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Becoming the Cat Lady

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BECOMING THE CAT LADY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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Abstract

Emma Baronne is mourning her lifelong dream of losing her teeth. When her company folds and her on-again-off-again boyfriend gets engaged to another woman, Emma wants to make a fort in the living room and never come out. But, she soon realizes - with the help of her quirky Catholic family and a coven of French Quarter cat ladies - puberty is often easier the second time around.

Prologue

Emma Baronne had been losing her teeth every night since she got them. It started when she sneaked a Milano from the pantry, bit in, and watched her teeth crumble, mixing with tiny chunks of crisp cookie and chocolate. Some nights there were white chocolate macadamias or iced oatmeal involved, but the cascade of crumbled teeth and sweets always found Emma waking in a pool of sweat and guilt. She would run to the bathroom, flip the switch, and shove her open mouth toward the mirror. *All there, thank God.*

Before her first Communion, Emma coughed up her teeth into a golden plate of Jesus wafers. A little tickle in the chasm of her throat, and before she knew it, wine and blood ran freely from her mouth like an unleveed Mississippi River. On occasion, Father McDurdy dropped the tray, allowing Emma's teeth to ricochet off the altar like tiny

enamel bullets. Other times, he swung the arm of his robe around the plate and ran down the aisle, protecting the congregation from the spiritually hazardous material in Emma's teeth. Each night Emma woke from this particular strand of the dream, feverish with culpability. Too embarrassed to get out of bed, Emma ran her hand between her lips and quietly counted her teeth in the dark. Shame overcame her as she felt the smoothness of each tooth and delighted in the curves and ridges particular to each individual incisor or bicuspid.

The Dream had become a friend to Emma—a living, breathing thing subject to evolution. She hated change, but its morphs were a survival tactic. During high school, while her best friend Lili dreamed about standing in front of the class in nothing but fluffy slippers, Emma imagined losing her teeth in front of a sold-out gymnasium. Sister Margaret passed out programs at the giant double doors by the basketball goals until every bleacher was crammed with awkward teenagers in pleated plaid skirts and khaki slacks. As the lights dimmed, Emma stepped onto the tiny platform at center court. She wanted to sing or dance like Paula Abdul, but the heat from the spotlight made her teeth shimmy and jiggle like a baby chicken hatching under an incubator.

No matter what happened to Emma during the course of the day, she took comfort in knowing that at least she still had her teeth. She watched on the sidelines as all of her friends regretted choices, cursed their lot in life, and took their full mouths of teeth for granted. During the final presentation for art school, Emma was calmer than any of her colleagues. As the instructors strolled through aisle after aisle of easels, all propping up various interpretations of a bowl of pears, Emma knew that nothing could be worse than the circumstances of her dream. Just the night before, she had walked into the room, everyone tense with the pressure of pass or fail, to find all of her peers painting miniature clown faces on each of her teeth.

Two weeks ago, on the eve of Emma's thirtieth birthday, they exploded one by one like tiny, white monoliths attached to a string of bombs. She was having tea at the Fairmont with her mother and Great Aunt Vivian. *What's the matter, Emma?* Vivian asked. Emma pursed her mouth tighter. *Cat got your tongue?* She was afraid to unclench her lips until—BOOM! Her teeth casually fell to the side as Aunt Vivian clapped. *Bravo,* she said. Her mother did not flinch the entire time. *Drink your tea, Emma. Don't be rude.*

And that was the last time Emma had been visited by her old friend, the Dream. As she lay in bed, fighting against the call of her alarm to get out from under the covers, Emma felt rejected. Her instincts told her to go back to sleep and wait for the Dream appear, much in the same way her mother had always told her to stay put if she got lost in the grocery store.

How would she know what to do without the Dream to guide her? She thought about the thousands of times she had dreamt of her teeth cascading in front of her in the shape of tiny wedding dresses, and how each time she had broken up with Conner as a result. Only weeks later, her teeth would slip out of her mouth and slide under the pillow transforming into Jimmy Choo shoes, or twenty-dollar bills. Within days, Conner would call, and Emma knew it was time to reconcile.

Toying with the idea of calling a sleep clinic, Emma pushed herself out of the comfort of her pima cotton sheets and onto the cold, hardwood floors. She reached into her closet and pulled out a fresh towel and an outfit - black bootleg trousers, snakeskin black belt, black kitten-heel pumps, and a French-cuffed black button down.

If anyone asked, Emma thought, she would tell them the truth. She was mourning a close friend.

Stage One: Denial

Chapter One

"How are the lubrication manuals coming?" Barrett popped his head into Emma's office.

"Fine," she said, putting a lug nut back onto the shelf behind her. "Totally on schedule."

Emma sat back down at her drafting table with Part #42, which she had named the angled side bar. She placed it at the top edge of the table in a manner that downplayed the shadows. When it was just right, she flipped the ID tag behind it, out of her field of vision.

"I'll leave you to it," Barrett said.

Emma looked up again, but he had gone. As she stared at the curved hunk of stainless steel, her pencil ran across the surface of her sketch pad. The lines were small and quiet.

"How's it going, KY Kid?"

Emma didn't have to look up to know that it was Marcus. In fact, she didn't look up at all. His lewd jokes didn't bother her anymore; she had become immune to them in the four months since she was originally assigned to the maintenance and lubrication project.

"What's wrong?" Marcus asked. "Creative juices all dried up? I know just the thing to get them flowing again."

Marcus Johansen, the lead engineer on most of the major projects at Prossacon, had asked Emma on a date every day for the last five years ever since she first showed up fresh out of art school. Professionally, Emma and Marcus had been at war the entire time. Marcus used to be in charge of naming each part that was developed by the engineering staff. Boxes of perforated motion wheels and bi-angulated reflexive beams were delivered to Emma's office for her to draw. With no idea how each part fit into the larger picture of the equipment, Emma would stare at the contraption until its particular personality was revealed to her, a fact she never told Marcus or any of the other engineers. Marcus continued naming the arts until the Shrimp Grader 6 product launch meeting. Ed Murphy, owner of Murphy's Shrimp Plant and the leading purchaser of Prossacon equipment, raised his hand.

"Looks great," Ed said, "but my operators don't know a mutated regulation beam from an asscrack."

Barrett decided to add the words *technical writer* next to Emma's existing title of *line artist*. The four words were enough to upgrade her from Cubicleville to a proper office. In addition to making her feel smarter, the new position also brought enough money to take Emma off the job market. Permanently.

With no regard for Emma's personal space, Marcus sauntered into her office and sat on the edge of her desk.

"Is Anne Rice having a book signing today?" Other people could pull off black on black, but against Emma's pale skin and dull, dark hair, she looked less like New York subway-chic and more like one of the Goth kids that hung out on the wrong end of Decatur Street.

"Your answer's no," Emma said, still not looking up.

"I haven't asked anything." He picked a silver-framed photo off her desk. "Thought you and Prince Harming finally called it quits?"

"We're just taking a break. Regrouping."

"Easy, Morticia," Marcus laid the photo face-down on the desk.

Emma watched from the corner of her eye but refused to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

"You know Barrett's been hinting," he paused for effect. "I think he might put me on the project with you."

Emma's head swung toward Marcus, now smugly standing in the doorway. "He wouldn't. No way."

"See you at the meeting." With that, Marcus wandered back down the hall to Cubicleville.

Emma knew he only was trying to break her concentration, but the mere thought of working with Marcus made her cringe. She finished sketching the bars and pulled Part #43 down. Emma had yet to give it a proper name, so she temporarily called it the back-end round thingy. As a technical writer, Emma had grown quite an affinity for words. She slipped a small notebook into her purse each morning so that she could write down interesting words she overheard. At first, she only jotted down phrases that might help her invent names for the parts. Then she was penning words and phrases she didn't understand in hopes that she'd be inspired to look them up later. Soon, she was using her notebook to journal ideas, log conversational topics, and scribble words that made her happy.

#3 Perpendicular (re: bars and rods)

#15 Uber (the new "awesome")

#26 Ferlinghetti

She was hoping to hear something soon that would inspire a name for #43. With the tag tucked underneath its weight, the part looked off-center and off-balance, unsure of its equilibrium. Emma tilted her head a tad and made the necessary adjustments in her rendering. With each brush of the pencil, Emma could feel #43's personality being transferred onto her vellum pad. She convinced herself she was drawing portraits. When the parts came to her from the engineering room, they had no value in and of themselves. If they didn't work quite right or perform to standard, they would simply be tossed out, redesigned. By drawing their pictures, Emma immortalized each piece.

"Where are you?" Janet fluttered in the doorway.

"I'm in my office," Emma said. "The one you just walked into."

"It's 3:15," Janet said. "The meeting started at 3."

"Shit," Emma said, scooping her notebook and pen off the desk behind her. "Shitshitshitshitshit."

Marcus grinned and made a faint bugle noise when Emma walked through the door. "Our Lady of Perpetual Lube."

"MaXchine is planning to uncover their new machines at the product expo," Barrett said. "Murphy seems to know what they have in store. He said it was a doozie."

"It can't beat our Grade-n-Sort 4000," came from someone on the development team.

"It's their X-treme Machine line," Barrett said. The room went quiet.

Emma was busy drawing a cartoon version of Marcus covered in snakes. He was wearing a head-to-toe leather jumpsuit and had cone-shaped horns protruding from each side of his receding hairline.

"Emma," Barrett said. "How are we?"

"Fine," she said. "Totally on schedule."

"Can you have the manuals ready to launch in two weeks?" Barrett gestured down the table toward Marcus. "Or should I get you some help?"

"Not necessary. I was planning to be done early anyhow," Emma said. "It was going to be a surprise."

Emma walked into the break room and took a packet of herbal tea from the pantry. She filled her tiny styrofoam cup with hot water from the cooler.

"They're going to flatten us." Janet McAlear had been Barrett's assistant since the Big Bang. Emma often drifted off in meetings and imagined the two of them walking side-by-side down the high-school corridors. *You have an eleven o'clock with algebra, an hour for lunch - your money is in the inside pocket of your Trapper Keeper*, Janet would say.

Then, it's off to English at one; I'll be around to fetch you for the pep rally at two o'clock sharp.

Janet was not talking to any one particular employee. That was the beauty of the break room. At any given time, there was someone standing there. All you had to do was walk in, say your piece, and get on with your day. Or, if you were Bob Cleary from Logistics, you could simply camp out by the fridge.

"I knew it," Bob said. "We're goners."

Emma felt calm, confident, and up to the task. Since she had been there, the company had been in a state of crisis almost every other month. Each time they launched a new line of products, the office evangelists started preaching doomsday. She was sure this time was no different.

As she walked back to her office, Emma stared at the tower of stainless-steel parts behind the drafting table, her orphanage for wayward cranks and faceplates. Part #43 was looking up at her from the notepad. She decided to call it the backend crescent disc. Emma scribbled its new name on the tag attached through its screw hole and placed it back in its bin. Perched on the second floor of the converted house that served as the administrative offices for Prossacon, above the antique shops and coffee houses

that lined that particular stretch of Magazine Street, Part #43 had found its own identity.

"Lili's on line one," Janet sprinted past Emma's office. She snapped out of her proud house-mother fantasy and picked up the phone.

"Not in the mood to drink alone?"

"Hey stranger," Lili said. "You up for Flimsy's after work?"

Chapter Two

"She's alive," Lili said. "Alive!"

"It's only been a week, you lush," Emma planted herself on the stool next to Lili. She flagged the bartender, "Pint of Boddingtons, please."

"Work is crap."

"I could tell," Emma motioned to Lili's shirt.

Lili was usually dressed in vivid magentas and yellows, shades only found in gerbera daisies and antidepressant advertisements. Today, however, she was wearing a white Lycra-blend baby-doll tee tastefully bedazzled with a miniature replica of the American flag. Her choice of attire was a sure sign that things were not going well at work with her boss, Vic, who, in addition to being a hardass, was Russian.

"Vat du you vant, Leeli? Do you have da report? Zat does not look like the vork to my eyes," Lili imitated.

Emma took large gulps of her beer, realizing she had some catching up to do. "Another, please."

Every chance he got, Vic told the story of how he built his fortune on a bar napkin in Moscow, solving the puzzle of the international chicken crisis—dark meats for the motherland and white meats for the New World. As he forged his empire over and over again to each client who graced the marble halls of their office, Lili felt a rising sense of patriotism in her gut. His tale provoked a Cold War spirit in her bones that had begun to seep out onto her screensaver, escaping to her car bumper, and manifesting itself in the shape of a *God-Bless-America* door wreath. Emma could now see that Lili's affliction had finally reached her wardrobe.

The bartenders turned up their favorite Flogging Molly song and gathered at the end of the bar to sing.

"Don't you just love Flimsy's?" Lili asked.

"Cheers!" Emma held up her glass.

The actual name of the bar was O'Flaherty's, but Lili's inability to verbally cope with the Foreign had led to the nickname Flimsy's. After five pints apiece one night, the name stuck, much to the dismay of the bar staff, all imports straight from County Kerry.

"We'll drink, and drink, and drink," they chimed together, swaying in unison, "and fight."

In order to keep the place from looking like the bar at a Bennigan's, the proprietors kept soccer on the televisions 24/7 and hung a huge sign advertising vinegar crisps in English and Gaelic above their potato chips. Together with the singing staff, the pub had all the charm and appeal of Ireland without the hoof and mouth.

"I love soccer legs," Lili stared at the television.

"Conner has soccer legs." The comment seemed to slip out of Emma's mouth and onto the bar with the thud of a garden slug.

"Here we go," Lili said. "Has it been a month already?"

Emma stared straight ahead at the television. All of the legs started to blend together until there was no Manchester United or Chelsea, just hundreds of Conners running past each other on the field. They had played this game before, and the rule book clearly stated that Conner should have called by now. It never took longer than a month.

"I'm sure you'll be dating again before you know it," Lili realized how harsh her words had been.

"Do you think he's seeing someone?" Emma leaned in hoping to get information from Lili.

"It doesn't matter."

"A-HA! So he *is* seeing someone." Emma took a victory sip of her beer.

"The man is a serial monogamist," Lili said. "Why should you be surprised? It always happens this way."

"What way?"

"He realizes she's not you," Lili said.

Emma motioned for another beer. Each time she started to see her future all planned out before them—the starter house by the lakefront, the two-car garage, the his-and-hers guest towels—Emma pushed Conner away. When they first started dating in college, Conner said she was his soulmate. And that didn't change, Emma told herself. Everyone knew they would end up together.

Emma started sweating.

In addition to the other decorative choices, the proprietor of O'Flaherty's insisted on keeping a fire lit in the main sitting area. Emma convinced herself that the beads of sweat on her forehead were from the flames, and she drank more beer to keep cool.

"I bet his name isn't really Vic," Lili said. "It's probably short for something like Ivonavich."

"Ivanikanovovich," Emma stuttered. "Ovich." The hiccup that was impossible to stop, like saying cinnamon after too many glasses of wine. Cinammonomonomon.

"Assholeovich," Lili added.

"Ovich."

"Off-to-the-toiletovich." Lili weaved toward the door that led outside to the bathrooms.

The three-piece house band was setting up in front of the fire. Emma listened as they affected a nice, thick brogue for their version of "When the Saints Go Marching In." All three members were from the West Bank. They played a variety of Irish drinking songs, and the regulars and tourists united in sing-a-longs. Emma, like most other half-bred Americans, fancied herself Irish. She was part Native American, with a little bit of Polish, and a few drops of Eastern European, but she clung to the tiny portion of Irish on her father's side. Strings of pubs across the States offered not only a quaint drinking spot for the more discriminating American palette, but also a sense of identity and welcomeness that one was hard-pressed to find in a world of strip malls and fast-food chains.

"We're doing a 5k in the morning," Emma said as Lili appeared back at the table with two Irish car bombs.

"Exactly," Lili slammed the glasses onto the table. "These will ensure that we get adequate rest." They dropped the shot glasses of cream and whiskey into their half-filled pints and chugged.

"You do all the same bullshit charity crap I do, so why don't you suck it up and join?" Lili asked. The band was leading the audience in an Irish rendition of the chicken dance.

"I already got my mom a birthday present," Lili tucked her hands into her armpits and flapped along to the music. "Just promise you won't forget about me when you're a full-fledged Junior Leaguer with very important friends."

"Promise." Lili pinched her fingers together like a crawfish.

Emma wadded up a bar napkin and wiped Guinness foam from Lili's cheek. "And you'll give me a free cookbook?"

"Now you're pushing it." Lili's head fell hard against the table.

Chapter Three

Each life-sized stone elephant at the entrance of Audubon Park was wearing a Cause 4 Paws Festival T-shirt. Underneath, welcoming each participant onto the grounds, was Snippy the Schnauzer, a desperate college student wearing the costume of the Orleans Parish animal-control mascot.

"Check which program you're walking for today." The woman behind the registration table had the energy of a nuclear power plant. Emma scanned the laundry list of programs and services all vying for her donation. There were plans to take stray dogs to nursing homes, to teach inner-city children how to care for pets, and to fund social activities for seeing-eye dogs. Emma checked the box next to "general fund." She just wanted to get through the day without breaking into hives or throwing up on anyone.

Looking around for Lili, Emma felt dizzy. Her eyes were flooded with images of graying, wrinkling women holding snapshots of their cats. *This is Mitzi*, she overheard. *And Blaze, and Shaggy, and Magpie*. All she had to do was think about their fur and their sandpaper tongues to start itching. Finally, she spotted Lili, in oversized black sunglasses that made her look like a hung-over Audrey Hepburn.

"Aspirin," Lili muttered. "Please tell me you have aspirin."

"Follow me," Emma said.

The girls walked to Emma's car at the side of the park. Tents were filled with people setting up for the festival, putting out hand-beaded collars, dog sweaters in holiday motifs, and anything else they could peddle. The smell from each of the vegetarian food booths mixed into a beany aroma that made the girls nauseated.

"I think I'm still drunk," Lili squinted toward the Avenue. The streetcar approaching was doused in purple crinkle paper and balloons, with brass music blasting through its tiny windows.

It stopped directly in front of the park entrance. First, the musicians unloaded, their black and white tuxedos offset by the dime store plastic cat masks covering

their faces. Behind them, a hoard of gray-haired women stepped off, all wearing matching purple and gold boas with gold-lettered shirts underneath. Emma knew before she read their shirts—Aunt Vivian and her cult had decided to come uptown.

Emma's great aunt had moved into the French Quarter years ago after her driver's license had been called into question over a freak stop sign incident. Slowly but surely, Aunt Vivian had made friends with the older women of the Vieux Carre, mostly washed-up socialites who were either mentally ill or scandalous. Eccentrics, Emma's mother would call them.

They were women caught in conflicting webs of rebellion and good breeding. Shunning their entire past was not an option, because they were forced by genetics and years of etiquette classes to judge their self worth by their ability to set a table. Therefore, they had created their own society. Ten years ago they banded together in sisterhood and, of course, the business of rescuing cats. As Emma saw it, the Feline Rescuers United against Mean People consisted of old, broken women who had no choice but to accept their roles as sexless, fluffy old maids.

Emma watched intently as the last of the FRUMPs unloaded from the streetcar. She was curious about these

women much in the same way she wondered what could cause a person to stand on street corners with cardboard signs. At what point in your life does wearing ridiculous hats and potato-sack clothing convince you that loneliness had been your choice?

"Look at little Miss Emma Jean!" Vivian insisted on adding Jean or Lou to everyone's name as a term of endearment. Emma's middle name was Katherine.

"Almost didn't recognize you outside of the Quarter," Emma said.

"We don't get up here anymore, so the ladies and I thought we'd show up in style."

Everyone in the park seemed to be staring at Aunt Vivian. She was a tall woman with black hair piled on top of her head. Streaks of gray ran through her bun, appearing too perfectly placed to be natural. Each silver line looked as if it had been painted there intentionally. She was wearing a bright purple FRUMP T-shirt with an enormous broach of gold, sculptured found art attached at her chest. Emma wanted to ask her if she cared that people stared at her, or if she wanted to know why they looked at her the way they did, and what went through their minds.

"Speaking of," Aunt Vivian said. "You could use a little flare yourself." She pulled a smaller broach out of

her bright yellow fanny pack and pinned it on Emma. The copper-plated trombone looked out of place against Emma's white rounded neck shirt and navy blue wind shorts.

"Is your mother working one of the booths?" Vivian asked. Emma knew this was her aunt's way of bracing herself for confrontation. Since the death of Emma's grandmother four years ago, her mother had tried to make Aunt Vivian her project. Vivian had different ideas.

"She went to a gardening expo with Dad."

"That man does love his tomatoes."

"Better snatch your friend before they clone her."

Vivian disappeared back into the purple crowd of the FRUMPs.

Lili was talking to Lindsay Monahan, chair of the Junior League Committee for Charitable Acts. Lindsay was the same age as Emma, but she had always looked older. While the other girls at school experimented with drugstore lipsticks and cream blush, Lindsay took her make-up seriously. Elizabeth Arden had been her signature cosmetic brand since high school. Even at the charity walk, Lindsay's face was flawless. The pink piping of her jogging pants was picked up in the pastel shade covering her lips. Her shiny, brown ponytail was pulled back at the nape of

her neck and hot-curled into a perfect spiral. Even her sports bra looked starched and pressed.

"What were you two talking about?"

"League stuff," Lili said. "Don't be paranoid."

"Just making conversation," Emma said. "Won't happen again." They walked through the rows of exhibition tents toward the starting line. Emma and Lili stood in back of the crowd.

"Sorry," Lili said. "Aspirin hasn't kicked in yet."

The gunshot went off and the brass band started playing *Walking to New Orleans*. At their own pace, far behind the joggers and the speed-walkers, the girls could hear the small sounds of hummingbirds and falling leaves mix with the distant notes of the trumpet.

A group of women pushing strollers lapped them on the track. As the plastic tubing from one of the baby toys caught the light, Emma saw a tiny rainbow bounce in the air. She felt trapped. She kept walking, sandwiched between the stroller women with their spandex and the FRUMPS with their purple clothes and odd taste in jewelry. Emma wanted to go home and curl up on the couch. She convinced herself that she was hung over and dehydrated, making the world around her look a little fuzzy and surreal.

Deep in her gut, though, under the churning alcohol units and late-night snack food, something was brewing. The shelves of spare parts and sketch pads called to Emma. She wanted to be in a world where she had control, where she was in charge. Here in the park, the world was different. Emma was out of step, off tune.

Everyone else seemed to have the manual.

They had all gotten the memo.

Chapter Four

Emma wished the services were still in Latin so she didn't have to feel guilty not knowing what Father McDurdy was talking about. She caught a few words here and there and pulled out her notebook to write down the ones of particular interest. In between jottings, her eyes searched the choir stalls for sleeping members of the chorus.

Today, Father was speaking on familial duties. As he droned on with words like *obey* and *participate*, Emma knew her mother would be quoting him during lunch. She thought of excuses not to eat with her parents after mass, but none of them would hold up under scrutiny. Even with thirty years of preparation under her belt, Emma was no match for McDurdy's family sermon. Although he seemed passive and unassuming on the exterior, the gentle Father was handing out ammo to every parent in the chapel. A mother's disappointment was to the fledgling Catholic what wooden

stakes and holy water were to creatures of the night. Dainty Baronne, Emma's mother, would be let down, not because Emma didn't want to do the dishes—it wasn't *about* the dishes—but because Emma was making the Virgin Mother sad.

Emma tried to at least appear interested in the Sunday-morning lecture. She had read somewhere that police detectives can tell if a man is lying or uninterested by the way he tilts his head. Father seemed to be tilting his head to the left while he spoke, a sure sign that he wasn't buying a bit of what he was selling. With each word, his head began to sink lower and lower until Emma couldn't stand it any longer. This is my chance, Emma thought. She could stand up and expose Father McDurdy for the snake-oil salesman that he was. If she could only recall the article she had read, or was it a T.V. show? Emma's impulse to leap up and expose McDurdy was fleeting. Maybe a right tilt meant you were lying.

The Baronne family was positioned perfectly with ten pews in front of them, ten pews behind, and equal amounts of room on either side. Dainty insisted on sitting in the center of the chapel as if the services were in high-definition surround sound. If Emma looked up, she was

perfectly centered under the point of the stained-glass turret.

She tried not to look up. She glanced around the room at the high Gothic arches and the decorative apse and felt small. Every aspect of St. Anthony's seemed designed to make Emma feel unimportant, tiny, and worthless. She felt guilty for even wanting to be more important than the stained-glass narratives covering the walls.

"Stop fidgeting," Dainty whispered into Emma's ear.

Margie Fitzpatrick and her mother Gerdy were, as always, in the far right of the front pew. Emma stared at them. She wondered if she would end up like Margie, childless and gray, still accompanying her mother to Sunday services, being in her fifties and still told not to act like a wiggle-worm. She was thankful for her allergies. Emma's hypersensitive skin was insurance against life as a crazy old cat lady.

One by one the pews emptied and people lined-up for Communion while Emma flipped page after page of her notebook:

31. discipleship (say ten times fast)
42. hair shirt
51. swaddling

64. Note to self - take Samaria off vacation wish list (too many obnoxious do-gooders)

Sketches lined the margins, from detailed renderings of the stained-glass windows of the cathedral to caricatures of McDurdy drinking wine with the altar boys.

"Why do you always insist on bringing your own car?" Dainty asked. "Your father and I drive right past your street every Sunday."

"You go all the way down St. Charles?" Emma asked.

Your mother loves..." Emma's dad interjected.

"The trees," Dainty cut him off. "I love the trees. They relax me."

"Screw you!" came from the window of a blue car pulling out of the parking lot as Gerdy Fitzpatrick shot them the bird from her Lincoln.

"How would I get home from lunch?" Emma asked.

"Your father would drive you. Right, Evan?"

"What?" he asked, caught off guard at being let back into the conversation.

"You would love to drive Emma, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," he said. "Wouldn't mind a bit." As her father climbed into the car, Emma marveled at how unaffected he was. For all he knew, he had just signed on to take Emma to Pokipsy for the weekend.

Emma pulled her cigarettes from the glove box as soon as her parents were out of eyeshot. She parked in the back of the lot with all of the other single adults who met their parents at mass. As soon as the front parking lot emptied, smoke rose from the back lot like a fog machine. Her car pulled onto the avenue, and she was sucked into the warp of Sunday-morning traffic. Mornings spent racing to work were nothing compared to the clusterfuck of an exodus after Sunday mass. Before the light could turn green, the Taurus behind Emma expelled a gassy honk.

"Green means go, asshole." The man driving was in a three-piece suit. His wife was wearing a lavender tent and touching up her make-up in the mirror. Emma slowly let her foot off the brake and crept across the intersection.

The parking lot at Ye Old College Inn was full, so Emma pulled down the side street. Cars lined the walkway to the diner, all covered in stickers for various Catholic churches and schools. Bumper stickers and decals were slapped on every SUV and sedan Emma passed - Sacred Heart, Brother Martin, St. John's, St. Anthony's. There were stickers boasting about honor rolls, advertising soccer-mom status, and even one claiming "I'm just thankful for the thousands of good priests." To Emma, the entire city of New Orleans was Catholic.

She walked straight to her parent's table, the same place they had sat every Sunday after mass for the past fifty years. There was already a Diet Coke waiting in front of Emma's empty chair. No menus were necessary because the gigantic chalkboard by the kitchen listed it for you - poboy sandwiches ranging from fried oysters to fried crawfish, French fries served with your choice of chili or cheddar-cheese topping, and an assortment of vegetables, fried and served with either Ranch dressing or remoulade sauce for dipping. Emma knew without asking that a fried artichoke would be arriving at their table any minute.

"I notice you're alone," Dainty started. "Margaret Hotspotter's son, Benjamin, is back in town."

"Just graduated from law school." Evan winked and nudged at his daughter.

"Conner and I are only taking a break."

"You could at least brace your mother and me before you dropped bad news."

"Thanks, Sandra," Dainty said as the waitress set down their appetizer. Emma enjoyed the brief break before her mother persisted. "I was thinking about having Ben over for dinner. Is Friday good?"

"I have plans."

"A date?" Evan asked, hopeful.

"With Lili." Emma could hear her mother's thoughts.

"Unless you're a lesbian like your Cousin Jeffrey, you'll never meet someone hanging out with your girlfriends in a bar."

"Conner *is* my boyfriend." Emma threw excess fried shell onto her plate. "And Jeffrey is gay. He's *not* a *lesbian*."

Sandra returned with three shrimp poboy and a plate of onion rings. Emma squeezed ketchup on the toasted French bread top and proceeded to pick at the breaded shells of her shrimp.

"I hear there's a new restaurant on Magazine that has a fabulous Sunday brunch," Emma said, scraping fry batter with the back of her fork.

"What's wrong with the Inn?" Evan sounded personally offended at the suggestion.

Emma wanted to unscrew the picture frames from the wall and show her parents that years of grease and coffee fumes had stained the walls like a giant smoker's tooth. She was sure that under each photograph would be the original stark white wallpaper with tiny green strands of ivy.

"Nothing," Dainty said. "She's just making conversation. Right, Emma?"

"How's the garden, Dad?"

"You should come by and see the tomato I pulled out the other day. I think it's the prettiest one I've harvested to date."

Her father's garden was always a quick way to change the subject. For the past few years, he had been growing peppers and tomatoes of every variety in a small patch of backyard donated by Dainty.

"Sounds fascinating," Emma said.

"Like wasting years of fine artistic training on scribbling out motor-engine parts?" Dainty was the master at navigating conversation.

Emma scooped all of the fry batter into her spoon and shoved it into her mouth.

"Yes, Mother," she pulled off another piece and dunked it straight into the Ranch. "That's exactly what I meant."

Chapter Five

"What time do you want to go out?"

"I'm in the middle of a *Rocky* marathon."

"Things that bad at work?" Emma could hear Apollo Creed jumping around to *I Live in America*.

"You have no idea."

"Martinis at Monkey Hill?"

"I'll get in the shower now," Lili said.

#

After an hour and a half of buffing, polishing, straightening, and applying, the girls were ready to hit the bars. After all, it was Thirsty Thursday, and they were both (for all practical purposes) single women. Emma didn't want to hook-up with anyone, but she certainly didn't see the harm in flirting. One month was not long enough for her to give up on seven on-again-off-again years of emotional roller coaster.

Monkey Hill had grown up with Emma and Lili. Their first year at Tulane, they would slip past the bouncer with their fake IDs and tight miniskirts and drink keg beer all night out of clear plastic cups. At the back of the large, open dance floor, there was a window serving all-hours bar food. They would time their eating for maximum effect, to keep them from getting sick without sobering them up. Black bean quesadillas after seven tall beers was Emma's fool-proof formula. Back then, the upstairs DJ booth was the bar's prime real estate. Every night, they competed to get the DJ's attention and an invitation to choose the music for the rest of the night.

Now, the jukebox played Norah Jones and vintage Smiths tunes. The walls were a deep chocolate brown, and bright red and yellow dividers separated the space into distinct lounges. Typically, nobody danced. Instead, they hunched in corners, leaning toward each other holding adult conversations. Emma missed the old bar, where she and Conner had spent so many of their first dates.

"Let's get a drink," Lili said. She eased up to the bar and picked up a table-top martini menu. Imports and microbrews had taken over the cheap light beer that used to dominate the taps, and wine bottles lined the back shelf of

the bar where the stray bra collection was once so proudly displayed.

"Things might be over with Conner," Emma said.

"Over like the time you saw him at McDonald's with that curly-haired girl who in fact turned out to be his homely cousin from Missouri?"

"Vodka martini," Emma said. "Jalapeno olives."

"He sucks anyway," Lili sipped her Mangotini. "And if you had wanted him to stick around, he would have."

"You're acting like we're not going to get back together, Lili."

"Maybe you don't want to get back together."

"Stop," Emma gnawed the jalapeno out of one of her olives. "You're freaking me out."

"Speaking of being freaked out," Lili pointed behind Emma's head.

"Well, I get to buy you a drink after all." Marcus put his arm on the bar so that it wrapped around Emma's shoulder. Lili smiled at Marcus, who undoubtedly confused her amusement with hypnosis under his charm.

"Two of you, two of us." Marcus gestured to Blake Mescowitz from Accounting who was sitting in the Jungle Lounge. The room was decorated with leopard-skin couches and bamboo tables.

"Actually, Lili and I were having...um...girl talk."

"I'm not one to interrupt an Oprah moment," Marcus said. "But I'll be back." He shot an imaginary bullet from his pointed finger and winked.

#

After three more vodka martinis and two shots of tequila, Marcus and Blake no longer looked as if their hair snapped on top of their heads like Weeble-Wobbles.

"You two kinda have a Ben Affleck-Matt Damon thing goin' on, huh?" Emma asked.

Lili shut one eye to vaguely make out taller/brunette, shorter/blonde and nodded in agreement. "You totally do," she said, raising her martini glass and downing the salty-sweet remains.

"I gotta pee," Emma announced in as lady-like fashion as that could ever be announced. She wove her way to the bathroom, each step so deliberate that she imagined looking like an inebriated Nazi soldier. Only one stall was in working order, the other occupied by the token vomitter.

"I just wasn't ready for this," Emma heard her the woman utter between heaves. "I can't believe he's already seeing someone else."

An enormous lead anchor dropped from the back of Emma's throat and pulled her stomach a good five inches

lower than it should be. *Seeing someone else*, she thought. *The son of a bitch is really seeing someone else.*

"Are you in line?" the girl behind Emma asked. She was contorting her legs and swaying back and forth. "I really gotta go."

Emma snapped to and closed the stall door behind her, wondering if Conner was seeing anyone she knew. Was it the girl behind her in line? That waitress at their favorite restaurant where he always insisted on over-tipping? She straddled the toilet and tried not to drop her skirt into the line of fire. She accepted the fact that Conner would go on dates with people, but it never occurred to her that he might actual date one girl. Someone other than Emma. With a quick glance up, Emma's world fell apart, and her scarf belt fell into the toilet. Etched into the door was her hard evidence.

Allison and Conner 4Eva.

Emma stormed through the door of the bathroom and toward the bar where Lili, busy ducking Blake's attempts at PDA, shot Emma a quick where-the-hell-have-you-been smile from the side of her mouth while she sucked the life out of her last cigarette.

"You ready? You know we have that thing tomorrow so we better get going," Lili said, winking in what she was sure was a clever and sly manner.

"I didn't know you wore contacts," Blake said. "Mine get all bunched up sometimes when I drink, too. Hurts, huh?"

"So, what are you guys doing tonight?" Emma asked. She had that closing time tone in her voice that let them all know she wasn't through.

"Probably just going home and playing with our X-Boxes," Blake said.

"That's disgusting," Lili almost fell off her bar stool.

"I think it sounds like fun."

#

Emma woke up early as she frequently did when she wasn't in her own bed. Her head felt wrong, as if something other than her brain were occupying it, renting it out for the morning. Lili tiptoed into the room. Her voice was raspy and deep from the two packs of cigarettes lodged in her throat.

"Emma...Emma..." her words poking almost as hard as her finger. "I can't find my clip."

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked, turning and seeming startled to see Marcus on the pillow next to her. Emma surveyed the room, the computer in the corner, the hunter green walls and dark navy comforter.

"We aren't in Kansas anymore," Lili said, still crawling around on the floor. Emma's throat felt gutted and carved like a jack-o-lantern as she slipped quietly and carefully out of the sheets without waking Marcus.

"My hair clip...I can't find my hair clippie," Lili ribbeted in a low, deep moan as she walked out of the room to comb the apartment. Emma could hear her from the living room as she picked up pillows and stacks of magazines.

"Emma," she said panicky, "he'll think it's a freakin' leave behind. It's bad enough that we double shacked with the Fisher-Price twins. I can't have them thinking we did a leave behind!"

By the time Emma was creeping past the threshold of Marcus' bedroom, Lili had her shoes on, purse hanging from her shoulder, and keys in her right hand. The brown tortoise shell clip was resting around the strap of her purse as Lili proudly pointed out. Emma picked her chunky loafers up from the corner of the typical bachelor-pad dark brown tweedy sofa and followed Lili tiptoeing through the sliding-glass door, across the patio, and into the carport.

The sun was brighter than Emma had remembered. It was burning her eyes and illuminating the tiny beads of sweat on Emma's arms. They looked like vodka, and the salty feel of her skin made her stomach churn.

She opened the passenger side of Lili's car and felt the air, thick with heat and stale cigarette smoke.

"I think he's seeing someone," Emma said.

"Marcus? You think Marcus is seeing someone?"

"No, Conner."

With a loud rev of the engine, the girls made a successful getaway.

Chapter Six

"Shit," Emma looked at the clock. Lili had only dropped her off two hours before, and Emma had curled up on the couch with the intent of just resting her eyes for a moment. It was 8:15 a.m., and she was momentarily worried that she needed to rush. Technically, work hours were between 8 and 5. She was notified though that alternate hours were perfectly acceptable. Most of the engineers were early birds - in by 7 and out before 4. Always trying to avoid creating fodder for water-cooler talk, she lived in fear of the dreaded question from Janet or one of her other colleagues.

"So, Emma, exactly what are your hours?"

Cosmo had featured an article raving about the benefits of "flex-time" employment, and Emma was ready to quote from it if she had to. She was not a lazy girl with

no work ethic whatsoever. She was on the cutting edge of office trends. She was *in the know*.

She was also filthy and hung over, so she threw a towel into the dryer to warm it up, jumped in the shower, and started getting ready.

"I'm getting way too old for this crap," Emma glared at herself in the mirror while she dabbed layer after layer of ivory cover-up under her eyes.

Luckily, Emma was too preoccupied with her acidic stomach and aching head to remember she was walking into work. And that she worked with Marcus.

Janet was perched at the desk when Emma walked in.

"Barrett called a mandatory meeting this morning," she said. "He requested that you block out your whole day." Janet's small stature was countered with an enormous energy. She always sounded on the brink of either a huge discovery or a nervous breakdown. Emma could never decide which one.

"Thanks," Emma said. Janet smiled like she was waiting for Emma to strike up conversation with her, but Emma walked past, avoiding everyone in the path to her office.

Emma shook her head and looked at the clock. It was only 9:00, and it already felt like midnight. Her eyes were

scratchy, and her face felt moist. All she wanted to do was crawl back into her bed and crash out for at least a week.

"Engineering, Logistics, and Emma," Janet sounded through the halls. "Meeting in ten minutes." Emma imagined her as the coked-out reincarnate of a patriotic town crier, carrying a lantern and wearing a pair of worn-out tan knickers. *British are coming, main conference room, high noon.*

Emma didn't want to think about seeing Marcus. She prayed that Marcus had called-in sick with a hangover, or preferably something incurable like smallpox or Ebola.

Too tired and nauseated to be worried about the meeting, or about seeing Marcus, Emma dropped her head down on the desk. It landed so that her forehead rested in the curve of her right arm. Both hands were resting on the desk, her right hand flat and her left in a fist upward. It felt natural. She floated back to the days of elementary school. She was in Mrs. Wilson's first-grade class playing What's Up 7-Up—her eyes slightly open to try and glimpse at her classmates. Her heels dug slightly into the floor on the off chance that she was picked to be *it*, chosen to chase Bobby Turner around the room in a fit of childish excitement. Her thumb moved slightly as if to say, "Pick me. Look at *this* thumb."

Then, she was chosen.

Her thumb had been picked and her body reacted to the weight pressed against it. She flung back her head and jumped up from her chair.

"You're it." Marcus painfully and sarcastically enunciated each embarrassing letter. "Nice to see you're resting up. Barrett sent me. From the conference room."

She picked up her Franklin day planner and walked down the hall to the imaginary beat of Janet shouting *dead girl walking*.

"Steel-X Machinery is offering two years of free maintenance," Barrett said.

Silence did the wave through the boardroom, and Emma felt the pressure of eight Processor Deluxes on her shoulders.

"Can you have a presentation ready this afternoon?"

Every eye was on Emma. She wanted to tell them she already had plans to curl up with her wastebasket and dry heave all afternoon.

"Okay," she said.

Funerals were generally more boisterous than the office of Prossacon for the rest of the morning. The air was thick and tense with the over-consumption of expensive

coffee drinks. Bob Cleary, a skinny-double-cappuccino man himself, was bouncing around Cubicleland.

"What do you think, Jill? Bill? Ed? Are we going under? Are we? Huh? What do you think?" he asked. Finally, after exhausting the Logistics and Accounting staffs, he wore himself into a caffeine hangover and slumped over his desk in quick-crashing coma.

Emma sat quietly in her office trying to block out the world. Box after box of sample manuals sat on the floor of her office, gathered around her like Starbucks' kiosks. She slipped off her shoes and lay down on the cool surface of her carpet. Deep breaths. She wished that she had taken yoga classes because she felt sure it would come in handy at moments like this. She stood up and tried to imitate the people she saw in infomercials and on video covers. She leaned forward until her hands reached the ground, and her body arched in a triangle.

Thoughts of Conner ran through her head. The impulse to call him kicked in, and Emma decided that she would make contact after the meeting. It had been too long. Today was a big day for her career, and she wanted someone to share it with. Marcus had been a momentary blip on her radar, but now that all of the martinis and tequila shooters had worn off, she and Conner belonged together. Her plan was to stop

by Martin Wine Cellar, pick up a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a couple of glasses, and show up at his apartment.

She imagined Conner opening the door in his bathrobe and boxers. *I've been waiting*, he would say. They wouldn't have to talk about the past few months, or about whom they had dated. It was understood between the two of them that they were meant to be together. There weren't any other viable options.

Emma was eager to get on with the meeting. She wanted it to be over so that she could execute the plan. She wanted to see Conner.

"Janet," Emma started, "could you plug me through to Barrett?"

"He's on a call." The pause was uncomfortable. "He's been on all morning. His door is shut." Janet's voice was spinning out of control. "I don't know who he's talking to, Emma!"

"I'll catch him going into the meeting," Emma said.

Emma watched every click of the second hand of her wall clock until it was finally time. She gathered troops to drop the boxes into the boardroom. She set-up her easel and spread pamphlets across the slick mahogany of the conference table.

"Good luck," Janet said as she situated the coffee urn on the table at the back of the room.

"Thanks."

The inhabitants of Cubicleville filed in one by one, all staring at Emma like the Second Coming.

"We're counting on you," Bob said. He sat down and immediately began to pull apart a mini-muffin with the nervous energy of an inner city crack whore.

"You can do it, Emma," She told herself. Hopefully not out loud.

Even Marcus smiled without looking greasy, and Emma knew things couldn't possibly get any better. She was confident that she could pull this off and convince everyone that her lubrication plan could keep them in the game. Barrett finally walked into the room, and Emma started right away. She directed everyone to the manuals. She flipped through the charts on her easel and highlighted important bits with her handy laser pointer.

"And as you see on page five of the manual—"

"I've sold the company," Barrett said. "We're shutting down."

Stage Two: Depression

Chapter Seven

After the meeting Emma was sure her day could only get better.

She needed coffee. She needed to vent.

In mid-reach for the phone, it started to ring. She answered.

"Hey you," Lili said.

"You are such a mind reader. I was just picking up the horn to call you. Did you see the smoke signals or something?"

"Bad day?" she asked.

"Bad is an understatement. I think I died about five hours ago. And I have news."

"Actually, I'm kinda glad to hear your day going so crappy already. I was worried that I was about to ruin it."

"What?"

"You first."

"No, go ahead." Emma said.

"It's about," Lili started, "I mean, it's just that I should tell you something."

"Then tell me."

"It's just that I would rather you hear it from me than someone else, but I don't want you to take it out on me for telling you."

"Spit it out, Lili."

"It's difficult."

"No. Actually, you just open your mouth and start talking."

"He's engaged."

Emma wanted to press rewind, shove the words back through the receiver and into Lili's mouth. She knew the answer before she asked.

"Who? Who is getting married?"

"Conner."

The silence was painful. Lili waited for Emma to cry, to scream, to laugh it off. She waited for Emma to do anything. To show any sign that she heard what Lili had just said, that she processed the information and would be okay. Finally, a full minute of painful silence, Emma spoke.

"That's all? Jesus, Lili. You had me freaking out," Emma said. "It's not like anything really bad happened, right? I mean it's just my fucking life we're talking about here." Her heart was pounding in her head, and she felt dizzy. She fought off every natural reaction she had and tried desperately to sound nonchalant. "So, you want to go for coffee later?"

"Emma," Lili took on a motherly voice, "did you hear what I just said?"

"It's not like you asked me a question. I, on the other hand, just asked you a very specific question. One that I think is worthy of a response," Emma said while gripping the edges of her desk with tight fists.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm great."

"What was your news?"

"Nothing," Emma said. "It really doesn't matter."

She quickly put the receiver back on the phone and walked past her desk to shut the door. Before she slammed it shut, Emma peeked out to survey the scene. Almost everyone had stayed in the office, as if their refusal to leave meant they still had jobs.

Emma listened to hear Janet chatting it up with her boyfriend about the money she needed from him to get her

hair and nails done for an interview she had for a better position. *It is a good thing*, she said right before busting into tears. Everyone was too self-involved to notice Emma. When she finally felt safe enough, sure that no one could hear her, Emma shut her door, walked to her desk, sat down, and threw her head back to cry.

"How could you?" She asked the photo of Conner on her desk. "What did I do that was so bad?"

"Hi, Pumpkin."

Emma wished she hadn't answered the phone.

"Your mom's cooking tonight for the Fitzpatricks. We figured you could come over later. No plans tonight, huh?"

"No, Daddy," Emma said. That was his polite way of hoping out loud that Emma had a date with an investment banker or CEO in the make.

"Well, you *always* have plans with family, eh?" he asked.

Emma started crying again.

"What? What's wrong? What happened? Who the hell is making you cry?" her father asked.

"Emma's crying?" her mother asked from the background.

"Conner," Emma started.

"What? When did you talk to Conner?" her father asked.

"Not again," her mother started. Emma could see her taking off her ruffled apron and walking straight into the hall to get on the guest phone. Even though Dainty could slice Emma's self-esteem with the effectiveness of a Ginsu knife, she prided herself on playing the overprotective den mother when Emma was upset. The phone clicked.

"I'm here, Honey," her mother said. "What did he do? Did he try to come crawling back to you?"

"Mom, I broke it off with him, remember?"

"I remember," her dad said. "It was one of your best moments."

"Evan!" her mother yelled. "Don't be so insensitive."

"Insensitive? You want to hear insensitive, Dainty? Try leaving our Emma for a year to go off and find yourself while she cries her eyes out every night wondering what she did wrong."

"He had some issues," her mother said. "Some men actually *do* have feelings, you know."

"Well, some of us have *jobs*," he countered.

Emma felt she could have hung up the phone, and her parents would keep at it for hours until they realized she wasn't there.

"Conner is getting married!" she screamed into the phone.

The silence lasted for a good ten seconds.

"Married?" her mother asked, shocked.

"Is he marrying you, Emma?" her father asked.

"Of course not, Daddy. Why would you ask that?"

"I'm just trying to figure out why you are crying. The only reason I would cry over this is if you were the one he was marrying," he said. "I think this is **great** news."

"Honestly, Evan, you can be so crappy. Emma, you get over here right now, and I'll make you some cinnamon toast with extra butter and a nice cup of snicker-doodle coffee."

"I thought we only made cinnamon toast for **bad** news," her dad added.

"Hang up the damn phone, Evan," her mother said in a low, stern voice.

"Mom, I'm at work, and I don't get off for another three hours." Technically, Emma told herself, she wasn't lying. She wasn't officially unemployed until morning. "And then I'm going home."

"And what?" her mother asked. "And be by yourself? Conner sure isn't by himself, so why should you have to be all alone, honey?"

"Ma," Emma said, "I just don't feel like being pleasing to the Fitzpatricks." Margie Fitzpatrick and her mother were the last people Emma wanted to see right now.

"Nonsense. You just need to march right into that Barrett's office and tell him that you are leaving because you need to be with your family right now and that is that."

"I can't do that, Mom."

"And why not?" her mother asked.

"It's called work," her father chimed in. "You should try it some time, Dainty."

"I **saaaaiiid** haaaaaang up the phooooone, Evan!"

Chapter Eight

At certain moments in a woman's life, a bottle of lavender-scented foam bath and a hunk of dark chocolate are the only things barring mandatory vacation to a four-star padded cell. For Emma Baronne, this was one of those times.

As she sat in the warmth of her claw-foot tub, surrounded by the soft aroma of bubbles and soap, Emma wondered where it had all gone. She thought back to her twenty-five-year-old self, the one who had just graduated from art school. She had given up her idea of being an artist before she had even started. She wanted to make it on her own or not at all. Emma sunk her head into the water.

The McDade twins, Julie and Margot, had their own studio in the Marigny. Emma hated them. She despised most of the girls she graduated with at Newcomb, all Trustafarians who wore tattered clothes and walked mangy

dogs. They wandered the Quarter and acted misunderstood, keeping their parents' credit cards in small patchwork satchels. Most of them were set-up with studio space and food allowances as graduation presents. Emma turned down the studio, the allowance, the free ride, and she had never regretted it.

Until now.

Five years of her life were devoted to the company, and everything she got in return had fit into a cardboard tequila box. She took just enough of her work to piece together a portfolio - a couple of technical bulletins, the Grader 6 manual, her employee evaluations. Photos of Emma at office parties and product launches were edged into the sides of the box. Emma had also taken Part #56.

Staring at the office space and the shelves of stainless-steel contraptions, Emma had been overwhelmed by how much she would miss having a proper job. Plenty of times she had complained about work, showing up on time, having to sit through meetings. But standing there, knowing it was the last time she would see the inside of the Prossacon offices, Emma had felt homeless. She felt like she was being evicted from a house she had helped to build with her own two hands.

Even the complaining about the office helped to give her life a sense of shared purpose, a way to relate to other people. She thought about all of the times she'd wanted to get fired, even planned out the scenarios in her head or at the bar with Lili. Now she felt ashamed of those thoughts. Maybe, just maybe, those ideas had set things into motion. When she had first been upgraded to the technical-writing position, Emma had felt it was because of her raw talent and ability. In hindsight, she realized it was just the opposite. *If Emma could understand it, Barrett had thought, anyone can get it.*

"Lili again. I know you're there," came from the answering machine in the hallway. "Don't kill the messenger. Call me."

Emma didn't want to talk to Lili or to anyone else that had known her while she dated Conner. They were another reminder of how naïve she had been to think her life was headed in the right direction. She thought about Rachel Lancer, her best friend until third grade when her father was transferred to Michigan for business. Emma made a mental note to look her up on-line.

Lili would try to make her feel better about Conner and convince her it was for the best. She didn't want to be encouraged. Her fingers were starting to shrivel like

fleshy raisins, and Emma hoped that if she stayed under the water long enough she would completely dehydrate into a toy sponge. Children would find her, The Incredible Shrinking Emma, years from now when scientists had found cures for homelessness and spinsterhood. They would just add water and watch her grow. She would provide hours of family entertainment and, in return, they would catch Emma up on current events, tell her who the president was, and help her locate the surviving members of her family. No doubt her Aunt Vivian would still be around.

The answering machine clicked.

"Emma, your mother wanted me to call and remind you that we have a place set at the table for you tonight. At least call us if you have other plans."

She soaked for another fifteen minutes before deciding to drain the bath and head to the kitchen. Fighting past the bags of frozen corn and boneless chicken breasts, Emma pulled out the pint of Ben and Jerry's. When the entire contents of the cardboard container had been dumped into the blender, Emma reached into the freezer again. This time for the vodka. Equal parts of both, and she pressed frappe.

Television didn't prove to be much of an escape. Everything was trying to imitate reality instead of help her escape from it. She flipped through each channel,

watching as people struggled to make their way cross country with no credit cards, marry off their fathers, or eat more maggots than their opponents.

She spread out her collection of glossy magazines in front of her on the sofa. She flipped through the pages looking for inspiration, hoping to find a reason for her life being in shambles. Maybe sandwiched between the fashion don'ts and make-up tips for combination skin, Emma could find the key to her happiness. The faux-pas sections made her feel better temporarily, but the consolation of knowing that she would never be caught outdoors in tapered slacks was not a lasting comfort.

She desperately wanted to know that something good could rise from the ashes of her life. Then it happened. Emma saw page 251 of *O Magazine* and had what can only be described as a light-bulb moment.

"Reconnecting and Reviving your Spirit"

by Maggie White, Ph.D.

In order to find what makes you happy, truly happy, look to your childhood. We've been taught to regulate ourselves, to conform to social norms. I say, let your six-year-old self be your guide to reenergizing your soul.

Emma's favorite pillow dragged behind her along with the comforter from her bed. She pulled blankets and sheets out of the linen closet. With the last slurp of her adult shake, Emma screeched the dining-room chairs across her hardwood floors into the living room, carefully placing them at each corner of the space. It looked like she was organizing a Wicca meeting. Or a séance.

Emma rifled through the entire contents of every drawer in the house until she found a box of twelve crayons and a blank pad of paper. She emptied the TV stand, keeping anything with Cary Grant or Meg Ryan or Julia Roberts. She pulled out the fifth season of *Friends*, and the second season of *Sex and the City*. Armed with the remote and the cordless phone, she draped the final sheet across the roof of Fort Emma and climbed inside. She watched as hearts were broken, as lives were mended, and as lost people became found.

And the whole time Emma played with her crayons.

She drew ladybugs and balloons tied with string, hearts with arrows through them and words in big, bubbly letters. For the first time since she could remember, Emma felt safe and warm and content.

Chapter Nine

"Your key was for emergencies only."

"This certainly qualifies," Dainty said, throwing her purse on the kitchen table. "This place is filthy. Why are you sleeping in a tent?"

"It's a fort." Emma took a bite of her cereal.

"Your father read the paper this morning."

"I can see why you had to rush over here to tell me that."

Dainty cut off the television, and Elroy Jetson disappeared in a swirl of darkness.

"You haven't answered the phone in a week. Come to find out, you're unemployed," Dainty dropped the *Times Picayune* on the floor in front of Emma. In bold letters, across the front page of the business section, was written *Shrimpers Upset at the Loss of Prossacon*.

"I thought I told you about that," Emma said.

Her mother was busy collecting empty microwave-dinner boxes and ice-cream cartons from the counter. She piled them into garbage bags and sprayed orange-scented cleaner across the entire surface of the kitchen.

"Go to your room and get dressed," Dainty said.

Emma took another bite of her cereal. "For what?"

"We're going to your Aunt Vivian's." Dainty ripped the sheet from across Emma's dining-room chairs and folded it into a tidy cotton square.

A feather-edged slipper flew across the room as Emma jumped up from her palette. "You know I'm allergic," Emma said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Dainty said. "You are not allergic to your Aunt Vivian."

"How many cats does she have now? Fifty?" Emma wanted to tell her mother that her life was plain and pathetic enough in the mildly suburban confines of uptown. She was not going to subject herself to a daily dose of the French Quarter, where she was sure to blend into the stucco background of a Spanish cottage, never to be seen again by human eyes.

"You don't have the work excuse anymore." Dainty picked up the spare clothes lying on the living-room floor

and threw them into the hallway washing machine. "You can at least be sociable."

"You're loving this, aren't you? You've hated that job since I took it."

"Well, you have to pay your bills, Emma."

"Exactly. And I can manage on my own." Milk splashed against her pajamas as Emma dropped her cereal bowl into the sink. She hated to think about borrowing money from her parents.

"As you've proven time and time again, you will cut off your pinky toe to spite your foot."

"It's your nose--"

"Whatever."

Emma headed into her room and turned on the hot water. She stood under the shower head, feeling like the streams of crystal-clear droplets were conspiring to knock her over. After drying off, she put on just enough make-up to keep her mother from complaining, slipped on a pair of jeans, and pulled her hair into a loose ponytail.

Back in the kitchen, Dainty was loading the dishes. Every plate and utensil was scrubbed clean with detergent and scouring pads before she deposited it into the dishwasher. It took her a few minutes to notice that Emma had returned and was sitting on the couch.

"Aunt Vivian does know that we're coming, right?"

"Don't worry," Dainty said. "It's all taken care of."

#

The terra-cotta walls of the foyer were covered in crosses—some were pewter, others made of Mexican tile or bent strips of rod iron. Etched missionary tables and dusty bookshelves gave the entire apartment the feeling of a Spanish monastery.

"Miss Vivian is in the sitting room," Evangeline said. Emma marveled at how Evangeline seemed caught in a time warp. Despite the fact that she had worked for Vivian for over twenty years, Evangeline didn't have a single gray strand in her thick, black hair or a single worry line across her face. She didn't have any laugh lines, either.

Emma walked through the cottage house where Vivian had all the accoutrements of piety—rosaries, a miniature Virgin Mary, and a *prie-dieu* beside her bed. The small bench had not seen a genuflect since Vivian outbid her coven of Catholics at auction. "Like crack whores at a pawn shop," she would say each time an unruly, irresponsible heir sold off her heritage at auction. She despised public sales, saying she had enough finery in her own family; she didn't need more silver or china. Instead, Vivian was there for a

greater cause, there to protect inheritance against turncoat antique dealers and flea-market gypsies.

Vivian was sprawled on the chaise lounge by the courtyard window, sipping from a fragile teacup. Emma was sure it was full of bourbon.

"Did your mother fill you in?"

"On what?" Emma sat down in a wing-backed chair across from her great aunt.

"Well, your new job, of course."

"New job? Where?"

"Here."

"You're hiring me?" Emma looked at her mother who was busy looking away, out the window onto the courtyard. "I'm afraid I don't know how to trap cats."

"You'll be painting," Vivian said. "A mural. I need something to brighten up the sunroom."

"I don't paint murals," Emma said. "There are people who paint murals, and people who don't. I'm the latter."

"Don't be silly," Dainty said, still staring out the window. "Vivian, your gardenias are simply magnificent."

"Horse shit," Vivian said. "A dump in the soil makes all the difference."

Chapter Ten

Each rise and fall of the road, every place where giant oak roots busted the concrete, or the sidewalk sunk into the ground, was familiar to Emma. She had walked this particular stretch of Magazine Street thousands of times, first as a little girl holding her mother's hand, and now as an adult. Tomorrow would be her first day painting Vivian's sunroom, so Emma wanted a full day to herself before then. She had to get out and clear her head. Java and fresh pastries sweetened the air as Emma got closer to the coffee shop.

A long line of people, all getting their caffeine fixes in various strengths and forms, led to the register. Emma scanned the menu of half-caff, skinny, and double-shot options.

"Next," the guy behind the bar called.

"Double pumpkin spice latte." She pulled her debit card from her wallet and set it on the counter next to the enormous vat of chocolate-covered espresso beans.

"Emma?" he asked.

The bright green apron threw her at first, but her attention was quickly called to the white plastic nametag on his lapel. The letters were printed out onto sticky clear plastic. M-A-R-C-U-S.

"What are you doing back there? Here, I mean," Emma tried to recover. "How are things?"

"My friend manages the place now," Marcus said. "Well, you remember Blake?"

"Of course," Emma said. "Is he here now, too?"

"No, he comes in at three," Marcus said. "That'll be four dollars and eighty-six cents."

"Did I mention it was to go?"

The wait for her latte seemed longer and more uncomfortable than Sunday lunch with her parents. She fiddled with packages of artificial sweetener, tapping them against the bar as if it would speed up the frothing.

Outside, the air was crisp and light, as close to autumn as it ever got in New Orleans. ShoeNami was having a sale on summer sandals, but Emma thought better of going inside. There was no room on her credit cards or in her

newly-meager budget for a new pair of red sling back mules, half-priced or not. Strolling on, Emma checked out the stunning arrangements of calla lilies and tulips on display at the flower shop. She stepped inside and inhaled the mixture of delicate smells. Coolers filled with freshly-cut flowers and arrangements lined the walls. Inside one of them was a shelf covered in plastic boxes of specialty corsages. Although Emma knew they were more likely for a homecoming or prom, she wondered if they could possibly be for Conner's wedding. It was a ridiculous thought, she told herself, and pulled a bunch of daisies from one of the other cases.

"I'll take these, please."

They were dripping water on the register table, and the sales lady quickly wrapped them in a cone of tissue paper.

"Lovely, aren't they?" She tied ribbon around the bottom. "So simple."

Emma held the flowers up to her nose on the way back outside. To her, they were anything but simple. Each petal was intricately designed and connected precariously to the center. Every stem was attached just so, allowing the flower to stand up, looking perky. Emma wished she could look at the daisies and not see all of their complexities.

The entrance to The Toy Chest was flanked by slender wooden soldiers dressed in bright red coats and black suspenders, and Emma couldn't refuse wandering between them. Ducking into the toy shop, Emma felt excited, like a little girl. She remembered walking through the doors every Saturday when her mother would bring her shopping, and how she would sit on the life-sized stuffed bears and read books about fairy godmothers and wicked witches. Everything looked smaller now. The books that used to cover her lap as she sat cross-legged on the floor now stretched out no bigger than a college textbook or technical manual in her hands. Even the bears seemed scaled-down. Bin after bin of yo-yos and plastic figures looked flimsy and pathetic. The silver Tinkerbell wands decorated with pink and white streamers made Emma think about sweatshop labor in Taiwan. The toy store had officially lost its magic.

Emma decided to get home and put the daisies in water. As she walked toward her car, however, something sparkled in the corner of her eye. It was silver and white, catching the light perfectly and creating a halo around it. It was RSVP's window display. She was drawn to it from across the street and walked toward it without even looking left-right-left. The window arrangement spoke to her. *Hi Moth*, it said. As she stepped across the yellow center line of

the road, totally oblivious to the traffic, it spoke louder. *I'm flame.*

Her face came nose-to-glass with the display. Paper dolls hung precariously from strands of clear fishing line. Each of them was covered in a different white gown, attached by carefully bent card-stock tabs. There were tea-length gowns, sweeping trains, and straight-cut dresses. Three of the dolls had gloves fixed on their long, slender arms. Others wore veils. In the center, invitations rested next to white guest books detailed with sheer ribbons and pearls. Silver easels held up an assortment of elegant bar napkins and photo albums.

Inside, Emma slipped past the sales associates at the front desk. She attempted to look like a casual browser, fingering packages of designer tissue and case after case of expensive ink pens as she made her way to the table at the opposite side of the store. The two sales associates were rustling through the store, so Emma carefully wove through aisle displays and decorative tables to avoid them. The older woman, a perfect Miss Manners, was redesigning the center display of brightly-colored, personalized note cards, each set monogrammed in a complimentary shade. The younger girl clapped her hands like a cheerleader each time

a box of the stationery was opened, and Miss Manners added it to the display.

Finally, Emma plopped into the chair, surrounded by book after book of invitation styles and napkin choices. She flipped through page after page of elaborate script fonts, suggested wordings, and paper choices. Each of the invitations began with a polite or humble request for attendance. Then, plastered in slightly larger letters across the center of the invitation was the bride's name. Emma was hit with the realization that she didn't even know who Conner was marrying. With all the commotion over the unemployment line, she had forgotten all about the Other Woman. There was someone out there, Emma thought, that Conner deemed better, more worthy. Someone with whom he was willing to spend the rest of his life.

Emma pulled tissue from the bouquet of daisies and blotted the corners of her eyes.

"It's often overwhelming at first." Cheerleader Girl was standing right behind Emma. "That's why we're here."

"Shit," Emma said. Hopefully to herself.

"So, when is your wedding?" Cheerleader Girl asked.

"Excuse me?" Emma asked.

"Have you set the date?" She was irrationally excited, sure to bust into *Gimme a D! Gimme an A!* if Emma didn't come back with something. Anything.

"I'm not getting married," Emma said. She flipped another page in the enormous book. Next in line was the groom's name. It was too much. "My boyfriend is getting married. Only he isn't my boyfriend."

Cheerleader Girl went mute. Emma had stolen her pom-poms.

"Of course, because how could he be my boyfriend if he's getting married and I am not. Right?"

She nudged her head toward Miss Manners. "Um...", she said politely.

Emma started crying all over the parchment swatches on page 242.

"Code blue." Cheerleader Girl's voice remained slippery sweet, like she was accepting the her Homecoming crown.

Miss Manners quickly abandoned her note-card display. In transit, she ripped open a pack of designer tissue covered in small frogs wearing golden crowns on their heads. She blotted Emma's face and quickly escorted her to the stock room, filled with stacks of boxes held together by rubber bands and tiny slips of paper with customers'

last names. Emma carried on in Biblical-style weeping. Miss Manners stayed with her, telling her that things would work out, that there were plenty of fish in Lake Pontchartrain. Emma cried harder and harder until she felt her sinuses would burst. Wiping her nose on the two-ply photo of a frog's ass, Emma knew she had to find out who the girl was that Conner deemed fit to marry. She needed to find out more about the Other Woman. Only then could she find out what she had done wrong.

Chapter Eleven

Drop cloths were on the shelf above the paint rollers. Emma grabbed two packages and put them into her shopping cart. Selecting brushes and paint colors was made more difficult by the fact that Emma had no idea what she was going to paint. Basic colors made the most sense and could always be mixed into something more dramatic.

Her instincts told her to go with something narrative. Maybe replication of one of the stained-glass panels of St. Anthony's or a knock-off of the Sistine Chapel. A handful of trumpet-blowing cherubs or a full-blown crucifixion scene seemed equally daunting. Unless Vivian wanted a gigantic carburetor on the wall of her sunroom, Emma was out of practice.

With all of the supplies in her basket, Emma proceeded to the checkout.

"Vivian LeBeau," Emma said. "She said to put it on her account."

"You must be Emma," the man said. He was an older black man with deep-set eyes and lines on his face like most people have only on the insides of their palms. "I'm Sam."

Emma shook his hand.

"Just take the cart," he said, watching Emma struggle with the paper sacks full of paint and brushes. "Bring it back when you can."

"Thanks."

Pushing the shopping cart down the residential section of the French Quarter seemed a natural step to Emma. Why shouldn't she be roaming around like a common bag lady? She expected to be getting a package left on her doorstep any day with her oversized straw hat and her housecoat. She had almost perfected the art of unintelligible babbling at R.S.V.P., so Emma felt well on her way to a bright future as a senile old maid.

Or worse.

The FRUMPS were all gathered in the courtyard of Vivian's apartment. They were wearing purple, green, and gold feather boas while snacking on miniature cucumber sandwiches and crudités.

Emma could hear them through the sliding-glass doors of the sunroom. They were all abuzz because Francis Pelletier, Krewe-of-Calliope Captain, had shown up to reveal the theme for this year's Mardi Gras.

Emma spread the drop cloths over the length of the hardwood floors.

"And this year's Krewe theme is..." Francis unveiled a sheet of poster board with huge letters covered in non-toxic glue and chunks of gold glitter. "The Dames That Will Live in Infamy."

She pulled tape out of the bag and started securing the cloth to the baseboard.

"And for your float," Francis got ready to reveal yet another fancy sheet of poster board. "Prison Living-the Martha Stewart Stock Scandal."

As she started sketching ideas onto her notepad, Emma was overwhelmed. She missed the comfort of the stainless-steel parts, each one waiting patiently to sit for a portrait. When she would finish one, there was always another component in line. She had forgotten the anxiety of a blank canvas.

She could hear Louise Tanner and Virginia Ellison going on about the perfect, blonde wigs for their costumes,

while Margie Fitzpatrick threw out ideas for masks and elaborately crafty headdresses.

Emma thought about extending the float theme into the sunroom. She could draw herself in black-and-white stripes, crouched in the corner of her modestly-decorated holding tank, the thick, black bars of her cell obscuring her face just enough so that she didn't have to get the eyes right. Emma could never master the art of drawing a person's eyes.

Chapter Twelve

"One medium pepperoni and jalapeno, extra cheese, and a small order of cinnamon sticks."

"Hey Emma," Rocky said. "It'll be about 30 minutes."

It was nice to be known, Emma told herself. Most people wanted to be where everybody knows their name. However, she wanted to be noticed for more than her ability to stay slim even though she ate her weight in fatty foods. She wanted to be known for something more important.

Emma fancied Aunt Madeline, her father's only sister, as the sort of woman who was a town celebrity for running charity programs and building houses for the needy. Ten years before Emma was born, Aunt Mad had packed her bags and defected. She married a carpet bagging Yank from Shreveport who had come to New Orleans selling handmade pralines at cheaper prices than the local shops. According to Dainty, it was downright scandalous.

For Christmas and birthdays, Dainty would send Mad presents that resembled care-packages more than proper gifts. She lumped mixes and sauces into a box, crammed in chicory and Hubig's fried pies. Emma grew up thinking Aunt Mad was off fighting a war, or homeless, or doing missionary work in the northern tip of Africa. She fancied having an aunt that did very important work, instead of scooting around the French Quarter pulling stray cats from under houses. In Emma's mind, Aunt Madeline made her family more noble. She was sure a Girl Scout badge for courage and duty would be delivered at any moment, if only because she was associated with such dignified individuals.

She was exotic, like a well-mannered and manicured Yetti with a heaping gray bun and elastic waistbands. She always donned a sort of theme wardrobe - from seasonal sweaters to match-sets with fabric birdhouses sewn along the hems and pockets. Her vocabulary was magnificently odd and Emma raced to her notebook after conversations with her:

#42 Humdinger

#54 Gullywasher

#57 Hogwash

#63 Flim-Flam

As Emma grew older, she noticed that Dainty always threw a Blue-Ribbon Praline on top of the tissue-papered packages as a middle finger to Uncle Albert's candied ambitions. Although Aunt Mad was only five hours away by car, as far as their family was concerned, she might as well have been in Yemen.

Emma flipped on the television and opened up the stack of magazines and books she'd bought earlier that afternoon in the Quarter, hoping to find inspiration for the mural that seemed an inevitable part of her near future. *Cosmo* probably didn't have what she was looking for, but it might help her get warmed up.

She was glad that the editors were spreading the word for women to stop self-tanning in the winter. Orange people made Emma nervous. On page 24, there were eight new hair-dos that Emma could get just by getting creative with a simple barrette. Watch out, MacGyver. She skipped through the health section and went straight for the quiz on page 58.

Are you a change-oholic?

Ten easy questions to measure your adaptability.

Question One: *How many moves have you made in the past five years?*

Emma had moved twice in her life - once to her college apartment with Lili and again when she graduated from Newcomb. According to the poll, Emma would be better suited for life in Germany.

Question Two: *How long have you been at your current job?*

Not a fair question, Emma thought. Anyway, wasn't stability a good thing? Why did you have to be moving around all the time to get the most out of life? Change was overrated, a concept that (according to the article) the Japanese understood.

Emma flipped over for the next question. Instead, she was greeted by a full-page advertisement for Bouquet Day, a web site offering one-stop support for the bride-to-be. Emma read the list of services, from wedding checklists to wedding registries.

Conner and the Other Woman must be registered somewhere, she thought. *Where* though? Emma grabbed the mail piled on her end table and thumbed through her stack of catalogs—Pottery Barn, William Sonoma, Lord and Taylor.

She grabbed the Crate-and-Barrel catalog sitting on her coffee table. The seven-bottle steel wine rack on page 3 was definitely Conner-lean, twisted and designed to be full of alcohol. She flipped through the following

pages, adding fuel to her neurotic fire. Were their sheets for a king-sized bed or a little tiny double where they would have to roll around on each other to get out every morning? Did they have the adequate thread count? And the china. What pattern had they decided would be grand enough to pass down to their children and their children's children?

The Tuscany flatware on page 12 made her cry. Emma could picture Conner holding it the way he would, his hand turned around the stem of a fork, holding it almost at the prongs. It used to annoy her that he held his cutlery like a two year old, but now, in retrospect, it was one of his most endearing qualities. She just *had* to check out what ugly flatware Shebitch had picked. Emma decided it was gold with slick forest-green handles and brassy exposed screws on the sides. Totally Wal-Mart.

The purple Bijou "plum of a chair" on page 17 hurt the most.

Emma imagined the fight in her head, Shebitch the fiancée spewing at sweet Conner about how she hated purple, how the chair absolutely would not go with anything else they had chosen. She could hear Conner defending the chair, the one item he decided was worth putting his foot down for. He wanted that chair. And, because he was marrying the

wrong woman, he would never have it. Emma started to cry harder and reached for the phone. She wanted to call Conner, but she didn't even have his number.

Forgetting all about the pizza she had ordered, Emma picked up the phone and started dialing. She was talking before Lili could even get out a quick *hello*.

"Get your things together," she said. "We're going shopping."

Stage Three: Bargaining

Chapter Thirteen

"This is psychotic." Lili said.

Emma pulled into the parking garage, positioned perfectly between Macy's and Pottery Barn.

"She won't let him have his chair," Emma said. "She called it *an eyesore!*"

"Have you ever heard of transference?" Lili gripped the door handle for a sense of security.

"It's a 'plum of a chair' for God's sake!"

"I'm only going along to protect the innocent bystanders," Lili said.

Emma was growing weary of Lili's mumbles and sighs as they walked through the cosmetic counters in Macy's. They loaded onto the escalator and headed for house wares.

"I need a bridal registry," Emma said.

"And a psychiatrist," Lili added.

"What's the last name?"

"Lafitte. Conner Lafitte."

"Let's see," the sales associate was pounding the space bar of her computer. "The bride's name?"

"We don't know," Lili said.

"Well, I can't find anything under that name."

Emma was sure that their registry was inside that computer. She thought for a brief moment that Lili had somehow tipped off the saleslady.

"My name's Annie if there's anything else I can do for you," she said, walking toward the other customers in her department.

"Now can we go home?" Lili asked.

"More stores," Emma commanded.

Emma turned to walk out and saw the prettiest crystal margarita glass she had ever laid eyes on. Actually, it was the *only* crystal margarita glass she could ever recall seeing. It was beautiful. Conner was the only person in the world who would appreciate it as much as she did.

"I need to buy him this," Emma said.

"Okay," Lili took the glass out of her hand and set it back down on the display. "Wedding gifts usually come in twos, Glen Close."

"We can stop shopping," Emma bribed.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea," Lili picked the glass back up, "but you can't give it to him."

"Then what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Closure."

"So I buy him a present, don't send it to him, and I feel better about the fact that he's marrying Shebitch, the hobag I've never even met."

"More or less."

"Deal."

Lili carried the glass to the register.

"Only one?" Annie took Emma's credit card as an affirmative.

Emma grabbed a small silver card from the plastic caddy on top of the check-out stand. She opened the card and began to write.

"Don't write anything," Lili said.

"If it's pretend, why do you care?" Emma asked.

"It could slip into enemy hands," Lili suggested.

Emma set the card on the other side of her purse and started scribbling.

"Put the pen down, Emma," Lili panicked.

"I can't just put my name?"

"Emma, you don't want to do this. Give me the pen."

Emma flinched and Lili charged her. The girls wrestled around like two sisters in a Saturday-morning argument over a favorite Barbie doll. Finally, Lili twisted the card out of Emma's hands and started reading.

Conner,

How are you?

Me, I'm fine. Ask anyone.

- Emma

Lili ripped the card in half and placed the pieces on the counter.

"Would you like gift wrapping?" Annie asked.

"That would be lovely," Emma said. "I'll just browse while you do that."

"I'll be in the ladies' room," Lili said. She walked up to Annie, "Don't give her paper of any kind until I get back."

Emma tried to look interested in the case of crystal figurines at the edge of the department.

"Emma?"

She almost crashed into the collection of baby turtles. "Well, hello there Mrs. Lafitte."

"Didn't expect to see you here."

Emma knew what she really meant. *I thought we'd shaken the likes of you when our son wised up and got engaged.*

"Just browsing," Emma stared into the case. "I collect turtles."

Annie came back with the wrapped margarita glass in her hand, the silver and white ribbons flowing down the sides of the slick, white paper. Emma acted like she didn't notice.

"Mam?" Annie waved the present by the side of Emma's face. "Your gift?"

"Excuse me?" Emma tried to appear startled. "Oh, okay, thanks," she took the gift and looked back toward Mrs. Vicks. She had to think fast. "This is for Lili."

"Lili's getting married?"

"Heavens no," Emma said before smiling silently at her could-have-been mother-in-law.

"Then why is that gift for her?" Mrs. Lafitte sounded agitated, not unlike Emma's mother when she had just found a stain in the carpet.

"Oh, no, no. It isn't *for* her," Emma said. She felt like she was caught with the glass of grape juice in her hands. "It's just her present."

Mrs. Lafitte stared straight at Emma. She wasn't going to be gracious and let it go.

"You see, she, Lili that is, just bought it," Emma shook the present at Mrs. Lafitte to demonstrate. Each word dragged out painfully, and she had no idea what she was saying. Mrs. Lafitte had a no-nonsense way about her that made Emma nervous. "And then she went to the restroom. So now, I'm standing here, talking to you, and holding the gift that Lili bought for someone else." Emma couldn't make her mouth stop moving. "A person that *is* getting married. Obviously."

She was desperately afraid of what Mrs. Lafitte was about to ask.

"*Who is getting married?*" she asked. "A simple answer will do." The subtext was clear. *Leave my son the hell alone.*

"Nobody I know," Emma said. "So good to see you."

Forgetting about Lili, Emma walked past the displays of pewter serving trays, down the escalator, through the rows of mock bedrooms, by women spraying cologne on anything that stopped long enough, and straight into the parking lot.

Chapter Fourteen

Anthony the Abbot, Dymphna, Isidore the Farmer, Jude Thaddeus - patron saint of desperate situations and lost causes. Perfect. Emma picked up the candle and paid for it along with two bottles of Merlot, a pack of peanut-butter cookies, and two boxes of ultra-light cigarettes.

Art books were spread across the living room, on the couch and spilling over onto the floor. So far they had not helped Emma come up with any ideas for the mural. She had started priming the walls, but she needs to start drawing out a pattern soon. The longer she waited, the more time she would have to spend at the beck and call of her mother and Aunt Vivian.

The Merlot was a perfect match to her sandwich of peanut butter and raspberry jam on toasted wheat bread. As she crunched corn chips, Emma watched the local news. Between the death toll and the reports of declining test

results in public schools, Emma was hoping to see something positive. Oh well, at least the wine tasted good.

Jude Thaddeus was still in the bag on the kitchen counter. Emma brought him into the living room and placed him on the coffee table alongside her food. She lit the wick.

Southwestern might work for the mural's artistic direction, Emma thought. She sketched out an adobe church like she had seen in black-and-white photos of New Mexico. Maybe.

Emma changed the channel and lit a cigarette off Jude Thaddeus' flame. Vanna White flipped over the letters spelling EUROPEAN VACATION.

She could always go with a French theme, she thought. Maybe an Eiffel tower surrounded by romantic, candlelit cafes. No, too typical. Who wanted to be in Paris walking around arm in arm when they could be in a New-Orleans sunroom admiring a life-sized stick-figure pieta? Emma was convinced that Vivian had commissioned her as a part of a cruel joke orchestrated by her own mother.

"Please," she said into the candle flame. "I'll do anything if you just give me a sign." Emma looked around the room, but the only light she saw was the flickering of

her television. The candle was a phony, so she poured herself another glass of wine.

An advertisement came on featuring one of the New-Orleans-Saints players. He was reading age-appropriate books to underprivileged children. *Join us, the ad went, in being a saint.*

Maybe it was a sign. Jude was ready to cut a deal. She pulled out her journal and made a list of things she would do if Jude Thaddeus would see fit to put in a good word about her to the Man Upstairs.

1. Stop fidgeting during McDurdy's sermons (although I think even Jesus would have squirmed during his version of the Moses bit).
2. Give more change to clever homeless people. Emma thought long and hard before finally pouring another glass of wine.
3. Draw a very complimentary portrait of HIM in Aunt Viv's sunroom.

Emma looked at the candle for a sign. She was sure that that would be the one. Instead, the wick seemed to be falling over, barely putting out enough glow to shine through the glass.

4. Stop planning ways to sabotage Conner's wedding.

The wick started to stand up, and the glow was gaining momentum. Emma became desperate for a sign. She wanted to make it absolutely clear that she was up for anything so long as it got her in better graces with the Master of Her Fate. She made hard, deep pen marks in all caps.

5. ANYTHING!

The flame jumped up to attention, and Emma could see a glow through the glass etching of Jude's halo.

"Feeling alone?"

Emma looked around her living room for a burning bush or maybe a small stone tablet with further instructions.

"Need somewhere to turn?"

The voice was coming from her television.

There, in a shiny, yellow suit and crisp, white cotton shirt was Reverend J.T. Jones of Faith Baptist Church of Gretna. Emma knew immediately what she had to do. She had to travel to the West Bank.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma pulled into the parking lot and circled around like a vulture over road kill. Minivans and navy blue family-sized cars filled the parking lot. They were standard issue suburban vehicles, not at all spattered with the militant Jesus-freak bumper stickers she had anticipated. Their backseats were filled with stray coffee mugs, baby seats, magazines, and pine-scented car fresheners. Not a single cage or aquarium for the snakes and vermin she expected to find inside.

Her gut told her to stop, get back in the car, drive far, far away, but Emma walked toward the glass doors under the reflective stickers spelling out *C-H-A-P-E-L*. They weren't the heavy, wooden doors of St. Anthony's. Those doors reminded you each time you walked through that you were weak, insubstantial, and imperfectly human. These doors, in comparison, were translucent and inviting.

Plexiglas panels and aluminum framework swung open with the confidence and pleasure of a shopping mall. *Come in*, they suggested, *stay awhile and grab a bite at the food court*.

"Good morning," a dark, black man in a maroon blazer said. He reached out to shake Emma's hand, and she hesitated as if he were knocking on her door to sell vacuums. She wasn't used to people being that nice especially at church.

"Okay," she said, "I'll take your word on that."

"Must be your first time here," the man next to him, wearing the same make and style of blazer, said. Together, the men looked like the sort of retirees you would find greeting customers at Wal-Mart or Home Depot.

"How could you tell?" Emma asked. One more glance around the chapel and Emma realized she was the only white person in the building.

They chuckled and offered her a small program folded on crisp copy paper. The man escorted her as she walked on, toward the rows of metal folding chairs, suddenly feeling as though she was walking into a piano recital. It sparked a reaction of equal parts comforting familiarity and horrific repressed memory.

"Here you go." He slapped her lapel with a blue ribbon reading VISITOR in large, white letters.

She wanted to peel off the ribbon and stick it in her purse. The back of her head was warm and moist, the target for hundreds of eyes, looking at her like the sacrificial Catholic, a fattened calf for the taking. *Some Pig*. The metal of the doors clashed hard against each other, and the two greeters made their way to the front of the congregation.

As soon as the choir started filing in from either side of the pulpit, Emma forgot about the ribbon. She had never heard a benediction like this. Trying not to look obvious, Emma glanced around and saw something that stunned her. Every last member of the flock was smiling. They weren't staring into space or covertly working crossword puzzles they had strategically placed in the center of their Bibles. They were singing along with the choir, and even doing it without their hymnals.

From a large metal door behind the pulpit, J. T. Jones emerged. He was glowing in his jewel-toned blue suit and the bright gold tie that matched his front tooth. He walked up to the podium, grabbed the microphone, and there was no doubt about it. This man was a rock star.

When he spoke, Emma felt a rise and fall in the pit of her gut that was tugged along by the cadence of his voice. She recognized a lot of the stories that he told, but she

was amazed by the spin he put on it. The man behind her clapped out loud for no reason. She tried not to jump.

It wasn't that these people, these suburban Baptists, were exempt from the wrath of God. If they were destined for the fiery pit, however, they were going out shouting.

"When we talk to God-ah," he said. "We tell Him our soul-ah."

Emma had never thought about going to the Man Himself. She always prayed through St. Aloysius of the young Catholics, St. Teresa of Avila, the patron saint of headaches, or St. Scholastica who controlled the weather.

Her program indicated that the service was almost over, and Emma panicked, afraid that there would be an unavoidable reception from the welcome wagon after the service. She needed to escape before Communion, although it wasn't listed on the program. Taking her purse in one hand and her notebook in the other, Emma slipped out of the row of chairs and into the aisle.

"God bless you, honey," a woman charged toward her, and soon Emma was swept up in a stream of people headed for the preacher.

"Oh, nonono," Emma pleaded.

They kept pushing forward.

Emma looked up into the bright lights streaming through the bands of stained glass. There were no elaborate stories of guilt and shame carved into the windows. Instead, they were simple strips of color that allowed for interpretation. She admired the way each color bounced light, reflected the sun's rays. People began to crowd around Emma, some of the crying, others exclaiming words like *Hallelujah* and *Amen*. It was hard for her not to laugh, not because she thought it was funny, but because she was more nervous and lost than she had ever been in her life. It was an incredible feeling.

Chapter Sixteen

Days later, Emma was still riding the high from her accidental rededication to her Lord Jesus Christ. She couldn't stop thinking about every detail of the chapel as she tried to sketch the plans for Vivian's sunroom. She had decided on a traditional cherub scene, complete with musical instruments and a few fluffy clouds thrown in for good measure.

She heard a screeching noise coming from the courtyard. Probably tourists playing Mardi Gras through the Quarter, Emma thought.

She measured off lines across her blank paper to help get the cherubs drawn to scale. One on each side would offer a nice sense of balance.

Again, the screeching came through the glass window. It sounded closer this time. Emma stepped outside and

looked around the birdbath. She peeked out of the gate and saw nothing. This time the noise was a lower whine.

She opened the small wooden gate at the back of the patio. It sounded like a baby had been left in the dumpster. Cases like this were always on the local news, some young mother with postpartum depression deciding to throw her newborn out with the potato peels.

Emma wasn't thinking about saving a baby or what she would do when she found the something that was making the noise. She just wanted it to stop. She rifled through the top layer of trash turning up nothing but empty whiskey bottles and shredded papers.

The noise was coming from underneath the trash bin. Emma dropped down on her knees and there, tucked underneath the cold metal trash heap, was the tiniest kitten Emma had ever seen. She instinctually scooped him into the curve of her arm to stop him from shaking. His eyes were closed and his fur was a matted combination of black-and-white fur.

"Aunt Vivian," Emma yelled as she ran in through the glass doors.

"She's not here." Evangeline was in the kitchen making miniature spinach quiche. "She went for her afternoon walk."

"Where? I have to find her," Emma said. "I'm allergic."

"It's all in here," Evangeline led Emma into the mud room. Vivian had transformed it into a makeshift vet clinic as part of the FRUMP's "underground-railroad" operation for stray cats. Where most people would store their gardening gloves and soiled boots, Vivian had a collection of baskets and kennels of various sizes and colors. The long countertop was littered with scratch posts and pull-toys. Evangeline reached into the pantry as if Emma had asked for a coffee cup. It was full of Karo syrup and evaporated milk. She mixed a concoction into a tiny ear dropper and handed it to Emma.

"No," Emma said. "I can't. Really."

"Runt," she said. "He's probably starving." Evangeline walked back to the kitchen and dumped the rest of her cheesy mixture into pastry shells.

Emma had no choice but to hold the kitten while she fed him from the dropper. She placed it right at the edge of his mouth, and he held out his paws, together the size of Emma's thumbnail, to guide it.

"And you don't even have a rash," Vivian walked in. "Evangeline said you'd found one, but I had to see it with my own eyes."

Emma set the dropper on the counter and looked at her arm. The hives would come any second.

"We'll make him a bed." Vivian pulled out a picnic basket and filled it with a heating pad carefully tucked between two fluffy dishtowels.

The kitten was sleeping, and Emma was afraid to move.

"He'll be fine," Vivian said. "I've done this before, you know."

Emma laughed and carefully handed the kitten to Vivian.

She looked at the enormous corkboard on the wall. It was full of Polaroid photos, each one a different kitten or cat. On the white strip at the bottom, each picture had a name written in magic marker.

"Do the honors?" Vivian handed the camera to Emma.

She snapped the picture and shook it in the air. He was mostly white, with small black stripes across the back of his coat.

He was so small and fragile in the basket, but earlier his cry had pulled Emma all the way from the sunroom. She wondered if he had been trying to call out for his mother, or if he felt scared and abandoned. He was only a few days old, Emma guessed. Maybe he was talking to someone else. Emma flipped through the rolodex of saints in her head. He

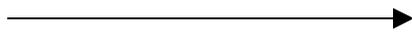
needed a strong name, something hopeful. In bold, black letters across the bottom of the photo, she wrote **Assisi**.

Chapter Seventeen

When Emma arrived to start penciling her design on the wall, Assisi was nestled into his basket in the corner of the sunroom. She was worried about stepping on him if he got out, but the wicker edges seemed too tall for him to jump over. Vivian had left a bottle next to his bed along with a note:

Please feed me when I wake up.

Then put me over there.



The arrow pointed to a microwavable bowl filled with litter.

Emma taped off each portion of the wall as she worked. Her master sketch was broken into grids, each one with the exact lines and curves that belonged there. She ran the edge of the pencil across the wall, getting lost in the

moment from time to time and losing sight of the bigger picture.

Assisi woke up and started to mew. His sounds had gotten quieter, less urgent. His eyes had started to open, and he had figured out that someone would come along to feed him. He had started to trust the process.

"We have an appointment after lunch." Vivian stuck her head into the room.

"We who?"

"You, me, and the little saint."

"I don't need to go, do I?"

"It's at one." Vivian walked out of the room. "And Evangeline is serving people food in the dining room."

The teapot was tall and pristine. After Evangeline set it in the center of the table, she sat down and pulled an English muffin onto her plate.

"Are you sure you don't want to see the plans?" Emma asked.

"What's the fun in that?" Vivian plopped buttered onto her green beans. "We need a big reveal."

"Of course, we do."

Emma helped Evangeline clear the plates and met Vivian at the front door. She tucked the blanket over Assisi's biscuit-sized body before they stepped out.

As always, Vivian seemed to know everyone in the French Quarter. They all waved to her, and she called them by name, asking about their children or their dogs. They walked past the Cathedral and onto Royal where they slipped into the Vieux Carre Dog and Cat Clinic.

"He'll be right with you," the receptionist said.

In just a moment, a doctor in a white coat and blue scrubs pushed open the door to the waiting room.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing your mother." His eyes followed Vivian through the door.

"Dr. Ledet, this is my great niece, Emma."

"Pleased to meet you, Emma." He shook her hand, and Emma didn't want to let go. His hands were warm and strong.

"And who is this little guy?" he asked.

"This is Assisi."

"Ah," he said, "Patron saint of animals." Dr. Ledet picked up the kitten and held him in front of his face.

"Emma named him," Vivian said.

"Good job."

"Thanks."

He proceeded to look inside Assisi's eyes, in between his paper-thin claws, and in his ears.

"Uh-oh," he said. "He's got visitors."

"Speaking of," Vivian said. "Did I mention Emma is painting a mural in my sunroom?"

"No," Dr. Ledet said. "You're an artist?"

Emma reached for anything to change the subject. She hated talking about herself to complete strangers, especially when the topic of art came up. She hated people that talked about their art in ways that made them seem pretentious or, even worse, tortured.

"What's in his ears?"

"Mites," he said.

"She's a Newcomb graduate," Vivian said.

"Impressive."

"Anyway," Vivian went on. Emma felt like she was watching preparation for an arranged marriage. "You just absolutely must come to the unveiling."

Dr. Ledet slid a thermometer into Assisi's backside, and the kitten let out a low grumble.

"It would be a pleasure."

Chapter Eighteen

"Come to Wine Princesses with me tonight," Lili begged.

"I'm afraid my tiara's off getting polished."

"No problem," Lili said. "I've got an extra one."

Emma was not as upset as she would have thought at the prospect of social interaction, even if it was with a group of over-stressed thirty-somethings who had decided wine was sufficient reason to resurrect their slew of old bridesmaids dresses and vintage costume jewelry.

"We haven't been out in ages," Lili pleaded.

"Okay, but I'm too old to be a princess. I'm more of a wine queen," Emma said.

"You can't be a wine queen," Lili said.

"Why not?"

"You'll see."

Emma pulled out her worst bridesmaid's dress in the lot. It was tucked into the back corner of her hall closet, the taffeta waves permanently imprinted by the vacuum handle. Sara Harmon had been the first of their friends to marry, and therefore, not privy to the mistakes of other brides to guide her nuptial planning. As a result, she hired an untested wedding planner whose idea of elegance was a room full of fruit. To finish the effect, the guests were subjected to bridesmaids in an array of custardy colors, Emma's a sickeningly bright shade of Key-Lime pie. Only after the honeymoon had it come to Becca's attention that The Wedding Planner from Hell had only done kiddy birthdays until she was fired for a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey scandal.

Emma dug through her jewelry cases to attempt excavation of the dangling lime-wedge earrings Sara presented her with at the bridal luncheon. As a thanks for buying the hideous gown and putting up with Sara's 4 a.m. cold-feet calls, ("Am I too young?" "Do you think Howard will go bald before he's thirty?" Howard's Aunt Ella is allergic to oranges-is it a sign?") they were given fruit jewelry.

Emma finally quit digging and slipped a string of pearls around her neck, thinking it added a nice whipped-

topping effect to the pie of her dress. One knock at the door and Emma knew her tiara had arrived.

"Did anyone order a Key Lime pie?" she swung open the door

It wasn't Lili. No, it was a boy-Man. He looked vaguely familiar, but the rush of heat to Emma's face left her with no immediate brain power. Man was handsome in jogging clothes, a tight (but not too tight) T-shirt, sculpted legs, and dimples? It clicked. Man staring back at Emma in her pouf of a pie dress was Dr. Ledet.

"No, but I'd love a slice," he jested.

Uncomfortable silence, followed by even more uncomfortable laughter.

"Right," he said once they'd recovered conversational footing.

"Your aunt said I could find you here," he said.

"I bet she did."

"I wanted to drop these by."

He handed Emma a bottle of tranquilizers. Or evolutionary tablets inducing short-term memory loss. Or tranquilizers

"For Saint Assisi, I think they'll help with the mites," he said.

"Oh, of course. Thank you, er..."

"Harrison," he said. "Please call me Harrison."

"Thank you, Harrison." Emma rolled his name out of her mouth like red carpet. He looked like a Harrison, solid and distinguished, probably skilled with a whip.

"Were you going somewhere?" he asked.

"No, not really," Emma was suddenly hyperaware of her outfit. "I mean, yes, but no where so special."

"The grocery store?"

"No," Lili offered, flustered. Was it better to have him think she was a loon or tell him the truth and confirm his suspicions?

"The gym then?"

"How did you guess?" Lili tried to laugh it off. "New program they've got going. It's all the rage."

"I've heard about that. Extreme ballroom dancing, right?"

"Right."

From the doorway, Emma could see Lili screech to the curb. She was the sight of glamour in her lemon icebox gown accented nicely by the half-smoked cig hanging from her mouth. The smoke hit concrete as soon as Lili caught a glimpse of the good doctor.

"Whatever you're selling, I'll take two," she announced.

"Well, you don't look like you have ear mites, but they can be tricky little devils to hunt down. They just linger around. Loiterers, really. Speaking of," Harrison gestured to the road. "I should get going." Emma looked for a car, but guessing from his attire, he'd probably walked over. "I'll let you two get to your workout."

"Thanks again for the pills," Emma said, dreading the car ride with Lili. She took a preemptive strike against hard questioning, but she knew Lili wouldn't desist.

"He's a vet," Emma offered. "I forgot to take Assisi's pills from the visit with Aunt Vivian, so he brought them by. Must live in the neighborhood. Don't go mental on me."

"Did you see his legs? Is he married? When was his last relationship? You should invite him to lunch or to coffee!"

"I can give you his number," Emma offered.

"Don't be a bitch. If some hunky doctor was knocking on my door, I sure wouldn't be dressing in bridesmaids' gowns and soaking myself in a flight of Cabernet."

"Whose house are we going to?" Emma asked.

"It's our night out this month," Lili laughed.

"Out as in public location?" Emma ran her hands in Vanna-White fashion across her extra-puffy silhouette.

"I promise you won't even be noticed."

#

"B-38 you bitches," Miss Luna said.

Lili punched a hole in Emma's card.

"A person might think you don't want to win that fabulous prize," Lili said.

Emma was petrified at the prospect of holding the winning card. Navigating her lime-puff dress through aisles of heckling players toward the larger-than-life figures of Miss Luna Chablis and Kitty DaGogo, the drag queens that hosted happy-hour bingo at Charade, was Emma's private version of hell. Emma had already thrown several games, deciding her dignity was not worth a tequila T-shirt or a twenty-dollar bar tab. There was no way Emma was going to let Lili talk her into collecting the Roxybrator.

"This one's strong enough for a man, but made for a queen," Kitty said, waving what looked like the severed arm from a life-sized plastic doll.

"How are things with Vic going?" Emma asked. Lili could always be distracted with talking about herself.

"Not too bad," she said.

Emma realized how out of touch she had been, preoccupied with Aunt Vivian, the mural, and her fascination with the Baptist religion, staying up at night and looking up web sites for all the local churches.

"B-52!"

As soon as Kitty announced the number, shot girls lined the aisles, passing out free shots. Emma and Lili threw them back and dumped the empty test tubes on the side of the table.

"Who was the doctor?" Lili asked.

"Still the vet." Emma lit a cigarette. "Still not going to call him."

"Come on, it's time to get out there."

"You got me in a bridesmaid's dress shortly after the love of my life announces his engagement." Emma took a hard drag. "I think I'm out there."

"Just because Conner is marrying Lindsay--"

Emma spit Cape Cod all over Lili.

"How long have you known?"

"Since she asked me to stand in the wedding."

Stage Four: Anger

Chapter Nineteen

Dainty placed a hand on Emma's knee to stop it from bouncing. Her hands overcompensated by wringing against each other in her lap. She felt like she would jump out of the pew at any moment. She wanted to rip the kneeler off with her bare hands and throw it onto the choir stall. Row after row of yawning children and their bored parents made her want to scream, run through the doors, and lead the congregation into the chapel of J.T. Jones.

Emma stood along with everyone else when it was time for a hymn. The sounds coming from the pews were weak and off-tune, but even those were better than the puffs of breath coming from the lip-syncers. Nobody was inspired to dance, jump into the aisle, raise their hands. The only swaying was the antsy shifting of back-and-forth children who wanted to get home to their Nintendos.

"Now join me," Father McDurdy raised his hands up in slow motion, "in praying to St. Francis Xavier for the safety of our missionaries in Asia."

Emma refused to bow her head. She wanted to tell everyone what she had found out. *Open your eyes*, she wanted to say. They were spending all of their time talking to the middle men when the Bossman's door was wide open. All of the years of guilt and silent suffering pissed Emma off. Each instance she had accepted her bad poker hand as fate suddenly flooded her memory. It had to stop.

Father McDurdy was still praying, but he had moved on to St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Giles of the breast feeders, or St. Herbert of drought relief. They were all starting to run together in Emma's mind, forming one giant Ubersaint. Half of the people were now kneeling, while the others sat at the edge of their seats in mock reverence. Why were they here?

It all started to swirl in front of Emma's face, and she wanted to do something to make it stop, to halt time. Before she knew it, Emma clapped, a loud, banging clap that resonated through the chapel. She could have passed it off as a temporary glitch in her nervous system, but it felt too good. Emma pulled her hands back and threw them at each other with everything she had.

"What are you doing?" Dainty whisper-yelled at Emma.

"Clapping," she said. "I'm inspired."

Dainty grabbed Emma's hand and pushed it into her own. As the pews started to thin out for Communion, Dainty pulled her daughter across the length of the row and through the back doors of the church.

#

"I've had a lot of stress." Emma pulled a leaf off the communal artichoke.

"Your Aunt Vivian tells me you've adopted a cat," Dainty said.

"He's actually not mine."

"And he came with a cute veterinarian." Dainty took a sip of her iced tea.

"I'm not interested in Dr. Ledet, Mom." Emma slipped out with the Mom comment. She never called her Dainty Mom unless she had something serious on her mind. Usually a boy. Emma felt her cheeks turning red.

"And your father isn't interested in his tomatoes."

Evan looked up from the Sunday paper. "Oh, the tomatoes are looking great. Yes, indeed, thanks for asking."

Chapter Twenty

"How's your aunt?"

"She's still Aunt Vivian," Emma smiled and placed the paint cans and paper bags back into the shopping cart.

"Tell her I said hello, then," Sam said. "And I miss seeing her around."

"Will do."

Emma pushed the shopping cart down the length of Rue St. Ann, stopping at the corner store for cigarettes and a Diet Coke. She parked the basket right in front.

"I'll keep an eye on it for you, Emma."

Miss Patty always sat on the stoop next to the store. Emma picked a lemonade out of the cooler and handed it to her on the way out.

"Rations for the neighborhood watch," Emma said.

"Many thanks." Miss Patty waved Emma down the street.

She pulled into Vivian's house and plucked the spare sheet off of the wall. Emma had put it up in case one of Vivian's friends got curious about the mural. It had taken Emma two days to cover over the pencil marks and brushes of paint to get back the clean palette of the wall.

Assisi was curled into a croissant in his basket. Emma set out a bowl of hard food for him with just enough water on top to make it easy to chew. He was strong enough to wrestle out of his bed, yet good about not climbing into the paints. She figured the strong smell kept him away.

Dipping her brush into the paint can, Emma made broad strokes across the length of the wall. There were no pencil marks to guide her this time. Instead, she decided that she would feel her way through it. She spent most of the morning on the right side of the painting before cleaning up to take Vivian on her errands. It was half-price day for Calliope Krewe members at the Bead Depot, and all of the FRUMPs would be there with boas on.

Emma draped the wall with the sheet and pinned it into the corners. She played with Assisi long enough to wear him down and went to find Vivian.

#

"Here is a list," Vivian said. "I've decided exactly what I need so we won't get confused when we get there.

Emma looked down at the cruise ships docked underneath the Crescent City Connection, tempting couples with their indulgent buffets and shuffleboard. This was the only stretch of the Mississippi River she had ever seen, and she was suddenly jealous of the ships. She thought about driving off the edge of the bridge with Vivian, throwing beads from the car window at each port as they floated to Minnesota.

"Every single year I get sidetracked by Georgie Anne Gleason and have to buy ten dozen of whatever she's talking up just to shake her." Vivian looked in the side mirror like she thought they were trying to shake someone off their tail. "I need you to run interference."

"You know I'm not good at that." Emma thought that the river would be smaller, cleaner around the Twin Cities. Maybe they would pass someone on their way, a young girl Emma's age who had driven off the Wakota.

"So, have you had dinner with our favorite doctor yet?"

"No." Remorse ran through Emma's veins as they drove off of the bridge onto the bumpy, warped Louisiana highway.

She pulled in front of the gigantic Mardi-Gras warehouse and stuck it in park.

"Ladies," Vivian said as soon as she was out of the car. The FRUMPs were gathered by the entrance, waiting for each member to get out of the car and walk up like a red carpet affair. For them, traveling to the West Bank was a rare event, and they were going to make the most of it.

#

Pushing a shopping cart of five dozen noisy blinking balls, six bags of plastic lip whistles, and a gross of glow-in-the-dark handcuff beads, Emma felt ridiculous. She checked "2 dozen glitter stickers" off the list and set the box next to a bag of purple doubloons.

"Isn't this fabulous?" Vivian held up a pin that spelled *Calliope* in rhinestone letters.

Outside, Francis Pelletier was selling official Krewe gear like Girl Scout cookies. Boxer shorts, license plate frames, and flags were all screen printed with the giant "C" logo. There were always a few women cooing over the embroidered onesies.

Vivian fluttered back to the coven and Emma finished checking off the list. A boy at the front helped the desk clerk load box after box of 48" pearl strands, iridescent disc beads, and plush alligators into her trunk.

She pulled the car around to the front where the last of the FRUMPs were waiting to see Vivian off.

"Where to now?" Emma asked. "Grocery store?"

"I'm absolutely whipped," Vivian said. "Those FRUMPS can wear you out."

"I can go for you," Emma said. Evangeline had the week off, and Emma knew her aunt was helpless without her.

"That would be lovely."

Chapter Twenty-One

Lactose-free milk was the first item on the list. Emma read each label and almost gagged at the words *dairy drink*. She tried to locate a jug of Vitamin D milk, the kind that supposedly did bodies good but was unable to find one. There was high-calcium skim, low-carb milk substitute, and soy milk. Emma wondered when soy nuts had started growing udders.

Next on the list was spinach dip. Emma picked up a package from the gourmet, refrigerated aisle and took a box of assorted crackers from the shelf.

Evangeline also needed laundry detergent.

As Emma rounded the corner, she heard a familiar voice. Barrett, maybe. Or Dr. Ledet. She pushed her hair behind her ears and pinched her cheeks to encourage a natural blushing effect. She hoped it was Dr. Harrison

Ledet. She tried to look aloof and unaware, focused on the grocery shopping task at hand.

"Oh crap," she heard.

Standing right in front of her, sandwiched between stacks of dryer sheets and row after row of laundry freshener, was Conner. And, Lindsay the Shebitch.

Her hair was longer than Emma remembered, her skin tinted a deeper shade of olive, and her eyes bigger and dark like Moon pies. Coordinated in shades of pale tan and light blue, the happy couple looked ready for a Sadie-Hawkins dance. Emma thought she would throw up.

Clean-up aisle fifteen.

Emma imagined yanking every last plastic container of non-color safe bleach off the shelf and dumping it into Lindsay's glossy brunette mane.

Clean-up on aisle fifteen.

She hated the sight of Conner. His khakis were freshly starched and smelled like lemons. When he dated her, he had stunk of bourbon and stale pizza.

Maybe Shebitch did all of his ironing, dressed him each morning saying, *now give me your right hand*, and slipping his arm through a tunnel of heavy cotton. Shebitch probably made lists for him, taped them to his bedroom door and the bathroom mirror so he wouldn't forget them.

Emma was happy for herself that she had chosen a better life. She could've had Conner if she had wanted him, she told herself. She could be standing next to him right now, holding his hand and helping him pick out a stain guard that could get pizza sauce out of his white oxford shirt.

"Holy fuck," she said. "Wrong aisle." She sped-walk to the front exit, abandoning her cart next to a cardboard display of Boudreaux's Butt Paste.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was the next reasonable thing to happen, Emma thought as she lugged Assisi's carrier through the streets of the Quarter. Aunt Vivian called at the last minute to say she had been delayed. Evidently there was something urgent at the bottom of her Napoleon House Pimm's Cup.

Although she had complained and groaned on the phone with her aunt, Emma was excited about going to the vet. It gave her a break from painting. She had pulled a lavender sweater over her t-shirt and straightened her hair into tucks behind her ears. Getting the paint off her black Mary Janes hadn't been easy, but Emma had managed. It had taken her thirty minutes and six shades of lip gloss to get the thrown-together look just right.

She had only gotten a few steps out of Aunt Vivian's house when she was stopped by Evangeline, holding Assisi and a tiny carrying cage.

"Thought you might want this," she said. "Unless you wanted the rabies shots yourself."

The receptionists were all in matching scrubs covered in cartoon poodles. All of them were blondes. Emma signed the appointment list and sat Assisi down on the side of the waiting room labeled CATS. Two boxers and a chocolate lab eyed Assisi from the DOG section.

One of the assistants fetched them from the waiting room and led them to the scales. He was the same size as a bag of sugar.

"You can wait in here," she stuffed the kitten back in his kennel.

Assisi looked calm and collected, curled in the back with a fabric mouse that was the size of his head. Emma couldn't stop fidgeting with the pamphlets on the table by her chair. She pretended to be reading them so she wouldn't look overly anxious when Dr. Ledet arrived.

"Fascinating stuff," he said.

"First animal," Emma said. "I was just reading up."

"Well, that's always good," Dr. Ledet smiled. "After all, he's a stray so you can't be sure who his parents were. But I have a hunch you're in the clear for that one."

Emma looked down at the pamphlet on bone disease in pet iguanas.

Dr. Ledet proceeded to pull Assisi out and give him his shots. With each one, he talked to the kitten and explained what was going to happen, that he should expect a quick poke followed by a slight sting. Assisi seemed to understand, follow along, stay still.

After he had doled out instructions for the aftercare, Emma grabbed the handle and headed out the door. For the first time, she wished Aunt Vivian were there to play matchmaker.

"Emma," Dr. Ledet rounded the corner and motioned for her to stop. He stepped in close. "Would you like to get dinner sometime?"

Emma was silent.

"Or coffee maybe?" Dr. Ledet said.

May be Aunt Vivian was channeling him.

"Yeah," he said. "Coffee's probably better first date stuff." He fiddled with the chart in his hands, clipping and unclipping the paper inside. "I'm really bad at this in case you can't tell, but I think this is the part where you say something back."

"Sure," Emma said. "Coffee's good."

Emma walked back into the waiting room and signed the bill for Assisi's shots. She felt like she was glowing. The

receptionists gave her a look that she interpreted as jealousy, and she walked away, confident.

"Doctor," one of the receptionists spoke into the phone. "Mrs. Ledet is on line two."

The words stopped her in her tracks. Emma turned around and walked back up the desk.

"*What* did you just say?" she asked.

"I said *have a nice day.*"

Emma walked outside, swinging Assisi's by her side, surprised at how calm she felt. Of course he was married. Why wouldn't he be? Had she really believed that he was different from any man she had met? Emma was a coupon good for a fun cup of coffee, a night on the town. Other women were the sort of sturdy, marrying brand.

The calmness started to freak Emma out. She wasn't angry or sad or disappointed. There was no urge to pick up the phone and slander his name to Lili. The impulse to cry was also absent. At this moment, Dr, Ledet's marital status didn't matter. She was confident in knowing that things would work out the way they were supposed to; she would be alone for the rest of her life. And that reality was something Emma Baronne had acknowledged.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The air inside the heated studio was not only warm, but damp. It felt like August. Four rows of people were lounging on purple and blue mats. An older man in the front was on all fours, arching his back like a bobcat.

"Do you need a mat?"

Emma nodded and the woman led her to an oversized basket. She pulled out a purple one and tucked it under her arm.

"I'm Dogma," The woman extended her hand to Emma.

"That's funny," Emma said. "Yoga studio and all."

The woman didn't laugh. She just stared straight at Emma while keeping her hand out.

"Emma," she shook her hand.

"Just go at your own pace," Dogma said. "And remember, yoga is a process."

In back of the room, there was a small black poster with a slogan in the center, "Discipline your sense of power with the power of your sense." She didn't understand, and hoped there would be no test after the workout.

Dogma demonstrated child pose, and told Emma to revert back to it if she got confused or frustrated by any of the other poses. She wasn't sure what the woman meant, and was too preoccupied with replaying Madonna's *Vogue* video in her head to ask questions.

Downward facing dog was a piece of cake. Emma was feeling more flexible already. As she situated her leg and arms into warrior pose, Emma was confident that she was a natural.

"Look into your third eye," Dogma said.

Maybe not.

As the class leaned their arms down to the floor and slung their legs above them, Emma got confused, falling each time she attempted the half moon pose. When she did it, she thought, it was more like the cow-tipping pose.

"Only push yourself so far," Dogma reminded. "Yoga is a process."

As the rest of the class balanced the entire weight of their bodies on the middle finger of their left hands, Emma

was getting more frustrated. It was blatantly clear that Dogma was speaking directly to her.

Eagle pose pushed her over the edge, and Emma crawled back down to her mat and rested on her knees. She pushed into her heels and set her head down to the floor. Each word out of Dogma's mouth floated across Emma's back and soon she was lulled into a state of pure relaxation - sleep.

The girl next to her gave her a push when class was over, and Emma knew instantly that yoga had been a success. Her center felt aligned. She was calm and collected, stretched out and elongated.

She didn't even feel like flipping people off in traffic. Passing the coffeehouses and shops along Magazine, Emma felt revived. Until she saw Lili's car parked in the lot next to Café Fleur de Lis.

Her shoulders knotted and rose toward her ears.

#

"Emma," Lili looked up from her glass of white wine. "You look...sporty."

"Sorry," she said. Vic was in the chair across from her. "I guess you're having a work thing."

"Not really," Lili said.

"Vic and I are," Lili jerked her head to the side.

"You know." Jerk. "You know." Jerk.

"No," Emma folded her arms. "As a matter of fact, I don't know."

"Friends." Jerk.

"*Special* friends?" Emma was starting to sweat.

"You know."

"No. I don't know, Lili," Emma clenched her fists. "I don't know *you*. I don't know *Conner*. I don't know why I'm even painting a mural of overweight angels blowing into trumpets."

"I think you should sit down."

"NO," Emma said. "I absolutely DO NOT need to sit down or kneel, or stand up, or sit down again. I've been doing that for far too long."

Lili downed the rest of her wine.

Emma hit Vic on the shoulder. "Did you know she used to pray to Saint Boris that you would get deported?"

"Zis truth Leelee?"

"Vic," Lili put his hand in hers and looked him in the eye. "Could you give us a minute? She's going through one of those, well, women things right now."

Vic nodded and walked toward the bathroom. "Vucking American vemen."

Chapter Twenty-Four

The long folding tables and metal chairs transformed the gymnasium into a cafeteria. Underneath the pots of food and the coolers of canned drinks, was the slick wood of the basketball court, and metal bleachers were folded and pushed to the side.

Sausage chunks dominated every spoonful of jambalaya that Mr. Bobby scooped onto Emma's plate.

"Thank you," she said.

Mr. Bobby stuck an extra shrimp on top. "Just glad you decided to join us this week."

Emma felt scandalous and thrilled to be ditching church at St. Anthony's. She had gotten used to tearing out of the parking lot after early morning service and screeching down the interstate, making it on the Avenue with just enough time to hide the Faith Baptist program in her glove box and scoot next to Dainty in the pew.

Every morning, the welcoming ushers in their maroon jackets would invite Emma to stay for lunch with the congregation. She imagined that they wanted to get to know her better, find out her story, and make sure she wasn't using them for some sort of research.

This morning, as she was slipping on her favorite blue sheath dress and a pair of kitten heels, Emma had decided she was going to accept their invitation. She would deal with Dainty later.

"Please," J.T.'s wife gestured. "Come sit with us."

J.T.'s suit was green today, with sheen so slick it looked coated in Saran Wrap. During the service, he had blended in with the thick bands of stained glass. Emma sat down, across the table from Sam. She had seen him in the congregation several times, and they always exchanged a friendly nod. Emma had been into his store for paint several times since her first trip to the chapel, but Sam never brought it up.

"So, Sam, do you live in the Quarter?"

"Sure do," he said. "Right upstairs from the shop in fact."

"Why do you come all the way out here?" Emma asked. She was sure there was a church closer to the Quarter.

"There's plenty of ghosts in the Quarter," Sam said.
"But none of 'em is holy."

Everyone at the table laughed, and Mr. Bobby passed around a dish of jambalaya for seconds. They looked like a twentieth century version of The Last Supper, passing food around J.T. at the table's center.

"So, Emma," J.T.'s wife began, "What brought you around to this place?"

Everyone turned toward Emma with their heads tilted slightly. She took a large bite of jambalaya and washed it down with her soft drink, suddenly realizing she was in Judas' position at the table.

"I saw the commercial on TV."

#

The beep of her answering machine sounded like an alarm. Emma forgot all about her mother and not showing up for lunch at the Inn.

She exercised her right not to answer. Dainty would try to convince Emma that the Virgin Mother would soon retaliate for her indecent behavior. Emma had made it home safe and sound-no car wrecks, flat tires, or unsightly blemishes on her face. And she was sure that the saints had more important things to do than punish Emma for consorting with Baptists.

"Emma," her mother's voice came through loud and clear. "I don't know what is going on with you." Emma rolled her eyes. "Your father and I thought you would like to know that your Aunt Vivian is in the hospital."

Emma ran for the phone, but Dainty had already hung up.

Stage Five: Acceptance

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Vivian," Emma whispered. "I'm taking care of Assisi for you."

Vivian opened her eyes just enough to make out Emma's face. She cracked a knowing smile and reached in the direction of Emma's forehead.

"Thou art dust and unto dust thou shall return," she gasped. Emma fought the natural reaction to roll eyes at her aunt's theatrics.

Vivian LeBeau proceeded to tell her great niece she was ready. It was time for her to go, she said. Time to meet her Maker. Until now, the only maker Emma had heard her Aunt Vivian speak of was Maker's Mark—crushed ice, a dash of simple syrup, extra-muddled mint in an authentic silver cup.

Emma stared at her aunt. She enjoyed a furtive laugh at the notion of Vivian's chatting back and forth with her

Maker. "Now tell me more about this seating chart," she would pry. "You are braver than I if you trust some young chef freshly arriving at the pearly gates with your dinner. Points for bravery, sugar. Just be sure and count the cutlery *before* you pledge eternal redemption."

It was unsettling for Emma to see Vivian immobile. It made her nervous, sad, and impatient. It made her crave a *mojito*. Vivian's shallow breaths threatened Emma's most veiled belief. Emma was convinced the years of bourbon and gin had left her aunt immortal, pickled like the tiny okra you drop in a bloody Mary.

Emma slipped out of her aunt's room and into the waiting area.

"I'm going to walk down to get some coffee, maybe a bite to eat. Do you want anything?" Emma asked her parents.

"Thanks, but I think we should stay and wait for the doctor to get back," her mother said.

Emma was too hungry and tired to feel guilty so she smiled simply, patted her father's shoulder and headed for food. Red beans and rice was the cafeteria special.

"On Wednesday?" Emma muttered. "Sacrilege!" She told herself she was not mocking Vivian, but rather paying her homage.

Somewhere in the grand scheme of things, Monday and only Monday had been designated red-bean day in the city of New Orleans. Emma would have rebelled, but the red-bean line went out of the room, wrapping around the cash registers, the length of the dirty-tray conveyor belt and out the door. She knew that if she stood in line, waiting in the hallway as surgery patients and accident victims were wheeled past, inching by the freshly nibbled-on cups of food traveling the conveyor, she would have absolutely no appetite when she arrived at the vat of beans.

Goodies Grill was featuring Philly cheese-steak sandwiches with Kraft singles and hamburger buns. Taco salads and burritos with shredded mystery meat were being slung from the Mexican-Madness window. Emma grabbed a plastic container from the end of the salad bar and started creating. The sign on top of the salad bar caught her eye.

SALAD \$1.00/pound

CRACKERS 2 free with salad or soup

 10c additional crackers

DRESSING 1 package with purchase of salad

 50c additional package

Her head was pounding again.

She popped the lid and squeezed a package of fat-free ranch onto the colorful assortment of salad mix, hard-

boiled eggs, imitation bacon, and herb croutons before spotting a sign for eggnog latte. Since childhood eggnog was one of Emma's favorite comfort foods. Back then it was a mild addictive craving to the Jack Daniels that Aunt Vivian poured into the large bowl of holiday happiness. As an adult it reminded her of family, the creamy winter flavor letting her know she is not alone in her dysfunction. She remembered Vivian's sister, Aunt Vidalia, holding back her hair the first time she got sick off Vivian's recipe, giving her advice she would never forget. *Never drink anything that old bat gives you before having a full-blown lab report made on it and, bad hair and bad manners are a southern lady's only deadly sins.*

"Excuse me. Did you want something?"

"Sorry," Emma said. "Eggnog latte, please."

The depressed barista had dark-black hair, deep-red lipstick and piercings randomly dispersed over her face and, more than likely, her entire body. The tattoos covering her long, pale arms seemed a little trendy for a hospital cafeteria. Emma had always wanted a tattoo.

"The real stuff?" The girl held up a fifth of whiskey in her right hand.

"Sure," Emma said. She wondered if that was hospital regulation. Probably not, she thought, but oh well.

"Thanks," Emma said as she picked up the latte being shoved in her direction. She walked toward the large black lady perched behind the cash register. Her dark hair was combed straight up the sides of her head, a purple streaked fountain of locks pouring down from the top.

"Up here," the cashier said, tapping her fingers on the metal scale. The salad weighed in at a whopping two pounds.

"How many dressings you put on there?" the cashier asked.

"One. I put one pack of fat-free Ranch."

"I don't care what kind it is, it looks like at least two packs on that salad."

"It's *one pack*, I promise," Emma said.

"Now, why would you go and put the dressing on ahead of time if you was only using one pack?" she asked, waiving her jeweled nail tip in the air.

"I'm crazy that way," Emma said.

The cashier sat still and expressionless.

"Just charge me for a damn extra dressing," Emma said.

She paid and walked to Condiment Island for a fork and napkins.

"MMMhmmmm," she heard the cashier saying to the next girl in line. "I knew she was trying to get away with extra

dressing. See this," she said pointing at the strip above her nametag that read **Employee of the Month**. "I did *not* get that by lettin' people walk out of this cafeteria without payin' for extra dressing."

Emma wondered if she would ever be a valued employee as she started back upstairs toward the waiting room to eat her lunch. As she turned the corner by the elevator, she could hear music coming from the downstairs atrium. The voices were soft and angelic. She walked further and the voices came in louder, sweeter. Glancing over the rail, Emma saw a group of Catholic students singing to patients. Their hallelujahs resonated with innocent conviction.

Angels we have heard on high...

What could they have to repent for, she wondered. Hiding a little sister's favorite doll or sassing a babysitter when she insisted it was bedtime?

Singing sweetly through the night...

A feeling was coming over Emma, a bittersweet feeling that she was part of something greater than herself.

And the mountains in reply...

Part of the human race? Why stop there, she thought. Why not include the universe, the Milky Way! She felt like she was made of more than ashes as she slowed her pace, almost floating above her feet. Looking onto the St.

Francis Xavier 5th grade class, Emma was spiritually buoyant.

Echoing their brave delight...

She had these moments. Moments of divine light and serenity. Glimpses of the infrastructure of life, moments where people were inherently good, and hymnals were a direct line to God.

They faded.

They became moments of rush-hour traffic and estrogen-induced PMS mania. They dissolved into Muzak filled with subliminal messages, pumped into shopping centers, malls and superstores.

Glo...ooooo....ooooo...ooooo-ria in excelsis Deeeeeeo...

"Shit!" Emma heard as her moment of transcendence ran head-on into a doctor. Eggnog latte poured down the front of his jacket, and her two pounds of salad fell over the edge and straight down over the choir, now covered in Iceberg lettuce and fat-free Ranch.

"Son of a bitch," one of the choirboys let out in a pre-pubescent squeal. Emma peeked over the rail where a chubby soprano was flipping her the bird, his maroon blazer snowy with boiled-egg crumbles. The girls screamed as they plucked bacon bits from each other's hair like orangutans removing fleas.

"I'm so sorry, Doctor," Emma said as she turned around. He had already started back down the hallway. She could see him shaking his head from side to side and brushing his arms down the sides of his stained lab coat. As the mob of soccer moms began to gather around their young, Emma recovered what was left of her latte and hurried toward the waiting room. The angry Velcro of Kate-Spade planners taunted her at each step, and by the time Emma reached her parents, she had excused her brief bout of spirituality as alcoholic dehydration.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Two Tonya Hardings were standing in the doorway passing out sports bottles from cardboard boxes. Their ratty blonde wigs were decorated with papier-mâché ice skates with bright red paint splattered on the blades. Emma unscrewed the cap on her bottle and held it up to the bar.

"Leaded or unleaded?"

"The real stuff." Emma situated her light blonde bob at the crown of her head.

"Ya'll look great." A Joan of Arc sidled next to Emma at the bar. She was wearing a red and orange wig bent into points to mimic flames with an inflatable palm tree strapped to her back.

"Thanks. Love your wigs," Emma said.

"Who do you think the headdress is going to?" Joan asked.

"I heard buzz about the Lorena Bobbitts, but I haven't seen one yet."

"Hmmm."

Emma sipped her Calliope punch while she looked around the enormous warehouse for the FRUMPs. It was hard to recognize anyone. Under normal circumstances, these women intimidated Emma. They were professionals—women who ran companies, juggled soccer practices, and had their lives organized on tiny Post-Its throughout the house. They were Lindsays.

She stopped a Squeaky Fromme who had a walky-talky in her hand. She looked official.

"Excuse me," she said. "Have you seen the other Marthas?"

"All the way to the right, center table."

Lili started everyone clapping as soon as Emma walked up. One by one, they hugged her and shook her squeeze bottle to make sure she wasn't in need of a refill. Francis handed Emma a tiny box with handcuff earrings.

"I got them on sale." She pitched her earlobe to show Emma her matching pair. "Total steal."

They sat and watched as announcements were made and random Krewe members shuffled in, making last-minute adjustments to their costumes.

"Little Orphan Annie?" A girl with strawberry blonde locks ran in front of Emma.

"Looks more like Shirley Temple," Lillian guessed.

Francis looked her over. "No, too many bullet holes. Must be Bonnie Parker."

"Ah," Emma said. "Didn't recognize her without Clyde."

Each time Emma glanced around the room, she felt more and more relaxed. She thought that maybe this was where she belonged, camped out with the FRUMPs in a warehouse full of scandalous women. Or maybe she just needed more punch.

"I'm going for a refill," she announced. After navigating the bar, Emma stopped in at the bathroom. Dizziness set in as she waited in line. She stared at the thousands of model ships woven into the wig in front of her, the elegant wheat-colored hair they were sewn to.

"Hope they have toilet paper," Helen of Troy was about fifty-six and had obviously never had work done.

"MMhmm," Emma said.

She washed her hands in the sink and was mesmerized by the mirror. Three Anna Nicoles were applying lipstick to each other.

"It's supposed to be like that."

"You totally missed my mouth, asshole." The one in the center took a huge sip through her straw.

That's the point."

On the other side, a Lizzie Borden was using duct tape to keep the plastic axe in place on top of her black page-boy bangs.

By the time Emma got back to the table, Francis was announcing the overall costume and headdress winners.

"Second runner-up," she said. She had a small envelope this time instead of a poster board. "Float 16: Intern the Other Cheek."

A herd of Monica Lewinskys rushed the stage. Cigars were wrapped through their wigs like hair rollers, and their dresses all boasted matching stains. Francis passed out small gift bags to each of the ladies.

"First runner-up." She opened another envelope. "Float 22: Suburban Women Scorned."

The Amy Fishers had rigged red lights to flash from the end of their pistol headdresses, casting an ominous glow over their "I-heart-Joey" T-shirts. They screeched their way to the front and accepted their free pedicures from the Bella Day Spa.

"Finally," Francis made jazz hands on either side of the microphone. "First prize for a free jazz brunch party at the House of Blues is..." She ripped open the envelope. The Lorena Bobbits were already starting to celebrate,

gathering by the side of the stage. "Float 9: Arsenic and Italian Lace."

"Not fair," Georgie Ann whispered across the table. "Penny Waguespack is their float captain. Her nephew sews costumes for Hollywood."

The Lucretia Borgias emerged from the back of the warehouse, leaving Mary Kay Letourneau and a stray Tokyo Rose in the wake of their enormous buttresses. Their float captain was throwing hollowed-out toy rings into the crowd, each one filled of artificial sweetener.

The Lorena Bobbits were chugging their punch. A few of them pulled plastic penises out of their hair and threw them at the stage in protest.

#

Emma stood next to Margie Turner's granddaughter, Becca. She had just moved to New Orleans after graduate school in Central Mississippi. Emma helped her organize her beads, long ones higher and specialty beads within comfortable reaching position. The girls helped to tie each other to the float with the sturdy rope of their safety harnesses.

Virginia's husband handed up jug after jug of bourbon milk punch which they put in small coolers near the Port-O-Lets at the center of the float.

At first, they traveled down the back roads, still unraveling strands of beads and popping open packages of stuffed footballs and rubber bouncing balls. A few of the locals gathered down Tchoupitoulas and asked for specific baubles as the sun started to set.

The band in front of their float started to play, and Emma thought back to high school, when she and Lili would sneak beer from her parent's cooler and walk the length of St. Charles, watching each parade twice and catching more beads than they could carry. The avenue was a blur of neon lights, screaming faces, and outstretched hands. As she tossed long strings of pearls and foam beer cozies off the side of the float, Emma felt for the first time like she had something to offer the world. With every throw, Emma felt more and more invigorated, like she was tapping into the energy below.

As they passed the side entrance to the hospital, each of the FRUMPs tossed a mini-frisbee hard against the air. They floated up into the sky and toward the fifth floor where, Emma assured herself, Aunt Vivian was toasting them with a Manhattan.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rain fell onto the city. It fell into the gutters, wrapping cups and cans in ten-cent strings of plastic beads. It fell over the streets of the French Quarter washing away the stench of stale beer and urine. It fell on the people-on the churchgoers waving umbrellas over their heads to protect the ashes smeared on their foreheads and on the out-of-towners scrambling to catch a taxi or make it to the overcrowded airport. It rained especially quick and cold on the out-of-towners. The sharp beads of rain stung as if to say, "We don't want you anymore. You have overstayed your welcome."

Emma practically levitated to the sound of her alarm, floating upward and whacking the snooze button before gravity pulled her back onto the mattress. Her head fell sideways on her arm, and she could smell smoke and alcohol emanating from her skin. Tequila and Marlboro were not an

appetizing mix. Her "morning-after" stomach agreed. Her hair was matted and tangled from being wadded into a bun and pulled under a purple wig the night before.

Her head was pounding.

She tried every position to make it stop. She rolled around and it followed her, pounding harder and harder, pounding in the front of her skull, pounding behind her eyeballs and at times, she swore, pounding to the beat of *Little Liza Jane*. Curled into a tight fetal position, Emma looped back into a deep sleep.

The Bill and Jeff show blared from her clock radio.

"It ain't over yet, Bill."

"What? Is there another parade rolling past? Hey there, folks, will this madness ever end?"

"Come on, Man. You know what I mean. We gotta wait for the weighing of the trash report before we declare this year's Mardi Gras a success."

"Why's that, Jeff?"

"More trash means bigger success."

"Sad, but true, folks. *Sad but true.*"

She turned off the alarm, cutting her lifeline to the world. This was how she got her daily dose of news. No morning paper, no CNN, just small snip-its of the world brought to her by Bill and Jeff. Once, she had a dream that

she was surfing in Mozambique when the Prime Minister of Israel revealed to her that he was a cross dresser. Another time, Emma ran away with the Pope to a nice quiet bed and breakfast in Vermont. That was when she stopped setting the channel to NPR and invited the local morning show duo into her bed every morning at 6:00, 6:10, and 6:20.

Sitting up, Emma peeked through the blinds of her bedroom window. It was still raining. The rain had started at eleven o'clock the night before. It had come just in time for the Pig Parade. At midnight on Fat Tuesday, police officers lined up wall to wall on Bourbon Street and rode through, shutting each bar along the way, declaring the beginning of Lent, and pushing the sinners onto Canal Street. Locals called it the Pig Parade, the last spectacle in what seemed to be an endless entourage of floats and bands gallivanting uptown, down Canal, through the Warehouse District, and even spilling over into Metairie and onto the West Bank.

Cabs were scarce, and it had taken Emma and Becca almost two hours to get one to stop for them. Walking from Jackson Square all the way down Decatur, crossing Canal, and then across Poydras to the brick-and-neon dome of Harrah's Casino. While they were still in the Quarter one cab driver had stopped for them.

"Where are you headed?" he asked in an undetectable foreign accent. When the girls said "uptown" he sped off so fast he almost ran over Emma's toes.

"Bastard," Becca screamed while Emma shot him the bird.

None of the drivers wanted to leave the realm of the Quarter, driving people one or two blocks for a "set fare" of ten to twenty dollars. Emma remembered how it had started raining, standing on the corner of Tchoupitoulas and Poydras, almost giving up hope for a cab when the bottom dropped out, and it poured on the two girls standing on the corner in their bright wigs. When they were still in the Quarter, toward the end of Decatur Street around Molly's on the Market, the girls hadn't looked like anything special in their purple bobs and silver Jetson-inspired dresses. But there, closer to the convention center than Bourbon Street, they looked like a mini-mart postcard reading *Greetings from Mardi Gras*. A young German driver had finally picked them up and taken them to the safety of their beds.

And it was still raining.

Emma pulled her legs out from the sheets, the alcohol sweat creating a Velcro effect as she jerked up and swung her legs off the side of the bed. Hearing her stir, Assisi

ran to his bowl and started to cry. He was hungry, still wanting more, unaffected by the binging of Mardi Gras and purging of the Lent season. Now standing, Emma kept her legs shoulder width apart to keep her balance and stop the room from spinning. She walked into the kitchen, poured the cat some food, and grabbed the aspirin from on top of the microwave.

"Shit," she said looking at the clock. She was already late for lunch at her parent's house. Dainty always had a huge lunch prepared for Ash Wednesday, and the entire congregation at St. Anthony's seemed to attend.

The rain was letting up slightly, so she made a break for her car, and parallel parked perfectly in front of her house. She had been taking cabs since the middle of last week, not wanting to deal with the tourist traffic and afraid to lose her prime parking spot. Driving again felt awkward. As she drove down St. Charles Avenue, she noticed the spectrum of plastic beads hanging from the giant Elm trees that lined the street. Raindrops heightened the prismatic effect of the sun, and Emma temporarily felt trapped in a Hollywood-dream sequence. Traffic was thin. The rain had washed away most of the filth, but the deep potholes puddled in the avenue—its side streets covered with a thick, brownish liquid. It was a roux of dirt,

vomit, rain, beer, hurricanes, and other unspeakable fluids; it was a sinful gumbo trapped below sea level in the streets of the city.

The Avenue, which had been briefly converted into a campground for RVs with Florida plates, lost partygoers or college kids in cars labeled "Mardi Gras or Bust," was now relatively empty. The occasional Go-Can or Pot-O-Gold lining the street was one of the few clues left pointing to what had happened the last two weeks. The town, with its parties as well as its politics, was a master of the cover-up.

She wanted to look fresh on the off chance that everyone inside didn't know she was completely hung over. When she looked in the mirror, she panicked at the sight of her clean, broad forehead. She had forgotten to get her ashes.

Nobody in the Baronne family of New Orleans, Louisiana, forgot to get their ashes. Emma instinctually reached her index finger into the ashtray of her car. She dipped her thumb into the soft cinders and quickly made the sign of the cross on her forehead. As she spritzed herself with Ralph Lauren Romance and rubbed Purell hand sanitizer over her palms, Emma mumbled, "I'm going to hell. One way ticket, don't pass go."

She freshened the Downtown Brown on her lips and opened the door of her car. She barely had one foot out of the door when her parents burst from the front door. Emma congealed like instant Jello, sure that her parents had witnessed her sacrilege. She waited, insides wobbling, to pay penance to immediate karma.

"Thank God you're here, Emma," her mother said. Emma noticed a tapestry-and-fringe purse slung across her mother. Her father was holding his car keys.

"What?" Emma asked, dizzy and confused from the sudden motions. "Is going on here?"

"It's your Aunt Vivian," her father said. Time stood still as Emma's headache slowed to a weak pulse. "You can ride with us."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dainty was unpinning envelopes from each of the arrangements.

"We need to save these for the thank-you cards," she said.

Emma held out her hand for the pins.

"How odd," Dainty said, pulling a small yellow card from a wreath of gladiolas. "A Baptist church."

Emma peered over her mother's shoulder to see FAITH BAPTIST engraved in gold letters at the top of the note card. Dainty flipped it over to look at the envelope.

"It's addressed to you, Emma."

Emma was too tired to fight with her mother. She wanted to crawl inside the casket and take Vivian's place, scoot her over, and tell everyone there had been a serious mistake. She was sure that if she lifted up the lid, Vivian

would be in there laughing, waiting to pop out in the middle of the eulogy and mix herself a drink.

"Maybe they got my name from the paper."

Dainty placed the cards into a plastic pouch and zipped up the top.

"We should sit down."

Emma's father came in to join them, and they sat as people walked in and walked out, all commenting on how extraordinary Vivian had been, how much she would be missed, and what lovely arrangements Debbie's Floral had provided.

Emma imagined the FRUMPs waiting outside of the funeral home, watching for each other and clapping as they emerged from their vehicles. Finally, they filed into the room one by one.

"Honestly," Dainty whispered into Emma's ear. "Do they have the slightest sense of what's appropriate?"

They each wore a feather boa in their signature color.

"There was a man asking for you out front," Virginia said approached the receiving line. Her boa was aubergine. "He had on the strangest bright-orange suit."

Emma thought about escaping, but it was too late. Reverend Jones had made his way through the crowd.

"So sorry," he said.

His wife was standing next to him. "Sam said your aunt was a real firecracker."

"Hi," Emma saw a pale white hand reach past her. "I'm Emma's mother, Dainty."

"Reverend J.T. Jones." He shook Dainty's hand. "I'm Emma's pastor."

"You have no idea what it means to meet you."

#

The car ride home was long and silent until they reached her driveway.

"If I've done something," Dainty said, "you don't have to take it out on God."

"This isn't about you," Emma said.

She crawled out of the car and pushed open the front door of her apartment, feeling out of place around her oversized pieces of mail-order furniture.

"Emma, it's Barrett. I was so sorry to hear about your loss." Emma flipped off the answering machine.

"It's Becca. Call me if you want to hang out and eat your weight in ice cream."

Emma picked up the phone. Eating her weight in anything sounded like just what she needed. There was no dial tone.

"Emma?"

The sound of his voice turned her into a mute.

"Emma, that you? It's Conner."

She took a deep breath.

"Yeah, it's me."

"I know we haven't talked in a while," he said.

"What, did you see the paper today?"

"Yeah," he said. "All I wanted to do was talk to you.

Do you think that's strange?"

"Guess not." Emma lost her appetite.

"I mean, she looked good."

"Thanks," Emma said. Conner always did make weird-ass comments when he was uncomfortable.

"It just seemed like it was all happening so fast," he said. Emma had remembered his voice as being lower.

"It was very sudden," she said. "But everyone says I'm holding up all right."

"There she was in that gown and her hair pulled back, even though she knows I like her hair better when it's down." Conner's voice was growing more and more agitated with every word.

And Emma was more confused.

She opened the paper sitting on her kitchen counter, and suddenly it was all clear. In the center of the bridal page, there was Lindsay in black and white.

"Conner?" Emma slammed the paper shut.

"Yes, Emma?"

"Fuck off."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The last shot of creamy ointment shot toward Assisi's ear, and he squirmed in Emma's lap to avoid it. She squeezed the tube end-to-tip as hard as she could, but nothing else would come out.

"I need to get a refill," Emma said.

"What doctor do you see?"

"I don't really need to see a doctor, it's just ear mite cream."

"Which doctor wrote the original prescription?"

The married one, she thought.

"Dr. Ledet," she said. "Harrison Ledet." He had called and attempted to flag her down at Vivian's funeral, but Emma had no desire to see him. However, there was one thing Emma wanted more than the satisfaction of snubbing Dr. Ledet. She wanted Assisi to stop scratching his ear while he still had a little fur left.

"Okay," the receptionist said. "It should be ready in about an hour."

"No appointment necessary then?"

"It'll be at the front desk for you."

Emma slipped into the clinic and made a beeline for the front desk.

"Prescription for Emma Baronne," she was nervous that Dr. Ledet would poke his head through the waiting room door at any moment. "Actually, it's for Assisi. The cat." Emma pointed to her ears. "All clean."

"The doctor will be right out," the receptionist said.

"You must be confused," Emma assured her. "No appointment required. Just the prescription will do, thanks."

"He asked me to let him know when you stopped by," she said. "He probably just has a concern."

Emma convinced the receptionist to let her pay for the medicine, and then she jerked the bag off the counter and headed for the door, busting into Olympic-style walking as soon as she was outside. She was halfway down the street when she got busted.

"Emma!" Dr. Ledet was running after her.

She kept walking, and he ran faster. Obviously, he was in much better shape.

"I know everyone says they're sorry, and it sounds lame, but I am."

"*She* liked you a lot," Emma said. It was true.

"I think I still owe you a cup of coffee." He put his hands on his knees and hunkered down to catch his breath.

"Thanks, but shouldn't you be having coffee with your *wife*?" she asked.

"I would love to," Harrison said. "If I were, in fact, married."

"Nice try, but I heard your receptionist field a call from the Mrs."

"Who?" Harrison laughed.

Emma held an imaginary phone to her ear. "Mrs. Ledet on line one." She hung the phone up in mid-air.

"Is that why you've avoided my phone calls?"

He laughed harder.

"Because I'm having a torrid love affair with my *mother*?"

Emma felt her face heat up like a candle.

"I like the Greeks and all," Harrison said. "But that's a little too tragic even for my taste."

"Holy Christ," Emma hoped she was standing on a manhole and that it would break at any moment, sending her far into the depths of the Orleans Parish sewer system..

Harrison kept laughing.

"I'm so sorry," Emma said. "It's just that I was going through all kinds of things, and had lost my job, and-"

"Basically thought all men were pathetic lumps of shit?"

"People," Emma said. "Not just men."

Harrison pushed his hair back in relief. Emma was suddenly aware of her appearance—the high-water blue jeans, scarf thrown haphazardly across her hairline, the white T-shirt covered in paint.

"Sorry I look so..."

"Radiant," Harrison looked right into Emma's eyes. Awkward moments were becoming their specialty. "So, about that coffee?"

"Actually, I'm throwing a little party tomorrow at-"

"I'd love to."

Chapter Thirty

Evangeline set the last of the cucumber sandwiches on the buffet and mixed cocktails for the Catholics, Shirley Temples for the Catholics. Most of the Baptists were having Shirley Temples.

Emma walked through the sunroom, greeting people and listening to stories about Aunt Vivian.

"She would have adored this," Virginia said, pointing up at the finished painting. "I don't think she ever would have left the room."

Assisi tugged at Emma's shoe strings each time she took a step. Her jeans were rolled up at the bottom, but he knew not to scratch at her legs.

The doorbell rang, and Emma heard Evangeline escort someone through the house. Soon, Lili was standing in the kitchen, looking more prim and proper than Emma had ever seen her.

"I wanted to come to the funeral." Lili was sipped from a large paper cup of designer coffee.

"It's okay." Emma refilled her glass with Merlot. "There were so many people there I might not have seen you anyway."

Lili took a few more pulls from her cup while the girls thought of something to say. There was only one thing on both of their minds, but neither one was brave enough to bring it up.

"The wedding's coming up," Lili said, finally.

"Yeah, I heard."

She thought better of telling Lili exactly how she knew. Emma thought about Conner's phone call and wondered if there would even be a wedding. She thought it was funny, how he had called her when his feet got cold. Deep down, he must have known that Emma would never tell him what to wear or try to talk him into parting his hair in a new direction. He needed someone like Lindsay. It didn't make Emma less of a person. She was just different.

"I'm sure it'll be nice," she said.

Kermit Ruffins and the BBQ swingers were playing on the CD player in the sunroom. Emma could see the FRUMPs dancing along the hard floor.

"Actually," Lili started, "the dresses are bright teal with fluffy white trim."

"Really?"

"You know her. Has to be the prettiest one even if it's at the expense of her wedding photos."

Emma and Lili shared the kind of laugh that you have with a stranger who has the same shopping bag as you on the streetcar, or on a bus in Chicago when you realize you're from the same hometown. They shared something, but it was minimal now.

"What do you think?" Emma peeked around the corner and gestured toward the wall.

"It's so big," Lili said.

Emma looked at the light reflecting off the windows in the mural and thought about the first time she had gone to Faith Baptist.

"And different," Lili added.

Emma picked Assisi off of the floor and moved into the hall. Virginia was unfolding white napkins and handing them out to everyone. They each waved one over their heads as the set out through the house in a New Orleans-style second-line.

"It is, isn't it?" she laughed.

Harrison paraded past, followed by Sam and Evangeline.

"Does he have claws?" Lili leaned next to Emma in the hall.

"Yeah, but they don't hurt." He was pulling at the ends of the scarf Emma used to keep her hair out of her face.

"Well," Lili said. "I better get going."

Emma figured Lili didn't want to risk getting cat hair on her smooth white pants.

"I gave Evangeline the meat tray that I brought by. I thought you might be able to use a little something to eat if people stopped by."

"That was thoughtful."

Emma walked Lili to the door, and watched as she crossed the street to her car. Inside, the sounds of Rebirth Brass Band were mixing with laughs and conversation. As Assisi brushing against her ankles, Emma watched Lili pull off and head back uptown.

Vita

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