

Chapter 1

I stared up at my bare legs suspended at ninety-degree angles from ice cold steel stirrups.

The gynecologist's examining table could have only been designed by a man. And probably a Nazi dentist, at that. I adjusted the thin paper sheet that covered my naked body, deciding that my new ob/gyn was either incredibly cheap or a member of a minimalist religious sect. At least Dr. Silverblatt had provided his patients with cotton gowns, woolen booties and a watercolor of a sunset hung high on the wall so it was visible from a supine position. I was still sulking about his retirement. For the past twenty years, Dr. Silverblatt had been the only man to have had this particular view of me other than my husband.

The door to the closet-size room opened and slammed shut. A young man with a stethoscope hanging in front of his white jacket and a woman in scrubs covered with fuchsia flying kites squeezed around the examining table.

"Hello. I'm Dr. Falas, and you must be Mrs. Wright, right?" The young man grinned as though pleased with his witticism and held up his fingers for a "high five."

"Please call me Wendy." I reached over awkwardly to slap the hand of the looming Greek god who looked as though he'd only just completed medical school. He was going to examine me? If I had known that Adonis would be fondling my uterus, I might have done a better job shaving my legs.

"The examination will only take a few minutes," he said snapping on his plastic gloves. "Relax."

Yeah right, relax, I thought as Dr. Falas inserted a large, cold metal contraption inside me. I felt like a frog about to be dissected by a seventh grader.

The go-fly-a-kite nurse hovered in the background examining her fingernails. Clearly her sole purpose for being in the room was to testify on behalf of her boss in the event he was charged with sexual harassment.

“Hmmm,” said the doctor, in a concerned tone that sent my nerve endings into code red. “I see you have an inverted uterus.”

“Jeez. Is that something I should worry about?”

“It can affect some women’s ability to conceive.”

“Oh.” I lowered my head back down against the paper pillow. “That’s never been a problem for me.”

He pulled off his gloves, threw them in the trash, then became engrossed in my file. “Three children?”

“Yes. Gabrielle’s seventeen, Noah’s fifteen and Mimi’s thirteen.” I waited for him to express amazement about how I looked way too young and fit to be the mother of three teenagers.

“Let’s see. You’re forty-four.” He sucked on the end of his pen. “Hmmm.” That worried vocalization again. “And how old was your mother when she became menopausal?”

“Gee. I’m not sure.” How stupid of me not to have asked her this basic mother-daughter question when she was still alive. But somehow I had thought of menopause as an event in my far distant future. Certainly not something I had needed to be concerned with. At least not until today.

“We need to monitor that and I’d also like you to take a bone density test. You should start taking calcium supplements and vitamin D. Does osteoporosis run in your family?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “But isn’t that an old people’s condition?”

I left the car engine running as I waited in the pick-up lane in front of the kids’ school. I was still off balance from the gynecologist’s visit. Just this morning, I’d been feeling energetic and productive. Now, I wondered if I should be spending my time researching long-term care insurance and assisted living facilities. What had I been doing with my life the last twenty years not to notice it slipping away from me?

The doors in the mission-style school buildings opened and a stream of kids began trudging toward the cars, weighted down by book bags on their backs.

Noah threw his pack into the rear of the SUV and climbed into the front passenger seat. He gave me a peck on my cheek and then immediately became engrossed in the Nintendo DS he’d gotten for his birthday. How could he see past the long strands of dark blond hair that obscured his eyes, which I knew from memory and photos to be hazel and intense?

“Hey, Mom,” said Mimi, getting in the back with her cheerleading pompoms.

“Hi, sweetheart.” I turned to watch my daughter sprawl her gawky, still-developing limbs across the length of the rear seat and stick the buds from her iPod into her ears.

For an instant, I felt an unsettling loneliness. The kids were growing up, becoming more independent. Gabrielle would be off to college next year, then Noah and Mimi would follow soon after. And where would I be?

I attempted to pull away from the school pick-up area, but cars blocked the exit. A mother in a monstrous Cadillac Escalade honked behind me. I couldn't imagine where she expected me to go in the traffic gridlock. The fall term had begun over a week ago, but most of the parents still hadn't mastered the pick-up procedures. It took me another ten minutes to get out of the self-induced traffic jam. As I drove past the upscale strip shopping malls that dotted our suburban warren southwest of Fort Lauderdale, I glanced at Noah, who was absorbed with his game. I decided to dispense with my usual how-was-your-day interrogation and hit my unsuspecting son with a frontal attack. "Do you think I look old?"

"Oh man. Why can't I beat this freakin' thing?" He hit his hand against the device in frustration. "What? What did you say?"

"Do I look old?"

Noah didn't look up. "You look like a mom." He began furiously pounding on his tiny machine with his thumbs. I wondered if there was a rash of kids developing carpal tunnel syndrome from video games.

"Right," I said. "But an old mom or a young mom?"

"I don't know. A mom. What difference does it make? No one looks at moms."

Zap. So it really had happened. I had given up a promising career only to merge with the faceless, aproned, nearly menopausal blob known collectively as "mom." How had I gone all these years believing I was doing something important, not realizing I was losing my identity in the process?

I turned in to our gated community and waved at the guard. The neighborhood was a giant jigsaw puzzle of mirror-image cul-de-sacs surrounding mirror-image lakes. Our own large

house, a barrel-tiled, faux Mediterranean, looked exactly like everyone else's, but Tommy was inordinately proud of it. Second mansion on your right, he would explain when giving directions. And in the evening, our high-powered security lights would play upon the gentle ripples of the manmade lake that had been dredged out of the Everglades so we could pay higher taxes and make believe we had "arrived."

But why was I suddenly so dispirited? I was just as pleased as Tommy with the life we had made for ourselves. While Tommy worked as a successful investment advisor, I had devoted myself to my family and home. I didn't need an artificial high like those "career" women who paraded around acting like they were better than those of us who had chosen the Mommy Track. And I was good at it. No. More than good; I was an exceptional homemaker. Our house had won second place in the "Warmest Hearth in Our Hometown" competition, and would have been first except that the winner had bribed the judges with free tickets to a Billy Joel concert. My kids were thriving under the influence of their stay-at-home-mom as multiple "My-Kid-Is-an-Honor-Student" bumper stickers clearly attested. I threw the best parties in town. And I had done it all without calcium supplements.

Of course, I hadn't even realized I needed calcium supplements until today.

I checked my watch as Noah and Mimi bolted out of the car, toward our house. 3:45. Tonight we were having our seasonal kick-off soiree, as Tommy liked to refer to these quarterly events of ours, despite the fact that there were no real seasons here in Florida. I had just over two hours to cook my special chili, help the caterer and bartender set up, scatter the bags of brightly colored leaves I'd bought to give the house and patio a festive autumn flavor, walk the dog, drive Mimi and Noah to their after-school activities, shower, and dress. I couldn't imagine having time for more fulfillment than that!

By a quarter to six, I was already exhausted. Even though I'd showered, a film of sweat had broken out all over my body and I could feel the perspiration stains blooming on my blouse.

“Should I wear my new silk button-down or the black Italian-knit sweater?” Tommy called from his closet.

“The button-down.” I gave my underarms another blast of antiperspirant, then ran the comb through my short, low-maintenance L’Oreal 7 ½ A Medium Ash Blonde hair, a close approximation of what had once been my natural color. Only a really tall person would notice my gray roots.

I was wearing my usual uniform—cream-colored pants, short enough to be worn with flat heels so I wouldn’t get cramped-party-foot halfway through the evening, a pink blouse and a pastel, tailored jacket—always perfect for informal dinners out, school events, and for conveying the image of Tommy’s competent, supportive wife. I checked my profile in the mirror. Was that an osteoporosis hunch? No. That kid doctor didn’t know what he was talking about.

“How do I look?” Tommy stood before me with a string of dental floss still hanging from between his front teeth. He was wearing the black Italian-knit sweater. So much for my recommendation. The smattering of freckles across the bridge of his pug nose gave him an impish quality. But at the same time, with his silvery-blond crew cut and broad shoulders—the result of lifting weights for a half-hour three mornings a week—he looked like he could have stepped out of a recruiting poster for the Marines. Well, maybe a recruiting poster for a senior officer in the Marines. Lately, I had noticed that Tommy’s hairline had receded and his abdomen

was bulging just a teensy bit—telltale signs of his forty-five years, though I'd sooner be submerged in boiling chili than disclose that to him.

“You look fine,” I said.

“Just fine?”

“Great. Very powerful.”

“But friendly?”

“Yes. Very much the amiable advisor.”

He nodded. “And are my teeth okay? Is this whitening stuff working?” He gave me a broad, square smile exposing uppers and lowers like a four-year old who had just said “Cheese,” for the camera.

“They look great, Tom. You look great.”

He seemed satisfied, but now his scrutiny had moved on to a new arena. “You’re wearing that?”

“It’s what I always wear.”

“Come on, honey. Why don’t you put on something sexy?”

“I’ll be running around like a one-legged dervish all night.”

He rummaged through my closet. “How about this?” He held out a short, low-cut dress I hadn’t worn in years. Tommy had insisted I buy it at a shipboard boutique when we were on a company-paid cruise he’d won as most valuable employee. At the time I had loved its vivid chartreuse color, though now it reminded me of toadskin.

I quickly changed into the dress while he watched. Maybe it wouldn't make me look like I was suffering from a degenerative bone disorder.

"It fits better than ever," he said, glancing at my butt.

I hoped that didn't mean tighter. I slid my feet into a pair of black stilettos that were already pinching my toes as I ran down the stairs to answer the first blast from the doorbell.

Beneath the palm trees, our guests stood around our free-form pool like flocks of blackbirds. As the sun set over the lake, they sipped their cocktails and nibbled on shrimp-kabobs while Tommy smiled, shook hands, and swirled his Johnny Walker Black Label on the rocks.

Tommy had invited the usual crowd—a half-dozen or so coworkers from Southern Trust, his preferred A-list clients, the handful of couples we socialized with, and some randomly chosen neighbors. I teetered over to the group from Tommy's office.

The women, young and gorgeous in their slinky black outfits, looked at me like I was a cockroach that had crawled into their crème brûlée.

"Hi," I said with my best Tommy's-wife smile.

"Hello, Mrs. Wright," said a barely post-pubescent woman from Tommy's office with a very straight back. Her name was Sari, or Sari-says, as I'd come to think of her, since that was how Tommy always referred to her, although she didn't exactly strike me as a pundit. Tonight she was wearing a black leather miniskirt and fishnet stockings that she must have found in the back of one of her mother's drawers. Her long black hair had several broad white-blonde streaks running through it in a pattern reminiscent of a skunk.

“What a lovely home you have,” Sari-says said.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t work, do you?” asked another young woman, nibbling on an olive from her martini.

“Not exactly. I have three kids.”

“It must be nice to be a housewife. Drop the kids off at school and have the rest of the day free for tennis and manicures.” She glanced at my nails, which I would have polished if I hadn’t been rushing around all day to prepare for this party they all seemed to be enjoying so much.

“Actually—” I said.

“What I wouldn’t do for just a few hours each week to decompress,” Sari-says said. She ran her shiny red fingernails through her hair. “These fourteen-hour work days can be so grueling.”

“Gee, that is a long day,” I said. Where’d she find the time to have a manicure?

“It’s what we new guys have to do to get ahead.” She revealed the perfect white smile of affluence and a good orthodontist. “But Tommy’s just been so sweet and helpful.”

“Nice dress, Wendy,” slurred Mike, ambling up to our group. Mike and Tommy had worked together for fifteen years. Mike had once been trim and handsome in a gangster sort of way, but with his slicked-back thin hair and bloated belly, he had grown into a caricature of the Godfather.

I self-consciously raised my club soda in front of my cleavage. “Thanks,” I said.
“Where’s Terri? I haven’t seen her tonight.”

“You mean Mother Teresa?” He chuckled. “She sends her apologies. Had some church thingie she had to go to.”

“Please tell her I missed her.”

“Sure.” He took a sip of his drink. The ice cubes chinked against each other. “By the way, Wendy. I found a new fund that I think you should take a look at. A vice fund—booze, gambling, tobacco. Good thing to get into if the economy goes down the shitter.”

“Mike.” Sari-says laughed and put her hand on his shoulder. “Why are you bothering Wendy with shop talk? Obviously her husband takes good care of her financially. I’m sure the last thing Wendy’s in the mood for is a load of technical gobbledygook.”

“It isn’t exactly gobbledygook to me,” I said, feeling the day’s insults pulsing through my veins.

“No?” Sari said.

“I happen to enjoy discussing investments. I’m in charge of managing our portfolio at home.”

“Are you?” she said, without losing the smile. “And here all I’ve ever heard about is your fantastic chili.”

By all accounts, the party was a rousing success—the shrimp-kabobs were a hit, Tommy was pretty sure three of our neighbors were interested in investing with Southern Trust, and no

one knew how close I came to accidentally spilling chili over the weasel-haired little head of Sari-says.

As I hung up my amphibian dress and shoved it in the back of the closet, I decided I wasn't quite ready to let my bones turn to dust.

After eighteen years, I was done with chili.

And being "just" a housewife.

Chapter 2

“I’ll need your driver’s license and social security card,” said the girl on the other side of the pass-through window, who couldn’t have been much older than Gabrielle. She was wearing pink-rimmed glasses and a navy mini-skirted suit that pulled awkwardly under her arms. Maybe she was trying to look like an adult, but the gum-chewing gave her away.

“Why?” I asked, handing her the application I had just completed. At least the clipboard didn’t have a pencil attached to it by a string.

She blinked at me. “Why?”

“Why do you need my driver’s license and social security card?”

“For the I-9. For when we send you out as a temp.”

“But I’m applying for a permanent job.” Every moment I spent in this employment agency reaffirmed I’d reached a new low. When I had first joined the labor force twenty years before, companies were practically begging me to work for them. Now, no one was interested in hiring me. But it wasn’t as though after eighteen years of running a household and raising a family my brain had shriveled up. I’d stayed involved in the community through my charity work and I was more qualified now than I had been with my hot-off-the-press MBA. If only I could get in front of the right people, I was certain I could persuade them that I could be an asset to their organization.

“And you only listed one employer,” the receptionist said, her eyes skimming the application form. “You have to put three.”

“I only worked at one company, plus the charitable organizations where I volunteer.”

She popped a bubble and a web of pink strands remained attached to her upper lip. “I still need your driver’s license and social security card.”

I was eager to move the process along; I dug them out of my wallet.

“I’ll call you when the testing room is available,” she said, trying to dislodge the gum with the tip of her tongue. “You can have a seat.”

“What testing room?” I asked, but she had already turned her back to me and my voice was drowned out by the rattle and whine of the Xerox machine copying my documents.

I sat back down with the other job applicants on a flimsy, metal chair that dug into my back. The waiting room was cramped with the chairs too close together. A heavysset man, whose neck was red from his too-tight collar, kept bumping elbows with his tall neighbor as they attempted to fill out their applications while consulting resumes, address books and BlackBerrys. Magazines were stacked so high on the end table that every time someone opened the outer door, I was worried that the sudden gust of stale air would cause them to topple over. I picked up an issue of *Newsweek*, careful not to scatter the pile, and noticed it went back five years.

While I waited, I began sorting and organizing the magazines by date and category. *Sports Illustrated* and *People* on one side of the table, *The Economist* and weekly news magazines on the other.

I was disappointed. When I’d researched the agency on the Internet, it seemed to be of a higher caliber than the others. *Rudolph Mange, Specialists in Financial and Business Professionals. Offering a full range of job placement services.* Now I realized that “full range” meant “temp.”

As my pile of “over two-years-old” magazines grew, I watched my fellow job seekers hand the receptionist their driver’s licenses and social security cards without even being asked. Most were immediately invited back into the inner sanctum. I wondered if I was being punished for having a bad attitude or if my qualifications weren’t as good as the other applicants.

After close to an hour, the newer magazines were organized on the table and I had bundled up the older ones with oversized rubber bands I’d gotten from the receptionist. I began flipping through the news weeklies, refreshing my memory about events that had occurred months before—international affairs, the state of the economy, stock market ups and downs.

I supposed Tommy would be happy if I didn’t find a job. But that wasn’t fair. He hadn’t wanted me to stop working in the first place; it had been my idea to stay home to raise our family. Tommy had reluctantly agreed, concerned about the entire financial burden being on his shoulders, but ultimately realizing it would be best for the kids.

Maybe I should have tried to balance my career with raising the kids. At least I wouldn’t be questioning my own worth and whether I was as complete a person as I might have become. I plucked the rubber band on a batch of magazines. *Ping, ping, ping.*

But I wasn’t being honest with myself. Even while I’d been pursuing my MBA and working for a top financial firm, I had always intended to be a homemaker when I had kids. Tommy sometimes teased me and called me “retro-mom.” He’d say I belonged in the era of *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave It to Beaver*. And it was true that I clung to old-fashioned family values. But I also always knew when the kids were old enough to fend for themselves, that it would be my time.

So here I was, in a cramped employment office, enjoying “my time.” I never dreamed it would be so gratifying! *Ping, ping, ping.*

Across from me, a plump woman with shiny black hair gave me a grazing glance.

I stopped pinging the rubber band.

The woman returned to her forms, which she was filling out with the help of a little boy, who appeared to be nine or ten. He was speaking to her in rapid Spanish, as he tapped one of his untied sneakers on the dirty gray tile impatiently.

“*Necesita ayuda?*” I asked in the limited Spanish I’d picked up in high school and on a couple of vacations to Mexico and Spain.

“*Ay si. Muchas gracias.*” The woman smiled at me and held out her application.

I crossed the room and explained some of the requirements as her son translated, and we worked our way through the application.

“Wendy Wright?” A woman with too-long blonde bangs and buck teeth surveyed the people in the reception area.

Finally. “That’s me.”

“I’m Patsy.” She gave me a droopy handshake.

“*Muchas gracias,*” the woman said to me.

“*De nada.*”

“*Buena suerte,*” she said.

“*Gracias. Y tu, tambien.*” Luck. I’d never relied on it before, but I had a feeling I was going to need some.

I followed Patsy down a narrow hallway with unraveling carpet. She was missing a button on the back of her skirt and had attached the waistband together with a safety pin. I was tempted to take out the sewing kit I kept in my handbag and show her how to sew on a button.

Patsy stopped at a room half the size of Gabrielle's closet, with two computers and two chairs. A man with graying hair was sitting motionless in front of one of the computers staring at the screen, a blank expression on his face. I hadn't seen him in the waiting room and wondered how long he'd been in here.

"First," Patsy said, "I'll set you up for testing, then we can talk."

"Actually," I said, "can we talk first?"

She stared at me as though I had told her a joke she just wasn't getting. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm here about the management position, so I'm not sure how relevant my computer skills are."

"You don't know how to use the computer?"

"Sure I do. I use the Internet for research and—"

"What level are your Excel skills?"

"Pretty good, but—"

"Macro, formula or data entry?" she asked.

"Aren't you more interested in my management and administration skills?"

"Management and administration," she said as though she were repeating new words in a foreign language.

“Yes. That’s why I’m here. The ad.” I opened the folder that contained copies of my resume as well as the ad I’d downloaded from the online job board and read, “*Our client has a growth-oriented opportunity for an organized individual with strong management and administrative skills.*”

She waved her hand dismissively. “That’s just a come-on.”

“You don’t have such a position?”

“Well sure we do. That description fits most of our openings.” She sucked in her lower lip, or maybe that was just the way her teeth fit. “Maybe we’d better go into one of the interview rooms and talk.”

The room was a six-by-six square with two swivel chairs and a small round table between them. On the wall was a pennant that read, “Rudolph Mange: Integrity, Passion and Commitment.” Someone’s idea of a mission statement.

Patsy sat down in one of the chairs and scowled at my application. “You didn’t list your skill sets or your other employers.”

“My only paid employment experience was when I was an analyst at Peabody, Stone and Goodman. I left to raise my three children, but I’ve been involved with several charities and—”

“An analyst?”

“Yes, I was responsible for—”

She held up her hand. “Please, let me conduct this interview.”

“Of course.”

“How much experience do you have with Quickbooks?”

“I haven’t used Quickbooks, but I’m familiar with other accounting programs. I have a bachelor’s degree in finance and I graduated first in my—”

“PowerPoint?” she interrupted.

“I haven’t worked with PowerPoint, per se, but I’m a quick learner. I also have my MBA and wrote a thesis on—”

But she was shaking her head.

No, I thought. Please don’t say you can’t help me. I have sent out over fifty resumes, of which only seven companies had the decency to turn me down with a form email. I have reached rock bottom by coming to an employment agency like this one. You can’t reject me, too.

“I’m sorry,” she said and closed my file.

That’s when I realized it was time to bring out the heavy artillery. I wasn’t leaving that room without something to show for my efforts.

When I got home a couple of hours later, I decided to make a special dinner.

“Something smells good.” Tommy approached me from behind as I jiggled the cast iron pan over the stove.

“Homemade ravioli filled with beets and ricotta in a butter sauce.” I turned to kiss him.

“Butter sauce?” Tommy patted his not-quite-tight abdominal muscles.

“Don’t worry. It’s very light and I made a large salad.”

“I wish you’d stick to broiling. Sari says saturated fats will clog my arteries.”

“I’ll take full responsibility if you have a heart attack.” I doubted that Sari-says could even boil water and here she was advising him on his nutritional regime. “Dinner,” I announced over the intercom and a panting Shadow appeared instantaneously by my side. That was one command our chocolate-colored retriever responded to without fail.

“So, how was your day?” Tommy asked, nibbling on a breadstick.

“Good. I got a job. Sort of.”

He smiled. “How does one sort of get a job?”

By begging, cajoling and flattering. By showing Patsy how to sew a button on her skirt and trimming her bangs with a pair of scissors intended for cutting paper. “It’s just a temp job,” I said. Though when Patsy had finally agreed to send me out on a one-week assignment, I had felt as if I’d won the lottery.

“A temp job?” Tommy said. “You can do better than that.”

The kids descended on the kitchen like a tornado touching down in Kansas. Or at least Noah and Mimi did. At seventeen, Gabrielle was a young woman who moved with the quiet grace of someone who spends hours walking with a book balanced on her head. Half of her long blonde hair hung perfectly straight while the other side was a mass of curls held in place haphazardly by an oyster-shell hairclip. Apparently her hair straightening process had been interrupted by dinner. She began taking the platters from the cabinet while Mimi poured water and put out napkins and silverware and Noah brought the salad bowl and breadsticks to the table. Shadow stood at the side, wagging her tail, too clever to step into anyone’s harried path.

All three kids resembled Tommy, which sometimes made me wonder if I was the real mother with my blue eyes, eggnog complexion, and not-quite-straight nose. “Very patrician,” Tommy had said after our second date, “not a pleb nose like mine.”

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” Tommy said now.

“What?” Mimi said. The frenzy of activity stopped as if someone had pulled the plug on the TV. My kids had an amazing ability to tune into conversations that were either about them or none of their business.

“It doesn’t concern you guys,” Tommy said.

“It’s dinner time,” Mimi said. “No private conversations at dinner. That’s the rule.”

“Fine,” said Tommy. “I’m not sure this idea of your mother’s to get a job makes sense.”

“Why?” asked Noah, my sweet boy. “Mom’s entitled to work if she wants to.”

“Of course she is,” Tommy said. “But for seven bucks an hour?”

“They’re paying me nine.”

“Seven, nine,” Tommy said. “It’s the same thing.”

“I’d work for nine bucks an hour,” Noah said.

“That’s my point,” said Tommy. He sat down at our large round kitchen table in his usual chair, the one with the best view of our backyard. It was still light outside and he liked to watch the fountain in the pool against the backdrop of lake and palm trees.

Mimi and Noah scooted in on the bench seat, Mimi making sure she was next to her father. Gabrielle and I sat in the two remaining chairs, the ones closest to the kitchen, so that we had the best access for serving and clearing. Shadow positioned herself between Mimi and

Tommy, but that was just her starting point. She would, by the end of the meal, have made her way around the table several times.

Tommy put a forkful of salad into his mouth. “It’s okay for you kids to work flipping hamburgers at Burger King, but it’s just not right for your mother.”

“I’m not exactly going to flip hamburgers,” I said.

“No, of course not. I’m just saying, with your background and credentials, settling for a temp job is such a waste.”

“I would never work at Burger King,” said Mimi. She was wearing her new cheerleading outfit, proud that she’d made the squad. “I’m going to be a financial advisor like you, Daddy.”

I placed the ravioli on the lazy Susan in the center of the table. “I’ve got to start somewhere, and no one else is willing to give me a chance.”

“Ryan got a job at KFC,” Noah said. “He says it’s really gross. At night they have to take the meat off the bones with their fingers and they make chicken salad out of it.”

“Eew. Don’t they use gloves?” asked Mimi.

“I don’t think so,” Noah said.

“I just hate to see you settle, Wendy,” Tommy said.

“How can they not wear gloves?” Mimi said. “It’s a violation of the health code.”

“I’m just saying what Ryan told me.”

“But Mom had a great job before I was born,” Gabrielle said. “Why can’t she go back to something like she was doing?”

“That was eighteen years ago,” Tommy said, spooning a second helping of ravioli onto his plate. “Apparently, no one cares about that.” He dropped a ravioli onto the floor and Shadow snapped it up.

“Gee Gabrielle,” said Mimi. “If you hadn’t been born, Mom would probably have some important high-powered job today. Now she’ll have to go work at Burger King and we’ll never have a nutritious meal again.”

“Or maybe if she’d stopped having kids after me, she could have gone back to work sooner and wouldn’t have to put up with an annoying brat of a daughter like you.”

“That’s enough,” I said, perhaps a bit too loudly.

The kids all looked down at their plates and toyed with their Brussels sprouts. Shadow walked from one to the next, nuzzling her head against their arms, but no one acknowledged her.

“Are you sorry?” Noah asked, without lifting his head.

“Sorry?” I asked.

“Sorry you had all of us? That you gave up your career?”

“Of course not. I’ve loved staying home and raising you kids. I can think of no greater joy.”

“Then why do you want to leave us now?” Mimi asked.

“I’m not leaving you, sweetheart.” Shadow wandered over and licked my hand.

The sputter of a neighbor’s ski boat engine broke through the silence, then faded into the distance.

“Well then,” I said, mustering up my most cheerful voice. “Who’d like ice cream with their apple pie?”