should

HAVE



known

JEAN HANFF KORELITZ

AUTHOR OF *ADMISSION*

YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

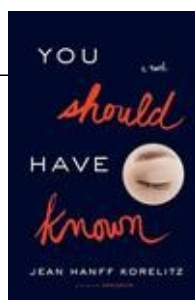


JEAN HANFF KORELITZ



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For Asher

Part I

Before

Chapter One

You Just Know

Usually people cried when they came here for the first time, and this girl looked as if she'd be no exception. She walked in with a briefcase and a swagger and shook Grace's hand like the confident professional she clearly was, or at least wished to be. Then she sat on the couch and crossed one long twill-encased leg over the other. And *then*, sort of abruptly, she seemed to register where she was, with a wallop.

"Oh wow," said the girl, whose name—Grace had double-checked a few minutes earlier—was Rebecca Wynne. "I haven't been in a therapist's office since college."

Grace sat in her customary chair, crossed her own much shorter legs, and leaned forward. She couldn't help it.

"It's so bizarre! The minute you come in here, you just want to start bawling."

"Plenty of Kleenex." Grace smiled. How many times had she sat in this chair, with her legs crossed just the way they were now, listening to the room fill up with weeping. Weeping happened here so often, she sometimes imagined her office underwater, as in one of the magical Betty MacDonald stories she'd loved as a child, where the crybaby protagonist literally couldn't stop sobbing until the water had risen to her chin. When there was extreme anger, the shouting kind or the silent, venomous kind, she envisioned the walls of her office (in actuality painted a very innocuous off-white) turning dark with rage. When there was happiness or accord, she sometimes imagined she could smell sweet pine, as from late summer at the lake.

"Well, it's just a room," she said cheerily. "With boring furniture."

"Right." Rebecca looked around, as if this needed confirmation. The room—Grace's consulting room—had been constructed with immense care to be many things at once: comfortable but not particularly inviting, warm without troubling individuality, decorated with things so familiar that everyone lived with that poster at some point? dorm room? summer rental?—the red kilim rug, the oatmeal-colored couch, and her own swiveling leather chair. There was a glass-topped coffee table with a single box of Kleenex in a leather holder and an old country pine desk in the corner, its drawers stocked with yellow legal pads and lists of psychopharmacologists, child psychologists, smoking cessation hypnotherapists, real estate agents, travel agents, mediators, estate planners, divorce attorneys. On the desktop, pens protruded from an unlovely ceramic mug her son, Henry, had made in first grade (this was an item that had, over the years, elicited an astonishing number of comments that ushered into speech a remarkable number of impacted memories), and a white ceramic lamp with

burlap shade threw discreet light on the proceedings. The only window overlooked the back alley the building, and there was never anything out there to see, despite one attempt years earlier to install a planter of some bright no-brainer flora—geraniums, actually, and ivy. The superintendent had signed off on this project, though his enthusiasm stopped well short of helping her maneuver the wooden planter off its truck and down the alley to its resting spot, but the plants had starved for light and the planter itself disappeared soon after, leaving a dark mark on the cement that persisted. She was not a flower person, really.

Today, though, she had actually brought in flowers: dark pink roses, on the specific recommendation of Sarabeth, who—as the Great Day drew ever nearer—was becoming more and more inclined to micromanage. Not only must Grace purchase flowers for this occasion, but they must be roses, and the roses must be pink—*dark* pink.

Dark pink roses. *Why?* Grace had wondered. Sarabeth wasn't expecting a color photograph, was she? Was it not sufficiently incredible that *Vogue* magazine had a black-and-white picture's worth of interest in her? But she'd done as she was told, plunking them in the only vase she had in the office—a little galley kitchen, from a forgotten flower delivery (end-of-treatment flowers? thank-you-for-showing-me-I-had-to-leave-him flowers? Jonathan flowers?), awkwardly and not very prettily spreading them out. Now they sat on one of the end tables, in some danger of being overturned by Rebecca's heavy wool coat.

"You know," Grace said, "you're right about the crying. Usually it takes a lot out of people just to get here. Or in the case of my practice, to get their partner here. It's very common to see people just let go when they finally make it through the door for the first time. It's perfectly all right."

"Well, another time, perhaps," the girl said. She was thirty, Grace thought, give or take, and pretty if a bit severe, and the clothes she wore had been rather cleverly designed to conceal her actual body type, which was plainly curvaceous and buxom, and present in its place the fiction that she was boyish and lean. The white cotton shirt looked as if it had been tailored expressly for this purpose, and the brown twill pants hit at exactly the right spot to suggest a waist that was barely there. Both pieces were triumphs of illusion and had clearly been made by someone who knew exactly what they were doing—but when one worked for *Vogue*, Grace imagined, one had access to such people.

Rebecca rummaged around in the briefcase at her booted feet, then extracted an ancient tape recorder, which she placed on the glass-topped table. "Do you mind?" she asked. "I know, it's like an antique, but I need it as a backup. I once spent four hours with a certain pop star not known for his ability to speak in complete sentences, and I had this little space-age gadget the size of a matchbox. When I tried to play it back later there was absolutely nothing there. Most terrifying moment of my career."

"It must have been." Grace nodded. "Obviously, you managed to handle the setback."

Rebecca shrugged. Her fine blond hair was cut in a sort of highly constructed mess, and she wore a silver necklace that lay along her clavicles. "I made her sound so smart she'd have been crazy not to confirm the quotes when they fact-checked. Not that I wasn't worried. But her publicist actually told my editor it was her favorite interview she'd ever done, so I came out smelling like a rose." She stopped. She looked squarely at Grace. "You know," she said with a half-smile, "it occurs to me that I should not have said that. Another effect of being in a therapist's office. You sit on the couch, you spill the beans."

Grace smiled.

Rebecca, with an audible click, depressed the pertinent buttons on her tape recorder. Then she reached back into her briefcase and extracted an old-fashioned steno pad and a shiny bound galley.

“Oh, you have the book!” said Grace. It was still so new, it amazed her to see it in anyone else’s possession. As if the entire endeavor had been to produce a vanity item for herself alone.

“Of course,” said the girl coolly. Her professionalism, her control of the meeting, seemed to have been restored to her in the same instant Grace had shown herself to be such a neophyte. But she couldn’t help it. It was still so strange to see the book in its actual book-flesh: her book, *her own book*, not quite in the world but very near now, due with the new year—the best time, Sarabeth the agent and Maud the editor and J. Colton the publicist (J. Colton! that was really her name!) had insisted, to publish a book like this. Even after the months of revision, the actual bound galley (so physical, so solidly reassuring), the contract, the *check* (deposited immediately, as if it might evaporate), the catalog listing—all very realistic, all very *This is actually happening to me*. She had given a presentation at the publisher’s sales conference last spring, to a gallery of note-taking, road-wearers, reps, all grinning at her (a few sidling up afterward to ask advice for their own suffering marriages—well, she’d better get used to that, she supposed). Even after the wild day a year earlier when Sarabeth had phoned in every hour to report increasingly incredible tidings. Someone wanted it. Someone else wanted it. Someone...no, two others, no, three, and then chattering away in a dialect Grace could not comprehend: a preempt, a floor (*a floor?* Grace wondered), audio and digital, sweeteners for “the List” (she did not discover what “the List” was until she actually read the contract). None of it seemed to compute. Grace had been reading for years about the death of publishing, but here was a pulsing, pushing, manic industry where she had expected a desiccated corpse: yet another outdated form of American manufacture, moldering alongside the steel mills and the gold mines. She mentioned this to Sarabeth once, when the auction in its third day was upended by a late entry, setting off a rash of new bids. Wasn’t publishing supposed to be dead? That’s what the magazines kept saying, after all. Sarabeth had laughed. Publishing was indeed fairly dead, she assured Grace, sounding very upbeat about this news. Except when you happened to snag the Zeitgeist. Her book, *You Should Have Known*, was apparently about to snag the Zeitgeist.

It had taken her two solid years to write it, sitting there at that desk in the corner, with her laptop open, between clients, and at the table in their bedroom at the lake, heavy oak, water stained, with a view of the dock, and the kitchen counter at home on 81st Street, at night, with Jonathan still at the hospital or gone to bed, exhausted from his day, and Henry asleep with some book unfurled over his chest and the light still on. She had written it with a mug of ginger tea dangerously close to the keyboard and her notes set out along the countertop all the way down to the sink at the other end, the old case files feathered with Post-it notes. As she wrote, her long-held theories became flesh, the more refined flesh, then downright authoritative-sounding flesh, the folksy wisdom she hadn’t known she possessed until she read it on the page, the conclusions she seemed to have reached before she even began her practice fifteen years earlier. (Because she had learned nothing? Because she had been right in the first place?) In fact, she couldn’t recall ever having learned how to do the work she did as a therapist, despite, naturally, having gone through the classwork and fieldwork, done her reading and written her papers, and collected the necessary degree. She had always known how to do this; she couldn’t remember *not* knowing it. She might have walked out of high school straight into this small tidy office and been as effective a professional as she was today, helped as many couples, prevented as many women from marrying men who would never make them happy. She knew that this did not make her special, or even clever. She viewed her ability not as God-given (God had never been anything to her but a subject of historical, cultural, or artistic interest), but as synthesized from nature and nurture, something along the lines of a naturally gifted ballerina lucky enough to have long legs, and a parent willing to ferry her to dance classes. For whatever reason—or, more probably, for no

reason at all—Grace Reinhart Sachs had been born with a predisposition for social observation and insight and reared in an atmosphere of ideas and conversation. She couldn't sing or dance or fo numbers together and pull them apart. She couldn't play music, like her son, or make dying children live, like her husband—both skills she would have been thrilled and humbled to possess—but she could sit down with people and see, usually very quickly, usually with unnerving clarity, what snare they were setting for themselves and how not to fall into them. Or, if they were already ensnared—and typically, if they were here with her, they were already ensnared—how to free themselves. The writing down these obvious things had brought *Vogue* magazine to her unremarkable little office which was fascinating and naturally a little exciting, but it was also slightly bizarre. Why should anyone be awarded a national platform for pointing out that day followed night, or that the economy was subject to reversals, or any other readily observable thing? (Sometimes, when she thought about her book and what it would say to the women who were going to read it, she felt almost ashamed of herself, as if she were about to market some miracle cure that had long been available on the drugstore shelf.) The again, there were things that could not be said too many times or loudly enough.

A few weeks earlier, she had sat down for a special lunch in the private dining room at Craft, with a table of clearly cynical (but professionally fascinated) bookers for media outlets. Over the sound of gently clicking silver, Grace had talked about her book and fielded boilerplate queries (one from a notably hostile man in a crimson bow tie) about why *You Should Have Known: Why Women Fail to Hear What the Men in Their Lives Are Telling Them* was different from all other books on the subject of relationships. Clearly, Tom Colicchio's food was the draw here. She spent a bit too much time attending to the magazine editor seated beside her (being, in other words, force-fed the woman's own tale of expensive divorce) and found, to her great regret, that the waiter came to take her plate long before she had had her way with the lamb shank. It had felt very unauthorlike to ask for a doggie bag.

After the lunch, though, J. Colton the publicist had indeed begun to call with news of interviews and television appearances, all as a result of the luncheon. The expensively divorced editor assigned a feature in *More*, and the hostile man in the bow tie booked her for an AP feature (making it all so very worth it, even Grace had to admit). The *Vogue* article was scheduled soon after that. The ball, clearly, was rolling.

She had (at Maud the editor's request) drafted an op-ed piece on why January was such a popular time of year to file for divorce (holiday stresses plus new year resolve) and (at J. Colton the publicist's request) endured a bizarre session with a media coach, learning precisely how to cock her head toward a television host, ingratiate herself to a studio audience, slip the title of her book into the most incongruous of verbal constructs without—she hoped—sounding like a robotic narcissist, and make perfectly formed sound bites.

"My editor sent it a few weeks ago," Rebecca said, placing the galley on the tabletop next to the Kleenex box. "Loved it. You know, people don't really ever hear this: *Don't screw up at the beginning and you won't have a lot of these problems down the line.* And it's very in-your-face. The typical book on this subject has a bit more of a kinder, gentler approach."

Grace, aware that the interview had now actually begun, tried to summon that cock of the head and those perfectly formed sound bites. Her voice, when she spoke next, was not the voice of what she considered her real life; it was a situational voice. It was what she thought of as her therapy voice. "I understand what you're saying. But to be frank, I think kinder-and-gentler hasn't served us especially well. I think women are ready to hear what my book says. We don't need to be handled gently. We're grown-ups, and if we've screwed up, we should be able to take a little truth about it, and make our own decisions. I always explain to my clients that if all they want is for someone to tell them everything

going to be all right, or everything happens for a reason, or whatever the pointless jargon of the moment is, then they don't have to come to my office and pay me for my expertise. Or buy my book, suppose." She smiled. "They can buy one of the other books. Any of them. *How to Love Your Marriage Back to Health. How to Fight for Your Relationship.*"

"Yes, but your title's rather...confrontational, isn't it? *You Should Have Known.* I mean, that's what we always say to ourselves when we're watching the press conference and some politician's just tweeted a photo of his penis to the world, or got caught with a second family, and the wife's standing there next to him looking stunned. You know, *Really? This surprises you?*"

"I don't doubt the wife is surprised." Grace nodded. "The question is, *should* she be surprised? Could she have avoided finding herself in this position?"

"So this is the title you chose?"

"Well, yes and no," Grace told her. "It was actually my second choice. I wanted to call it *Attention Must Be Paid.* But nobody got the reference. They said it was too literary."

"Oh really? We didn't all read Arthur Miller in high school?" Rebecca asked archly, establishing her bona fides.

"Maybe your high school," said Grace diplomatically. In fact she had read *Death of a Salesman* in middle school at Rearden, the proudly intense (and, once upon a time, vaguely socialist) New York private school where her own son was now a seventh grader. "Anyway, we compromised. You know how we always tell ourselves, *You never know*, when someone does something we don't see coming. We're shocked that he turns out to be a womanizer, or an embezzler. He's an addict. He lied about everything. Or he's just garden-variety selfish and the fact that he's married to you and perhaps you have children together—that doesn't seem to stop him from behaving as if he's still a single unencumbered teenager?"

"*Oh yeah,*" Rebecca said. It sounded, Grace thought, a little personal. Well, that was hardly surprising. That was sort of the point.

"And when it happens we just throw up our hands: We say: *Wow, you never know about people.* And we never hold ourselves accountable for what we bring to the deception. We have to learn to be accountable. If we don't, we can't act in our own best interests. And we can't prevent it next time."

"Uh-oh." Rebecca looked up. She fixed Grace with a plainly disapproving expression. "We're not about to blame the victim, are we?"

"There is no victim," said Grace. "Look, I've been in practice for fifteen years. Over and over I've heard women describe their early interactions with their partner, and their early impressions of the partner. And listening to them, I continually thought: *You knew right at the beginning.* She knows he's never going to stop looking at other women. She knows he can't save money. She knows he's contemptuous of her—the very first time they talk to each other, or the second date, or the first night she introduces him to her friends. But then she somehow lets herself *unknow* what she knows. She lets these early impressions, this basic awareness, get overwhelmed by something else. She persuades herself that something she has intuitively seen in a man she barely knows isn't true at all now that she's—quote unquote—*has gotten to know him better.* And it's that impulse to negate our own impressions that is so astonishingly powerful. And it can have the most devastating impact on a woman's life. And we'll always let ourselves off the hook for it, in our own lives, even as we're looking at some other deluded woman and thinking: *How could she not have known?* And I feel, just so strongly, that we need to hold ourselves to that same standard. And *before* we're taken in, not after."

"But you know"—Rebecca looked up from her pad, while her pencil, impressively, continued to write—"it's not just men. Women lie, too, right?" She was frowning, and there was, in the middle of

her forehead, a pronounced V. Clearly—happily—the magazine she wrote for had not persuaded her to inject herself with botulinum toxin.

“Right. Of course. And I do talk about this in the book. But the fact is, nine times out of ten it’s the woman sitting right there on my couch, totally distraught because, in her view, her male partner has hidden something from her. So I decided, right at the start, this book is going to be for women.”

“Okay,” the girl said, returning to her pad. “I get it.”

“I’m being didactic,” Grace said with a rueful little laugh.

“You’re being passionate.”

Right, Grace thought. She would have to remember that.

“In any case,” she said deliberately, “I reached a point where I couldn’t stand to see so many decent, well-intentioned women suffering through months or years of therapy, ripping their guts out and spending a fortune, just to realize that their partner has not changed at all, possibly has never seriously tried to change, or even expressed a willingness to change. The women are right back where they started when they first came in and sat where you’re sitting right now. Those women deserve to hear the truth, which is that their situation isn’t going to improve—at least, not nearly as much as they want it to. They need to hear that the error they’ve made might be irreparable.”

She stopped herself, partly to let Rebecca catch up, partly to savor the impact of this, her “bombshell” (as Sarabeth the agent had put it in their very first meeting the previous year). It still felt just slightly seismic. In fact, Grace could remember the moment she had decided to actually write down the thing she really thought, the obvious thing made ever more blindingly obvious with each passing year of her professional life, with every dating guide (which never said it) and marriage manual (which never said it either) she had devoured in preparation for writing her book, and with every International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors conference she’d attended (where it was never uttered). This thing no one talked about, but which she suspected her colleagues understood as well as she. Should she say it in her book and call down the vitriol of her peers? Or just reiterate that ridiculous myth that any “relationship” (whatever that was) could be “saved” (whatever that meant).

“Don’t pick the wrong person,” she told Rebecca now, emboldened by the presence of *Vogue* in her bland little office, the artificially long and lean woman on her oatmeal-colored couch, wielding her retro steno pad and tape recorder. “Pick the wrong person and it doesn’t matter how much you want to fix your marriage. It won’t work.”

After a moment, Rebecca looked up and said, “That’s pretty blunt.”

Grace shrugged. It was blunt, she wasn’t going to argue with that. It needed to be blunt. If a woman chose the wrong person, he was always going to be the wrong person: that was all. The most capable therapist in the world wouldn’t be able to do much more than negotiate the treaty. At best, Grace thought, it was terribly sad, but at worst it was punitive—a lifetime of punitive. That was no way to have a marriage. If these couples were childless, the effort should go into separation. If there were children: mutual respect and co-parenting. And separation.

Not, of course, that she didn’t feel for them. She truly did feel for them, her own patients especially because they had come to her for help and it was too late to offer them anything but the equivalent of garbage bags and Windex after the oil spill. But what she hated most of all was the sheer preventability of all this distress. Her patients were not unintelligent. They were educated, insightful about others. Some, even, were brilliant people. And that they should have met, on the paths of their younger lives, a potential companion who offered sure or at least likely pain, and that they should have said yes to that sure or at least likely pain, and thus received the very sure or at least likely pain

that was promised...well, it baffled her. It had always baffled her, and enraged her, too. Sometimes—she couldn't help it—she wanted to shake them all.

“Imagine,” she said to Rebecca, “that you are sitting down at a table with someone for the first time. Perhaps on a date. Perhaps at a friend's house—wherever you might cross paths with a man you possibly find attractive. In that first moment there are things you can see about this man, and intuitions about this man. They are readily observable. You can sense his openness to other people, his interest in the world, whether or not he's intelligent—whether he makes use of his intelligence. You can tell that he's kind or dismissive or superior or curious or generous. You can see how he treats you. You can learn from what he decides to tell you about himself: the role of family and friends in his life, the women he's been involved with previously. You can see how he cares for himself—his own health and well-being, his financial well-being. This is all available information, and we do avail ourselves. But then...”

She waited. Rebecca was scribbling, her blond head down.

“Then?”

“Then comes the story. He has a story. He has many stories. And I'm not suggesting that he's making things up or lying outright. He might be—but even if he doesn't do that, we do it for him because as human beings we have such a deep, ingrained need for narrative, especially if we're going to play an important role in the narrative; you know, *I'm already the heroine and here comes my hero*. And even as we're absorbing facts or forming impressions, we have this persistent impulse to set them in some sort of context. So we form a story about how he grew up, how women have treated him, how his employers have treated him. How he appears before us right now becomes a part of that story. How he wants to live tomorrow becomes part of that story. Then we get to enter the story: *No one has ever loved him enough until me. None of his other girlfriends have been his intellectual equal. I'm not pretty enough for him. He admires my independence*. None of this is fact. It's all some combination of what he's told us and what we've told ourselves. This person has become a made-up character in a made-up story.”

“You mean, like a fictional character.”

“Yes. It's not a good idea to marry a fictional character.”

“But...you make it sound as if it's inevitable.”

“It's not. If we were to bring to this situation a *fraction* of the care we brought to, for example, our consumer decisions, problems would arise far less than they do. I mean, what is it about us? We'll try on twenty pairs of shoes before we make a purchase. We'll read reviews by total strangers before we choose someone to install our carpeting. But we turn off our bullshit detector and toss out our own natural impressions because we find someone attractive, or because he seems interested in us. He could be holding up a placard that says, *I will take your money, make passes at your girlfriends, and leave you consistently bereft of love and support*, and we'll find a way to forget that we ever knew that. We'll find a way to *unknow* that.”

“But...,” Rebecca said. “People do have doubts. Maybe they just don't act on them.”

Grace nodded. Doubts emerged often in her practice: very old, desiccated doubts, saved and preserved and brought forth by very wounded, very sad women. They were a theme with countless variations: *I knew he drank too much. I knew he couldn't keep his mouth shut. I knew he didn't love me, not as much as I loved him*.

“Many people have doubts,” she agreed. “The problem is, few of us recognize doubt for what it is. Doubt is a gift from our deepest selves, that's how I think of it. Like fear. You'd be amazed how many people experience fear just before something bad happens to them, and when they go back to the

moment later, they understand that they missed an opportunity to avert what was about to take place. You know: *Don't walk down that street. Don't let that guy give you a ride home.* We seem to have a highly developed ability to ignore what we know, or suspect. From an evolutionary standpoint alone, that's fascinating, but my interests are more practical. I think doubt can be an extraordinary gift. I think we need to learn to listen to our doubt, not just dismiss it, even if that means putting a stop to a certain engagement. You know, it's much easier to cancel a wedding than it is to cancel a marriage."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Rebecca said with heavy sarcasm. "Some of the weddings I've been to lately. I think it might be easier to cancel the Olympics."

This—without knowing anything about Rebecca's recently married friends—had to be true. Grace's own wedding had been small because her family consisted of her father and herself, and Jonathan's family had chosen to absent themselves. But she, too, had attended her share of insane nuptials.

"Last month," Rebecca said, "my roommate from college had this complete blowout, five hundred people at the Puck Building. The flowers—oh, my God. At least fifty thousand dollars, I kid you not. And they had all the wedding presents out on a long table in another room, like they used to do. Remember?"

Grace remembered. It was an old rite that, like so many other old wedding rites, had somehow returned in all of its materialistic glory, because apparently the modern wedding wasn't busy or flashy enough. Her own parents' wedding at the St. Regis had featured such a display of gifts in a foyer or the ballroom: Audubon silver, Haviland china, and a full set of Waterford Crystal, every bit of which was now in the clutches of Eva, her father's second wife.

"Half of Tiffany's. Plus every gadget Williams-Sonoma ever came up with. Which is a scream"—Rebecca laughed—"because she can't cook and I don't think he'll ever be civilized enough to eat with silver."

Grace nodded. She had heard this before, these details, and so many others, from the oatmeal-colored couch in her office. She had heard about the massive search for the pastel-colored minicake served at the bride's parents' wedding (apparently still produced only at one tiny storefront on Rivington), and the engraved lockets for the bridesmaids, and the precise make of vintage car to drive them to their wedding night at the Gansevoort, and then, at the end of it all, those ten days at the same resort in the Seychelles where some celebrity couple had honeymooned, in a hut on stilts in the vivid blue Indian Ocean.

Which was where they had had the argument that cast a pall over the entire nuptials and still reverberated here, years later, in front of the therapist who already knew that these two people brought out the worst in each other, and probably always had, and certainly always would.

Sometimes Grace wished she could take a poison-tipped lance to the entire wedding industry. Downgrade your average twenty-first-century nuptial extravaganza to quiet vows, taken in the presence of dear friends and family, and half the engaged couples—the right half—would drop the entire notion of marriage on the spot. Persuade couples to save the party for their twenty-fifth anniversary, when his hairline had evaporated and her waist was thick from childbearing, and a whole lot of them would retract in horror. But by the time they came to her, the barn door was bolted and the horse long gone.

"*Doubt can be a gift.*" Rebecca spoke the phrase aloud, as if testing its weight and repeatability. "That's good."

Grace felt the weight of Rebecca's cynicism. Then she felt the weight of her own.

"It's not that I don't believe in human transformation," she said, trying not to sound as defensive as she felt. "Human transformation is possible. It requires immense courage and selflessness, but it does."

happen. It's just that we spend so much effort on that slim possibility of correction and none at all on the side of prevention. That's a serious disconnect, don't you think?"

Rebecca nodded vaguely, but now she was busy. She was scribbling, her left hand all knuckles, the pen jerking and sputtering along the wide-ruled lines. After a moment, she came to the end of whatever she was trying to get down. Then she looked up and said with perfect therapeutic intonation, "Can you say more about that?"

Grace took a breath and went on. It was one of the more pointed ironies of her profession, she explained, that when you asked people what they wanted in a mate, they tended to offer you sobering, mature, insightful truths: Protection and companionship, they said, nurturing and stimulation, a snug harbor from which to be outward bound. But when you looked at their actual partnerships, where were those things? These same insightful and eloquent people were alone or in combat, perpetual diminished. There was abandonment and friction, competition and hindrance, and all because, at some point, they had said yes to the wrong person. So they came to her with this broken thing that needed fixing, but there was nothing to be gained by explaining it all now. You had to explain it all *before* they said yes to the wrong person.

"I'm getting married," Rebecca said, quite suddenly, when she had finished writing all or some of this down.

"Congratulations," Grace told her. "That's wonderful news."

The girl burst out laughing. "Really."

"Yes. Really. I hope you will have a beautiful wedding and, more importantly, a wonderful marriage."

"So wonderful marriages are possible?" she said, enjoying herself.

"Of course. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be here."

"And you wouldn't be married, I suppose."

Grace smiled evenly. It had been a struggle to give up even the limited amount of information her publisher insisted on. Therapists did not advertise their personal lives. Authors, apparently, did. She had promised Jonathan that their lives as a couple, as a family, would stay as private as they possibly could. Actually, he hadn't seemed as bothered by it all as she was herself.

"Tell me about your husband," said Rebecca now, as Grace had known she would.

"His name is Jonathan Sachs. We met in college. Well, I was in college. He was in medical school."

"So he's a doctor?"

He was a pediatrician, Grace said. She didn't want to say the name of the hospital. It changed things. All of this was readily available on any Internet search of her name, because she was mentioned in the short piece *New York* magazine had done a few years earlier, in the annual Best Doctors issue. The photograph showed Jonathan in his scrubs, his curly dark hair well past the point which she usually urged him to get it cut. He wore the ubiquitous stethoscope, and there was a large pinwheel lollipop sticking out of his breast pocket. He looked as if he were trying to smile through exhaustion. A bald and grinning boy sat in his lap.

"Kids?"

"One son. Henry is twelve."

She nodded, as if this confirmed something. The buzzer on Grace's desk sounded.

"Oh good," said Rebecca. "That's Ron, probably."

Ron must be the photographer. She got up to let him in.

He stood out in the lobby, surrounded by heavy metal cases. He was on his phone, texting, when she opened the door.

“Hello,” she said, mostly to get his attention.

“Hey,” he said mildly, looking up. “Ron? They told you I was coming?”

“Hi.” She shook his hand. “What, no hair and makeup?”

He looked at her oddly. He couldn’t tell she was joking.

“I’m joking.” She laughed, secretly disappointed that there was no hair and makeup. She had allowed herself to fantasize about the hair and makeup. “Come on in.”

He stepped heavily inside, carrying two of the cases, then went back for the others. He was about Jonathan’s height and might be Jonathan’s build, Grace thought, were her husband not so conscientious about holding off this very protuberance of gut.

“Hey, Ron,” said Rebecca, who had come to the threshold of the office. The three of them now stood in the vestibule, which was even smaller than her consulting room. Ron looked aggrieved at what he saw: a couple of mission chairs, a Navajo rug, back copies of the *New Yorker* in a wicker basket on the floor.

“I was thinking inside?” Rebecca said.

“Let’s see inside.”

Inside, apparently, was better. He brought in a light, a curved white screen, and one of the cases from which he began to extract cameras. Grace stood nervously beside the couch, a stranger in this her own land, watching them banish her leather chair to the vestibule. He pulled back her desk to set up his light, a hot bright box atop a chrome stalk, and wedged the screen against the opposite wall. “I usually have an assistant,” he told her without further explanation.

Cheap job, she automatically thought. Low priority.

“Nice flowers. They’ll look good against that wall. I’m going to move them into the frame.”

Grace nodded. That Sarabeth. Amazing, really.

“You want to...” He stopped and looked at Rebecca, who now stood with her arms crossed over her protruding bust.

“Fix up a bit?” Rebecca finished for him. She had morphed into the photo editor.

“Oh. Right.”

Grace left them and went into her bathroom, which was very small—so small that it had once elicited a tearful outburst from an obese client—and not terrifically well lit. She regretted this just now, because even if she’d known how to magically transform her current self into a self that would appear, to her own *Vogue*-reader eyes, *Vogue*-worthy, she doubted she’d be able to pull that off in such a cramped, dim space. For want of a better idea, she washed her face with the available hand soap and dried it with one of the paper towels she kept in a dispenser. This produced no discernible effect, and she stared into her clean, familiar face with a sinking heart. From her purse she took out a tube of concealer and attempted two swipes under the eyes, but there wasn’t much improvement: Now she looked like a vaguely tired woman with concealer under the eyes. Who was she to treat *Vogue* so cavalierly?

Was this important enough to call Sarabeth about? Grace had found, over the past few months, that she was reluctant to interrupt what she thought of as her agent’s real work—that is, her work with rewriters. It would be wrong, in other words, to interrupt what might be a session of intense literary exchange with a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award to ask if she—Grace—ought to be sneaking out to Zitomer pharmacy and begging one of the ladies to buff her up. And what about her hair? Should it be in its usual configuration of tight coil and clean lines, pinned with the heavy bobble pins (these were made for old-fashioned plastic rollers and getting harder and harder to find)? Or should she brush it loose, which made her feel untidy, and look like a kid?

I should be so lucky, she thought ruefully, as to look like a kid.

Of course, she was not a kid. She was a woman of a certain seasoning, a self-reliant woman of some refinement, with myriad responsibilities and attachments, who had long ago set certain parameters for her appearance and then remained consciously within them, relieved at not having to reinvent herself constantly or even aspire to greater heights of beauty. She was aware of the fact that most people viewed her as formal and contained, but that didn't bother her, because the Grace who wore jeans at the lake house and brushed out her hair as soon as she got home from work was not a Grace she wished to make available to the world.

She was young *enough*. She was attractive *enough*. She seemed competent *enough*. That wasn't it.

The fame part...well, perhaps that was getting a bit closer. If she could have hired an actress (tall and prettier!) to play the role of her book's author, she would have been tempted. An actress with a earpiece, into which Grace could feed the correct lines (*In the vast majority of cases, your potential spouse will tell you everything you need to know very quickly...*) as Matt Lauer or Ellen DeGeneres nodded soberly. *But I'm a big girl*, Grace thought, absently brushing dust against the surface of the mirror with the backs of her fingers. She went back to the others.

Now Rebecca was sitting in Grace's chair, staring deeply into the screen of her phone, and the coffee table had been angled away from the couch, with the pitcher of roses and the bound galley of her book pushed aside and forward, into the frame. No one had to tell her where to sit.

"Your husband's adorable," Rebecca said.

"Oh. Yes," she said. She didn't appreciate being put on the spot. "Thank you."

"How can he do that?" she said.

Ron, who was already looking through the lens of one of his cameras, said, "Do what?"

"He's a doctor for kids with cancer."

"He's a pediatric oncologist," Grace said evenly. "At Memorial."

At Memorial Sloan-Kettering, in other words. She really hoped they'd drop it.

"I could never do that. He must be a saint."

"He's a good doctor," Grace said. "It's a difficult field."

"Jesus," said Ron. "No way could I do that."

It's a good thing no one's asking, she thought irritably. "I was trying to decide what to do with my hair," she said, hoping to distract them both. "What do you think?" She touched the tight coil at the nape of her neck. "I can take it down. I have a hairbrush."

"No, it's good. I can see your face. Okay?" he asked. But he was asking Rebecca, not her.

"Let's try," she confirmed.

"Okay," he said.

He picked up the camera again, looked through it, and said, "So this is just a practice, all right? No sweat." And before she could respond, he produced a heavy metallic click.

Instantly, Grace went stiff as a board.

"Oh no." Ron laughed. "I said it would be painless. Aren't you comfortable?"

"Actually, no," she said, trying to smile. "I've never done this. I mean, had my picture taken for a magazine."

Thus completing my public infantilization, she thought as the last of her courage fled.

"Well, what better magazine to start with!" Ron said merrily. "And I'm going to make you look so stunning, you'll think some supermodel came in and pretended to be you."

Grace produced a highly disingenuous laugh and rearranged herself on the couch.

"Very nice!" Rebecca said brightly. "But cross your legs the other way, all right? Better angle."

Grace did.

~~“And we’re off!” said Ron, sounding chipper. He began to take pictures in a rat-tat-tat of click~~
“So,” he said as he dipped and leaned, producing—as far as she could tell—tiny variations on the same angle, “what’s your novel called?”

“Novel? Oh, I didn’t write a novel. I couldn’t write a novel.”

It occurred to her that she probably shouldn’t be talking. What would talking do to her mouth in the pictures?

“You don’t have a new book?” he said without looking up. “I thought you were a writer.”

“No. I mean yes, I wrote a book, but I’m not a writer. I mean...” Grace frowned. “It’s a book about marriage. I specialize in work with couples.”

“She’s a therapist,” Rebecca said helpfully.

But wasn’t she a writer, too? Grace thought, suddenly perturbed. Didn’t writing a book make her a writer? Then something else occurred to her. “I didn’t hire anyone else to write it,” she insisted, as he’d accused her. “I wrote it.”

Ron had stopped shooting and was looking down into the digital monitor.

“Actually,” he said without looking up, “I need you a bit to the left. Sorry, my left. And could you lean back a little?... Okay,” he said, considering. “I think we might have been wrong about the hair.”

“Fine,” Rebecca said.

Grace reached back and deftly removed the three heavy pins, and down came one shoulder-length coil of highly conditioned dark brown hair. She reached for it, to fan it out, but he stopped her. “No, don’t,” he said. “This is better. It’s sort of sculptural. You can’t see it, but there’s a nice contrast with the dark hair and the color of your blouse.”

She didn’t correct him. It wasn’t a “blouse,” of course. It was a soft, thin sweater of parchment-colored cashmere—one of about five she owned. But she didn’t really want to talk blouses with Ron, even if he shot for *Vogue*.

Then came a small adjustment of the vase. Another small adjustment of the book on the table. “Good,” he announced. “Right. Let’s go.”

He began again. Rebecca looked on, saying nothing. Grace tried to breathe.

She almost never sat here, on the couch, and the perspective was odd. The Eliot Porter poster, she noted, was askew, and there was a grimy mark over the light switch by the door. *I must get that*, she thought. And maybe it was finally time to replace the Eliot Porter. She was tired of the Eliot Porter. Wasn’t everyone tired of that Eliot Porter?

“Marriage,” he said suddenly. “That’s a biggie. You’d think there wasn’t much left to say.”

“Always more to say,” said Rebecca. “It’s the kind of thing you don’t want to get wrong.”

He went down on one knee and shot up at an angle. Grace tried to remember if that was supposed to make your neck look shorter or longer. “I guess I never thought too much about it. I thought, you meet somebody, if it’s the right person, you just *know*. I mean, I knew when I met my wife. I went home and told my friend I was living with, ‘This is the girl.’ Love at first sight kind of thing.”

Grace closed her eyes. Then she remembered where she was, and she opened them. Ron put down his camera and picked up another one, which he proceeded to fiddle with. It seemed safe to speak.

“The difficulty is when people count on that ‘you just know,’ and they dismiss people they don’t respond to right away. I actually think there are lots of good matches for each person, and they cross our paths all the time, but we’re so wedded to the idea of love at first sight that we can miss the real great people who don’t come with a thunderbolt attached.”

“Can you look over this way?” Rebecca said.

Can you shut up, in other words? Grace thought. She looked at Rebecca, who was seated in Grace's own chair, at Grace's own desk. To compensate for this unpleasant fact, she felt herself smile broadly. That was even more unpleasant.

But there was another thing, too, and as she sat, uncomfortably angled, uncomfortably twisted, the other thing began to move up through the situational distraction of being photographed for *Vogue* (whose pages, she was quite sure, not a single reader would mistake her for a supermodel) and the displacement of being on her own couch, until it had set itself indisputably before her. That thing was the unalterable fact that she—like Ron the photographer, like any number of patients in this very room, like an unknowable portion of the future readers of her book—had absolutely *just known*, the first time she had laid eyes on Jonathan Sachs, that she would marry and love him for the rest of her life. It was a truth she had hidden from Sarabeth the agent and Maud the editor and J. Colton the publicist, just as she was now hiding it from Rebecca the about-to-be-married writer and Ron, who like her, had *just known* that he had met the woman he was supposed to marry. That night she had crossed the Charles River in the first trill of autumn, with her friend Vita and Vita's boyfriend, to go to a Halloween party in some ghoulish cavern in the medical school. The others had gone in first, but she had wanted the bathroom and gotten herself lost in the basement, turning like a mouse through underground corridors, losing herself, growing increasingly irritated, increasingly afraid. And then very suddenly, she was not only not alone, but in the presence of—the company of—a man she recognized instantly, though she was quite sure she had never seen him before. He was a scrawny guy with neglected hair and several days' growth of inelegant beard. He wore a Johns Hopkins T-shirt and carried a plastic tub of dirty clothes with a book about the Klondike wobbling on top, and when he saw her, he smiled: an earth-on-its-axis-halting smile that had lit up the grimy hallway, making her stop on a dime, changing her life. Before Grace had taken her next breath, this still-unnamed man had become the most trusted, valued, and desired person in her life. *She just knew*. So she had chosen him, and now, as a result, she was having the right life, with the right husband, the right child, the right home, the right work. For her, it really had happened that way. But she couldn't say that. Especially not now.

"Hey, can we do a few close-ups? You mind?" said Ron.

Should she mind? Grace thought. Did she get a vote?

"All right," said Rebecca, confirming that the question was not for her.

Grace leaned forward. The lens seemed so close, only inches away. She wondered if she could look through it and see his eye on the other side; she peered deep into it, but there was only the glassy dark surface and the thunderous clicking noise: no one was in there. Then she wondered if she would feel the same if it were Jonathan holding the camera, but she actually couldn't remember a single time when Jonathan had held a camera, *Click*, let alone a camera this close to her face. She was the default photographer in her family, though with none of the bells and whistles currently on display in her little office, and with none of Ron's evident skill, and with no passion at all for the form. She was the one who took the birthday pictures and the camp visiting-weekend pictures, *Click*, the photo of Henry asleep in his Beethoven costume, and *Click*, the photo of him playing chess with his grandfather, *Click*, her own favorite picture of Jonathan, minutes after finishing a Memorial Day road race up the lake, with a cup of water thrown over his face and an expression of unmistakable pride and just-distinguishable lust. *Or was it only in retrospect*, Grace thought, *Click*, that she had always seen lust in that picture, because later, running the numbers, she had realized that Henry was about to be conceived, just hours after it was taken. After Jonathan had eaten a bit and stood for a long time under a hot shower, after he had taken her to her own childhood bed and, *Click*, rocked over her, saying her name again and again, and she remembered feeling so happy, and, *Click*, so utterly lucky, and n

because they were actually in the act of making the child she wanted so badly, but because at the specific moment even the possibility of that did not matter to her, nothing but him and, *Click*, the and this, and now the memory of this, rushing up to the surface: the eye and the other eye through the lens that must be looking back.

“That’s nice,” Ron said, lowering the camera. Now she could see his eye again: brown, after all, and utterly unremarkable. Grace nearly laughed in embarrassment. “No, it was good,” he said, misunderstanding. “And you’re done.”

Chapter Two

What's Better Than Raising Children?

The highly intentional neglect of Sally Morrison-Golden's East 74th Street town house began with its exterior, which featured window boxes of nondescript greenery, both dying and dead, and a drooping red balloon tied to the iron grille over the door. The house sat on its leafy side street between two elegant and immaculate brownstones of the same vintage (made, more than likely, by the same architect and builder), whose dignified and doubtless expensive plantings and bright polished windows seemed to bear their slumming neighbor with a certain long-suffering forbearance. Inside, when the stout German au pair opened the door to Grace, that theme of defiant disarray was taken up by an immediate and relentless mess, which began just inside the door (indeed, the door could not open completely because of the bulging shopping bags behind it) and continued along trails of child-related debris down the hall to the kitchen and up the stairs (where it undoubtedly led to messy spaceshelves unseen). This was all thoroughly deliberate, Grace thought, as the au pair (Hilda? Helga?) pulled back the door and she stepped carefully inside. In a city of wealth, Sally was perhaps the richest person Grace personally knew, and with a staff that certainly included at least one person whose job was to keep order, if not cleanliness, even in the wake of the four children who lived here (and the two from Simon Golden's first marriage, who visited on weekends with their own accompaniments of homework, sports equipment, and electronics). Yet this assertive accumulation of stuff had to be Sally's preference. The stacks of discarded shoes, the teetering pile of *Observers* and *Times*, the bulging shopping bags from the Children's Place and Sam Flax blocking the bottom of the staircase—Grace looked at these with an involuntary calculation: five minutes to move them, unpack them, fold the shopping bags into order, and store them in the place one kept shopping bags for some future use; two minutes to put the receipts into the box or file where they lived (or ought to live), remove the tags from the new clothes and take them to the laundry room; another two to place the paints and papers wherever art got made; and a final two to gather up the papers and dump them outside in the recycling bin. Eleven minutes at most, and really, how hard could it be? The elegant Greek Revival house was shouting for release, its dentiled moldings and fine plaster walls nearly obscured by children's finger paintings and macaroni assemblages, tacked or taped up at random, as if the entryway were the hallway outside a kindergarten classroom. Even the Morrison-Goldens' ketubah, richly colored and solemnly Hebrew, like a page from a Semitic Book of Kells, had been framed in a Popsicle-stick contraption with bits of dusty fuzz and dried glue protruding from between the shards. (This was odd, Grace had to admit, since Sally had converted to Judaism at the request of her then fiancé and after the marriage had effortlessly drifted into her husband's neglect of all other things Jewish.)

She followed the noises of a meeting in progress to the back of the house, where new construction had extended the kitchen into a small garden. There Sally sat, between the sycophantic Amanda Eme and Sylvia Steinmetz, single mother of the brilliant Daisy Steinmetz, adopted from China as a one-year-old and—after leapfrogging third grade—the youngest student by far in Rearden’s middle school.

“Thank God...” Sally laughed, looking up. “Now we can actually accomplish something.”

“Am I that late?” said Grace, who knew she wasn’t.

“No, no, but we can’t seem to settle down without your calming influence.” She adjusted the wiggling toddler on her lap: her youngest, named Djuna (Sally had informed them) after her late mother-in-law, Doris.

“Should I make more coffee?” asked Hilda or Helga, who had followed Grace into the kitchen. She stood barefoot, her feet looking none too clean, Grace thought. She also had a dark metal nose ring that communicated a certain lack of cleanliness.

“Yeah, maybe. And would you mind taking the baby? We’ll get done a lot quicker without her contributions,” said Sally, as if she had to apologize.

Silently, the au pair reached out for the squirmy Djuna, whom Sally extended over the table. Djuna, sensing her departure from center stage, let out a diva’s cry of protest.

“Bye, sweetie,” said Sylvia. “God, is she cute.”

“She’d better be,” Sally said. “She’s my last.”

“Ooh, are you sure?” Amanda said. “Neil and I keep saying we wish we’d kept our options open.”

Grace, who did not know Amanda very well, was unsure of what this might refer to. Vasectomy? Egg freezing? Amanda had ten-year-old twins and despite some recent “facial rejuvenation” was easily forty-five.

“Done and done. To tell you the truth, Djuna was a bit of a surprise, but we figured, what the hell? It means, why not?”

Why not, indeed? thought Grace, as thoroughly aware as the other women in the room of what four children (or, indeed, six children) signified in New York City. Two children meant that you had reproduced yourself, numbers-wise, which was expensive enough. Three meant that a third round of private school and summer camp and ice hockey lessons at Chelsea Piers and college counseling at IvyWise was inconsequential. But four children...well, not many families in Manhattan had four children. Four children meant an extra nanny, for one thing, and a town house. You couldn’t ask kids to share a room, after all. Children needed their private space, to express their uniqueness.

“And I mean,” she went on, “what’s better than raising children? I had this big career, seriously, I haven’t missed it for one second since Ella was born. Even at my reunion last year, when all the other women I’d gone to college with gave me crap about giving it up, like I have some big responsibility at Yale that’s supposed to dictate how I live my life. I just looked at them, like, *You’re so wrong*. Don’t let anyone tell you it’s not the most important thing you can do,” she insisted to Amanda, as if that were the issue at hand.

“Oh, I know, I know,” Amanda said weakly. “But I mean, the twins, they’re so much work. God forbid they should want to do anything together. If one wants Broadway Kids, the other wants gymnastics. Celia won’t even go to the same camp as her sister, so thanks very much, two visiting weekends in Maine.”

Hilda/Helga brought coffee and set it down on the long farmhouse table. Grace produced the box of butter cookies she’d stopped for at Greenberg’s, and these were greeted with mild enthusiasm.

“My thighs hate you,” Sally said, taking two.

“Your thighs have no right to hate anyone,” Amanda told her. “I’ve seen your thighs. Your thighs

are the envy of the entire Upper East Side.”

“Well,” Sally said, looking pleased, “you know, I’m sort of in training. Simon said if I finished the half marathon out at the beach, he’d take me to Paris.”

“My mother used to bring these home,” said Sylvia, tasting her cookie. “You know those little cinnamon buns they make? They had a German name.”

“*Schnecken*,” Grace said. “Delicious.”

“Should we start?” Sally asked. She had not grown up in the city and, having nothing to contribute to the shared nostalgia, sounded almost irritated.

Pads were produced and pens uncapped. Everyone looked deferentially at Sally, who was chairing the committee as well as hosting the meeting. “Right. Two days to go. And we are...” She trailed off with a girlish shrug. “But I’m not worried.”

“I’m a little worried,” said Sylvia.

“No, it’s fine. Look...” Sally turned her yellow pad to display a neat column of items in blue Sharpie. “People want to come and they want to spend money. That’s what’s important. The rest is just details. And we’ve got two hundred confirmed. Almost two hundred. It’s already a success.”

Grace looked over at Sylvia. Of the three of them, she knew Sylvia the best, or at least had known her the longest. Not that they were particularly close. Sylvia, she knew, was holding her tongue.

“So I was over at the Spensers’ yesterday morning. I did a walk-through with Suki’s assistant and the house manager.”

“Suki wasn’t there?” said Sylvia.

“No, but I went over everything with the staff.”

Grace nodded. To be granted admission to the Spenser abode—that alone had been a serious coup and certainly a big motivator for those two hundred RSVPs, at \$300 a pop. Suki Spenser, third wife of Jonas Marshall Spenser and the mother of Rearden preschoolers, presided over one of the most storied apartments in the city (it was actually three apartments, combined into two floors the width of the Fifth Avenue building). She had called out of the blue the previous month—well, her assistant had called—and said that while Mrs. Spenser wasn’t able to serve on the committee, she’d be pleased to host the event. Her staff would serve whatever food was brought in, and they could also offer the wine. The Spenser family had their own vineyard in Sonoma.

“Do you know her?” Grace asked Sally.

“No, not really. I’ve nodded to her in the halls at school, that’s all. And of course I e-mailed her inviting her to work on the committee, but I didn’t expect to hear from her, let alone all this.” The RSVPs had had to go through security checks, which had been a hassle. But it was worth it.

“Oh, my God, I am so excited,” Amanda chirped. “Did you see the Jackson Pollocks?”

There were two of them, on facing walls of the dining room. Grace had seen them in *Architecture Digest*.

“I think so,” said Sally, honestly enough. “Sylvia, your friend’s all set? It’s so great he’s doing this for us.”

Sylvia nodded. She knew someone at Sotheby’s who had agreed to handle the auction. “He told me it’s payback for getting him through trigonometry at Horace Mann. Actually I barely got him through trigonometry.”

“And the auction itself?” Grace asked. She was visualizing Sally’s list, trying to push things forward.

“Right. I have a proof of the catalog. Amanda, what did I do with it?”

Amanda pointed out the ragged-edged booklet amid the scattered papers on the table.

“Okay,” Sally said. “This isn’t final, we can still add till tomorrow morning, but he’s printing tomorrow afternoon, and...Sylvia?”

“Picking them up Saturday at one,” she said efficiently.

“Good.” She put on her glasses, opened the cover, and started down the printed page.

Flowers from L’Olivier and Wild Poppy. Stays in no fewer than six Hamptons houses, one on Fire Island (“But the family part,” Sally said reassuringly), a pair each in Vail and Aspen and one in Carmel, New York (this particular offering relayed with less than effusive gratitude). There was a design consult with an A-list decorator (daughter in twelfth grade), a cooking lesson for eight in an excessively popular Tribeca restaurant (son of chef’s publicist in seventh), a chance to shadow the mayor of New York for a day (policy analyst’s twins applying for two of the extremely valuable spots in next year’s pre-K), and something called a “stem-cell face lift” with a doctor at NYU, which sounded so appalling (yet so intriguingly bizarre!) that Grace made a mental note to ask Jonathan what it was.

“And—I think I sent out an e-mail about this,” Sally said. “Or maybe not. But Nathan Friedberg offered us a place in his camp.”

“Sally, that’s fabulous!” Amanda said.

“What camp?” Grace asked.

Amanda turned to her. “You know, his camp? That he’s starting?”

“It was in *Avenue*,” said Sally. “He’s starting this camp?”

“It’s going to cost twenty-five thousand dollars for the summer,” said Sylvia.

“That’s...a lot of waterskiing,” Grace observed.

“No waterskiing. No knot tying. No campfires,” said Sylvia, sounding suitably bemused. “Children of mere mortals need not apply.”

“But...I’m sorry, I’m not understanding. This is a summer camp?” Grace said slowly.

“I think it’s a little bit brilliant, actually,” said Amanda. “I mean, let’s face it, these are the kids who are going to be running things. They need to know how business works, and they need to know how to be philanthropists. Nathan called me about it. He was wondering if the twins might want to enroll. I said I’d love it, but they’d kill me if I took them out of their camps in Maine. They have the whole posses up there.”

Grace still couldn’t grasp it. “Where exactly do they go for this camp? What do they do?”

“Oh, they’ll all live at home. A bus picks them up in the morning. And all these great people are going to come talk to the kids,” Sally said. “People from business and the arts. They learn about business plans, and investments. They take trips to visit companies downtown and outside the city. They know they’re going out to Greenwich at least once. And they get the weekends off so they can do whatever they’d usually do then. I signed Ella up. Bronwen just wants to stay out at the beach all summer. She has her horse out there. But then I thought, *I wonder if he’d donate a place*. I mean, twenty-five-thousand-dollar value! If we could get that for the school, it would be great.”

“Bravo, Sally!” Amanda smiled. “That is completely brilliant.”

“Yes,” Grace managed, but she was still mystified. And now slightly appalled, as well.

They went back to the list. A college admissions counselor. A preschool admissions counselor. A genealogist who came to your house with her computer, so you didn’t have to do all that online stuff, and made a gorgeous family tree for you, which she painted like a Shaker dream design. (Grace wondered briefly if she ought to buy that one herself—she would probably have to buy something, and wouldn’t that be a good thing to give Henry?—but the thought of Jonathan’s terrible family stopped her. To have such hateful people on her son’s Shaker family tree made her angry, then guilty, then just

sad for him. Bad enough that he was down to a single grandparent. Knowing that those people were still out there, and only a few hours' drive away, in spite of their showing not the slightest inclination to see their grandson, somehow made it worse.) And then the doctors: dermatologists, plastic surgeons. And someone Amanda referred to as "the toe guy."

"He has a daughter in third grade and one in Daphne's class," she explained to Sylvia.

Sylvia frowned. "He's called the toe guy?"

"He's famous for making the second toe shorter than the big toe. So I waited till I saw his wife's pickup and I asked if he'd donate a toe shortening."

Just one? Grace thought. *What about the other foot?*

"I mean, I'll ask anybody anything. Why not? What can they say except yes or no? But they almost never say no. Why should they, this is their kid's school! They should be happy to donate the services. And what's the difference if it's a plumber or a doctor, right?"

"Well, but..." Grace couldn't stop herself interjecting, "you're talking about elective things. Most doctors aren't dealing with—" She nearly said *human vanity* but caught herself. "With...things people actually want to be seeing a doctor about."

Amanda sat back in her chair and looked frankly at Grace. She did not seem angry, just perplexed.

"That's not true," she said. "I mean, we all want to safeguard our health. Even if it's...I don't know...a tummy doctor or a heart doctor, it's all about taking care of ourselves, and you always want to go to the best person, whether it's a financial adviser or a doctor. How many wives would buy consultation with a famous heart doctor for their husbands?"

"Grace's husband is a doctor," Sylvia said. She said it matter-of-factly, and Grace knew exactly why she'd done it. Now they both watched its inevitable effect.

"Oh right, I forgot that," Amanda said. "What kind of doctor is he again?"

"Jonathan's a pediatric oncologist."

Amanda frowned for a baffled moment, then sighed. She had concluded, appropriately, that no one wanted the services of a pediatric oncologist, no matter how famous.

Sally was shaking her head. "I keep forgetting. He's always so upbeat when I see him. I mean, how does he do that?"

Grace turned to her. "Do what?"

"Work with those sick kids, and their parents. I could never do it."

"Me neither," said Amanda. "I can barely deal with it when one of my kids has a headache."

"It's different when it's your kid," Grace said. She was sympathetic to this, because she had always found it unbearable when Henry got sick, which he hadn't even done very much. He had been a very healthy child. "When it's a patient, and you're bringing your expertise to their illness, it's just a whole different thing. You're there to help. You're trying to make their lives better."

"Yeah," Amanda said disagreeably. "But then they die."

"You still tried," Grace insisted. "No matter what doctors do, people still get sick and die, and some of them are kids. That's never not going to be true. But I'd much rather have a kid with cancer now than twenty years ago. And I'd much rather have a kid with cancer in New York than anyplace else."

Amanda, impervious to this argument, only shook her head. "I couldn't deal with it. I hate hospitals. I hate the way they smell." She shuddered, as if assailed—there, amid the expensive squalor of Sally Morrison-Golden's town house—by a puddle of Lysol.

"I just wish we had more, you know, artists and writers," said Sylvia, who—having raised the particular topic, was now obviously attempting to move on. "Lunch with an opera singer or a visit to the painter's studio. Why don't we have more artists?"

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