

Mending Dreams

Bonnie Schroeder

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*To Miss Annabel Doss and all the other teachers who strive to change lives
for the better*

When your life falls apart, sometimes you need help putting it back together...

Chapter 1

A Narrow Escape

Did you ever have one of those days that was so bad you thought, *Well at least it can't get any worse?* And then you realized, *Oh, yes, it could. It most certainly could.*

That August Monday started out hot, humid, and as wretched as Los Angeles can be. Somehow it always surprises us, the people who live here. “Where’s the ocean breeze? Why is it so *hot?*” Because we live in a desert, that’s why. It’s been greened over with stolen water, but it is what it is.

The muggy weather came courtesy of Hurricane Isabel, which had devastated a bunch of towns along the Gulf of Mexico, and then brought her havoc further inland, even as far as California. Thick clouds held the heat in, and we baked, simmered, and stewed. A malicious pink sky tinged everything the color of thin blood.

Mechanical devices misbehaved. Traffic lights suddenly went dark. Internet servers spontaneously disconnected. Air conditioners strained and threatened to die.

I was late to work, thanks to some moron’s car in the no-park zone of Glendale Blvd. When I finally arrived, caffeine-starved and out of breath, disaster awaited.

Over the weekend, I’d logged on to my office network and picked

up my emails, even as “workaholic” hissed around in my brain. Jacobs Laboratories had sure been getting its money’s worth out of me. I’d flown home late Friday night after five fun-filled days at our Dallas plant, and on Saturday I barely had time to take in my dry cleaning, mail my mom’s birthday present to New Mexico, and restock my refrigerator. My houseplants begged for water, and so did my elderly neighbor’s front lawn, which I’d helped take care of since she fell and broke her hip. Unpaid bills lurked in the pile of unopened envelopes scattered across the floor beneath the mail slot.

And I was desperate to get to the gym. Those days of enforced inactivity and hotel food had taken their toll. Maybe I was overly paranoid about my weight, but I’d been on diets since I was ten years old, and I’d finally learned that exercise helped silence the nagging little voice—my own or my mom’s, I was never sure which—that whispered “fat, fat, fat” whenever I saw my reflection.

Not until Sunday did I even get time to catch up with my friends. Noah, the man in my life, was camping with his son in Yosemite. He’d left a message on my answering machine to welcome me home (as usual, I’d forgotten to turn my cell back on after the flight) and in some ways that was better than having him there in person.

* * *

My first clue Monday wasn’t going my way at work came as a voicemail from my assistant, the inaptly named Angel Fairweather.

“Susan, I hate to do this, but I caught one mother of a summer cold,” her recorded voice said between sneezes and coughs. “I know you’ll be buried with work, but maybe one of those lazybones down the hall can help out. I’ll try and be back tomorrow. Sorry.” Another sneeze for good measure before she hung up. Her message had been time stamped at five o’clock Monday morning, and she sure sounded miserable—but Angel was an aspiring actress, and a couple of times before, she’d phoned in sick to go to an audition.

“Damn,” I muttered as I booted up my computer and connected to the Jacobs intranet.

My email inbox was relatively clean, thanks to my weekend check-

in. But sitting in the middle of my desk was a note from Derek Bord, my boss, asking for a time-consuming report on my year-to-date expenses compared with my budget. Double-damn. I went to the break room for coffee, and by the time I got back, I'd received three new emails, all way more urgent than Bord's request.

A few minutes later, Bord himself stomped into my office. He was a small man with dyed-looking black hair and eyes that didn't quite line up.

"Ah, there you are, Susan. Good."

I put all my energy into a smile and pointed at the computer. "Derek. I'm researching the expense data right now."

This was a lie, but he wouldn't know the difference. Bord's computer skills were somewhere below a first-grader's.

He waved a manicured hand. "Forget that. We have bigger fish to fry."

I bit my lip. "Fine. What's up?"

"I need a list of everyone in Benefits, how much they make, how long they've been here. And I need it right away."

I peered into his beady little eyes and wondered if he'd somehow forgotten that my job description—Manager of Corporate Compliance—didn't include keeping personnel records on individual work groups. I had enough of a challenge making sure the company maintained a semblance of ethical corporate conduct.

"Val should have that at her fingertips," I said without thinking. Big mistake.

My friend and co-worker Val Desmond managed Personnel, which also reported up to Bord and included recordkeeping. I overcame the urge to point out that last detail.

Bord's face scrunched up like a squirrel passing an acorn. "I'm not asking Val. I'm asking *you*. I have my reasons—and please don't cause another scene about this."

Another scene?

"I don't understand," I said, trying to figure out what had Bord wound up so tightly.

Again the squirrel face, accompanied by a heavy sigh. "I don't have time to explain it to you. I need the information, I need it *now*, and I

need it done discreetly. If it's beyond your capability, I'll get someone else to—"

I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm on it."

He still blocked the doorway, studying me. I shuffled some papers to show I meant business. "Anything else?"

He shook his head. "An hour, Susan. I need it in an hour."

I went to work. The data wasn't that hard to come by, but the research kept me from what I considered more important matters. Every time I glanced at my email inbox, the number of unopened messages had grown.

I sent my query to the database, and an obnoxious little box popped up in the middle of my computer screen, informing me that the system was "WORKING ... PLEASE STAND BY." While I waited, Ginny Loring tapped on my door. Ginny was Val's assistant, a pale, freckled woman with curly red hair and a bizarre sense of style manifested in the yellow sundress and purple sandals she wore that morning.

"No one's answering your phone," Ginny said.

I frowned. "I know. Angel's out sick, and I'm on a rush project for Derek. Just let 'em go to voicemail."

"Okay, but NitroLitho's calling—they really need—"

"Not now. Take a message. Thanks."

Back to the computer, where rows of data appeared on the monitor. I scrolled down to see if the names looked right. Wait—there was one I didn't recognize. Was it a mistake, or someone who'd just been—

Tap, tap, tap. Ginny again.

"What?" I snapped.

She flinched, and I felt a twinge of remorse, but I could practically hear Bord snorting for his damned report.

"Do you want your mail, or should I leave it for Angel to open when she—"

"Leave it! Please."

Ginny actually whimpered as she turned away. Belatedly, I called out "Thanks" as her sandals slapped down the hallway. I sighed and made a note to apologize later, when things calmed down. Even if she had a poor sense of priorities, Ginny meant well.

I found my place in the rows of data, found the unfamiliar name. A new hire. Okay. I downloaded the list, still trying to figure out what that little prick Bord was up to.

Lilah Cantrell, Bord's own personal Dragon Lady, glared at me as I approached, report in hand.

"Mr. Bord is on the phone," she told me.

I cursed the day I'd opposed Bord bringing Lilah with him when he was hired. She had to know about it, judging by the way she treated me. None of the other managers on Bord's staff got the chilly reception I did. Sure, I was just doing my job when I recommended he take one of the existing assistants rather than bring in an outsider, but I don't think Bord had explained my reasoning to her. Not that Lilah would have cared anyway.

I ignored the ice in her voice. "He asked for this report ASAP," I told her, fluttering the papers.

She held out a red-taloned hand. "I'll see that he gets it."

Yeah, right—in another hour or so.

"I'd rather give it to him myself. In case he has any questions."

She pressed her thin red lips together and glanced toward the heavy wood door that closed off Bord's inner sanctum. With a belabored sigh, she got up and knocked softly, then went in and pulled the door shut behind her. A moment later she emerged. "You can go in."

Still on the phone, Bord motioned me to a seat in front of his heavy walnut throne. Me, I'd have gone for a smaller scale in furniture, but I guess he thought it made him look important.

After a leisurely end to his phone call, Bord peered at me over his reading glasses. "What've you got for me?"

I handed him the report and he paged through it, frowning. No "thank you," no "good work, Susan." Just the Bord scrutiny.

"I don't see any ages on here," he said finally.

I fought down a wave of annoyance—at him for the belated request and at myself for not anticipating it.

"You asked for names, salary, and length of service," I said.

He shook his head with a well-crafted look of disappointment. "I expected better of you, Susan."

"It would help if I knew what was going on, Derek. I'm working in the dark here."

Bord looked at me blankly. An awkward moment passed.

"How soon can you get me more complete information?"

I checked my watch. "Fifteen minutes."

He gave me back the report, like it was too contaminated for him to keep. "Do it."

I went back and rewrote the query to ask for age data—plus gender and minority codes for good measure. That should give the little creep more information than he knew what to do with. I sent the request and then retrieved the voicemail messages that had piled up while I worked on Bord's pointless project.

As the query results began coming in, my phone rang. I picked it up without looking at the ID display, sure it was Bord wanting to know how long he had to wait.

"Hi there."

It took a second to place the voice, coming at me out of context like that.

"Bad time to call?" he continued when I didn't answer right away.

Is there ever a good time for a call from your ex-husband? Frank Krajewski and I had somehow forged an edgy truce in the shattered aftermath of our marriage, and even if he did still tell me every time he saw me that I looked just like actress Angie Harmon, *only better*, it didn't mean I was happy to hear from him. Oh sure, I kept his name after the divorce, despite the inconvenience. It's pronounced Cry-YES-ky, but I lost count of the times a sales clerk cheerfully addressed me as Mrs. Kurh-JOO-sky. My maiden name was Stafford, but I'd used Frank's name professionally for six years, and it was just too much trouble to change back.

Besides, the Stafford name was about all my father gave me. I never knew him, but I was pretty sure I liked Frank better. That's not saying much, though. Months of therapy and gallons of tears had worn away the sharp corners of my feelings, but sometimes I felt like my anger toward Frank was all that kept me going.

"No, it's fine," I said in answer to Frank's question, proud of how easily the lie came. "How are you?"

A pause. “Okay. I was wondering if maybe you’d like to have dinner at Emilio’s tonight? Haven’t seen you for a while.”

Something in Frank’s voice made me uneasy. I twirled my stainless steel letter opener and then pressed its sharp tip into the report Bord had rejected. Behind me, the computer hissed softly. A black plastic tray full of incoming mail sat on the far corner of my desk, and it wasn’t going to magically disappear on its own. One of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling started to flicker and buzz; I scribbled a mental note to call Building Maintenance.

“Susie?”

“I’m here. Just checking my schedule. Ummmm, yeah, I can do that.”

“Great!” He sounded relieved.

“How’s Clayton?”

“Fine—he’s up at Davis for some kind of training.”

Aha, that explained it. Frank was on his own and bored; he never handled solitude well. We agreed to meet at seven. I went back to Bord’s little emergency and put Frank out of my thoughts. Almost.

* * *

This time the Dragon Lady didn’t even bother to look up at me. “Go on in.”

Bord studied the report, lips pursed. He set it down and shook his head. *Oh great, he’s going to find something else wrong.*

“A lot of people,” he said, looking at me across four feet of gleaming walnut.

I nodded. “Anything else?”

Bord leaned forward and lowered his voice, even though the connecting door was closed. “This is highly confidential, but you’re going to have a role in it eventually, so we may as well get you started.”

I dug my nails into the padded leather chair arms. *Terrific—more pointless work.*

If you’re beginning to think I didn’t have much respect for Derek Bord, you’re right. I wouldn’t have liked him in the best of situations, but it so happened he was hired to replace my favorite boss of all time,

Paul Dumas. Paul had been tough on his people, but when they delivered, he wasn't stingy with praise. Or bonuses. Paul and I worked well together—until he dropped dead of a heart attack at the age of fifty-three. That had been two years earlier. When Paul died, Jacobs was in the midst of acquiring a medium-sized processing plant in Washington State; we needed to merge their workforce into ours without delay. As Vice President of Human Resources, Paul had been working twenty-four seven on the merger, which is probably what killed him.

Pressed for an immediate successor, Jacobs had opted for an outside hire with supposed credentials in the area of blending workforces. Enter Derek Bord.

And at that moment Bord was giving me an imitation of a benevolent smile from behind his desk, sure of his place in the Jacobs hierarchy. "We have decided to outsource our benefits work," he said.

We who, Derek? You and the rat in your pocket?

"What for?" There I went, speaking without thinking. But the idea sounded stupid, even for Bord. Our Benefits group was small and, except for a marginally competent manager, pretty efficient—too efficient to warrant outsourcing. In my opinion anyway.

Bord scowled. "There are a lot of reasons, but I don't have time to explain it all right now. The thing you have to keep in mind is that people will be ... released. And we'll need to avoid the appearance of discrimination when we decide who to keep and who to let go."

He paused and cocked his head as if waiting for some sign of agreement from me. When I didn't offer any, he added, "That's where you come in."

Still trying to absorb the news, I nodded.

"So you need to be thinking about who's expendable and who's not. And I want you to think outside the box here, Susan."

"Outside the box?" I repeated like a moron. Was he asking me for ways to circumvent our normal Equal Employment Opportunity practices?

"Yes. For example, Jeff Tate. Jeff's a fine manager, but I'm not sure we'll need *his position* when the outsourcing's done. However, Jeff's skills are transferable—we could, say, move him into Personnel and—"

"But that's Val's—"

I didn't have to finish my sentence. Val and Bord had clashed several times when he tried to cut corners in the hiring process. This outsourcing would give him a prime chance to weed out the people who'd stood in his way, the ones he didn't like or want. Maybe even the Compliance Manager, if she gave him an excuse.

"Of course we have to obey the rules," Bord continued. "I'm not suggesting any wholesale disregard. Just ... be creative. Think of ways we can *flex* the rules."

I got up and pretended to study the view. Bord's office had a nice set of windows, and I could see the glass cylinders of the Bonaventure hotel to the north. On bright days the reflection might blind you, but those thick, murky clouds had smothered the sun. I looked back at Bord's desk and his shiny brass name plate, and I pushed away an image of me bashing him over the head with it, blood splashed all over his crisp white shirt and gray silk tie.

Finally I trusted my voice enough to speak. "I'll see what I can come up with."

He nodded. "This is top-secret, Susan. I know you and Desmond are friends, and I'm counting on you to be discreet."

"Don't worry, Derek. I'm good at keeping secrets. I know where a lot of bodies are buried—figuratively speaking."

I hoped that sounded mysterious enough to make him wonder if I had anything on *him*.

I sprinted back to my office, closed the door, and leaned against it. My desk was exactly the way I'd left it, but I felt like my whole world had changed. Val was my friend. Should I warn her of Bord's plan? What good would that do? Was I next? Bord didn't like me, and maybe he knew how much I disliked him. And what about the other people who would lose their jobs? People with kids in high school, a mortgage, doctor bills.

Somehow I found my chair and sat down, hard; then I made myself inhale and exhale until I could feel my skin again. My hands shook so much that I spilled coffee when I tried to take a sip, but I didn't care. I just watched the pale brown stain, almost the color of dried blood, spread over my copy of Bord's report.

Then I decided the best antidote to Bord's toxic news was the

comforting familiarity of my regular work. Among my unopened emails was one from NitroLitho, our printer. The subject line read “URGENT!!!” The message forwarded a draft of Jacobs’ new employee handbook. They wanted comments by close of business. No wonder they got Ginny to bug me. Thankful for any distraction, I started editing.

Val tapped on my door just before noon and poked her head in. “Welcome back. Lunch?”

Val didn’t look a day over thirty, but I knew she’d just turned forty-three. Compact and energetic, she had the mischievous grin of a teenager—always ready to laugh, and when she did, she put her whole body into it. She had straight, shiny brown hair, and her green eyes smiled with the rest of her face. I knew Val looked forward to lunch. She enjoyed her food but never seemed to gain weight, lucky duck. All that laughing must have vaporized the calories.

I marked my place in the handbook draft and shook my head, trying to avoid those smiling eyes and grateful for an excuse to pass on lunch. “I’m buried here. Rain check?”

“You got it. Want me to bring you anything?”

“Thanks, but I’m not real hungry. I’ll survive.”

I sent NitroLitho my comments on the handbook, answered eight other routine messages and returned all the phone calls. Things were looking up, except for the big, gloomy cloud Derek Bord had dropped on my world. I found some stale rice cakes in my desk drawer and washed them down with another cup of coffee, then decided I needed a stretch and a pit stop.

As I passed a bank of vending machines, the Snickers and Milky Way bars on display started calling my name. Damn, I was hungrier than I thought. Snickers had peanuts in them—that meant protein, right? *You deserve it. No, you don’t. You don’t deserve shit. You can hardly fit into your clothes now. Yeah, but it’d taste soooo good.*

The dialogue was tiresome but familiar. I gritted my teeth and kept walking. Some women would have caved, but not me—not that time, anyway.

As I reached the door to the women’s restroom, Ginny Loring’s voice came through from the other side.

“She’s such a bitch,” I heard Ginny say as I swung the door open, “I don’t know how Angel—”

Ginny and Alice DuValle, another assistant, were washing their hands; Ginny had raised her voice to be heard over the water flow. She stopped mid-sentence as I came in, and the freckles on her face almost disappeared in the red flush that rose on her cheeks.

“... how she can wear those pointy-toed shoes,” Ginny finished, carefully not looking at me.

Alice cringed, but I ignored both of them and locked myself in a stall. Only when the door hissed shut behind them could I let out my breath.

The women’s restroom walls were a dull, sickly yellow, and the overhead lights put shadows on your face in places they didn’t belong. Even drop-dead gorgeous Angel looked slightly jaundiced in there. The mirrors had dulled with age and abuse, and I think the idea was to discourage loitering.

I knew all this, but when I emerged from the stall I still flinched at the sight of my worn-out, scared reflection. Two weeks overdue for a trim, my normally flattering chin-length hair had morphed into a muddy brown fright wig with curls poking out in all the wrong places. My face looked like every one of my thirty-five years had told a story on it. And where did I get the idea I could wear black? It did nothing to hide the unwanted pounds I’d picked up during the funfest in Dallas.

When he saw me, Frank would probably shudder with relief that he didn’t have to look at me across the dinner table every night. Would he still compare me to Angie Harmon? Not tonight—I’d lay odds against it. I smeared on some lipstick and fluffed up my hair, but that didn’t help.

“The hell with it,” I muttered, and then I went back to work. Some days you can’t do much except grit your teeth and try not to notice how bad things are.

The rest of the afternoon swept past in a blur of messages, responses, and interruptions, but by the time I left work just after six-thirty, tired and famished, I’d done a decent job of clearing my desk. I hoped Frank was on time and ready to eat.

* * *

Emilio's Ristorante was the consummate Southern California Italian restaurant—big windows, lots of warm wood offset with marble and terrazzo, cozy glass-topped tables flanked by grapevines on the shaded patio. Interesting choice on Frank's part—our first date had been at Emilio's. The restaurant hadn't changed much over time except that the old neon sign had been replaced with discreet lettering in the window, the final "e" curling into the shape of a lush red rose.

I spotted Frank's silver BMW in the parking lot—at least I assumed it was his from the rainbow license-plate frame. I eased into a space next to the Beamer, took a deep breath, and tugged my dress into place as I walked toward the entrance.

The clouds had finally lifted, leaving a heartless blue sky that bounced a shaft of sunlight against the chrome trim on Emilio's front door, temporarily blinding me as I pushed into the dim lobby. Time warp: the burnished walls mimicked the inside of a cave—cool and dark. I could almost hear water dripping over rock. Even though smoking had long been outlawed inside Emilio's, as it had almost everywhere in California, decades of nicotine had saturated the dark paneling with a lingering tobacco smell.

How long had it been? Six months, at least, since I'd seen Frank.

I took one last glance at myself in the gold-veined mirror behind the host's lectern. The view was a little more forgiving, but I still hated my hair. Oh, well. I licked my lips and headed for the bar, where I knew I'd find Frank.

He was talking to the bartender so he didn't see me come in, and I had a chance to study him. Slouched over, right hand cupping his highball glass, he was, for just a second, still My Frank: the first man I ever loved. Frank was handsome, in the classic sense—a good, straight nose, black curly hair that he always wore just a shade longer than most men so it spilled onto his forehead and the back of his neck. Blue eyes so pale they sometimes seemed transparent. And artist's hands: long, slender fingers, capable and strong.

Violin music played softly from the dining room, and candles

flickered in stubby little glasses along the bar and on the round tables by the window.

The bartender looked my way, and so did Frank. His face broke into a smile like sunrise over the desert. He slid off the bar stool and turned to me, arms open wide.

"Hey, Susie," he said, "you look terrific. Great dress—I was hoping to see those killer legs."

Suddenly, the extra pounds, the lousy hairdo, the shitty workday dissolved in a fizz of pleasure.

"Thanks. You're looking good yourself."

"Liar." He said it with a little laugh to take the bite out.

I hugged him and was surprised at the feel of his body. Frank had always been slender—a cosmic practical joke on me because he could eat his weight in M&M's and not gain an ounce, while I put on a pound just thinking about candy. But that night I felt his bones through his soft white shirt, every knob and junction of his spine. Had he always been that lean, and I just hadn't noticed? Or was Clayton wearing him down to nothing?

He kissed me, quick and close-mouthed. Too bad.

Damn you, Susan, don't go there.

I held him at arm's length. He looked okay, but something didn't feel right. He seemed pale, especially for the end of summer, the skin around his eyes and cheeks more deeply furrowed than I remembered.

The bartender put a tall vodka-tonic next to Frank's bourbon without being told; I pried my eyes away from Frank's face, slid onto a bar stool, and picked up my drink. So did he, and we clinked glasses.

"Cheers. Good to see you, Suse."

I took a hefty pull on the vodka and smacked my lips indelicately. Frank laughed.

I should say right now that Frank Krajewski was not the worst ex-husband in the world. And one thing that had drawn me to him from the start was that he made me feel like a woman. He noticed stuff—my perfume or my clothes or my hair. Thinking back, that should have tipped me off, but oh, no. And isn't it just the mother of all irony that he left me for a man, not another woman? But before and even after our breakup, my coarser habits, my height, my laugh—which some

have compared to a donkey's bray—never fazed Frank. He took the whole package, and he never criticized me with one of those “Oh please!” looks designed to wither a person's soul. That wasn't in his repertoire.

When Frank told me about Clayton, I threw up. Really. Oh, not at the very minute. At first, I'd thought he was joking. And when I'd realized he was serious ...

What kind of woman was I, that my husband would walk out on me for a man? And how stupid was I, to never have had a clue? I mean, I'd been so happy that he was interested in me. It's not like I had a hundred guys trying to date me. Being almost six feet tall kind of narrowed the field. My mom had seen to it that I never got really fat, but I'd never truly been cover-girl material either. I couldn't believe that tall, handsome, funny Frank Krajewski wanted to be with me. Too good to be true. Oh, yeah.

I looked around the half-empty bar: not like the old days when you had to be there by five o'clock to get a seat. Crowds change. Tastes change. I took another sip of my vodka.

“Are you starving?” Frank asked.

I shook my head. “We can drink a while first.”

He smiled and took hold of my hand, brought it to his lips for a quick kiss. This was not normal behavior.

“So—how are things?” I asked, expecting to hear about Frank's job, Clayton's veterinary practice, their yard, their house. And maybe he'd drop the other shoe, the one hovering in my mind ever since he called.

Frank took a deep breath, drained his bourbon, and signaled for a refill. I passed. The vodka had gone straight from my empty stomach to my brain in a giddy rush.

“Not so good—truth be told.”

Uh oh. I was afraid of this. Something's going on. Maybe he and Clayton are breaking up. Maybe he finally realized I was The One after all. Ha ha.

“What is it?” I tried to sound low-keyed but concerned.

The bartender slid a glass of bourbon with very little ice in front of Frank, and he took a swig before answering.

"I've been feeling kinda lousy lately, so I went to the doctor. He did some tests."

Oh my God. Clayton has given him AIDS.

Frank looked down at his drink. "I'm sick, Susie. I've got lung cancer."

His voice gave out, and he covered his eyes with one hand and grabbed onto me with the other.

Tiny dark sparkles erupted behind my eyeballs and for a few seconds I couldn't see Frank, or much of anything. I shook my head, the way you do when you get water in your ears, like maybe I'd heard him wrong.

I put my arm around him and pulled him close to me. "Jesus! What—how—when did you find out?"

He sat back and swiped at his face. "Sorry. I swore I wasn't gonna bawl like that. Friday. I found out Friday. Doc sits me down across from him and tells me—bam! Just like that. You've got cancer, Mr. Krajewski. Late stage, not much they can do. Just like he was reading me the menu in a restaurant, just that cold."

"Maybe you should get a second opinion."

Frank shook his head. "He was the second opinion."

"God, Frank. I don't know what to say."

I still didn't believe it. Oh, I knew he wasn't kidding, but sometimes you hear something so horrible, so unthinkable that you just won't let it into your head. Maybe, I thought, if I don't really hear it, if I don't believe it, it won't be true.

"Susie? You're not gonna pass out on me, are you? I'm the one who's sick, but you look like hell."

Breathe, Susan. My body felt like it belonged to someone else, but somehow I managed to inhale a few sips of air. There. The buzzing in my ears subsided. I took a hasty gulp of vodka to loosen my vocal cords.

"Oh, Frank." That's all I could say. Big-time comfort.

Frank rubbed my back. "I should've quit when you did. But no, I had to be the stubborn asshole, didn't I?"

I quit smoking the year Frank and I got married. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. Only the mercy of Prozac kept me from

dissolving into tears and/or rage, and each day I grimly applied a nicotine patch to my upper arm, fearing that if I smoked with the patch in place, I would overdose on nicotine and die.

"Can't they operate, or—"

He shook his head. "It's late stage. He kept saying that. Late, late, late. Too late to cut it out."

"Chemo?"

He scowled. "I'm not gonna spend the last few weeks of my life bald and puking. The oncologist—can you believe it? They have their own special name! Anyway, he says I'm too far gone for chemo to help much anyhow."

All I could do was stare at him. My mouth probably hung open like an idiot's, but it would have taken too much concentration to close it.

Frank went on, "I could try some experimental drug, but that's not very promising either. The tumor has already spread to my back. That's how I noticed something was wrong—back pain. All the time."

"So what happens?"

He drained his glass and slammed it on the bar. "Nothing—yet. When it gets worse I'll go into the hospice program."

I wasn't sure exactly what that meant and, honestly, I didn't want to find out. Frank told me anyway.

"They set you up at home, keep the pain under control—they say—and ..."

He waved his hand in the air.

And they let you die on your own?

"Did you tell your mom?"

He shook his head. "Not yet—haven't had the guts to. I don't want her roaring out here and taking over, dragging me to every quack in the country to find a miracle cure. No, thanks."

I couldn't think of a single helpful thing to say, no matter how much I rummaged through my mental collection of comforting phrases. Maybe none existed for this.

"I'm sorry, kiddo," he said. "I just kinda dumped this on you, huh?"

I rubbed the back of his hand. "I'm in shock."

“Yeah, I know the feeling. But for me the shock is wearing off, and I’m getting majorly pissed off.”

He took a deep breath and then seemed to pull himself together a little.

“Is there anything I can do?” I had to ask.

“Yeah—find me a new body.”

Back when we were married, that had been his stock response to my offers of help when he had the flu or a hangover or any other minor ailment.

Frank’s “ain’t-life-a-bitch” smile was as lopsided as ever; his mouth curved up more on the right than the left. “Sorry to bring you down, Suse. But I wanted you to know, and I felt like I needed to tell you face to face.”

He turned on his bar stool, and I felt a twitch in my chest, that magnetic pull he exerted. Even then. Even when he was dying.

He put down his bourbon and signaled the maitre d’ that we were ready for our table. I had no appetite by then and considered pleading a sudden stomach upset and fleeing. But I couldn’t abandon Frank that abruptly, so I let him put his arm around me and lead me into the dining room.

I took a deep breath. “So—how is Clayton handling this?”

“Not real well. He’s pretty much freaking out.” Another drink arrived, and he took a sip. “Clayton is *emotional*—you know?”

I nodded, although I didn’t “know”—not really. Aside from the fact that he’d taken my husband away from me, I knew little about Clayton Selden except that he was a veterinarian, he liked to grow roses, and he was a terrible cook. These informational treasures came from a few forcedly cordial encounters in the four years since Frank and I broke up. I no longer bore Clayton ill will, any more than I did Frank. What happened, happened. I accepted it and moved forward with my life. For the most part.

Frank took another hefty swig of his bourbon and shook his head. “Yesterday I found him in the garage, bawling his eyes out. He says, ‘What am I going to do without you?’—like he hadn’t made it through the first thirty years on his own. But that’s Clayton. He doesn’t handle trouble well. Not like you.”

“Yeah, I’m such a beacon of strength.”

“You are.”

Yeah? But not strong enough to make you change.

I kept my thoughts to myself. Frank had enough to cope with. We ordered another round and studied our menus.

“Well, you *look* good,” I said. *Let’s try and redirect this conversation.*

Frank shrugged. “I feel okay, actually—except for the back pain. Most of the time I can’t believe I’m sick.”

“Are you going to take some time while you still feel up to it and do stuff you’ve always wanted to do? Travel, or sky dive, or anything?”

Frank put his menu down and took my hand. “I’ve pretty much done what I wanted all my life, now haven’t I?”

Yeah. Come to think of it, he had. Including walking out on me when he met Clayton Selden.

* * *

He told me on a Thursday, and I’ve hated Thursdays ever since. I thought things were okay between us. Sure, I’d been putting in some long hours at work; the Department of Labor had been crawling all over our employment statistics, like they did every couple of years. Jacobs was a federal contractor and had to document fair treatment of its workers. But as the audit wrapped up, I looked forward to some quiet time, alone with Frank; maybe we’d go down to Mexico for a long weekend.

Instead I got the verbal equivalent of a kick in the gut. He’d met someone, he told me. He was in love. He was moving out. Leaving me. Oh, P.S., the someone was another guy.

“How could you not *know* you’re gay?” I’d shrieked at him during one of the soul-scorching yelling matches that followed his defection.

He’d come back for some of his books and CDs a few days afterward. It was midafternoon, the house full of sunlight and the sweet smell of roses, strong enough to break your heart. Frank had probably expected me to be at work, but I’d phoned in sick ever since he left, lying on the living room sofa watching television without seeing it,

eating Milky Ways without tasting them, and crying until my eyes were practically swollen shut.

He started packing the boxes he'd brought, while I glared at him from the sofa. I wanted to rip open his skin, shred his flesh with my fingernails. I wanted him to stop filling the boxes and admit he'd been playing a bad joke. Frank couldn't make eye contact with me. He looked so damn good. The bastard had on a turquoise shirt I'd given him for his birthday, and he had the sleeves rolled up above his wrists, a cruelly sexy look. New gray slacks—no doubt Clayton had picked them out. I still wore my pajamas.

He'd flinched when I yelled at him and then finally he looked at me. His eyes were a little red, so maybe this wasn't all sunshine and happiness for him after all, I remember thinking.

"Susie, it's something I fought my whole life, something I tried to pretend wasn't there. But when I met Clayton, I just—I couldn't keep on pretending. I was too damn tired."

I'd thrown an ashtray at him. I missed, and it rolled all useless across the floor. He'd finished loading up his stuff and left without saying anything else.

* * *

"Susie? You in there?"

I blinked away the memories. "Sorry."

"You haven't asked the big question yet."

I had no clue what he meant, and it must have shown.

"How long?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "How long do I have?"

"Oh." Jesus, when did I turn into such a brilliant conversationalist?

"I didn't want to—"

"It's okay. You can ask me anything, kiddo. Anyway, the doc says three to six months. Everybody's different, blah de blah."

Those goddamn sparkles came back, pushing in between Frank's face and my eyeballs, and I felt like my head was about to explode. Three months? Three *months*?

Frank kept talking, and finally I could hang on to his words again.

"... but the tumor's gonna grow, and spread, and they'll put me on

morphine. Right now Vicodin does the job. Vicodin and Zoloft. Yum.”

When the waiter brought our drinks, I pointed to his bourbon.

“Should you be drinking?”

Frank laughed. “I’m probably doing irreparable damage to my liver.”

To my horror, I laughed along with him.

We ordered dinner. Funny the things you remember: he got the salmon and I got the sea bass—accompanied by Emilio’s famous pasta, of course. Alfredo for him, Marinara for me. Just like always.

He skipped on to other subjects, but I had a nervous feeling one more bomb was going to fall. I crunched on a thick slab of bread to drown the alarm bells, as my thoughts jumped all over the place. So Clayton was panicking, and Frank was looking at a slow and miserable death. Hospice or no hospice, he wouldn’t be able to take care of himself, and he didn’t want his mom’s interference. Who was left? And wouldn’t that just be the shittiest outcome in the world, if that’s what he was leading up to? Now, after all that had happened, was he going to ask *me* to be his caretaker? Hey, like an idiot, I’d even offered my help.

Please don’t ask for it, Frank. Please please please. I wouldn’t be able to do it anyway, I have my job, my life, Noah ... I practiced excuses with half my brain while the other half talked with Frank about mutual friends, his garden, my work.

He brought me up to date on my former in-laws, who lived in Chicago, Frank’s home town. His sister Zoë and her husband Henry had a daughter now to go with the son who’d been born while Frank and I were married; his mother Elise still ran most of the family business; and his grandfather was still going strong at eighty-plus—which pleased me because Grandpa Krajewski had always been kinder to me than the rest of Frank’s family.

And, oh yeah, Frank and Clayton had a dog—a Max look-alike, he said. Not that any dog could ever replace the late, great Max, who had died the summer before at the ripe old age of fourteen.

Frank had always loved dogs. When we started dating, I was surprised the first time he took me home to meet Max, a Golden Retriever mix Frank had rescued from the animal shelter. Lucky for me, Max and I hit it off. Frank later confided, and I think he was only half-joking, that I'd passed an important test when I picked up a slobbery tennis ball and threw it for Max to fetch. Again and again. And again. I'd been a non-animal person until then, but I grew really fond of Max, with his dark unjudging eyes and sloppy pink tongue. I liked the way he'd lean into me as if this simple physical contact was enough to make him totally happy.

I never dreamed that Max would cause the greatest disaster in my life, though.

Here's what happened: the dog, a prodigious glutton, had a yen for people food. Late one afternoon, he gobbled up a whole dish of cellophane-wrapped chocolate mints that Frank, oh careless man, had left on the coffee table. An hour later, Max started convulsing. I was still at work, so Frank took him to the emergency veterinary clinic on his own.

Clayton Selden was the doctor on duty, and while he pumped the dog's stomach and reassured Frank that accidents happen, my sweet, proper husband fell in love with him. Right there in the treatment room. Max survived, but our marriage did not.

* * *

Normally, I'm a pretty hearty eater, but that night at Emilio's I scarcely tasted my food. Frank pushed his salmon around on the plate, but I didn't see him take many bites.

The voices around us blurred into one wide murmur, like a swarm of bees. Our forks clinked against our dishes. Otherwise, we ate in silence. I chewed and swallowed and tried to think of something clever to say, something positive and comforting. Words had always been my forte, my weapon of choice, but they let me down, badly, that evening.

Finally the wretched meal was over, and I practically leaped up the minute Frank remarked that it was getting late.

He walked me to my car. "Thanks for coming, Susie. I've been missing you."

I tensed. He wanted something else from me; I could *feel* it. What? *Out with it, Frank!*

He hugged me, and he smelled of bourbon and cigarettes, just like I remembered. Frank was still pretty strong, and he held onto me so tight that I feared he might crack a rib. When he let go, he was crying, and I stroked the tears away.

"Thanks for listening," he said. "It helps to talk about it."

Okay. He just wanted to tell me the news, he doesn't want anything else from me. Thank God. I'm safe now. I'm safe.

Then why did I feel the teeniest bit disappointed? I *wanted* to do something to help Frank, but I sure didn't have a cure for cancer up my sleeve.

"No problem."

"You're the best, Suse. You always were."

A quick kiss on the cheek, and he let me escape.

After I started the car, the sparkles came back and blocked out my view of the instrument panel. I sucked in a big lungful of air and let it out in a whoosh. The sparkles intensified for a second before they dissipated. Frank was standing by the Beamer, head cocked. I waved and backed out of the parking space.

Over and over on the way home, I swiped at the tears trickling down my cheeks. It didn't seem possible. How could he be dying? I cringed at the memory of all the times I'd wished calamity on Frank for abandoning and humiliating me the way he had. Before I moved past it all, I'd torn up most of the photos of us together or scribbled "Eat shit and die" on them. And now . . .

I comforted myself by thinking of the fate I'd escaped. To watch someone you love die, piece by piece. That had to be the worst thing in the world. Thank God I wasn't married to Frank anymore. Thank God I wasn't in love with him anymore.

I was so deep into these thoughts when I turned into my driveway that I almost forgot to open the garage door. Zeus, my neighbor's cat, a big tom the color of night, liked to sprawl on the cement apron flanking the garage. Normally the opening door's rumble startled him

into motion, but since I didn't push the remote until I was two-thirds of the way down the driveway, he was blinded by the oncoming headlights. I saw his eyes flash green as he leapt up, not knowing which way to run.

I hit the brakes, hard. Zeus escaped by a whisker.

"One down, eight to go," I whispered as he scrambled over the fence.

