

Chapter 1

TOO MANY STEPSISTERS

My husband's face loomed from the billboard, smiling more broadly in two dimensions than I'd ever seen him do in real life. Warren Wunder, D.D.S., suave in a sleek black tux, his arms draped across six rail-thin blondes, three on each side, whose bounteous breasts and seductive smiles could easily cause a traffic accident. *For a Wonderful Smile, Call Dr. Wunder*, the billboard read.

Even with the glare of streetlights cutting through the windshield of my Volvo, I recoiled at the sight of six deep cleavages, accentuated by glittering, low-cut gowns. "Madison Avenue comes to cosmetic dentistry," Warren liked to say. But I still wondered why my husband needed a clutch of vamps to advertise tooth whitening and porcelain veneers. A car honked behind me. The traffic light was green. I stepped on the gas and continued home, feeling my six sexy stepsisters sneering at my back.

Turning from Biscayne Boulevard in to Williams Island, a residential development of towering condominiums where Warren and I had moved from Greenwich Village eight years before, I felt my usual disorientation. I'm more of a hobbit, my natural habitat being a cozy burrow. But Warren had insisted on living in the heart of Aventura, an upscale development Aventurians like to think of as South-Beach-sans-riffraff, that fades into Ft. Lauderdale to the north, Miami to the south, and Miami Beach to the east. The west was an undefined blob of suburbia and Cubans, at least from the perspective of Warren and his Aventura friends, themselves all transplanted New Yorkers who seemed to thrive on Maseratis, Montecristos, and Neiman Marcus.

I drove through a maze of roads lined with palm trees rooted in concrete. The twinkling Christmas lights seemed incongruous. The community association was also planning to truck in some snow. I imagined my bikinied neighbors stretched out on lounge chairs in the chipped ice sipping mojitos while their kids built snowmen. Clearly I still didn't get how Floridians celebrated the holidays.

Warren and I rented a two-bedroom, two-bath on the eighteenth floor of one of the enormous edifices that dominated the small island. Our panorama of the Intracoastal Waterway was beautiful, except in the master bedroom where a newer building had obliterated the view. I've got to admit—the apartment had a lot more of Warren in it than me. It was a geometric jumble of gray mica, chrome, marble, and glass, and I was constantly banging my hips and thighs on pointy, protruding edges.

As a realtor, I hated renting, but Warren had persuaded me to wait. Once we had a baby, he assured

me, we'd buy our dream home. A place with a big green yard, spreading oak trees and a wooden swing, where our children could play and not fear being run over by Aventura drivers in 6-speed BMWs.

In keeping with recent bad habits, I went straight to the refrigerator, a stainless steel vault always smeared with dozens of mysterious fingerprints. I took out a package of uncooked chicken breasts, then scrounged through the sparse contents of the refrigerator until I found a dried-out fudge brownie wrapped in aluminum foil. It was so old it had become tasteless. I ate it anyway. It was seven o'clock. Warren had promised he'd be home by seven-thirty, a nice change after all the late nights he'd been working. Maybe after a relaxing dinner and a bottle of wine he'd be in the mood for making love. I seasoned the chicken breasts, then put them in the oven to bake while I went to the bedroom to get ready.

Conceiving was a lot more challenging than I had imagined, particularly with a husband who was more interested in crown bridge reconstruction than in sex. But tonight, with my temperature optimum for getting pregnant, I was leaving nothing to chance.

I set the three cinnamon aromatic candles that I'd picked up at my mother's store down on the nightstand. They'd come with a spell called "Love-making boost." I hadn't been able to resist. The instructions read: *Place the three candles in a triangle. This symbolizes feminine and masculine mergers. Light the bottom left one and say, "for passion," then the right one and say, "for lust" and finally the top one and say, "for pure love."*

I lit the candles as I recited the mantra. Passion, lust, and love. Honestly—I couldn't believe I was really doing this, but I was up against the billboard babes. I went to

change into something more competitive. The black lacy caftan successfully hid my recent weight gain, seventeen pounds of looking for love in a box of chocolates. Not that Warren didn't love me; he was just preoccupied with growing his dental practice. The box of truffles he'd brought me last night was open on my dressing table. I popped one of the last three into my mouth. The chocolate melted away and the rich, smooth cherry cream leaked into my mouth. Mmmm. Of course he loved me. Why would he keep bringing me chocolates if he didn't?

I dabbed perfume behind my earlobes and at the nape of my neck. My straight black hair hung loose to my shoulders—in high school I'd been cast as Cleopatra and had been favorably compared with Elizabeth Taylor in the old movie version—but I couldn't help wondering if Warren actually preferred blondes and that had been my problem all along.

Something harsh pierced my nostrils. I sniffed the air. Perfume, cinnamon, candle wax, and something else that made it all add up to smell like a New Age crematorium.

Shit. The chicken was burning.

I ran into the kitchen, took out the tray of chicken breasts, scraped off the blackened skin, then left them covered with foil and on "warm" in the oven, hoping they wouldn't taste like jerky by the time Warren got home.

It was after eight. Where was he? I called his cell phone. It went straight to voicemail. The battery was probably dead. Again. I tried Warren's office number. His nasal voice came on. "Thank you for calling Dr. Wunder. Sorry no one is available right now. For a wonderful smile, please leave a message at the sound of the tone. Beep." I hung up.

Some of the black ashes from the burnt chicken skin had floated down to the gray marble floor. I got down on my hands and knees with the Dustbuster and sucked them up, experiencing a weird Cinderella moment. Like there was a fancy ball going on in town and I hadn't made the Invite list.

I rolled over onto my butt, the Dustbuster in my lap, and got a dog's-eye view of my gray kitchen, chrome and glass dinette, gray mica living room—

And my life.

What the heck was I doing?

I stormed back into the bedroom, blew out the damn candles, and dumped the friggin' truffles in the wastebasket.

Working late?

But maybe I was jumping to conclusions. He could have had a heart attack. I grabbed my handbag and keys, picturing my husband stretched out on the floor beside one of the new state-of-the-art massaging-lumbar-support dental chairs he'd absolutely had to have.

The lacy caftan bunched up between my knees as I drove out of the parking garage and took a right turn on Biscayne Boulevard.

The detested billboard came into view. I accelerated, hoping to make it through the green light. No chance. The light turned red and I stopped short. I didn't even try to turn away. Six perfect white smiles and the man responsible for them. I looked directly into Warren's ten-inch eyes.

"For your sake, Warren," I said, "I hope you had a heart attack."

Warren's office was just ahead. In accordance with a pattern established early in our marriage, we lived about

five minutes from Warren's office, about twenty-five from mine. Of course, being a real estate broker wasn't a "real job," Warren would tell me, so it didn't matter if my commute was longer. I guess that's why he spent the money I earned so freely; it wasn't "real money" after all.

I was breathing hard, clenching my teeth—flawless white ones, no thanks to any intervention by Warren.

The parking lot beside the medical building he shared with an assortment of doctors and dentists was empty except for Warren's black Porsche and a white Jaguar.

I picked up my pace.

Warren's office was on the ground floor accessible to the parking lot by a walkway surrounded by palmetto palms glowing from the decorative lights hidden in the pampas grass. The night air was oppressive and bullfrogs croaked a deafening dirge as I hurried along the pebbled Chattahoochee path.

The door to Warren's suite was locked, but there was a keypad beside it. I input the code we used for our PIN number, and virtually everything else that required a numeric passcode—his birthday. The door opened.

The reception area was dark, the only light coming from the hallway and a couple of exit signs. It took me a second to adjust. Armless chairs covered in gray flannel stood on a gray area rug over gray marble. On the counter beneath the pass-through window was a silver tray filled with yellow buttons. Each 'happy face' had a full smile of even white teeth instead of a curved black line, the message: *Have a Wonderful Smile*, and Warren's phone number and website. One of Warren's patients, the same one who had designed the billboard, had created these in some kind of barter arrangement with Warren.

I picked up a plaster model of Chiclet-size teeth fitted into pink, waxy gums. There were red, rubbery lips that grotesquely stretched into a smile when the upper and lower teeth opened. A gift from another patient.

I went down the carpeted hallway to Warren's office, opening and closing the teeth. They made a comforting clacking sound.

There was muffled laughter coming from Warren's office. The door was closed. My heart rate accelerated and I hesitated. Did I really want to take the lid off Pandora's Box? Then I heard a sound that resembled a squealing pig and I threw open the door.

The first thing I noticed were the large white breasts, over-inflated like a pair of volleyballs, belonging to the woman lying on her back on Warren's extra-long gray couch.

Warren jumped up, his hands in front of his crotch, as the woman rolled off the couch, reaching for a pile of clothes on the floor.

"Please, Frankie," Warren said. "Don't be angry. I can explain."

The woman's plunge neckline sweater was caught on her head as she struggled to pull up her tight white jeans. She was fast, but then it helped that she hadn't worn any underwear. Jeans up, she tugged the sweater the rest of the way down over the volleyballs. Out popped her head. Straight blonde hair fell across one eye.

Even without the billboard smile, I recognized her. One of my salacious stepsisters.

Second from the left.

Chapter 2

SAY GOODBYE TO KANSAS, TOTO

“Bastard.” I let loose a battle shriek and lunged at Warren.

He turned and threw himself against the extra-long couch, his white butt shimmering in the dim light like a half-baked soufflé.

I came down on him with the open teeth gripped in both hands.

The teeth clamped shut on his ass with a satisfying chomp.

On the drive home, I called several of the 24-hour lock changing services that flourished in Aventura—this being the realm of billboard husbands—but they all said there was a backlog and no one could get to me until the morning. Probably a full moon tonight, and all the princes had turned into werewolves and wife-cheaters. I was glad I’d made it home myself before midnight—not

sure what I might have become if I'd stayed in Warren's lair any longer. I had experienced a moment's regret that the teeth that bit into Warren's ass hadn't had protruding fangs.

Warren got to the apartment a few minutes after I did. He used his key and shouted through the guard chain, "Come on, Frankie. Open up. Let's at least talk about it."

I wondered if my neighbors would call the police, but they were the type that slept with earplugs.

"Go away, Warren. It's over."

"Please. You really hurt me, you know."

Unbelievable. "I hurt YOU?"

"Come on, baby. I can't sit on my butt. At least give me some ice."

"I'm not your baby. Why don't you call Drizella, or Anastasia, or whatever your billboard bimbo's name is?"

"Please, Frankie. Let me in. I have no place to sleep."

"Try the extra-long couch in your office."

I waited. There was silence, then the sound of footfalls walking away from the apartment and the ping of the elevator stopping

I was tempted to run after him. Scream at him. How dare he do this to me?

I heard the elevator door slide shut. He was gone.

That bastard. Bastard. Bastard.

I buried my face in my pillow, hoping the down feathers would absorb my sobs. I was angry. So angry. But there was something else squeezing my heart. Something I didn't want to think about.

A short while later, the door chain clattered. I sat up and listened, hoping Warren hadn't returned with some kind of tool to cut it. But no, that wasn't Warren's style. He acted like he didn't know pliers from a hammer.

“That’s why we have a checkbook,” he would say anytime something broke.

After a few minutes, the clanking stopped. Slowly, my anger merged with my dreams.

Voluptuous blondes with cobwebbed hair and teeth like Chiclets sang cacophonous melodies while hundreds of bullfrogs dragged their distended penises along pebbled Chattahoochee paths hurrying to answer the Sirens’ call. The frogs crawled up long, naked legs and spread their webbed feet in a gesture of ET-like bliss as dozens of volleyball breasts bounced against their slimy bodies.

A shrill ring awakened me and I jumped up swatting frogs. Security calling about sending up a locksmith.

Locksmith? I looked over at the fluffy pillow and empty space where I expected to see Warren. My abdomen convulsed as I remembered.

I dragged myself out of bed, my face feeling like it had been attacked by swarming bees, and went to let the locksmith in. I was sure he’d remark on my puffy eyelids and red nose, but instead he began examining the lock, which apparently held more interest to him than yet another jilted Aventura wife. Fifteen minutes later he handed me two new keys and an exorbitant bill.

I locked the door after him and tromped back to the bedroom, wondering if expenses related to disposing of ex-husbands were tax-deductible.

The bedroom seemed wrong somehow. My legs began to shake and I sat down on the edge of the bed staring at the bill.

Now what? All the dreams I’d carefully constructed over the past ten years seemed to blend with the lingering stench of last night’s aromatic candles and burned

chicken. I looked at my rumpled pillows and comforter. How nice it would be to climb back into bed and sleep for a while.

Warren's untouched pillow stared back at me.

"No more," I said. I'd slept through too much of my life already, denying the truth.

I took Warren's matching set of Louis Vuitton suitcases out of the closet. I filled one with black shirts, black pants, gray shirts and gray pants. Black and gray underwear, shorts and gym clothes went into the next one. Warren was a monochrome kind of guy and, as he liked to say, he never mixed. I surveyed my work with disgust, everything neatly folded in orderly stacks. What was I doing?

With some effort, I scrambled the contents, successfully tangling black silk boxers in black tee shirts and sweat pants, discovering just how good it felt to discard my OCD behavior for once. I debated putting his shoes and sneakers into his gym bag, but decided that was too good for him. I stuffed the shoes into the suitcases, hoping the soles had a little dirt, or worse, on them.

I could do this. Let Warren find someone else to be his personal valet.

I slipped on my customary uniform of a black top and pants, then pulled them off just as quickly. No more dark, empty colors. Warren had insisted I wear black because it was more flattering. Yeah, flattering if you happen to be a vampire.

I rummaged through the back of my closet and found an outfit I had bought the past spring, a yellow silk blouse and sky blue skirt covered with tiny daisies. Warren had been aghast when I showed up wearing it to his dental

hygienist's bridal shower. The blouse felt soothing against my cheek and I remembered the soft, yellow shirt I had worn the first time I met Warren.

We were both juniors at NYU, but since I was majoring in elementary ed and Warren pre-med, our paths hadn't crossed. Then of course, Warren's parents were paying full freight while I was on a scholarship and we all tended to keep to our own. His cousin, whom I knew from junior high and who was in my psych class, fixed us up.

Warren sat at a table in the back of one of those dark coffee shops near Washington Square Park where students liked to hang out on cold winter days. You could drink a cup of coffee and bullshit with your friends for hours and no one would kick you out. I recognized Warren from his cousin's description: narrow-shouldered with a slight stoop. Straight hair covered his ears, a faded shade of brown that looked like he had dumped a cup of flour on it. His nose was narrow with a slight bump and delicate, flaring nostrils. This was before he grew his moustache, and his long upper lip stretched into a thin mouth that formed an almost perfect, straight line. He wore a black cable-knit sweater and black pants. "Warren Wunder?" I asked.

He looked skeptical. "Aphrodite Frank?" When I nodded, he said, "You're not what I expected."

"Oh?" I'm pretty sure I blushed.

"You're so vivid."

"Vivid?"

"You don't look like the NYU type. I mean for starters, the colors. Bright yellow shirt, red lips. Then there's your body."

I remember wrapping my arms self-consciously around what my mother referred to with some concern as my “conspicuous hourglass figure.”

“It’s too ‘50s,” he continued. “Too Gina-Lollobrigida and Sophia-Loren.”

I should have turned and walked out, but I was so stunned, I merely froze.

“Hey,” Warren said. “I’m just kidding. Come on and sit down.” He signaled to the waiter. “How about a cup of coffee? There, that’s better,” he said as I pulled out a chair. “Truth is, Aphrodite, you’re a good-looking girl but, Jesus, you even have dimples when you smile. I feel like I’m with a former Mouseketeer.”

I took a deep breath and thought, it’s only coffee. “Actually,” I said. “My name’s Frankie.”

He looked confused.

“I stopped using Aphrodite when I started high school, but your cousin still insists on calling me that.” My mother was into the classics at the time I was born. A flip of a coin and I became the Greek goddess, Aphrodite, a source of consternation and embarrassment for me as I was growing up. Though I suppose it was better than Venus.

“Frankie.” He nodded his head. “I like that.”

Thank god I can get something right, I remember thinking.

I pulled the yellow silk blouse over my head and stepped into the blue and daisy skirt, which fit only a little snugly. Into the waste basket went my mocha brown lipstick. It landed on the box of truffles. I scavenged through an old makeup case for what I hoped hadn’t melted with time. The smell and taste of bright colors and

starting afresh enveloped me as I smeared the candy-apple red lipstick over my un-kissed lips. The reflection in the mirror smiled back. Vivid.

Inside the envelope I scotch-taped to the front door was a note that said: *Warren. Your suitcases are with the doorman. You can come by later to pick up the rest of your things. Don't call me; I'll call you when I'm ready. Frankie. P.S. Yes, I changed the locks.*

Heading to work, I pressed down my left turn signal when I came to the traffic light at Biscayne Boulevard, my usual route to Miami Beach. Then, on impulse, I flipped it up and turned right, exceeding the speed limit as I crossed Miami Gardens Drive. I came to a dead stop in front of the billboard. Cars honked all around me. I just stared up at the face of the man who now seemed like a stranger while those six perfect sets of white teeth smirked down at me.

My office is located in an old building just off Arthur Godfrey Road on Miami Beach. I hesitated at the front door and decided I needed a cup of coffee before I went in and saw my partner Joan. I wasn't quite ready for people and their well-intentioned advice.

The restaurant, and I use that term loosely, had only a few customers. The breakfast crowd was gone and it was still a couple of hours before the next group wandered in for lunch. The previous owner had died and his children had sold the eatery to Esteban, a Cuban Jew who, by modifying its classic menu and offering latte and *café Cubano*, bagels and *pastelitos*, had succeeded in attracting an eclectic crowd. Esteban was brusque and, like his café, not quite clean, but he brewed the best

coffee in town. I ordered it black at the counter, and decided to forego my usual bagel with cream cheese. Formica tables and metal chairs with red vinyl cushions, most of which seemed to have been slashed with a plastic knife by an angry customer, were in desperate need of a good scrubdown. I always tried to do my part by scraping dried cream cheese out from the table rims and, since I generally ate there once or twice a day, I was surprised that my efforts didn't seem to make a dent.

I dumped a Sweet 'n' Low into my cup. My friend, Neil Fogelman, was sitting at a back table, bent over the manuscript of his Great American Novel. I decided not to duck out. Neil was divorced, early forties and, although brilliant, seemed to be living on some distant planet. His oversized black-framed glasses had to have been at least twenty years old judging from the style and scratches on the lenses. He struck me as an unkempt Clark Kent, with brown hair curling over his ears and collar and broad shoulders camouflaged by an un-ironed oxford shirt.

I brought my coffee over to his table.

"I'm having a problem getting the sperm into Mary," he said without looking up.

"Excuse me?" I sat down opposite him. I hadn't thought of Neil as the dating type and his statement seemed to confirm this.

"Mary. Remember? My protagonist." He raised his head and blinked behind smudged lenses as though I was slowly coming into his focus.

"Of course. Mary." I sipped my coffee, remembering Neil's novel was about a modern-day researcher who impregnates herself with sperm from a frozen body exhumed from the 1849 Franklin Expedition in northern Canada.

“She could use an applicator.” I was relieved to have this distraction from my own problems.

“An applicator?” He tapped on the cleft in his chin. There was a small patch of beard he’d missed while shaving.

“Like women use for yeast infections,” I said. “They fill it with a vaginal cream, then squirt it. Mary can defrost the sperm, mix it with a solution, then pow.”

“That might work.” He scribbled something in the margin with a red pen.

He had told me his ex-wife had kicked him out after he’d quit his “real job” to write his novel. He had a law degree from Stanford, an MBA from Michigan and no interest in taking any further part in the corporate world. Now he rode around on a ten-year old Yamaha, doing the accounting for small businesses on the Beach. I think he liked the bagel shop best because Esteban gave him free food and let him use one of the tables to work on his novel in exchange for bookkeeping services.

“So you left Warren,” Neil said.

I almost spilled my coffee. “How do you know that?”

“I’m oblivious, not stupid.”

“Neil, really. I haven’t told a soul.”

He leaned back in his chair and stretched. He had perspiration stains under his arms, probably from riding his motorcycle there. “You’re wearing colors,” he said.

“And that means I left Warren?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, what else do you know about my situation?”

“You probably caught him screwing some hottie with nice teeth.”

“And you know that how?”

“Because you would have already known yourself, if you hadn’t been buried so deeply in denial.”

“Wait. You’re saying Warren’s been cheating on me and everyone knew except me because I chose not to?”

“Frankie, my friend. You’ve been walking around with your head in your *How to Get Pregnant* book. No matter what anyone said, you wouldn’t look up long enough to see what was really happening.”

My eyes filled with tears. “I’m trying to have a baby and that bastard’s screwing around.”

“That’s right. And I’ll tell you something else. Those tears aren’t over him.”

“They’re not?”

“You don’t love him. I don’t think you’ve loved him for years.”

“That’s not true. I loved him.”

“Really? If you did, you wouldn’t be sitting here now, with your red lipstick and your ‘finally-I’m-free’ ensemble. You’d be in bed for the next month crying your eyes out.”

“But I’m devastated, I really am.”

“Sure you are. You’re probably pissed off that you’ve wasted so much time trying to use him as your sperm donor. Mary’s got the right idea. Why don’t you use an applicator?”

“I’m not that desperate yet.”

“And of course, I’m always available.”

“Thanks, Neil. It’s a comfort having a friend like you.”

“So what should I mix the sperm with?” he asked, removing his glasses and smearing the film around with his napkin. “Maybe some K-Y Jelly and sterile water. What do you think?”

“What?” I asked before realizing he was back into his novel. “Neil, stay with me a little longer. I’ve got real life problems. Mary can wait.”

“Mary’s been waiting three years. I’ll never finish my book if I keep getting interrupted.”

“Please. I need to decide on a plan of action.”

“Hold on. Less than twenty-four hours after you catch your husband cheating on you, you need a plan of action?”

Something was burning. A bagel or toast. Esteban began yelling into the kitchen in a combination of Spanish and Yiddish.

“I have to get on with my life.”

“Come on, Frankie. How about slowing down a bit? Do a little grieving, a little partying, you know, the normal things one does after discovering your marriage was a piece of shit.”

“I’m not the kind of person who falls apart whenever something goes wrong.” I’d learned that much from my mother. “Besides, I don’t have time.”

Neil shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. I don’t think he owned a comb.

“I want a baby, Neil. I’m thirty-five. I’ve got to find a husband, and soon.”

“Why? Why not just get pregnant if a baby’s what you really want? Why bother with a husband? Men are messy and we smell bad.”

“I don’t want to raise a fatherless child. I’ve been there and it’s not fair. I’m going to make sure my child has a real family.”

“Okay, fine. So what are you going to do? Hurry up and get divorced, get married and have a child in twelve

months or less? Before your biological clock explodes or your last egg drops?”

“Now there’s a plan.” I was starting to crave a toasted sesame seed bagel with cream cheese.

“You’re about as practical as Mary.”

“She has a plan. I have a plan.”

“Which is?”

“First, I have to get organized, then I’ll make a list.” My fingernail gravitated toward a crust of dried cream cheese at the rim of the table and I began scraping furiously. “I’m not going to make another mistake. I know the kind of man who will make a good husband and father. My Prince Charming is out there and I’m going to find him.”

“Well,” Neil said. “I hope you have a very capable fairy godmother.”

“I don’t need a fairy godmother.” I reached into my handbag for my makeup case, applied a fresh coat of candy-apple red lipstick, and smacked my lips together. “I’ve got me.”

Chapter 3

WHO ATE MY BREADCRUMBS?

I drove east to my first client appointment, then turned on Pine Tree Drive feeling less sure of myself than when I'd left Neil a few minutes earlier. Contemplating a program to find my soul mate was fine, but the reality was something else. The thought of returning to the singles' scene nauseated me. I had hated dating even when I weighed twenty pounds less and my breasts were still perky.

A Mercedes convertible was already parked in the driveway of the property I was showing on Indian Creek. A powerfully built man and slender woman were craning to peek over the dense bushes at the house. They were dressed completely in black like twin burglars.

"Good morning," I said to the couple. Neither one of them could have been more than twenty-five, but I'd prequalified them. She was a model and his dad owned several car dealerships. "How are you both today?"

“Perfect,” the guy said. He wrapped his arm protectively around his wife’s delicate shoulders, then gave her a playful squeeze. “Aren’t we, babe?”

She responded with a cover-girl smile. “Perfect.”

I’ll admit it. I was envious of her—half of a happy couple, like I wasn’t. But I was also a businesswoman with little patience for whining about my lot in life.

“Why don’t we get started?” I asked.

I led them down the seventy-five foot brick loggia and unlocked the front door. Unlike most realtors, I preferred showing vacant properties so the buyers could see the actual house, not just someone’s great decorating job. “As I told you on the phone, this is a classic Mediterranean-style villa built in 1932, with many touches in the style of Addison Mizner.”

Our footsteps echoed off the scratched hardwood. “The floors are original as are the cypress-beamed ceilings and fireplaces,” I said. “It’s just under six thousand square feet with a hundred feet on Indian Creek and direct ocean access.”

“Perfect for our yacht,” he said.

“Yes, perfect,” she said.

I took a deep breath and led them from room to room, pointing out delicate interior ironwork, the detail on the mantels, the views, but also the ceiling leaks, the decrepit bathrooms and the rotting guesthouse that smelled like someone had died in it. Joan and I attributed our success in selling real estate to our unique approach. Honesty, honesty, honesty. Ironically, it seemed the harder we tried to talk clients out of buying a house, the more they wanted it.

Mrs. Perfect pulled her husband back into a small corner room with wonderful light and the remnants of a

ceiling fan dangling from an overhead fixture. “Don’t you think this would be perfect for Shlomo?”

Mr. Perfect rested his fingertips against her flat belly. “Or Shloma. I still think it’s a girl.”

“You’re pregnant?” I blurted out.

“I know,” she said. “I look like a whale.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. In fact, just the opposite. I would never have guessed.”

“Except the wonderful glow in her face is a giveaway,” Mr. Perfect said.

Just shoot me and throw me out to the gators.

“Mind if we walk through again?” the woman asked.

“Please. Take your time.”

I hated this sensation of feeling sorry for myself. They were a nice couple. Just because they were perfect didn’t mean they didn’t deserve happiness. But why did they have to have it all?

I sat on one of the stone benches that overlooked the waterway and the Collins Avenue hotels and high rises that had sprung up years after this villa was built. There was a time when the old house would have been a serene gem, before the city had grown up around it, before someone had stopped loving it.

I remembered the first apartment Warren and I rented in Greenwich Village. The original building and apartments would have been magnificent. Not so by the time Warren and I moved in, but we were nonetheless delighted by the high ceilings and courtyard view. Our six hundred square-foot abode was located on the second floor and was at the back of the original apartment, which had been converted into three units. The bedroom was huge, but there was barely enough space in the living room for a small loveseat. A narrow closet had been

transformed into a bathroom with the toilet wedged between the bathtub and a wall, and one time, Warren's Aunt Fanny—that's really her name—got stuck.

We painted the apartment ourselves and wallpapered the tiny kitchen. I'd forgotten that—Warren speckled with pale yellow paint like old-fashioned dot candy, his hair tucked under a New York Mets baseball cap, sipping chocolate milk from its container. We'd eat the dinner I prepared each night, usually Hamburger or Tuna Helper, at the cramped kitchen table and talk about our future when someday we'd live in a big house with lots of kids and a dog.

Lots of kids and a dog.

"Frankie, we love the house," the young man called out, as they approached from the deteriorating dock.

"Good." I stood up from the bench and brushed tiny pieces of gravel from the back of my skirt. "I want to make sure you understand what's involved here. First, the five and a half million asking price is fair for a property of this size in this condition. But it needs work. New roof, new electrical, new plumbing. Then, the kitchen and bathrooms need renovating. Also the dock."

"We'd like to make an offer," Mr. Perfect said. Then he slid his large hands under his wife's perfect hair and kissed her hard on her perfect lips.

I should have been elated—this meant a huge commission. But for some reason, all I could think of was Aunt Fanny sitting on the toilet, stuck between the wall and the bathtub, shouting, "Help! Get me out of here."

A half hour later, I pushed open the creaky outer door to my office building. The Art Deco exterior was charming, but except for the reception area and client

conference room that had been refurbished recently, the interior rooms inhabited by the realtors and their assistants were half a step from dilapidated. Joan and I could have gone out on our own and gotten a nicer place, but we decided it made more sense to affiliate with a national realtor and concentrate on selling houses, not administration.

Joan was on the phone with a client when I walked into the small, narrow room we shared with our assistant, Missy, a cranky part-time college student, who hadn't arrived yet—late again.

I plopped my briefcase down on the table that served as my desk, directly across from Joan's long table.

Joan gave me a puzzled look from behind wire-rimmed glasses, but continued her phone conversation and returned her gaze to the computer screen. Her short blonde hair was pushed back from her round face and she wore a khaki pantsuit.

The two of us had started working together as inexperienced assistants eight years before. I had just moved to Florida, determined to do anything besides teaching, and Joan was returning to work with her three children all tucked away in school. Joan had been born and raised in central Florida, not far from the Kennedy Space Center. She was blocky and efficient and had an incredible knack for business. It also helped that her husband, Dave, was a real-estate attorney. It hadn't taken Joan and me long before we decided we could sell real estate better than anyone else in the office and formed a partnership. Since that time, we'd never had a fight.

I began organizing the piles of papers that had accumulated since the previous day. New brochures for the properties we were listing had arrived and I double-

checked them, although I had already scrutinized the proofs.

Joan hung up the phone and swiveled around in her chair. She had piercing blue eyes like a Persian cat. “So, do you need the name of a good divorce attorney?” she asked in her soft, Southern accent.

“Is it written all over me?”

“The colors, Frankie. You never wear colors.”

“I caught him in his office with one of the women on his billboard.”

She nodded, not seeming the least surprised. “You’re taking it well, but I suppose you’re still in shock.”

“I’m not in shock.”

“Sure you are. It’s a natural reaction.”

“But I’m not, really.” There were several new cracks zigzagging across the wall over my table. We really needed to find better space. “Anyway. It’s over. I’ve changed the locks and I’m ready to find someone new.”

“Just like that? Twelve years of marriage and no regrets, no doubts, no guilt?”

I jugged the stack of brochures against the table to even them out. “Why should I feel guilty or have regrets? I tried to make it work. You know that. I tried harder than Hercules flushing the Augean Stables, and I’ll bet the marriage stank just as much as those horses. But enough is enough.”

“Ah.” She turned back to her table. “It’s great that you don’t have any feelings for him or any remorse about ending things.”

“Joan, he was cheating on me. I’ve been a doormat for long enough. I need to get on with my life.”

“Your marriage must have been truly empty.”

“What are you trying to do?” I raised my voice. “I’m fine. I’m dealing with things. Do you think every woman who goes through a divorce has to have a nervous breakdown?”

She kept her eyes on her monitor. “I’m glad you’re handling it so well.”

I pushed off my table, hurling myself in my chair toward her side of the room. Luckily I was stopped by its impact against her table.

“Okay, Frankie.” She turned toward me. “Here’s what I think is going on with you. When you don’t like a situation, you block it out. You lock it away in a deep, dark closet and throw away the key. That’s what you’ve been doing with Warren the last few years, refusing to acknowledge that something was wrong with your marriage. And now you’re doing it again.”

“I’m just trying to get through this.”

“You can’t just get through it, Frankie.” Her accent had become more pronounced, a sure sign she was getting aggravated with me. “There’s going to be pain and hurt and fear and a boatload of other things that you don’t want to deal with.”

“Maybe for other people, but that’s not for me.”

My cell phone was ringing, but it took me a few seconds to react to the sound. “Yes?” I said, “Oh. Warren.”

Joan shook her head and turned back to her computer.

“So you changed the goddamn locks?” His voice was low, like there were people within earshot. “Just like that? And threw my clothes out? How am I supposed to live, like a bagman?”

“You can get the rest of your things when you want. Just call me first so I can have someone there.”

“Call you first? What? You’re afraid I’ll attack you? Jesus, Frankie. What are you doing?”

“Well, I’m planning on calling a lawyer.”

“For god’s sake. You don’t need a lawyer. We’re not getting divorced. It’s just a little misunderstanding.”

“There’s no way I misunderstood Miss Happy Smile with the volleyball tits.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“No, Warren.” I was shouting now. “This is more like a delayed reaction. I should have realized years ago what a piece of shit you are.”

I could hear him breathing hard, or maybe it was my own breathing.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said finally.

A few bits of plaster from one of the wall cracks had fallen near the back edge of the table. I picked up a small chunk. Turned it over with my fingers. Something hard and bruised was forming in my chest.

“Okay then,” Warren said. “Go ahead; call a lawyer. I just want you to know I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.” His voice cracked. “And Frankie, whether you believe me or not, I still love you.”

I sat with the phone in my hand, long after he hung up, and looked at the rough piece of plaster. I remembered dusty hair escaping from a New York Mets baseball cap, chocolate milk and Hamburger Helper on a cluttered kitchen table. I remembered huddling together at a bus stop and eating Chinese dumplings on Mott Street. I remembered sweet kisses and earnest promises.

“Are you okay?” Joan asked. She touched my shoulder.

Then the tears came.