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BEING ILIA

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CHAPTER ONE

Slushy mud. Muddy slush. Illy wasn't sure which sounded better. She stared at the mounds of grey snow, melting into swamps by the sidewalk, imagined the taste of engine oil under her tongue and chewed her upper lip. Neither was quite right. She just couldn't capture that mushy, crisp, ticklish feel. The word sensual came to mind. *Sensual slush.* She rolled her eyes. Muddy slush was probably best, even though it lacked any sense of gloopiness.

Illy hated writing descriptions. The words she wanted swam like beautiful and elusive mermaids in her mind, but as soon as she put one on paper, it bored her. There simply weren't words for all those in between feelings that pressed at the inside of her skull and made her toes curl in her boots.

Mushy slush. That sounded like old Cheerios.

Despite the vocabulary failures, these were Illy's best creative moments, walking down Queenston, feeling melancholy and bohemian. There was something so literary about walking downtown with a bulky scarf around her neck and a porcelain travel mug clutched between her mismatched mittens. The mittens were probably superfluous since spring had officially begun, but she thought the tenacious trails of snow on the ground allowed for at least another week of socially acceptable mitten wearing. It was exactly here, somewhere between Dakota and Wentworth, that she felt it most- that the perfect novel was waiting inside her. She thought of it as her own literary embryo, a brilliant piece that she was coddling and nourishing with her own lifeblood. She resisted the urge to pat her stomach, the proud mother of a non-existent story.

Illy had decided months ago that her novel would be about a smarter, braver version of herself. About a young writer who lived downtown in an unassuming prairie city and met eccentric artists and elm-loving activists. She

didn't yet know anyone that fit that description, but she had her eye on a few people in her apartment building with great character potential.

The girl stepped gingerly off the sidewalk, careful not to splash mud on her favourite green army pants. Army pants sounded so militant, and gingerly reminded her of her grandmother setting the dinner table. *The girl skipped over the murky puddle, careful not to splash her crinkly tangerine skirt.* Too cluttered.

Illy decided to abandon the mud description. She didn't want to start the novel on a dreary note. *The sun shone eagerly on the bustling street.* She was trying to decide if eagerly was the written version of a smiley face on the sun when she reached the front of her apartment building. She instinctively looked up at the third floor window and nodded hello to Fern and the girls. Then, just as instinctively, she glanced around to be sure no one had seen her. She knew there was something embarrassing about a grown woman greeting her house plants through the window. But whenever she tried to ignore them and walk straight into the building, she felt like a guilty mother who didn't wave goodbye to the school bus and then ended up running up the three flights of stairs to apologize. She made a mental note to ask her mother about her own weird plant relationships. Illy's mother had an uncanny connection with the forests of potted plants teeming in every corner of her suburban bungalow, though as far as Illy could recall, she never discussed it. For someone so pragmatic she threw away every piece of Illy's childhood art the moment it was completed in order to prevent clutter, her mother was surprisingly indulgent of the ivy creeping along the kitchen counters and the cactus blocking the hall closet. Her plants always looked like newly arrived rain forest immigrants, but if her mother ever left town for even a night, Illy watched them shrivel and droop like heartbroken widowers. Illy tried to imagine her no-nonsense mother singing love songs to her adoring plant family as she did her daily vacuuming, but couldn't picture it. Her mother's flora magic remained a mystery. She'd try to broach the subject the next time they met for lunch.

Illy stepped through the front door. *The girl pushed open the large door and inhaled the familiar aroma of...* Of what? She couldn't say that it smelled like day-old marijuana smoke and leaky radiators. She needed something more sophisticated ...*the familiar aroma of cloves and pine needles.* Perfect.

Bending over in front of the wall of aluminum mail boxes, Illy peered up at the slots in Box 14. A few months ago she had discovered that if she looked from just the right angle, she could tell if she had any mail without actually opening the box. Just at that moment, the front door swung open, and Illy froze, rear end in the air. She closed her eyes, suppressed the impulse to make a bad talking butt joke, and reached for an old gum wrapper on the carpet.

"There's always so much litter in here." Illy tried to sound cheerful yet sincere in her concern about the building's slipping standards of cleanliness. She was afraid if she stood up too quickly, she'd look guilty somehow, and so she continued to peer at the carpet, butt in the air, as if she routinely examined the foyer floor for small bits of paper. She heard a muffled breathy sound from the person behind her that could have been a snort of disdain, but, she quickly assured herself, just as easily could have been the sniff of an allergy sufferer.

"I've been thinking about maybe putting up a little sign, you know, a friendly reminder..." Illy reached for an imaginary piece of lint, straightened up as naturally as she could, and turned to find herself face to face with the Crazy Killer Man from the second floor. She'd never seen him from so close. Usually he was running past her on the stairs, mumbling under his breath and fidgeting nervously with his keys or the zipper of his corduroy jacket. He always looked like he was on the verge of some horrific act of violence. Like tonight would be the night that the waitress would forget to put pickles on his sandwich one too many times and he'd pull out a pistol and wave it around the crowded diner, shouting about pickles and the apocalypse.

"A reminder to, uh, not litter. Maybe it could be like a little poem about how it doesn't hurt to pick up dirt." Illy forced a smile, horrified at what she heard herself say. She was even more horrified when she realized she was still talking. "Or maybe, don't be mean, keep it clean." Crazy Killer Man slammed his mailbox shut as his eyes darted between Illy and the stairs behind her. He was planning an emergency escape. Illy imagined him pulling a gun out of his jacket and pointing it at his own head as some sort of threat to make her stop talking about litter poems or else. "I'll see what I can come up with. I'm a writer you know." He snorted again. Illy suspected Crazy Killer Man didn't have allergies. She eased towards the front door, trying to provide him with a nonthreatening route to the stairwell. "I should be able to whip up a little something poetic, and who knows? Maybe it will be the surprise launch of

my literary career."

By this point, Crazy Killer Man had made his break and was disappearing up the stairs. Illy called after him in a rather matronly voice that she'd never heard herself use before, "Keep your eyes out for the sign, and don't forget to pick up your litter!" She remembered the need to justify her movement towards the front door, so she pushed it open with a great sense of purpose and strode out onto the front steps as the door slammed behind her.

There, it was with much compassionate self-pity that Illy thought back on the last few minutes of her life. She forced herself to accept the fact that not only had she contributed to the mental instability of a potentially dangerous man, but she had also dropped her keys on the floor by the mailboxes and was now stranded outside her own apartment building. She felt an overwhelming urge to sit down in the mud.

CHAPTER TWO

Illy was still standing in front of her building half an hour later. She had sat down on the front step for a few seconds but that looked too permanent somehow, like she *wanted* to be sitting outside. She was afraid someone might come to the door, comment politely about enjoying the spring weather, and then let the door shut before she could jump up and explain the situation. So she stood up again and tried to maintain the constant appearance of having just arrived and realized she'd forgotten her keys. After a few minutes, an elderly woman came towards the building, murmuring to her overweight beagle. Illy began patting her pockets. She waited until the woman was within earshot, then smacked her forehead with a little too much force and groaned.

"Oh no. My keys!" Beagle Woman didn't even glance at Illy, but she stopped murmuring, yanked the dog's leash, and scurried down the sidewalk. Illy patted her pockets a few more times, then slumped against the brick wall of the building.

She wondered if this was a scene she could use as the tragic surprise ending to her novel. *Cold and alone, the girl huddled outside the locked door, staring longingly through the glass.* It did have a certain romanticism to it. The girl could be locked out in the cold all night, and then a handsome stranger would find her in the morning, curled up on the step, dead. As he carried her to the ambulance, the residents of the apartment building would gather around, whispering about the identity of the mysterious girl who died clutching a pen, an unfinished novel in her bag.

Illy was so touched by the image of herself lying dead in the ambulance, that when she heard footsteps approaching, she realized she was crying. This didn't really surprise her. She had the rather morbid habit of imagining herself dying in any number of tragic ways and often found herself crying at inopportune times as she pictured herself languishing from malaria on an

African safari, or plunging from the top of a malfunctioning ferris wheel.

Illy decided to explore the literary potential of the ambulance scene once she had resolved the current key dilemma, then wiped her runny nose with the back of her hand.

"Don't you dare give me that prissy little attitude, Nancy. You can head straight inside and beg for my forgiveness. Do you realize how embarrassed I am? Maybe I won't let you watch the game tonight. How'd you like that, little missy?"

Illy felt the familiar pressure forming at the base of her throat that indicated the approach of another awkward social encounter. She tried to swallow it down as she looked up with a too-wide smile. "Hi Dave." She maintained the stretchy smile and wiped her nose again.

"Hi Ilia. Excuse me for a moment. Nancy, sit. Sit! Can't you see I'm talking here? Sorry Ilia, just a sec." A middle-aged man in a tracksuit crouched down and picked up a scrawny cat. He grabbed the blue harness that was wrapped elaborately around the cat's body and began whispering in its ear with exasperated intensity.

The pressure in Illy's throat shifted from awkward to embarrassed. She coughed and turned to study the divots in the brick wall of the building. She always tried to avoid being caught in the middle of Dave and Nancy's sordid relationship. Just yesterday she was about to leave her apartment when she heard the familiar sounds of another domestic dispute. Nancy had once again escaped from their apartment and Dave was chasing her up and down the stairwell, calling after her in a tone that swung between desperation and fury. Illy couldn't help thinking of Nancy as a young girlfriend who was trapped in a relationship with a very needy man. As she waited with her hand on the doorknob she silently cheered for Nancy. *Come on, girl. Just keep going. You can do better than him.* But Nancy always came back, probably as tired of Dave's pathetic pleas as the rest of the tenants. Illy thought if she could just sit down over a cup of coffee with Nancy, she could convince her to end this unhealthy relationship. Maybe Nancy could move in with Illy for a while until she was back on her feet, gaining strength from some female companionship. Illy had listened for the click of Dave's door shutting across the hall. Then she'd waited an extra second to be sure the argument was over

before entering the hallway, not yet ready to forge the uncharted social waters of confronting a grown man on his unhealthy relationship with a cat.

"Sorry about that, Ilia. Hello." Dave smiled at Illy, still clenching Nancy's harness. He was one of the few people besides Illy's mother who called her by her full name, and Illy suspected her mother mostly used it out of sheer stubbornness. Before Illy was born, her parents had decided to name their only child Katherine, a strong and sensible tribute to a strong and sensible great aunt. But during her long and foggy labour, Illy's mother had heard the name Ilia on the radio blaring from the nurse's station down the hall and after her baby was neatly swaddled in the hospital bassinet and her mind had emerged from its nitrous oxide cloud, she announced that the baby would be named Ilia. Illy's father didn't feel he was entitled to any objection, seeing as he had spent most of the previous eighteen hours worriedly eating sandwiches in the hallway, so he wrote the strange name on the birth record and imagined his own father's reaction. Later, he asked the nurses about the radio program and discovered that what his wife had heard was, in fact, a dramatic retelling of Homer's *The Iliad*, but by that point it was too late to revert back to the comfort of Katherine. Illy's mother never admitted that the name had been a mistake, and Illy thought her mother still pronounced the name as if scoring another point in her defense.

Her neighbour Dave, on the other hand, had noticed her full name on a piece of dropped mail and seemed to enjoy this privileged intimacy, using the name unnaturally often.

"Out enjoying the sunshine?"

"Yeah, sort of, but mostly I'm working on my novel." Dave was staring at her, his eyebrows pinched in a concerned manner. Illy turned her face dramatically towards the sky. "I really try to get into my subject matter, you know, experience what the characters are experiencing. Right now the main character is... standing outside. I thought I should spend a few minutes in the sun before hammering out the chapter."

Dave wasn't blinking. Illy resented his confused stare, as if she was the crazy one here. She just wanted him to snap out of it and unlock the door. "But I'm done now. I think I've got the hot sunny sensation just right. I just need to dash in and pour it out onto the page."

"Hmm. Good for you, Ilia." Dave finally blinked, then nodded, although he still hadn't relaxed his eyebrows. Illy smiled and felt like she should nod too. They stared at each other, both nodding.

Illy had unconsciously furrowed her own eyebrows and wondered why he wasn't opening the door. "Silly me! I should be opening the door for you. You've got your hands so full there with your sweet little cat." She managed to stop nodding as she dug her hands into her pockets. "Oh no! My keys!" This was all sounding ridiculously familiar. She even smacked her forehead again, although she knew her timing was off and it couldn't have been convincing. "I must have left them by the computer." Illy had no idea why she refused to admit that she had dropped her keys inside, but by this point it seemed crucial to stick to her story.

Dave sighed and attempted a reassuring smile as he set Nancy down and pulled his keys out of his jacket pocket. He had barely begun to pull the door open when Illy slipped through the opening, grabbed her keys off the floor by the mailboxes and rushed up the stairs. She knew she should at least thank Dave and wish him a good day, but she was so relieved to be inside, that she didn't want to risk any more awkward conversations.

As she shut the door to her apartment, she heard Dave's loud whisper on the stairs. "Well, Nancy, sometimes people act strangely, but we really should try to be polite."

Illy rolled her eyes and locked the door.

CHAPTER THREE

"I don't know, June, isn't that a little weird? Like for bored housewives who want to reclaim some lost sexual fantasy?" A week had passed since the key incident, and Illy was balancing flamingo-like over the toilet, trying to clip her toenails while talking on the phone. "Do you really want to stare at a room full of women in sweatsuits, seductively jiggling their big bellies? Why not ballet? It's so much less...vulnerable or something."

June had been Illy's best friend since junior high, when a fateful gym class had revealed their shared inability to do a cartwheel. After three failed and flopping attempts, Illy had wrapped her lanky arms around her torso in a mortified effort to fold herself up and disappear, but June had bounded across the gymnastic mat towards her, frizzy-haired and beaming. "Finally, a non-cartwheeling kindred spirit. Please tell me you've also read *Gone With the Wind*." When Illy mumbled through her braces that she'd read it three times and was currently writing a prequel, their bond was immediate and eternal.

Illy tugged at a hangnail on her big toe and tried to concentrate on what June was saying. June had recently fallen in love with a handsome and brainy historian she'd met at the community college where she worked, and today he'd mentioned that he adored dancing. June, who got flustered and wobbly trying to do the hokey-pokey, had of course agreed with too much enthusiasm (*What is life without dancing?* or something equally dramatic) and was now in a state of panic. She needed to gain what she called Basic Body Awareness as soon as possible, and was begging Illy to come to a beginners' belly dancing class that evening.

"Oh shoot! I dropped the nail clippers in the toilet. Hang on." Illy set the phone on the radiator, looking for something to use to fish out the nail clippers. Neither her hairbrush nor a washcloth seemed like a helpful option,

so she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached into the water, wondering how sophisticated people dealt with problems like nail clippers in the toilet.

A few moments later, after a successful rescue and a lot of hand washing, Illy wiped her hands on her jeans, picked up the phone and sighed. "Okay, I'll do it. But I think you're nuts. What should I wear?" Illy accepted June's wisdom on the inappropriateness of sports bras as outerwear, then hung up the phone and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. She lifted up her t-shirt and frowned. She had long rejected the idea that her body had to conform to any Hollywood standard of beauty and considered her unshaven legs and unpadded chest proud badges of an evolved feminism. But all her empowering beliefs about embracing her body in its bulging, birthmarked authenticity cowered at the thought of being paraded in front of a group of exotic strangers. She apologized to the insecure rolls in her belly that she'd been trying to affirm for years, then sucked them in and held her breath. Illy made a quick deal with both her sulking bulges and her feminist principles that if they'd just be willing to stay out of sight for one evening, she'd reward them later with Oreos. It seemed like a fair deal.

CHAPTER FOUR

Illy burst into the dance studio at 7:05. A group of women, as still and poised as music box ballerinas, were sitting cross-legged in a circle with their eyes closed. A few looked up at Illy with annoyance, as though she had just interrupted their moment of achieving nirvana.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Couldn't find a parking spot." More glares. Illy pretended not to notice, spotted June, and walked to the circle, remembering to suck in her belly and sway her hips with subtle seduction.

"Why are you limping? Are you hurt?" June whispered as Illy sat down beside her with what she hoped sounded like a contemplative sigh.

"Uh, just a little cramp in my leg," she lied. She'd have to work on the seductive sway.

A curvaceous woman with long black hair smiled at Illy. "Welcome. I'm Soraiya. We're just warming up by concentrating on our breathing." Illy smiled and nodded as if she knew exactly what they were doing, and began concentrating on her breathing.

Illy knew that focusing on your breath was the most basic of all meditation and stress management techniques. She'd been meaning to try it for months, but didn't quite understand how focusing on her breath could be any more helpful than just breathing, so had mostly trusted her lungs to take care of her stress management without the extra attention. Now she found that concentrating on her breathing was way harder than any of the meditation gurus ever let on. The added attention appeared to have struck her lungs with stage fright and they had completely forgotten their lines. Illy tried to prompt them from the wings, but realized she was breathing in too deeply and then holding her breath. Her head felt light and wobbly and her lips started to

tingle the way they did in grade four when she had hyperventilated on the playground.

She looked at June in panic, but June had her eyes closed, oblivious to the near-emergency occurring beside her. Illy knew that a paper bag was somehow crucial when hyperventilating, so she grabbed her water bottle and held it near her mouth, hoping that the medical theory was mostly based on breathing into any closed container.

"Okay ladies, open your eyes." Illy was concentrating so hard on her water bottle that it took her a moment to realize that Soraiya and the rest of the women were looking at her. She took a gulp of water, glanced at June, who rolled her eyes, and then smiled at Soraiya.

"The first step in belly dancing is to isolate your hips. Let them move on their own, back and forth, side to side. " Soraiya stood up to demonstrate. Illy prepared herself for the rather embarrassing prospect of staring at a grown woman's bottom, and then watched in amazement as Soraiya's hips took on a will of their own, sliding in every direction to some ancient beat pulsing in her body. Illy was mesmerized. At that moment, she knew that belly dancing was the most beautiful form of dance, no, of all movement, she'd ever seen and made a silent vow to learn to dance like Soraiya. She wondered if she might be able to learn the basics this evening and then just have to come one or two more times to perfect all the moves. Maybe belly dancing would even help her become a better writer. She was pretty sure she'd read somewhere that dancers were good writers, something about the physical movement enhancing your imagination. In fact, sitting cross-legged on the floor of that funky downtown studio, she already felt a little more sophisticated and imaginative. She considered including belly dancing in the author biography on the back cover of her novel. *In her spare time, the author enjoys learning new languages and belly dancing.* It would definitely add to her mystique.

"Alright, everyone find a spot by the mirror and try to isolate your hips, just moving them slightly from side to side."

June leaned over to Illy. "This looks a lot harder than I thought it would be. Maybe you were right about ballet," she whispered.

Illy tried to look reassuring. "You'll be fine. Remember, all you want is a

little body awareness. It's okay if you're not an expert." She felt sorry for June, knowing it would be humiliating to be so uncoordinated in front of other people. She hoped that June wouldn't be too jealous of how effortless it would be for Illy. Some people were just natural dancers. She'd try to explain that to June later as gently as she could.

Illy found a spot in front of the mirrored wall next to a woman in a yellow lycra body suit. She wished that she could use a woman like that in her novel just for the ease of the description. *The woman looked like a long sleek banana.* But Illy knew that no believable character would ever be wearing yellow lycra. She forced herself to forget about her novel for a moment and concentrate on her hips.

Eyes closed, belly in, Illy began to slide her hips, first to the left, then to the right. She imagined her hips were water, flowing back and forth like a seductive human wavepool. It was easier than she'd thought. She hoped Soraiya was watching her. She was probably wondering how Illy was able to capture that fluid movement so quickly. Maybe Illy could share the Wavepool image with the class to help them achieve the same sensual smoothness.

"Seriously, he refuses to take any advice. Like he's the expert and we're just the lowly typists placed on earth to support his genius." Banana Woman had been on a tirade about some ego-maniac named Michael ever since the hip exercises had begun, and Illy was getting annoyed. How was she supposed to perfect her Wavepool motion if she couldn't concentrate?

"I really can't take it anymore. If he wants us to publish his novel, he'd better lose the cocky attitude and act like a grown up writer."

Illy froze. Banana Woman published novels. A real life publisher was standing less than three feet away from her. Things like this didn't happen just by chance. Illy knew that she had come to belly dancing for a reason, and the reason was to meet- no, to be *met by-* the Banana Woman Publisher. She began to hyperventilate.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Are you okay? Do you need help sitting up?" June's face floated above Illy in the blurred halo of a medical drama. Illy wondered for a moment if maybe she was in the hospital, but then felt the smooth hardwood beneath her and was pretty sure there were no IV tubes in her arms. Maybe they were waiting for an ambulance.

"What happened? Where's my publisher?"

"Your publisher? Oh no, I think you banged your head when you fell." June leaned in closer to Illy, eyes wide, the concern of a decade of late night phone calls and giggly sleepovers etched into her forehead. "Maybe I should call the ambulance."

"No, June, I'm fine." Illy blinked to bring June's face into focus, then closed her eyes against the glare of the overhead lights and remembered to suck in her stomach. "It's the Banana Woman. She's a publisher. She's my destiny." Illy's heartbeat felt like an unfamiliar presence behind her ribs. She wondered if fainting had triggered a spontaneous heart murmur, or if it was the surge of adrenaline that precedes a life-changing moment.

June was still leaning over Illy in emergency vitals-checking posture. She seemed to be determining whether she was dealing with a brain injury or a practical joke. A few of the other dance students were loitering around, trying to gauge the seriousness of the situation without making direct eye contact with June or Illy. Soraiya was coaching a woman in a gauzy skirt printed with skulls on the importance of establishing your belly button as focal point and hadn't even noticed Illy was on the floor.

June leaned back on her heels. "Illy, I think you'll need to explain this again. I caught something about a Banana Publishing Destiny, but it makes so little

sense that if your next attempt isn't more reasonable, I really am calling the ambulance. Or shining a flashlight in your eyes or something."

Illy closed her eyes and spread her fingers along the floor, small starfish grounding her to the earth. She had once heard that contact with the earth held healing power for women, and so she pressed her body into the hardwood, hoping that it was a viable substitute for the ground. "June, the woman in yellow lycra is a publisher. This is my chance to make a connection in the publishing world for my novel, and my future novels—"

"I think all your novels are future novels at this point" June spoke slowly, scanning Illy's face for signs of lucidity.

Illy ignored her. "I need to talk to the Banana Publisher before she leaves. Do you think I should wait here until she comes to check on my situation, or risk another fainting spell and walk over to her?"

June's concern had shifted from the physical to the emotional. "Oh Illy, you know I love you. But I don't know if staggering over to a shiny yellow woman at a belly dancing class to ask her to publish your non-existent novel is the best display of judgment. Maybe you should just drink some water, go home, and spend a few months writing."

Illy knew that June was right. She knew approaching a potentially influential professional while light-headed and wearing sweatpants was never a good idea. She knew that book deals were not made at belly dancing classes and that authors weren't supposed to approach publishers directly. She even knew that a person who worked for a publishing company wasn't actually called a publisher, but she didn't know what the accurate alternative was. Publishing Director? Editor in Chief?

But Illy had also been telling June for years that if she didn't acknowledge the serendipitous encounters handed to her, the universe might find a more grateful recipient. So Illy took a deep breath, pressed her fingers to the hardwood one more time, and sat up. "Thank you, June, for your sound and reasonable advice. I'm not taking it this time, but I give you full permission to gloat over me if I make a complete and utter fool of myself. Is my hair okay?"

June smiled and smoothed back Illy's hair like a nervous mother. Illy waited

for her to lick her thumb and rub a juice stain off Illy's chin. Instead she said "Your hair is so-so. But your audacity is impressive. Good luck."

Illy stood up, made a quick decision to abandon both her seductive sway and her meditative breathing, and walked toward the door where Banana Woman was maintaining sleek sophistication while tying her shoes. Illy patted her stomach for courage, remembering the novel embryo trusting her with its life. She crouched down a few feet behind Banana Woman, untied her shoelaces and then slowly began re-tying them.

"Time to get back to the old manuscript," she whispered. She hoped the word 'old' gave a sense that the novel was already well developed, and not stale and out-dated. Banana Woman didn't seem to have heard her. Illy tried again.

"Hope my favourite old novel is still waiting up," she said in a half-whisper, half-sigh. That sounded like she was hurrying home to read a book, not write one. Thankfully Banana Woman gave no response. Illy leaned in as close to the woman's shimmery yellow back as she could without toppling over, and gave one last flailing, full-volume attempt. "Can't wait to go check on my fresh and relevant novel manuscript. Hope it's waiting up for its good friend, the promising belly-dancing author." Utter disaster. Illy closed her eyes and willed Banana Woman to remain oblivious to the literary and conversational embarrassment unfolding behind her, but of course Illy could never have been so lucky.

The woman stood up and slowly pivoted towards Illy. "Excuse me? Were you talking to me?" She stared down at Illy like she was a mangy dog who had just peed on her shoe.

Illy looked up with forced surprise. "Me? Oh no, no. I was just mumbling to myself." She stood up, pulled in her stomach, and stretched her arms above her head in what she thought must be a classic yoga pose. "That's just the eccentric writer in me, you know, always playing around with words." She reached down to touch her toes, but could only reach her knees. Maybe squats would be better. She squatted down to the floor, smiling up at the woman who was continuing her slow pivot. Illy wondered how she maintained such a smooth motion. She was like a mannequin on a revolving pedestal. "I just can't help myself." Illy sprung up and then squatted again, a little too quickly, feeling uncomfortably frog-like. "When you're working on

a novel...well, you probably don't want to hear about all that..." Illy was starting to lose her breath from her enthusiastic squats, but thought she'd committed to at least twenty. She leaped into the air again.

"Good luck." Banana Woman grimaced at her, then stepped off her imaginary pedestal and walked toward the door.

Illy sprung up from where she'd been squatting, trying to catch her breath, and shouted, much more loudly than she meant to, "No, wait!" Banana Woman jumped and dropped her gym bag, a look of panic on her face.
"Sorry," Illy lowered her volume,
"I'm so sorry, I just...do you have one second?"

Banana Woman bent down to pick up her bag, watching Illy out of the corner of her eye for sudden movements. Illy took her nervous silence as the opportunity she'd been hoping for.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but I just wanted to..to..." She was staring at the woman's stomach, mesmerized by the metallic yellow lycra. Then she blinked hard, and, channeling all her positive self-talk in front of the mirror that evening, June's years of motivational speeches over donut holes, and her dreams of faking a glowing review of her own novel on Amazon, said, "I wanted to ask if you would publish my novel." There. She'd done it. She stood ramrod straight, hands by her sides, staring into her new publisher's eyes and feeling triumphant.

Her publisher, on the other hand, looked skittish. She was clutching her gym bag to her chest and squinting at Illy as though trying to decipher the real meaning behind Illy's words. Illy attempted a disarming smile and wondered if there was a way to explain her knowledge of the woman's career without admitting to eavesdropping. She opted for more smiling and the hope that Banana Woman wouldn't notice that suspicious detail.

"Well," Banana Woman swallowed to buy some time. "I can't agree to publish your novel, but if you have a work you'd like someone to read over, you can drop it by our office next week." She moved toward the door, adding, "Hartfield House Publishers on 12th Avenue" as she pulled the door shut behind her, afraid Illy was going to chase her.

Illy was still standing perfectly straight, trying to absorb what had just

happened. *Hartfield House Publishers*. She had never imagined her publishing company to have such a beautiful name.

CHAPTER SIX

Illy had been trying for years to become a morning person. She was convinced the morning was the most inspiring time of the day and had visions of waking before dawn, doing a few invigorating sun salutations in her living room and then sitting down to churn out five or ten pages while the rising sun glowed through the window. So far she'd managed it twice- at least the waking up before dawn part. Both times she'd opted for coffee before yoga to get some brain synapses firing, then sunk into the couch to enjoy the coffee, reached for the brown and green afghan her grandmother had crocheted for her, and woken up around noon, yarn patterns pressed into her cheek and half a cup of cold coffee wedged into the couch cushions.

The problem was that she wasn't really a night person either. Even in university when every other student was pulling all-nighters to crank out term papers the night before the deadline, Illy had worked as hard as she could till eleven, then added a three line concluding paragraph and climbed into bed. She figured it wouldn't help her academic success to be sick and exhausted so made it a point of duty to get a good night's sleep. Now, without the incentive of a morning deadline, she found even evenings impossibly unproductive and usually ended up watching online sitcoms from the eighties. Her creative window was shrinking at an alarming rate and Illy was beginning to fear it would soon stretch from approximately nine to eleven a.m.

But that was before she had a publisher. The morning after the belly dancing class, Illy woke before her alarm rang. She opened her eyes and watched pre-dawn shadows slip through the slats in her blinds and slide across the ceiling, grey and foreign. The air felt still and alert, like the morning was holding its breath, so Illy moved slowly, afraid to break the silence. She sat on the edge of her bed, took careful deep breaths, and envisioned the next few minutes. For years, Illy had been imagining what her life would look like once she was

a real author, and now that it was here, she had to make some quick decisions. She wanted so badly to do this morning right, to set herself up for inspiration and productivity.

An early morning jog had always been a crucial part of her Life as an Author Vision, but now it seemed a little ambitious, not to mention time-consuming. She opted for a few stretches and stood beside her bed, reaching for the ceiling and feeling lithe and sophisticated. She bent at the waist to touch her toes but still could only reach her knees, so settled on arm circles, banishing the accusation that she looked more like a junior high gym student than an urbane Pulitzer winner.

After completing the Fitness Component of the morning- a component that admittedly needed some development in the future- Illy moved on to Wardrobe. She stood in front of her closet and smiled. This was her favourite part of the Author Vision because she understood how important the right outfit was in achieving optimum creativity. Illy knew lots of writers wore only black, and she had definitely considered it as a viable option for her own writing career, but had decided that writers in black looked like they were trying too hard. Plus she wasn't really an all-black kind of writer- the kind who smoked and wrote about sleazy sex and didn't use proper punctuation. She was more of a mismatched tank top and skirt kind of writer- like Sylvia Plath, but happier. Unfortunately she still hadn't bought any perfect Sylvia writing skirts. She had been intending to stop by the Salvation Army thrift store for months, but the truth that she could barely admit to herself was that she hated the way thrift stores smelled like kidney beans and wet corduroy. What she longed for was a store with the edgy, alternative elements of the Salvation Army laid out in the crisp orderliness of the Gap. For now, she settled on the sweatpants she'd worn for belly dancing, her tightest tank top, and a purple head scarf- casual, but sexy.

Life as an Author component number three: Atmosphere. Illy wanted to establish the feeling that everything around her was cooperating in the creative process, like the universe was her inspiration midwife, coaxing her through the birth of her story. That was a lovely image- the universe as midwife. Maybe she could use it at the beginning of her novel, or even in the dedication. *This book is dedicated to the Universe, my inspiration midwife.* Feminist things like that were so trendy; Banana Woman would probably

love it.

Illy walked- glided really, like an earthy, artsy Audrey Hepburn- to the kitchen to prepare her snacks, the centrepiece of Inspiring Atmosphere. Usually she had coffee and animal crackers; she loved the ironic contrast of adult and child, and felt that it gave her writing both maturity and freshness. But today she needed something more exotic, something more in line with a name like Hartfield House Publishers. She remembered her mother giving her some sample drink packets that had come in the mail- what had she done with those? She scrounged through her junk and utensil drawer and found a small silver envelope. *Taste of India Cardamom Chai*. Perfect.

Illy felt a little guilty as she waited for the water to boil. Just last week June had been reading a book about being an artist and she told Illy that the author's main advice was to never try to feel like an artist. Just start creating and you'll actually be an artist, instead of trying to conjure up an artistic identity, or something like that. At the time Illy thought that was great advice, but now she thought it was rather audacious. Really, what did that author know about what worked or didn't work for other artists? And anyway, she probably didn't mean little things like making chai. It wasn't like Illy was wearing all black. She stirred the powder and water in her favourite mug, cupped it in both her hands, and walked to her desk, feeling the jittery but hopeful nausea she felt before a first date.

Illy loved sitting at her desk. She loved the little African Violet beaming from a plastic pot on the corner that kept blooming even though Illy always forgot to water it, as if reassuring her that she was still loveable. She loved the view out the window, looking out on the big elm tree that held its ground with dignity in the middle of all that pavement and watched her like a doting grandfather. And most of all, she loved her typewriter. Illy's favourite university professor lived in an old brick farmhouse and wrote quirky children's books on a typewriter in the attic. Illy had always thought that this was the most romantic and authentic way of writing, and so when she found the old Remington at a garage sale in university, she vowed to write all of her novels on this beautiful machine. She had a laptop too, of course, that she kept in her bedroom for writing less important things, but here on her desk by the window where she would write her novels, sat the typewriter. Illy smiled to herself as she sipped her chai and watched melting snow drip off the elm's

branches. Life as an Author was unfolding exactly how she'd envisioned.

Illy had just rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter when she heard the buzz of the intercom by the front door. The intercom was below Illy's window, so she could hear it when she sat at her desk, although she considered it a point of honour to not listen in on people's conversations, or at least not repeat the information she gained. She knew that living in that particular suite and hearing what she heard bestowed on her a responsibility to the rest of the building's tenants, whether they knew it or not, and she was proud of being such a trustworthy neighbour.

Illy wondered who would be getting a visitor so early in the morning. She leaned a little closer to the window, listening to the mysterious guest dial a number on the keypad.

"Hello?" A woman's groggy voice crackled from the speaker.

"Good morning, Starshine. I've got two piping hot double mochas. Just looking for a beautiful woman to share them with."

"What? In the middle of the night? You're crazy- and a little amazing..." The intercom buzzed. Illy pressed her forehead against the damp window, trying to see who the man was, but only saw the door swing shut. She set down her mug and hurried to her door, hoping to hear which suite he went to. The sound of footsteps passed in the hallway and continued up the stairs, soon fading away. Illy sighed and leaned against the door. Who in her building could have such an incredibly romantic boyfriend? There was Kayak Lady who lived above her and dragged her kayak down the stairs every morning, but Illy was pretty sure she was gay. Or the woman with the gray braid that hung to her knees and only left her apartment on Tuesdays, but she was at least seventy years old. Illy just couldn't picture any of the women in the building with a boyfriend who delivered coffee in the morning. Whoever she was, she was devastatingly lucky.

Illy walked back to her desk, slouched in the chair and sipped her chai. She knew she had an unhealthy tendency toward envy, concocting elaborate daydreams that revolved around other people's gorgeous and hypothetical lives. Countless stern lectures from June had helped in the battle against these Envy Dreams, as had getting a bit older and meeting some really miserable people whose lives looked fantastic to the casual observer. But she still had

moments of relapse like this one, when it just seemed like other people were starring in poetic and romantic storylines while she drank free samples of powdery drinks and did arm circles in sweatpants.

Illy was just about to grab her laptop and climb back into bed for a few self-pitying hours of celebrity gossip and sleep, when she remembered Banana Woman, pivoting above her with arrogant disdain. As she spun, Banana Woman had probably been assuming Illy was only posing as an author, and in reality spent her days analyzing the names movie stars chose for their babies. Illy refused to live up to her own predictability. She sat up straighter and looked at the African Violet, her doting Elm, and dear old Fern for moral support. It was a little unfortunate that her fan club members were also all members of the plant family, but she knew June and her mother would join if called upon. And she knew they would all say the same thing: Stop feeling sorry for yourself, make some real coffee, and start writing. Her mother and Violet would also have something to say about watering her plants, but Illy had plenty of valid excuses in response to that suggestion.

Illy dumped the rest of the chai in the sink, turned on the coffee pot, and grabbed a handful of chocolate chips from a bag lying on the counter. This was no longer about being sophisticated. This was about a one week deadline and a very blank page in the typewriter. By the time she sat back down at her desk and nodded with gratitude at the Plant Team, she had had an epiphany, or at least a profound jolt from the caffeine and sugar. From now on, other people's lives would not be fodder for Envy Dreams. They would leap right over her self-pity onto the page, providing her with a constant source of literary inspiration. Contestant number one in her post-epiphany resolution was Mocha Man.

Illy began typing. The clicking of the typewriter sounded professional and productive. *Dylan opened the door-* Dylan was the perfect name because although it had been trendy in the mid-90's, it was practically retro now and sounded so passionate- *and walked toward the girl at the desk. He was carrying two cups of steaming mochas and a single yellow rose.* The rose idea had appeared out of nowhere and Illy knew it was fabulous. It implied so much: that Dylan had planned enough ahead to stop at a flower shop, that he thought of the girl as more than just a friend, and that he wasn't too cheesy. A red rose would definitely have been cheesy, but yellow was charming and

authentic. Illy took a deep breath and looked out the window, squirming in her chair with the energy of it all. Being a writer was so rewarding. She knew that with a character like Dylan leading the way, her novel would unfold with poetic grace. Illy couldn't wait to meet with her publisher.

CHAPTER SEVEN

An hour later, Illy was lying under an afghan on the couch, staring at mysterious grey stains on the ceiling. She had rewritten the Mocha Man paragraph four times and had finally achieved the perfect balance between small realistic details and an emotional pull that would touch the reader. She wished someone could read the paragraph right now in all its newborn energy. Some writers never shared anything until it was finished and edited to death, but Illy loved constant input. She called it Process Feedback, and she thought it was a key element in writing. With Process Feedback, writing became a communal activity, which Illy knew was important in the postmodern era. The image of writers as isolated hermits was so outdated, and the new generation of writers- she loved that phrase, *the new generation of writers*- was more of a community.

She really needed someone to read this paragraph. Her mother was probably home, but Illy didn't think her mother would appreciate the romance of it all. She was pure pragmatism and didn't understand the value of writing a novel in the first place. She was trying to convince Illy to write a recipe book instead, which Illy thought was the most embarrassing type of writing ever. One of her cousins had written a recipe book a few years ago called *Farm Feasts with Fanny*. Her cousin's name wasn't even Fanny- it was Caroline- but she thought the title was too catchy to pass up. Illy felt so sorry for Caroline that she'd bought a copy of the book, but she worried that if too many relatives bought the book out of pity, Caroline might actually think the book had been a good idea. Illy's mother, of course, thought it was brilliant and kept it propped up on her kitchen counter, hoping that Illy would eventually follow in Caroline's illustrious footsteps. Obviously a woman who thought *Farm Feasts with Fanny* was a clever title would never appreciate the genius of a literary creation like Dylan.

June was usually willing to read Illy's work and give appropriate compliments, but she was out of town this weekend, visiting her boyfriend's parents for the first time. Illy thought it was exceedingly brave to spend a whole weekend at their house when she'd only been dating this guy for a few weeks. But June had been sure that they'd hit it off immediately, and her only concern was whether she should hug them when introducing herself or just shake their hands and then hug them when she said goodbye. Illy tried to convince her that not everyone's parents were as warm and huggy as June's, but June just laughed and rolled her eyes, accusing Illy of being cynical. Illy couldn't wait to hear about the weekend and hoped June's new relationship was still intact by the end of it.

Illy couldn't think of anyone else to go to for Process Feedback. How was she supposed to move forward in her writing if she had no sense of the quality of her work so far? She was just about to call her mother when there was a knock on her door. She jumped off the couch and glanced at her reflection in the window. Her purple scarf had slid back on her head kerchief-style and made her look like she'd been out milking the cows. She snatched it off her head, tousled her hair in a desperate attempt at artistic disheveledness, and ran to the door. Maybe Mocha Man had just discovered his girlfriend was a lesbian and was looking for some sympathy. Illy smiled, leaned casually against the wall, and opened the door.

"Mother?" Illy's smile disappeared as her mother strode by her into the apartment, a crumpled sheet of paper and a mutated mop in hand.

"Hi, dear. I thought I'd stop by for a moment on my way to the gym. Did you just roll out of bed?" She was staring at Illy's hair. Illy's mother went to the gym every morning of her life. She'd always been freakishly disciplined and had even run in the half marathon the month after Illy was born. Illy felt insulted every time her mother mentioned the gym, as though Illy's own lack of exercise discipline somehow made her less of an adult. She reassured herself with the fact that she would join a gym when she turned thirty. It seemed like a reasonable plan. Though she had also promised herself to start a daily yoga practice when she turned twenty, and two years into the decade, she was still unclear on what exactly constituted a yoga practice. Would her morning arm circles, for example, count as yoga if she did them with calm, focused breathing? What about the time sitting in the circle at the belly

dancing class? Maybe she had more of a yoga practice than she realized. She pressed back her shoulders with a new strength and serenity. She might not even need the gym in her thirties if yoga was this natural and beneficial.

Illy's mother thrust the mop contraption at Illy as she walked into the living room, scanning the horizontal surfaces for dust and clutter. Illy's shoulders drooped a little as a familiar presence formed at the base of her neck. For someone who put almost no value on tidiness, she managed to harbour a surprising number of housekeeping insecurities, eager to rally at the sound of her mother's voice. She ignored the accusing throng. "What's this? It looks like a mudflap on a hockey stick."

"Oh, it's the latest cleaning gadget. Supposed to pick up dirt and bacteria without even using water. I thought maybe you'd like it."

"Why don't you like it?" Illy still couldn't figure out which part of it actually cleaned.

"Too fancy. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't get on my hands and knees to scrub the floors every week. Wouldn't feel right somehow." Illy's mother was also addicted to housework. "Anyway, I thought you might be interested in this." Her mother was examining Fern while holding out the crumpled sheet of paper in Illy's direction. "Have you been misting your plants regularly? This one looks a little wilty."

Illy, who had been meaning to ask her mother about Fern's wiltiness for weeks, was offended that her mother had brought it up first. "I don't need your plant counsel, Mother, we're doing just fine on our own." Illy winced. Why did she always do that? Now she'd never know what she was doing wrong. She grabbed the paper.

"Cell Phone Sales Technician? What is this?"

"A great job opportunity. It was posted on one of those little shiny kiosks in the mall and I thought it would be perfect for you." Illy's mother was filling up a spray bottle at the kitchen sink while she talked. Illy pretended not to notice.

"You thought that sitting in a metal box in the mall selling phones would be perfect for me? Are you angry at me about something?"

"Oh Ilia, don't be so dramatic. I just thought it would be convenient and easy and, well, you do need a job." She began misting Fern. Illy thought she saw Fern's leaves turn a shade brighter in instant gratitude. How did her mother do that?

"I do not need a job." Illy ignored her own unconvincing tone. Truthfully, she did need a job, or at least would need one soon, but was determined to first give her Five Year Dream Plan a legitimate chance. When June and Illy had graduated from high school they had taken a celebratory road trip to New York City. Well, the plan had been New York City, but the station wagon June had borrowed from an Uncle had broken down in Akron, Ohio, so they'd considered that the hand of destiny and spent the week watching their favourite musicals in an Akron motel room and planning their futures.

June's future involved a lot of European destinations and PhD dissertations. Illy's, on the other hand, really only involved one thing: Writing. She was determined to be an author and wanted any of her jobs or studies to contribute as directly as possible to that goal. The Five Year Dream Plan, written in scratchy blue ball point on Super 8 Letterhead, that she tucked into the glove compartment in Akron and that was now taped to the door of her refrigerator looked like this:

*Year One (Age 19): Take creative writing classes at community college.
Work part time at public library*

Year Two (Age 20): Work full time at public library. Take at least one on-line writing course from big New York Writing Institute (Try to go to New York to meet with instructors. And see Les Miserables on Broadway). (Establish Daily Yoga Practice).

Year Three (Age 21): Back to part time at library. Begin submitting articles and stories to (paying) newspapers, contests, and literary journals

Year Four (Age 22): Have enough money from library and literary prizes/publications to write full time. Write first novel.

Year Five (Age 23): Publish first novel. (first need an agent?). Begin second novel. Make guest appearances at Public Library. (Maybe start teaching yoga in the evenings?). Enter romantic relationship if suitable partner appears (must support life as author).

End of Year Five: Road trip with June to celebrate Five Years! (NYC? Baja?)
Write new Five Year Dream Plan

The plan had gone smoothly for the first two years. She'd taken classes at a community college and worked at the local library for two years. Granted, her work there mostly involved shelving books and wiping up juice spills after the Toddler Story time, so it was hard to see how the job directly contributed to her development as an author, but at least it helped her pay her rent. She hadn't found time to take the online course or go to New York or start a yoga practice, but she did watch the movie version of *Les Misérables* a number of times, and really those were all secondary to the overarching goal of writing.

It was around year three that her Dream Plan started to veer alarmingly off the tracks. She hadn't yet submitted any piece of writing to any contests or newspapers, and so by the time she'd quit her job at the library this year to jump back into the plan at Year Four, she really only had enough money saved for three months rent. Her mother appeared to have intuitive access to her dwindling bank account.

Illy mustered more conviction than her bank statements warranted as she continued, "I've saved up plenty of money from my job at the library and now I'm a writer, remember? I work every day. And so even if I don't get a pay cheque each week, there will be plenty of payoff in the end. An end which may be in the very near future, I may add." She paused here for dramatic effect and retied the scarf on her head. "I have a publisher."

Her mother looked up from her misting, eyebrows raised. "Really? A publisher who has agreed to publish your book?"

The impressed tone in her mother's voice revitalized Illy's earlier Audrey Hepburn confidence. She smiled, flopped with great elegance on the couch and stretched her arms above her head as though talking about her publisher was getting so old and obvious. "Yes, Mother darling, They want me to bring the first installment by the end of this week." Yawn.

"Are you feeling okay, Ilia? You look awfully tired." Her mother had proceeded to the African Violet and was rubbing its leaves between her fingers. Illy thought her mother should be some sort of homeopathic plant doctor.

"No, no, I'm feeling great. Just bored with all this sitting around. I really should be writing, you know." Illy honestly couldn't tell if she was trying to give a false but impressive impression or if this was the authentic new her. Her fingers really did feel charged with electric writing energy and she was eager to get back to her typewriter. Her Life as an Author Vision was becoming a reality. Illy wondered if she could tell her mother that this was the first time ever she wasn't just pretending to be a writer, but decided her mother would be distracted from the significance of the moment by the revelation of so much dishonesty.

"Well, don't let me stop you. I wouldn't want you to fall behind on your deadline. Any idea when the book might be finished?" Illy's mother set the spray bottle down on the coffee table, which Illy had to admit would be a helpful reminder. For how much expertise her mother possessed on nearly every topic, she really was pretty good at doling it out with subtlety. Illy smiled with gratitude. Now that she was a nearly-published author, she felt freed from years of defensiveness.

"Oh I don't know. It's really just flowing right now, so I'm thinking with a good stretch of uninterrupted writing it should be done in a couple months." That seemed pretty realistic, considering how quickly she'd been able to develop Dylan's character. From here the story would take off on its own.

"Good for you, honey. Well, keep the cell phone ad just in case. And don't forget to mist!" Illy's mother blew her a kiss, then made spray bottle motions as she walked out the door. Illy was still stretched out on the couch, her hands behind her head, smiling. She'd just had a conversation with her mother about writing without the subjects of cookbooks coming up, and she had a dreamy man waiting for her in her novel. Maybe she could add in a short mature kissing scene with the mochas.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Oh, Illy, it was terrible. I swear it was the most awkward moment of my life," June moaned and stuffed another donut hole into her mouth. She and Illy were sitting on their favourite bench at a park near the community college, a cardboard box of donut holes wedged between them. The bench itself was grimy and uncomfortable, but it faced an old-fashioned lamp post that looked like it had emigrated from the streets of Paris and was now deeply regretting the decision, so they sat on it as often as possible. During less emotionally desperate bench meetings, they tried to speak French.

"More awkward than last week's pap smear with the sexy doctor from your bus stop?" Illy always felt guilty for how much she enjoyed hearing about June's life disasters. Not only did it make her feel better about her own embarrassing encounters, it also always meant another box of honey-dipped donut holes, one of life's most effective emotional supports.

"Yes, a million times more, seriously. We walk in the door and there are Steve's parents, standing like they're about to salute us or something, and Steve introduces us so of course I try to hug his mom." Illy winced. She had tried to warn June. "So I'm leaning towards her, arms out in a warm, friendly, hugging position, and she actually takes a step back and grimaces. Like she's being smothered by some grotesque Blobman or something. Oh my word, I can't even think about it." June flopped her head into her hands and rocked back and forth. Illy was almost worried. This was a bad one.

"So then," June looked up and reached for another donut hole, "there I am, frozen, the hugging Blobman from hell, and I don't know what to do with my arms, so I-"

"Oh no, you didn't..."

June looked at Illy, clenched her eyes shut, and nodded.

"You hugged his dad?" There weren't enough donut holes in the world.

"I hugged his dad. What else could I do? At least he didn't back away. He just sort of stood there, statue-like and patted my arm. What are these people-druids or something?"

"I think you mean droids."

"Whatever, they're not human. And Steve, bless his soul, didn't know what to do, so he thought he'd make me feel less awkward by hugging his mom, so there we all were, hugging and awkward and druid-like. I swear I'll never be able to face them again. I'm hoping Steve and I can elope and live in Morocco for the rest of our lives."

Illy nodded. "I'll visit."

"Let's talk about something else please. How's your novel coming? Have you met any cool hippies to use for character inspiration?" She said inspiration with a French accent. June found immense satisfaction in words that were the same in French and English. They provided the critical mass of her French vocabulary.

"Well, one. And I didn't actually meet him. And I don't think he's a hippy. But he was perfect, I promise, and has totally given the story the boost it needed." Illy told June about Mocha Man Dylan and the great scene she'd written about him. June munched on donut holes and hmm-hmmmed at all the right moments. Illy made a mental note to include June in her acknowledgments.

"Sounds great, Illy. I'm so proud of you and can't wait to read it some time. But now I've gotta run. Class starts in twenty minutes. Junior Instructors aren't given the privilege of breezing in late with the air of genius." June leaned over and gave Illy a quick hug, then grabbed one last donut hole as she walked away. "Thanks for listening."

"You too," Illy called after her, "Keep me posted on the elopement." She smiled. June made life so enjoyable.

As Illy walked back to her apartment, she tried to shift back into writer mode.

A grey-haired man was walking ahead of her in a sports jacket and jeans. He had headphones in his ears and seemed to be walking to the beat of his private soundtrack, looking to the side every few steps as though posing for some invisible camera. Illy tried to describe him. The word *strutting* came to mind, but seemed contrived. *Sauntering*? No, the connotations were too rebellious. There really wasn't much you could do with middle-aged men in sports jackets. She looked for someone else.

A teenage girl, in bold defiance of the snow still clinging to the curb, rode by on an old bike with an orange plastic basket attached to the handlebars. Now there was a perfect character for a novel. *Willow pedaled by, the wind blowing gently through her long blond hair like the streamers flowing from her antique bike. She was a child of yesterday, riding into tomorrow.* Wow. That description seemed to arrive straight from the literary heavens. Maybe Willow was meant to be a character in her novel. Illy waited a moment to see if the girl's bike would slip on the slush and leave her injured on the pavement, in need of Illy's help and, eventually, friendship- a sure sign of their shared destiny. But the girl disappeared around the corner, and Illy decided the effortless description was simply another affirmation of her development as a writer. Torturous descriptions were a thing of her past.

A couple walking across the street caught her attention. Illy was pretty sure they were the people who had just moved in to the suite next door to her. She'd only seen them twice before, and they were the weirdest people she'd ever seen. Both of them had blue-black hair and thick black-rimmed classes and looked like they were part of some underground Goth society from the late nineties. Or a theatre troupe involving lots of nudity and black lights. Illy was always scared she might run into them in the hallway. What do you say to people with matching black hair? It seemed so creepy to her. She slowed down a bit so that she could observe them without being noticed.

They seemed relatively normal when they were out on the street- holding hands, laughing, carrying a Safeway bag. Illy knew there weren't groceries in the bag, though. It was probably filled with drugs or spiky dog collars and their whole happy couple act was a cover. She considered calling the landlord as soon as she got home, just to give him a heads up on their strange activities.

The couple turned down the sidewalk to Illy's building. She walked as slowly as possible to avoid any awkward interaction, but the guy seemed to be having trouble with the lock and was taking an unusually long time at the front door. They were still standing on the front step when Illy reached the front of the building, so she had to keep walking. The girl turned to look at her and almost caught Illy watching them, but Illy pretended to be admiring the ivy on the side of the building, yawned and kept walking. The key was to look completely relaxed and avoid any potentially agitating movements. Illy continued to saunter- it really was the only word, she realized, even without the rebellion- down the street, forcing herself to go all the way to the end of the block before turning around.

When Illy finally reached the end of the block, she turned back and was annoyed to see that they were still standing outside the apartment building. Now what was she supposed to do? She couldn't wander the neighbourhood all day- she had writing to do. But if she walked back and they were still outside, they'd become suspicious.

Illy reached down to pick up a gum wrapper that was blowing by and stuffed it into her pocket. Ever since her encounter with Crazy Killer Man she'd felt a moral obligation to pick up litter. Somehow it redeemed her embarrassing actions.

After a few minutes of scanning the street corner for imaginary pieces of garbage, Illy decided she was being ridiculous. She was an adult woman and could enter her own building with confidence. It wasn't Goth Couple's business if she wanted to stroll down the block first to check on the neighbourhood's litter status. If they tried to harass her about it, she could just dash into her apartment- she had done it in less than eight seconds when that psychotic Girl Scout had tried to sell her suspicious-looking cookies. Illy picked up one last cigarette butt from the grass and tossed it onto the street where at least it wasn't defiling green space, and stood up straight, proud of her decision to act with dignity.

The woman strode down the sidewalk, exuding confidence and an impressive aura of honour. Maybe she could use this type of experience as the turning point in her main character's life- the moment when she decides to transform fearful situations into auspicious opportunities for courage and growth.

Although the antagonists would have to be more interesting than two postmodern actors. Maybe they could be bank robbers who had been on the run for months, hiding out in the unassuming apartment block. And although they were always loitering in front of the building smoking- no, shooting up heroin- and cracking their knuckles, her character would decide enough was enough and would stride right up them, her hands in fists, and-

"Hi. Is everything alright?"

Illy was face to face with Goth Boy, her hands clenched at her chest like a frightened boxer. He stared at her through his thick black frames with a mixture of concern and amusement.

Illy stared back.

CHAPTER NINE

"Are you okay?" Goth Boy asked again. Illy noticed that his eyes were so grey they looked almost purple, like the chalky skin of plums. Something like recognition or affection slipped past her defenses, but was immediately bowled over by the immediate need to avoid embarrassment. And danger.

"Sorry." Illy lowered her hands. "I just saw that you were hesitating at the door and thought maybe someone inside was scaring you or something, like maybe the Crazy Killer Man from upstairs, and well...I was just backing you up." She paused, then added with a shrug, "I know a little kickboxing." Even while she was saying the words, Illy knew this was rapidly becoming one of her most embarrassing first impressions. June had been reprimanding her for years for making completely false claims about herself that she then was obligated to sustain for entire relationships. June insisted it was deceitful and unethical on top of stressful, but Illy maintained that she wasn't morally responsible for things said under social duress. The kickboxing claim would be a tricky one though.

"Thanks. We're fine. I've just managed to get my key stuck in the lock, so we're waiting for the landlord."

"Would you like a banana?" Goth Girl reached into the Safeway bag and smiled at Illy with a surprising level of sincerity for someone wearing an old Morrissey shirt and combat boots. Illy considered accepting the banana, but then remembered who she was dealing with. She couldn't let her guard down.

"No thanks, bananas sort of make me sluggish, affect my agility you know." Illy cringed. She really needed to move past the kickboxing references.

By this point, the Goth Couple seemed wary of her, shaking her conviction that she was a woman of dignity and honour. They had sat down on the step

to eat their bananas and were looking blankly down the road, willing the landlord to appear. Illy couldn't help thinking they looked sort of cute sitting there with their bananas and matching hair. Maybe she really could use them as characters in her novel. They were probably just the sort of liberal activists she was looking for, she just hadn't considered them before because they weren't wearing gauzy skirts or Birkenstocks. But this was probably the new look of cutting edge, downtown hippies. She took a deep breath, inhaling the potential of this literary moment. It was crucial that she made the most of her time; the landlord might show up any second and her character research would be over.

Illy was afraid that sitting beside the couple on the step might make them uncomfortable, so she crouched down and leaned against the door, trying to look nonchalant and praying that the jammed lock would prevent anyone from pushing the door open from the inside. It always amazed her that other people seemed to move through the world with such ease, transitioning from one location to another with so little concentration, while she was continually finding herself regretting her choice of position. She tottered against the menacing door for a moment before making an attempt at casual conversation.

"Sorry about the whole boxing thing," she made a few quick jabs in the air. "I didn't mean to freak you out."

The girl looked over with a weak smile. "No problem."

"So I was wondering...um... do you two go to rallies and stuff?" Oh no. That was too forward. She should have first asked about their work or something.

"Rallies? Like car rallies?" The guy tried to suppress a smile. He made knowing eye contact with the girl that nearly shouted *Is this weirdo for real?*

Illy took offense, but didn't want to lose this opportunity. She could always make them mean, awful hippies in the book. "No, like peace rallies. Or rallies for whales or hummingbirds or whatever. You know, just regular old rallies."

"Nope, sorry. Can't say that we-"

The girl interrupted, "Not that we don't like hummingbirds or anything. We're just pretty busy with work and grad school."

"Oh yeah? What kind of work do you do?" Illy crossed her metaphoric fingers, hoping for something involving organic grains or folk festivals.

"I'm in digital marketing. Mostly contract work right now, you know how it is these days."

Illy had absolutely no idea how it was these days. She didn't even know what digital marketing was, but was pretty sure it didn't involve organic grains. "Yeah, seriously." She nodded with what she hoped appeared to be either sympathy or congratulations, depending on how marketing contract work in super techie world was going.

"What kind of work do you do?"

Illy sighed. This conversation had lost its literary appeal at the word marketing. Now she just wanted the landlord to materialize as soon as possible. "I'm a writer. And I kickbox when I have the time." Shoot. Totally wrong time for a kickboxing reference. Now it sounded like she did it for a career.

"Cool. Simon's a writer too." She nudged Goth Boy, who shrugged and continued eating his banana. "What sort of stuff do you write?"

"Novels mostly." Illy was getting annoyed at the girl's nosiness. She regretted initiating any conversation.

"Hey, Simon just finished this super rad novel about time traveling valkyries. Maybe you two could swap novels, and you know, give each other feedback or something."

Simon looked mildly interested in this prospect. He raised his eyebrows at Illy, inviting her to a secret author alliance.

Illy was horrified. Not only did she have less than four pages of actual text written, there was no way she was going to share it with some creepy science fiction writer. What were valkyries anyway - some sort of bird robots?

"Oh, sorry, no. I mean that sounds great and all, but I don't really like showing my work to anyone while it's in process. You know, the old isolated hermit writer, that's me." She laughed, trying to lighten her rejection.

"Thanks, though. Your book sounds really...cutting edge."

Simon reached for another banana. He didn't seem too disappointed. He probably thought her novel would be boring and shallow. Maybe she should swap novels after all and prove to Mr. Trendy Writer that even though her book wasn't spacey and weird, it was just as thought provoking as his. Probably more. Plus it really would be good to have an actual author look at her work. He'd definitely be more helpful than her mother, who usually just drew smiley faces in the margins.

"Oh good, there's the landlord." The girl stood up, Safeway bag in hand, a helpful reminder that Illy needed to relocate. She scooted away from the door and sat on the step that the girl had just vacated. "Let us know if you change your mind. It could be like an apartment writers club. I'm not much of a writer but if you'd let me join, I could probably piece together a few poems, and who knows? Maybe there are more writers in the building."

The landlord, with the confused blinking stare of someone who has just been woken from a very deep sleep, grunted a greeting, stuck some sort of tool in the lock, and jiggled the door loose in less than five seconds. Illy wondered at the obscure skill set that led you to a career of jiggling doors and fixing leaky radiators. Or diligently not fixing them.

Illy was still sitting on the step after the landlord and Goth Couple entered the building. An Apartment Writers Club. Now that was a great idea.

CHAPTER TEN

It was only as she stood in front of the receptionist's desk, tugging at the purple scarf that she had thrown over her shoulder in a casual, elegant sort of way but that kept sliding down her arm, that Illy realized she didn't know Banana Woman's name.

"Hi. I'm here to speak with... someone." She looked pointedly at the receptionist as though she should know exactly who Illy was talking about. The receptionist didn't look up. In fact it appeared that she exerted a fair bit of energy in ensuring she would never have to meet anyone's pointed looks. Her eyes were securely hidden behind thick glasses and dark bangs that nearly reached her eyelashes. She wore a brown turtleneck with long sleeves that covered half her hands. Illy recognized the desperate and familiar longing for invisibility, though she'd rarely seen such an effective attempt. It really did seem like she had caught the woman in the last few moments before she disappeared altogether.

"Someone," the receptionist repeated, still looking down at her computer keyboard. "Anyone in particular?"

Illy noticed an envelope on the desk addressed to Margaret Martinez and decided to risk it. "Margaret."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to speak with Margaret please."

"That's me." The receptionist looked up for the first time. Even through the blurry lenses Illy could see her eyes were gorgeous- round and dark with eyelids that blinked slowly like a doll that Illy had loved as a little girl.

"Right." Illy pulled up the scarf again. How did so many women manage to

keep their scarves in a permanent casually flung state? She suspected the involvement of safety pins. Illy tried to discreetly tuck the rogue scarf into the back of her skirt to keep it in place. "Well, I can't seem to remember her name, but I was personally invited by a woman who works here. I'm sure I'll think of her name in a second..."

"Can you describe her for me?" Margaret tapped her fingers on the edge of the keyboard in an elaborate pattern, like she was playing Mozart on a miniature piano.

Illy thought for a moment. "She was wearing yellow."

"Yellow?" Margaret repeated, obviously needing more information.

Illy offered the only information she had. "Lycra."

"You'd like to speak to a woman you met who was wearing yellow Lycra." Apparently that wasn't the sort of information Margaret was hoping for. "Maybe you have the wrong office."

"No, no, Hartfield House Publishers, I'm sure. She asked me to come by this week to show her a novel I'm working on. She's a publisher, or editor, or something. I met her at a..." Illy didn't know if it would be unprofessional to disclose where she had met Banana Woman. Perhaps belly dancing was a secret hobby that she indulged in as an escape from her daily persona. "...at a meeting."

"A meeting." Tap, tap, tappety-tap.

Illy was getting tired of Margaret's repeating. It didn't help the conversation progress in any useful direction and left Illy feeling like her answers were inadequate. "Yes, a secret meeting." That should prevent further questions.

"You would like to speak with a woman that you met at a secret meeting wearing yellow Lycra?" Margaret had stopped tapping. Her eyelids closed and opened in slow motion as though she were trying to draw the curtain on this scene that had obviously derailed, and put all the actors out of their misery. She looked apologetic when Illy was still standing there.

Illy was just about to thank Margaret for her time and make a confident but quick exit stage right when she saw someone cross the hall behind Margaret's

desk and enter the bathroom.

"That's her! The woman I'm here to meet. She just went into the bathroom."

Margaret looked skeptical, as if this had been Illy's most ludicrous claim yet.

"She came out of that office there, across from the washroom," Illy offered.

"Louise Topping? You have a meeting with Louise Topping?" Margaret was obviously impressed. Illy wondered if Louise was the president of the whole company. "Why don't you have a seat while we wait until Louise...is available." Margaret gestured to a chair by the front door. Illy really wanted to be situated nearer to the hallway so that Louise would see her when she came out of the bathroom. And she wanted Margaret to notice when Louise recognized her. Illy pulled the chair a few inches away from the wall as she sat down. Still not quite in Louise's line of vision. She coughed a few times as she scooted the chair a little further. Then coughed again for good measure without moving the chair. Margaret didn't seem to notice. She had returned to the task of disappearing.

Illy waited. Louise was taking an embarrassingly long time in the bathroom. Illy decided she must be sick, which might put her in an irritable mood. Maybe she could offer Louise some Tums from her purse, revealing that she was not only observant and caring, but also well-prepared. All these little impressions would really contribute to her desirability as a writer for the publishing house. Illy slid her chair a few more inches towards the hallway, careful not to distract Margaret from her finger tapping. She wondered if Margaret ever did any real typing or mostly passed her time with the imaginary version. It definitely looked more artistic than hitting the actual keys, but presumably less productive.

Finally the bathroom door opened and Banana Woman, now dressed in a very non-fruitlike navy blue, crossed the hallway. She was just about to close her office door behind her when Margaret called out, "Excuse me, Louise? Could you come here for a moment?"

Illy's stomach turned a little when she realized her chair was situated in an unlikely angle in the middle of the room, but decided any sudden repositioning would draw undue attention. She chose to embrace her location with confidence, crossing her legs and tilting her chin up a little. The image

of Julie Andrews clicking her heels and singing “I’ve Got Confidence” came to mind. Illy smiled. This was her moment.

“This woman is here to see you. She says you set up an appointment?”

Louise looked around the empty room before her eyes settled on Illy. “This woman?” She spoke as though Illy couldn’t hear her. Illy pretended that she couldn’t, swung her foot, and kept smiling.

“Yep. Um, excuse me? Louise is here to meet you.” Margaret sounded desperate for the two women to establish their own conversational connection so she could back out of the uncomfortable situation.

Illy looked up at Louise with a little too much surprise as though she was emerging from a deep and consuming daydream, then tried to stand up to shake her hand. She felt like someone was tugging at her back, so she sat down and then tried again more quickly. The chair hopped behind her. Louise hadn’t moved. She watched Illy with uncaring solemnity as Illy twisted around to find her scarf snagged on the corner of the chair. “Excuse me, sorry,” she continued smiling at Louise as she tugged at the scarf, which ripped a little but came loose. She winced. It was her best scarf.

Illy reached out to shake Louise’s hand, proud that she’d navigated that slight hiccup with graceful composure. “So nice to see you again, Louise.”

“Sorry, have we met?” Louise held Illy’s hand between her thumb and pointer like a soggy dishtowel.

“Yes, just last week, you know at...” Illy glanced over at Margaret who was scraping a pencil under her fingernails, and leaned toward Louise’s ear. “At the class.” She wiggled her hips just a little, a sort of secret sign between belly dancing conspirators.

“Oh, dance class. Right. You’re the one who had some sort of attack, aren’t you.” Recognition dawned on Louise’s face. Illy had been hoping to be remembered as the promising and charming young novelist, but figured emergency medical victim was better than nothing. She nodded.

“Why don’t you come have a seat...”

“Ilia. My name is Ilia.”

Louise ignored this introduction as she led Illy into her office and sat down behind a large black desk, glossy and bare apart from a carefully aligned silver ballpoint pen. Illy was distracted for a moment by the desk's vast emptiness. Where was the woman's computer? Paperwork? She blinked and looked away from the shiny surface as though it might be a trap to distract unsuspecting young writers. She would not be distracted. This was her momentous chance to pass on the vision of her novel and secure her place in the publishing world. She felt her leg start to bounce like it used to when she played piano in her elementary music concerts. This was a bad sign. Once her leg started bouncing the only way to stop it was to jam her foot under the piano pedal. She tried stepping on the pulsating foot with her other foot but that just got them both going. She laid her purse across her lap in an attempt to hide the unruly leg, and began her speech.

"Thanks so much for seeing me. I'm so honoured that you've agreed to look at my novel and I'm sure that once you catch the vision I have for it, you'll agree that it will be a great fit with Hartfield House Publishing." Illy's leg was still bouncing, but she plowed ahead. She had practiced this speech for an hour in front of the mirror and wasn't going to abandon it now. "You see, the story is about the struggle of modern women to define their identity in a world-

"Excuse me?" Louise interrupted. "There must be some miscommunication here. You say I agreed to look at your novel?" Louise picked up the silver pen and squinted at Illy as though through the scope of a long range rifle.

"Yes, yes you did, or at least when I mentioned my novel you were very encouraging and said I should bring it by this week." This was not going as planned. She considered trying to restart her speech, but before she could begin, Louise snickered like a bully who has just found her favourite victim alone in the school yard. Louise was turning out to be a villain. The Publisher of Doom.

"I'm so sorry...Lydia, You clearly misunderstood my intentions in that conversation. You see..." She cracked her knuckles. It was so cliché, Illy wondered if she was *trying* to be a comic book villain. "You see, I'm the Executive Editor here at Hartfield, an imprint of a very large publishing corporation. " She raised her eyebrows and nodded, urging Illy to respond

with awe or applause. Illy just waited. "The manuscripts I consider are by well established authors in the publishing world. This one, for example," she slid open a desk drawer and lifted out the top file folder, as though presenting evidence in a crime case. "This one is by Earl Peterson, the winner of two National Book Awards. And this one," Louise didn't even look down as she pulled the next file from the drawer. Illy suspected this was a routine she had executed many times. "is by Jane Lowden. I'm sure you've read her work, or Michael Gorn, you know, the Booker a few years ago?" Louise was piling files onto the desk at a frenzied pace. "And this is a very impressive new work by the best selling—"

"Okay, okay, yes, I've heard of them. So, you're saying you won't look at my book." Illy glared through her own rifle scope.

"I'm sure you understand that with so many prestigious authors needing my time, I can't skim through every local wannabe writer's scribblings. There's a ladder that you need to climb, and well, you'll need to climb pretty high to reach me." Snicker. Smirk. Louise was clearly proud of her rejection routine.

"Well, then," Illy smiled her best plastic smile. "Thank you for your time... Lenore" She stood up, remembering to hold her scarf in place over her shoulder, clutched her purse to her chest and walked out the door. She strode straight into the bathroom where she locked herself in the last stall, and burst into tears.

How could one woman be so cruel? Illy yanked at the toilet paper and wiped her runny nose, not even bothering to tear the toilet paper from the roll. She leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor. This had been her one chance to talk to a real life publisher and the woman wouldn't even let her finish her sentence. Illy imagined a comic strip about the Publisher of Doom. The villain was shaped like a banana. *Banana of Doom*. A giggle bubbled through the snot running down Illy's face before becoming another sob. She pulled more toilet paper.

The bathroom door creaked as it swung open. Oh no. Louise had concocted more brilliant insults and was going to stand outside the stall, zinging them at Illy and cracking her knuckles. Or maybe she'd found more famous people files to slide under the stall door.

Illy unfolded herself from the floor and sat on the toilet seat. The old pretend-you're-going-to-the-bathroom-for-so-long-that-the-person-leaves-in-embarrassment-trick. Illy was all too familiar with it.

Whoever had entered the bathroom wasn't saying anything and wasn't going into a stall. The bathroom was dead silent. Illy sniffled a little and pulled at the toilet paper, trying to fill the silence with some natural bathroom sounds by crumpling it in her hand.

"Um, hello?" The voice sounded like Margaret. "I don't even know your name, but...woman with the scarf, I sort of heard what happened in Louise's office, and I'm sorry." Her voice dropped to a whisper. Illy pulled more toilet paper. "She can be so awful. I should've warned you." The faucet started running. Margaret had her own repertoire of noise-making techniques. "Are you going to be okay?"

Illy paused for a moment, decided she couldn't hide on the toilet forever, and stood up, flushing the toilet to maintain the dignity of her charade. She opened the stall door, still holding the giant mass of soggy toilet paper. Margaret was leaning against the sink, chewing a hangnail. She was taller than Illy had expected, and now that she wasn't behind the desk, no longer looked in danger of disappearing. Against the pale yellow bathroom tile, her various shades of brown looked solid, earthy. She looked up at Illy with her huge eyes, still blurry behind her glasses, and a sympathetic smile, "Really she's a witch."

"I was thinking evil villain was more appropriate." Illy remembered to tear the toilet paper from the roll before dumping the wad in the trash can by the toilet. She walked to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. "It was a disaster. I can't imagine how it could have been any worse." Another residual sob escaped. She splashed more water.

"Um, I'm on lunch break now." Margaret was still concentrating on her hangnail, allowing Illy her own private recovery ritual. Illy pressed wet paper towels to both her eyes. "There's a great little falafel place down the block that's pulled me through my own share of near death Louise encounters. Do you want to join me?"

Illy peeled the paper towels away from her eyes and stared at herself in the

mirror. The front of her blouse was soaked, her face and eyes were a puffy, blotchy pink, and her once favourite scarf trailed dejectedly behind her on the bathroom linoleum. She definitely needed falafel.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"So, how can you handle working in the same office as that woman all day?" Illy took a bite of her overstuffed pita, cool slimy tzatziki sauce sliding down her hand. That was the great thing about Greek food- it was such a full sensory experience. She inhaled the aroma of garlic and parsley. Heavenly.

"I don't know, I guess it's the hope that it's temporary. That some day I'll have put in my time and the fates will reward me with a job in editing." Margaret popped a stray olive in her mouth. "And I eat lots of chocolate."

Illy hadn't imagined Margaret with any ambitions beyond receptionist. Somehow she'd pictured her at her desk, perfecting imaginary sonatas and avoiding unnecessary eye contact for the rest of her life. Illy was annoyed with her unwitting but unfailing judgmentalism. "You want a job in editing? Like proofreading for grammar or running a publishing house?" Illy was still a little unclear on the job title lingo in the publishing world. And the marketing world. She wondered if she'd missed some essential career counseling course in high school.

"Either." Margaret's eyes widened for a second, like Illy had just asked her about a secret she'd been dying to tell. Her eyelashes reached above the thick frames of her glasses. "I love all of it really- reading a new work, analyzing its overall patterns, discovering its soul. And also weeding through the syntax, yanking out the comma splices, all of it." Margaret paused to bite into her pita.

"You love fixing comma splices?" Illy had a vague recollection of hearing the term. She decided to feign understanding for now and Google it later.

Margaret nodded, tzatziki sauce pooled in the corners of her mouth. She bounced her head back and forth, trying to chew as quickly as possible. "It's

all connected. A few unconscious comma splices, an incorrect modifier, and the whole thing- the magic castle the author was so carefully building- shatters. The soul of a book is a fragile thing, totally at the mercy of unforgiving syntax." She was still chewing.

Illy couldn't help smiling at Margaret's excitement. She loved it when people were passionate about unusual things, although comma passion was a new one for her.

Margaret had abandoned her pita on her plate, freeing her fingers to return to what seemed their natural state, fluttering over invisible piano keys, this time in the air and punctuated by flying bits of onion. She was unconcerned about the onion. "You know how sometimes you read a book that seems on one level to be well written and interesting, but really you have to force yourself to get to the end of the chapter before you put it down and watch TV or something?" Illy wished she could hear the music Margaret's fingers were playing, the silent soundtrack to her speech. "It could be something as unassuming as the wrong typeface." Illy's eyebrows went up. "Seriously, typeface affects your reading experience more than you've ever imagined. Or it could just be an unrefined sense of commas, dashes, anything really. But then sometimes-" Her fingers froze for a moment mid-air. She licked a drip of tzatziki from her fingernail. "Sometimes you read a book that moves into your skin and settles in like a childhood memory. You don't even care that much about the plot, you just want to keep reading forever because the act of reading is so stinking enjoyable. That book had an editor who knows comma splices and typeface. That's the editor I want to be." Margaret collapsed back in the red vinyl booth, grinning.

Illy was grinning too. Margaret's enthusiasm was infectious. At the moment she couldn't imagine anything more fulfilling than a career choosing typeface and fixing punctuation errors. She and Margaret reached for their pitas simultaneously and took giant bites, eyes smiling, onions dropping in soggy piles on their plates. The alchemy of a great idea and really flavourful food seemed to produce an electric desire to sit in red vinyl booths forever, sharing life with other creative women. Illy sucked up an escaping strip of lettuce.

"What about you? What do you want to do with your life?" Margaret was sopping up the sauce on her plate with a corner of pita.

"I want to write." Illy said it without even thinking. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, though she remembered Louise and the Publishing House Debacle. She realized she hadn't thought of it once since they'd started eating. Maybe there really was something emotionally restorative about falafel, although now she felt the weight of her demoralizing morning settle back on her.

Margaret must have noticed the slump of her shoulders, because she quickly said, "No thinking about Louise allowed. This is a time to think about Greek food and dreams, nothing else. "

"Okay..." Illy took a deep breath to muster the courage of honesty. "Well, it's true. I want to write. It's really all I want to do. The problem is, I rarely do it. I mean, I think about writing a lot. I come up with ideas and cobble together descriptions, but for some reason I almost never really get anything written. It's my grand disappointment with myself." Illy paused and drank some Coke, examining the bumpy brown plastic of her cup. She had never admitted this aloud before and it felt like both a relief and a failure. Margaret waited. "But when I do write, which I do sometimes, it's the best feeling ever. It...well it re-centers me or something, reminds me who I am and makes me enjoy everything else about my life so much more." She glanced up at Margaret, who in a momentous manifestation of kindness, was not rolling her eyes. "Sorry, I know that sounds like I'm trying to be super profound, but I think it's sort of true."

"I believe you. And I get it. You've just described exactly how I feel when I play the mandolin."

"You play the mandolin?" Margaret was turning out to be the most interesting person Illy had ever met. She exerted great effort in suppressing the envy that she felt swimming upward in her chest. Also the accompanying instinct to try to learn the mandolin as soon as possible. She knew emulated coolness never transferred into authentic coolness, but it was so tempting. Maybe she could look into the ukelele.

"Just a little. And just in private. I've been playing the piano since I was four, but two years ago my Grandpa died and I got his old mandolin. I started playing it in a misguided attempt at manufacturing a relationship with him that I never actually had. " Margaret's hands were no longer moving. At the

mention of her Grandfather her body seemed to fold back into itself. She sat still for a moment as though considering a return to Disappearing Mode. Illy thought of a book she'd read in junior high about people who were really shadows, whose edges were blurred. She held her breath, hoping Margaret would choose visibility.

Margaret stared at the hands lying motionless in her lap. "Sometimes days or weeks seep by and I feel shallow and...grey—"

Like the shadow people, thought Illy.

"-but then I'll pick up the mandolin and I remember that I love my life- well, besides my job. But even work is more tolerable when I'm playing the mandolin regularly." Margaret looked up, back safely on the shore of solid presence, and smiled at Illy. "So, anyway, I think I get you. That's writing for you, huh?"

"Yeah, it is." Illy fiddled with her straw and thought of days seeping by, grey and shallow. That was it exactly. "But then why don't I do it more? I know how important it is to me, but somehow I manage to spend whole days flipping through magazines and eating animal crackers instead." Her shoulders drooped again. She'd never before realized the emotional revelations hiding in a pair of shoulders.

"Hmm. That doesn't sound so bad to me." Margaret wiped the drips out of the corners of her mouth.

Illy grinned. "No, sometimes it's pretty great actually... But it's not what I want to be doing. I want to be writing."

"Okay, then it sounds like you need some motivation. Deadlines or something. Or a writers group where you have to show up with something that you've written each week or month or whatever. Do you know of something like that?"

Goth boy. An apartment writers club. "Actually, yeah. Well, no, but sort of. I mean I don't know of any that exist right now but the other day I met some people from my building who talked about starting something just like that." Illy cringed when she thought of how rudely she'd responded to the idea. How in the world would she redeem her image with the Goth People? She'd

have to bring over cookies or something. Although they probably didn't eat sugar or regular flour. She could bring bananas.

"That's perfect! That's exactly what you need." Margaret leaned forward, eyes wide. "Just think, you'd be forced to come up with something each week which would prevent the animal cracker syndrome, plus you might get lots of great feedback and ideas." She took a gulp of her Coke and set it down with so much enthusiasm that it splashed on to the table. She didn't notice. "Did these people seem like people you could really connect with? Are they accomplished writers?"

"Well, they have matching black hair, write about flying robots, and quite likely mastermind a drug smuggling ring under the pretense of bananas. But besides that, I'd say they have potential." Illy and Margaret both burst out laughing. Illy licked the remnants of tzatziki off her fingers and leaned back in the booth, basking in the magic falafel spell.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Something was wrong with Fern. She was lopsided and breaking out in worrisome splotches. Illy was afraid to touch her because little papery brown leaves kept falling to the floor, like Fern was suffering through some terrible plant chemotherapy. Illy felt completely helpless. How did one support a dying plant? She sat on the floor and leaned against the ridges of the radiator, stroking the sides of Fern's pot. There was so much trauma in life already- Illy didn't think it was fair that she had to add plant suffering to the list.

"Come on old girl. You're okay, right? It's springtime. You should be excited and rejuvenated. You should be...procreating." Illy paused. Did plants have an innate need to reproduce in spring? Was Fern needing plant sex? It made sense really. All her friends were out there shooting off their little seeds and receiving them from their virile neighbouring ferns, and here she was, stuck behind the window, lonely and unfulfilled. "Oh no you don't," Illy glared at Fern. "You will not project your needs on to me. I am perfectly happy and fulfilled. You're the one who needs help." More withered leaves fell to the floor. "I'll see what I can do." Illy wasn't looking forward to the prospect of asking the guy at the garden centre for a lonely male fern in need of companionship. Maybe she could send her mother.

Illy's phone rang. She patted the side of Fern's pot in reassurance and reached for her phone.

"Hello?"

"Oh, Illy. Thank goodness. Can I come over?"

Illy couldn't tell if June sounded excited or distraught. "Of course. Come right away."

"Thank you, thank you. I'll be there in five." The call ended. After eleven years, you were allowed to skip the niceties.

Illy wondered what could be going on. June sounded too coherent for a break up, and she was pretty sure it was too early for a proposal. June's job at the community college was unlikely to warrant an emergency visit, it wasn't nearly time for her annual physical, and her dad wasn't due in town until next month. This was clearly not an ordinary June situation. She'd better brew a big pot of coffee.

Illy was pulling out June's favourite ceramic mug- the one Illy had made in her short-lived pottery stage and that no one but June was allowed to see- when there was a knock at her door. She had already half-opened the door when she realized with some confusion that she hadn't buzzed June in through the front door. This was accompanied by the even more disturbing realization that she was still in her bathrobe. It wasn't even the Tibetan bathrobe that she had bought at global hippie store downtown for way too much money in case of a night time fire alarm involving a street gathering of strangers and fire fighters. It was a terrible flowered satin thing that her mother had given her as a hand-me-down years ago. It was so short it barely covered her butt and always gaped way too low in the front. She tried to scoot behind the door as she opened it, peering around in what she hoped was a relaxed and hospitable manner.

It was Dave.

"Hi Ilia. Sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for Nancy, and- are you okay?"

Illy realized she probably hadn't needed to open the door quite so wide, as she was now squished up against the wall, still peering around the edge of the door like some body-less butler from the Adam's Family.

"Yeah, sorry, Dave. You just caught me by surprise and I'm not exactly dressed." Dave's lips pressed together in a remarkably straight line as his eyes widened just a little. Illy couldn't tell if it was an excited or horrified eye-widening, but she was offended either way. "I mean I'm not naked or anything, it's just, my mother is a lot shorter than I am and so-" This was ridiculous. "I haven't seen Nancy, sorry." She started to shut the door.

"Well, thanks anyway. I guess I'll see you at the meeting tonight." Dave

turned towards his apartment.

“Meeting?” Illy forgot her attire and stepped into the doorway. “What meeting?”

Dave turned back, then averted his eyes. It was too late to jump back behind the door. Illy figured she’d let him be the awkward one for a while. She even felt a strange satisfaction in the fact that she hadn’t shaved her legs in a week. This was a freedom she would need to explore at a future date, but for now she was scrambling through the jumbled files in her mind, wondering which one held the forgotten committee that she and Dave were both apparently on.

“The Writers Meeting. I assumed you’d be there since you’re a writer and all.” Dave scratched the strip of exposed skin trying to escape below the jacket of his beige track suit. It was Illy’s turn to avert her eyes. “Actually I thought you had probably initiated it. Didn’t you see the poster by the mailboxes?” He kept scratching. Illy wondered if his hairy belly acted as a comforting replacement in Nancy’s absence.

“No, well, I actually was part of the initial brainstorming process, but I hadn’t realized that a specific time was already set.” Dave was studying the ceiling. Illy was still staring at his belly strip, trying to process this new information. Goth Boy must have been the one who put up the poster. “But, yeah, of course, I’ll be there. See you tonight.” She shut the door before she’d even finished talking.

A Writers Club meeting tonight. It had been a week since Margaret had encouraged Illy to start the club. She’d had the best intentions, of course, but the thought of it triggered such full body flashbacks to junior high birthday party planning that she never made it past the question of who to invite. Now Goth Boy had saved her from that agony. But what in the world was she going to bring to read? Her actual repertoire of written work was instantly exposed for the meagre collection it was.

There was another knock on the door. Illy still had her hand on the doorknob and swung it wide open, assuming Dave was announcing that he had found Nancy. She sort of enjoyed seeing Dave suffer through a bit of embarrassment and didn’t even bother tucking her stubbly legs behind the door.

“June!”

“Illy? Were you just waiting by the door or something? And what are you wearing?”

“It’s a long story. Come in. How’d you get in without buzzing me?”

June was already kicking off her flipflops. She was one of those people who started wearing flipflops after Groundhog Day whether there was still snow on the ground or not. It was part of her life philosophy, along with a refusal to use her car air conditioner after August. June operated on the faith that weather patterns- and the universe in general- would bend to her expectations if she enacted them with confidence. “The guy across the hall let me in. He was standing at the door calling for Nancy. You’ve got the weirdest neighbours.”

“You have no idea. Help yourself to some coffee. I’m going to put some clothes on.” Illy went to her bedroom and threw on the first clothes she saw crumpled on the floor. She did a quick odor check of the t-shirt as she pulled it over her head, then made a commitment to herself to never leave her bedroom in the satin housecoat again. Some things just weren’t worth the risk.

When she got to the kitchen, June had already poured two big mugs of coffee and was sitting at the table, knees pulled to her chest, fingers tapping her shins. Illy noticed that there was even milk in June’s coffee, which she took as a bad sign. June had started drinking her coffee black when she turned eighteen, determined to acquire a taste for what she called “the adult way.” It had something to do with a John Wayne movie she’d seen and Illy thought she was ridiculous, but she let June suffer through it. Illy had started taking triple cream in subconscious compensation.

She sat down at the table, closed her eyes for the first sip of coffee, then set the mug down and leaned back in her chair. “What in the world is going on, June? Is everything okay?”

“Illy,” June took a deep breath. “I’ve found you a man.”

Illy stared at June. She was trying to figure out how this constituted a milk-in-the-coffee situation. “A man? June, I don’t need a man. I’m perfectly

content on my own.” She glanced toward Fern in the living room, wondering if she’d somehow been conspiring with June.

“I know, I know. You’re wonderful and fulfilled and you don’t need a relationship. It’s not that I’ve been putting out ads for you or anything. It’s just that this man has appeared in our lives and destiny does not take well to being ignored.”

Illy rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, Illy. Destiny.”

They drank their coffee in silence. Illy was deciding if she even wanted to continue down this conversational and potentially relational path. The last guy she’d dated had definitely brought more trauma than fulfillment into her life. She’d met him at a friend’s wedding and been swept away by the movie-like romance of it all. He was tall and dark, wearing a gangster style pinstripe suit and had charmed her with his compliments and impressive vocabulary. After a few dates she discovered that he was coming out of a long stretch of drug experimentation and street fights, but he was so sincere in his commitment to change that she’d fallen for him. There was something about the combination of late night philosophical discussions and those droopy green eyes that she just hadn’t been able to resist, despite the warnings from June and her own better judgment. Of course it had ended eventually, after way too much emotional exposure on her part, and she’d been more than happy to remain independent and emotionally stable ever since.

“I don’t think I’m interested, June. Really. I’m loving my life right now. Awkward goodnights and clammy handholding just don’t seem like the better option at this point.” Illy was impressed with herself. There would definitely have been a point a few years ago when she would have jumped at the prospect of a Man of Destiny, but not right now. Not this morning, when sitting here drinking coffee with June and then spending the day writing sounded altogether more appealing.

“But Illy, you have to at least meet him.” June was pulling her curly hair into an elaborate pile on her head. She reached for her coffee spoon and jabbed it into the middle of the pile, creating an effect that would take any normal human two hours and a crate of bobby pins. Illy worked very hard at not

resenting June's relationship with her hair. "He's fun and funny and smart and kind and just came back from a year in Botswana with the Peace Corps, for goodness sake."

"Already suspicious. No one in real life actually works with the Peace Corps. It's altogether too cliché. He probably just got out of prison." Illy poured herself another cup of coffee. For a moment she even considered drinking it black as a sign of her inner strength, but abandoned that idea after the first sip. She could still be strong with lots of milk and sugar.

"You're missing out, I promise. You two could come out with me and Steve. It would be very relaxed and low pressure. He's wonderful," she added in a sing song voice as though trying to convince Illy to take some cough medicine.

"I'll keep it in mind. Today, though, I've got bigger things to worry about. Tonight is the first meeting of an Apartment Writers Club." Illy felt an uncomfortable constriction in her throat. Maybe she was getting strep and should skip the first meeting to avoid infecting her neighbours.

"Wow, that's great! That's exactly what you were hoping for, isn't it?"

Illy nodded and tried to swallow, surprised to feel tears collecting in the corners of her eyes. Sometimes it seemed like her emotions held secret meetings without her, planning embarrassing moments to jump out from behind the furniture and surprise her with her own intense feelings.

"Then what's wrong?" June was confused.

"Well, for one thing, I only found out about it ten minutes ago, so I have no time to mentally prepare. For another, I have no writing to bring. And lastly—" She felt like June, who regularly talked in outline form, but never quite correctly. She'd introduce her three points as 1A, 2A, and 3A, then leave it at that. It cracked Illy up every time and she noticed that she was acquiring the outline habit. "Lastly, I'm scared. What if they think my writing is terrible? What if I have nothing intelligent to say about anyone else's writing? What if they all write sexy grown up postmodern fiction about incest and cigarettes and I bring a piece about elderly women eating yoghurt and discussing cellulite?" Illy groaned. "Also, I think I have strep throat. So I probably shouldn't go."

“Of course you’ll go.” June ignored the strep. She had little patience for Illy’s medical anxieties. “Illy, this is exactly what you want and need to do. You’re a great writer. Who cares what other people write about? Not everyone wants to read about cigarette incest, or whatever. I personally would love to read about women and cellulose. You have to go. It will be so great. Promise.”

Illy wiped her tears with her sleeve. What in the world did people do without a friend like June to keep them going? Of course she was right- it didn’t matter what other people wrote. But that still didn’t change the fact that she had no actual piece of writing to bring. She needed to get to work.

“You need to get to work.” June was beyond observant. “And I need to get to the gym. My body is taking on a disturbingly marshmallow-like consistency. Apparently this is the difference between early twenties and pre-mid-twenties. Why did no one warn me?” June finished her coffee and stood up. “Be sure to get lots of writing done today. I’ll call later to see what you’ve accomplished. And of course I’ll call again even later to hear about the club.” She gave Illy a quick hug and headed to the door. “And don’t forget about Mr. Peace Corps! I’ll pass on his number as soon as you say the word.”

Illy smiled and heard the door shut. It was time to write.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ding. The typewriter arm whirred across the page. Illy unclipped the paper and pulled it out with the flourish of an orchestra conductor. She'd done it. It may have taken four and a half hours, but she had written something that she loved. It was a delicious feeling. She laid the sheet of paper flat on the desk and smiled at it with motherly affection. It really needed a name. More than just a title- a name for this beautiful creation to be known by. The name Albert came to mind. Perfect.

June had always said name choosing wasn't Illy's forte and already felt sorry for her future children. Somehow no one else felt the resonance that Illy felt with each instinctually chosen name. Like her little brown Pinto, Cathy. Or Inspector James, the now deceased goldfish. And June probably wouldn't approve of calling a paragraph Albert, but Illy really had no choice. There was no going back on a name that chose itself.

It was unfortunate that it was only a paragraph. She knew most people would probably bring short stories or plays or the first eight chapters of their sweeping epic of Russian history, but who really wanted to listen to that much writing anyway? Besides, Albert was a good paragraph. And one good paragraph was much better than twenty-three pages of vague cliches. She folded Albert carefully in half, kissed him, and went to pluck the hairs on her chin.



Illy was still feeling elated as she walked down the hall and knocked on the

door of apartment 2B. Albert was tucked in the back pocket of her favourite old jeans, a pencil stuck out from behind her ear in a wonderful balance of prepared yet casual, and her hair looked especially artsy tonight thanks to a lot of mousse and strategic tousling. It was going to be a good night.

Goth Girl opened the door and smiled at Illy. “Oh good, you came! I was hoping you’d show up. I don’t think we ever formally introduced ourselves. I’m Sally.” She reached out to shake Illy’s hand. She seemed to have forgotten about the Kickboxing incident.

“Hi Sally. I’m Ilia.” Illy smiled too. This was going to be the beginning of the new non-judgmental Illy. So what if Sally wore scary black t-shirts and was a digital marketer? She was probably also smart and funny and kind. Illy was open to the possibility of all sorts of new relationships starting this evening and promised herself that she wouldn’t omit anyone from her potential friend list no matter how strange they appeared to be.

“Come on in and get comfortable. There are a few people in the living room already and I’m just getting some drinks together.” Sally disappeared into the kitchen. Illy turned the corner to the living room and paused. The plan was to stroll into the room, sit down by the first person she was drawn to, and proceed to make witty conversation with a newfound kindred spirit. Instead, she stood frozen in the doorway, feeling trapped. None of the people in front of her looked at all like kindred spirits, and they were spread so evenly around the room that it was impossible for Illy to continue the established pattern of personal space. She would have to sit right next to someone, even though so far everyone had instituted a two-empty-chairs radius around themselves. This was such a big commitment. Illy reached down to scratch her ankle, buying a little more time to scout out the situation. She decided on Lesbian Kayaker. She was the only person Illy recognized and had always been friendly when they’d passed in the hall. At least Illy could ask her something about kayaking, though at the moment she was having a hard time coming up with kayak topics... Favourite rivers? Stance on the necessity of life jackets? Hopefully the questions would flow naturally in conversation.

The room was silent as Illy walked towards the bean bag chair to the left of Lesbian Kayaker. Someone coughed. Illy wondered if it was a secret code the rest of them had created to pass judgment on newcomers. One short cough. It

probably meant *Too insecure to be a real writer*. Or *The old pencil behind the ear trick. Tacky*.

Illy pivoted and flopped back into the beanbag chair. Bad decision. There simply was no way of sitting down gracefully on one of those things. Plus the vinyl felt sticky. Illy hoped it wasn't pet pee. Or Coke that someone had just spilled. They were probably getting a paper towel at that very moment and would return to find Illy sprawled in the middle of it. She leaned back and tried to look relaxed, like she always lounged around on sticky mounds of beans.

Thankfully, Lesbian Kayaker turned to her and smiled. "Hi. I'm Zoe. You're in apartment 2A, right?"

Illy craned her neck to look up, trying not to stare at the woman's nostrils. Sitting below other people definitely put you at a social and psychological disadvantage. She determined to never choose a bean bag chair in a social gathering again. How had it taken her so many years to learn these basic life principles?

"Yep, that's me. I'm Ilia. Nice to meet you." She put her hands behind her head to reduce the strain on her neck. "Have you done a lot of writing?" That was one of the introductory questions she had prepared for the evening. Her first attempt sounded natural and appropriate, gracefully saving her from having to dive straight into the life jacket debate.

"No, not much, actually. I like poetry and I write poems sometimes, but I've never shown them to anyone. I'm hoping this club might give me a bit of confidence. How about you?"

Illy paused. She always told people she was a writer and left it at that, sometimes mentioning the novel she was working on. But here she'd have to actually show evidence of her claims and suddenly she wasn't sure what to say. "Ah, writing. Yes, writing is wonderful, isn't it? I love mucking around in all that writing." Oh dear. Had she really just said the word writing three times? And *mucking around*? Next she would be describing the way she slurped at the trough of poetry. She considered leaving the gathering immediately and packing up her apartment before morning. Maybe live in her parents' basement for a few years and order her groceries online to avoid any

chance encounters with Zoe. Or any of the current apartment tenants. Unfortunately this plan would necessitate the impossible task of extracting herself from the beanbag chair. How had the conversation derailed so rapidly?

Luckily a skinny guy with floppy hair and penny loafers sat down beside Zoe at that moment, buying Illy a few moments of unobserved strategizing. As Zoe turned to greet Penny Loafers, Illy retousled the section of hair she'd been pressing flat with her hands. She sat a little straighter so her neck could support her head on its own, relaxed her furrowed eyebrows, and smiled gently and vaguely at the people in the living room, willing back some of the confidence she'd felt earlier in the hallway.

A few more people had entered the room and everyone was making polite small talk over the glasses of wine and mugs of coffee that Sally was passing around. Illy recognized a few faces. Dave was there without Nancy. They must have had a fight. Illy hoped he'd left a window open and that at this very moment Nancy was executing her great escape, squeezing under the window pane and leaping to a nearby branch and relationship freedom. Poor Dave. How would he cope with the loss?

Simon of the Flying Robots had brought in a bowl of olives and was talking to a woman that Illy recognized from the laundry room as The Whistler. The woman was always whistling with an air of innocent cheerfulness while doing malicious things. Illy had seen her pull people's laundry out of the washing machine before the cycle was done and drop the clothes on the floor, all to the tune of "You are my Sunshine". It was quite disturbing. Illy avoided the laundry room whenever she heard the whistling.

Illy heard another knock at the door and a moment later a man she'd never seen before entered the room. Illy knew immediately who he was. Her stomach flipped. Although she'd never seen him, every womanly and writerly instinct told her that this was Dylan, the Mocha Man.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had to be him. He was tall and broad-shouldered and he walked with that slight swagger of a man who knows his place in the world, but maintains an endearing humility. Illy studied her cuticles, waiting to see where he would sit. He didn't seem to know anyone in the room, but didn't spend much time analyzing the personal space layout before walking over to the empty seat beside Dave. Illy was both disappointed and relieved that he hadn't sat by her. She really wanted their first interaction to take place at a horizontally equal level.

The question was why he had come by himself. If he really was Dylan—or rather the Man Who Inspired Dylan—he wasn't from the building and was probably there because of his girlfriend. But where was his girlfriend? He hadn't left an empty seat beside him. They must have recently broken up but his undying commitment to the craft of writing superseded any fleeting romance so he came to the meeting anyway. Illy loved his literary devotion. She could definitely learn from a writer like that. She scanned each of her cuticles one more time then tousled her hair with nonchalance. Finally there was someone here with immense character—and possibly romantic—potential.

Sally handed out a couple more mugs of wine and then sat cross-legged on the floor. Illy loved the quirkiness of wine in coffee mugs. She would definitely try that the next time she had guests, which now that she thought of it, would likely be June or her mother. June would probably appreciate the experiment and tell her honestly if it suited her general vibe. Her mother, on the other hand, only saw wine as a preventative measure against heart disease and gulped it down like cod liver oil. Illy wouldn't waste a bottle of wine on her.

Sally cleared her throat. The room fell silent pretty quickly. No one was that committed to the small talk they were engaging in and turned their attention to her with relief. “Well, welcome to the first ever Harrison Apartment Writers Club. Simon and I,” she nodded towards Simon who was scribbling something on his smartphone. Illy couldn’t believe he had his phone out at a writers club. Some people had no sense of propriety or authentic artistic identity. “-are so glad you’re here. We’re not professional writers or anything, but we do love to write and we thought this would be a great way to get to know our neighbours while developing some of our writing skills.” A few people murmured in agreement. Illy agreed too, but was never much of a murmurer.

“So why don’t we jump right in,” Sally continued. “Hopefully everyone brought something they’ve written recently and we can all just read our stuff and get to know each other’s writing. Then maybe next time we can include more critique. Since we don’t all know each other, please introduce yourself a bit before you read. Anyone want to start?”

Illy braced herself for the inevitable awkward silence. She’d always hated these moments in high school when the teacher asked for volunteers and everyone stared at their desks, frozen, hoping not to be picked. She found herself doing the same thing now, as though Sally’s vision was somehow based on movement and it was crucial to remain absolutely still.

“I can go first.” Illy jumped. There hadn’t even been five seconds of the obligatory silence. She turned to see who had been so eager. It was the skinny floppy haired guy. Mr. Penny Loafers. Illy smiled at him, trying to silently assure him that even though he had been a bit too keen in his volunteering and even though, based on the style of his shoes, he probably had written a bland historical report, he was still in a supportive community and no one would judge him. He caught her eye while she was smiling and winked at her. Oh no. She must have smiled with enthusiasm that surpassed supportive and moved into flirtatious. She reverted to the safer staring-at-the-desk position.

“Hi everyone. I’m Danny.” A few people said, “Hi Danny,” AA meeting style. Danny laughed. “I live up in suite 3C and teach Physics at a high school in the North End of the city. But what I really love is politics, so

you'll notice that most of my writing is political." He flipped the hair out of his eyes and started reading. Illy hadn't been far off in her historical report prediction. Except a political report was even worse. She wondered if this sort of thing even counted as writing for a writers club.

Illy fiddled with the frayed cuff of her jeans while Danny began his report. He was saying something about the new mayor's proposed budget when someone snickered. Illy was horrified. Sure it may be boring and unliterary, but they were all adults. You couldn't just snicker aloud at someone's writing. Danny kept reading in his deadpan voice as though he hadn't noticed, which Illy was grateful for, and then a moment later, Zoe giggled. Illy turned to stare at her but then realized that almost everyone in the room was on the verge of laughter. Dave let out what could only be called a guffaw. Illy looked at Danny to see how he was managing the humiliation. He was still reading—Illy picked up something about taxing the soup kitchens—but by now he too had a huge grin on his face. Then it hit her. His piece was funny. They were supposed to be laughing. By this point everyone was chuckling and when Danny read his last line, the room erupted in applause.

"Brilliant!"

"Our very own Jonathan Swift!"

"That was truly hilarious."

After the initial shock, Illy joined in the applause, and even looked up at Zoe with a forced laugh, "Wow, that was great, hey?"

Zoe nodded and turned back to Danny who was blushing and embarrassed, but obviously quite pleased. Illy couldn't believe she had missed the whole piece. How could she have known that political writing would be so entertaining? She was also jealous. Everyone had loved Danny's writing. If only she had thought to write something humorous. Her apartment block piece seemed so drab and lifeless in comparison. She wondered if she'd be able to add a little impromptu humour while she read it.

"Thanks, Danny, that was great." Sally let out another giggle. "Really funny." Illy was getting annoyed. It couldn't have been that funny. "So who's next?" Sally scanned the room.

“I can go.” It was The Maniacal Whistler.

Sally smiled. “Great. Go for it.”

“Pam. My name’s Pam. I live in 4C and I’m a hospice worker at St. Jude’s. I’ve been writing short pieces on some of our residents’ lives. And deaths.” She paused and chewed her lip. A few people shuffled and reached for coffee mugs. “Sorry if it’s a bit heavy. It’s just one of the ways I try to deal with it all, you know? This one’s about a woman named Helen. She just died last week.”

Illy knew she couldn’t listen. Pam’s introduction had already made her a little teary and there was no way she was going to cry at the first meeting. She tried to distract herself by thinking about Albert and The Man Who Inspired Dylan. Pam was saying something about false teeth and lemon drops. There were a few quiet sounds of laughter. Illy picked at the threads unraveling at the cuff of her jeans and willed Pam to end her piece. It was so personal and was probably making other people uncomfortable. She wondered if it would be rude to get up to go to the bathroom. Maybe a bit of movement in the room would help diffuse the tension.

Pam’s voice was getting shaky. “Her eyelids fluttered for a moment, then closed. I thought of butterflies as her husband George leaned over and kissed her cheek. He paused over her face and inhaled, breathing in the wisps of her life still floating by. I imagined hundreds of tiny white wings flitting in the air around them, rising to the ceiling like upside down confetti. There was so much life in Helen’s death.” Pam closed her eyes. The room was silent. Finally Sally started to clap and soon everyone joined her, the applause growing strong and loud, although not as boisterous as for Danny. Pam smiled, her eyes still closed. Illy watched her and was amazed at the contentment on Pam’s face. How could someone who watched people die for a living look so peaceful? A tear escaped down Illy’s cheek, which she wiped away with her sleeve. She tugged at her eyelashes a little as though there was something in her eye, but realized that no one was watching her. She slumped back in the beanbag chair.

“I’ll go next. Maybe lighten the mood in here a little.” It was Mocha Man. He snickered at his non-joke, but no one else joined him. Somehow Illy didn’t

think people felt the need to lighten the mood. They were still soaking in Pam's butterfly images. Pam even still had her eyes closed, although they snapped open at Mocha Man's snicker. Illy's first instinct was to be annoyed, but she realized he probably felt as awkward as she did and so nodded at him in encouragement. And really, she couldn't wait to hear his writing.

"So it's great to be here everyone." He was speaking much too loudly, as though he was trying to drown out any remnants of Pam's voice still lingering in people's minds. "My name is Jay and I don't actually live in this building. I heard about this club through a friend and it sounded like a good time, so I just showed up." He snickered again. Illy stared at his hair, trying to find the best word to describe its colour. *Umber?* *Ochre?* She really needed to remember these details to use later in her book, though her colour vocabulary was limited.

"I thought for a Writing Club you had to write poems, so I whipped up a little something poetic for all of you." He looked around the group and grinned as though about to do them a huge favour. Illy admired his confidence. And she loved that his poem was written on the back of an old receipt. Very bohemian.

"Her eyes are like the ocean, blue, blue, blue. Her hair is like a wheatfield, blond and blowing too. Her body is like a treasure map," Jay paused and then looked up at Illy. She started at their unexpected eye contact, then quickly looked down at her fingernails. He wasn't talking about her, was he? She felt her neck turn warm and blotchy, her unfortunate and unfailing embarrassment signal system. How could he be so forward in front of all these people? "-that's filled with caves of gold. And her kisses are like a rock concert that never will get old." Jay leaned back in his chair, crumpled up the old receipt and tossed it into the middle of the circle. The room was still as everyone stared at the crumpled piece of paper lying on the hardwood, like it was the final installment in a work of bewildering performance art.

Illy was sweating. She felt like her own destiny was somehow tied up in that grimy piece of paper and she knew she had to do something to end the awkwardness. She inhaled. "Bravo!" There was an unfortunate hint of a British accent in her outburst, which had startled her with its volume, but at least it snapped the room back into action. Sally raised her eyebrows at Illy,

but began clapping. A few others joined in and Dave reached over and patted Jay on the back. The worst was over.

Illy tried to act nonchalant and clasped her hands behind her head, but then noticed major sweat circles under her arms and folded her hands in her lap instead. Her mind was racing. It seemed impossible that Mocha Man would have written a poem about her, and yet he was so direct—so passionate—in his look at her. She tried to remember when it had happened. Was it the part about the hair or the treasure map body? Maybe her hair was similar to the woman's he was describing and so he had looked at it for emphasis. But her hair was dark brown and couldn't really be compared to a wheatfield. Unless maybe the texture was grain-like? Her thoughts were interrupted by Sally.

"Thanks a lot, Jay. You seem to really be in love. And every woman loves to inspire a poem." Her words sounded like she was placing them carefully on the table, one at time, but her smile looked genuine. Jay nodded at Sally, clearly aware of exactly what a woman loves. "Who's next?"

The next half hour was a blur. Illy was vaguely aware of Dave reading a short story about two cats journeying through New York City, and she tried to pay attention to Zoe's poem about rivers, but she had so much to process that she hardly heard a thing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I think I’m in love.”

“What!?” Powdered sugar flew out of June’s mouth as she leaned forward across the Formica table. “With who? I just talked to you yesterday and you weren’t even ready to go out for coffee with Jesse.”

“Who’s Jesse?” Illy rolled a chocolate donut hole in her fingers. She was too nauseous to actually eat anything. Love was a powerful force.

“The Peace Corps guy, but apparently he’s already out of the picture. Who in the world are you in love with?”

“His name is Jay—”

“Like Blue Jay or the letter?” The spelling of names was very important to June. She was always afraid people might imagine her name with two O’s, and in doing so, misjudge her character completely.

“Blue Jay, probably. Well, I don’t know for sure, but who has a name that’s just a letter? Anyway, that’s not the important part. The important part is that I think he loves me too. Or at least is interested.” Illy tapped the donut hole. She hadn’t been in a relationship in a long time and the thought of it was invigorating. It gave her the pain in her fingertips that she got in glass elevators.

“Okay, you’d better start at the beginning. And if you’re not going to eat that donut hole could you please not squish it?”

“Well, yesterday was the Writers Club, as you know, which really is a whole other story, but is this story too. So I was sitting there on a bean bag chair—”

“You should never sit on a beanbag chair with strangers.”

“Thank you, June. I know that now. Could you not have shared that little tidbit of advice earlier in our friendship? Anyway, there I was, trying to figure out what to do with all my limbs, when in walks none other than Mocha Man.” Illy paused for June’s squeal of amazement, but June only furrowed her eyebrows.

“You know, that guy that brought the mochas to my building the other day? The most romantic boyfriend in the world?” How could June have forgotten that monumental event? She was usually so good about those things. June nodded and mumbled something through her donut. She waved for Illy to go on.

“So he walks in and there’s just this electricity. I can feel it immediately. But of course we’re both really casual about it all and he goes to sit across the room and virtually ignores me, which I think shows a lot of maturity and restraint, considering. And then he reads his poem and it’s about a woman that he loves and right in the middle, when he’s describing her body, I think, or maybe her kisses, he looks at me. And I just get it. I can totally feel what he’s trying to say.” June’s face wasn’t moving. “And that’s what happened.” Illy popped the chocolate donut hole in her mouth for effect.

June’s eyebrows were furrowed again. “Um, Illy? I think maybe you need to fill in a few gaps for me here. Like the you loving him part and the him loving you part. I missed those. Also the part where you met.”

“Oh June, I don’t really love him, of course, and it’s all just in the beginning stage, but there’s something about this guy. It’s different. He’s passionate and artsy and smart and casually handsome and I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Was his poem any good?”

Illy paused. She’d been hoping June wouldn’t ask about the poem. “Well, truthfully, no, it wasn’t all that good. It was a little...” She searched for a word that wouldn’t be a betrayal of Jay. She smiled when she thought of his name. Maybe she could call him Blue Jay as a cute nickname sometimes.

“Cheesy? Cliche? Idiotic?”

“No...okay, yes, a little, but he just obviously hasn’t written a lot yet and it had a lot of potential. He used a number of poetic devices and he clearly was working at capturing an overwhelming emotion.”

“My dear Ilia, let me get this straight.” June set down her coffee mug and spoke with careful enunciation, studying Illy’s face for signs of comprehension. “There is a man who has a girlfriend in your building and who writes bad poetry and who looked at you once and whom you think you’re in love with.” She reached for the new donut hole that Illy was tapping. “Forgive me for my pessimism.”

“June, I know it sounds ridiculous but if you’d been there, you’d understand. Please, I need your help. I don’t know what to do next. If he really is my destiny I can’t let him slip by.”

“I thought you were perfectly content without a man.” June was fulfilling her obligation to be responsible and realistic, but Illy wanted her to skip straight to the supportive and wildly optimistic stage.

“I know, I know. Mr. Peace Corps sounds way better on a theoretical level, but sometimes reality is different— better— than theory, you know? Mocha Man Jay may be my soulmate. Please help?” She put on her best pleading pout and nudged the box of donut holes closer to June.

June sighed. “Okay, I will help you formulate a plan, but do not mistake my kindness for enthusiastic support. I’m withholding judgment on this guy until I’ve met him and observed the way he laughs at your jokes. And heard him talk about his grandmother and the ethics of sushi-grade tuna.” June was continually perfecting her Character Indication Topics. She loved to throw her newest C.I.T.s at unsuspecting acquaintances and watch as their true character was supposedly revealed. Illy hadn’t heard the tuna one yet. She wondered if there was a way to warn Jay. But first she’d have to meet him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Illy stared at the typewriter. Tonight was the second meeting of The Harrison Apartment Writers Club and she needed to write something impressive in a very short amount of time. Thanks to June, she had a great outfit to wear, some interesting topics to discuss with Jay and the most decadent Oreo truffles to share. She knew that bringing snacks to parties to attract friends was a pathetic carry-over from elementary school, but she convinced herself that she was now doing it out of a genuine graciousness toward others. And really, who could resist Oreos and cream cheese? The only thing missing in tonight's relational, literary and culinary success was a piece of writing.

She found this second meeting even more intimidating than the first. At least that time she hadn't known what anyone else would write so she just wrote what her muse had provided—this was a phrase she was hoping to incorporate into tonight's discussion—but this time there was so much more at stake. Should she try something funny and political like Danny? Or profound and artsy like the Maniacal Whistler? As she sat with her fingers poised on the keys she felt a pang of longing for her laptop. At least on the laptop she could fiddle with font size and look for inspiring literary quotes to kickstart her writing. The typewriter didn't allow for much fiddling. The last time Illy had tried to adjust the volume of the end-of-row dinger, she'd had to bring it in for repair to some sketchy antique shop downtown and almost hadn't mustered the courage to pick it up when it was ready.

Illy stood up and walked to the middle of the room to do some stretches. Yesterday when they'd met for coffee, Margaret had told her about the importance of crossing over your centre line to activate your brain's synapses. Illy thought it sounded far-fetched, and hadn't had the courage to ask what brain synapses were exactly, but she was definitely needing some sort of activation so she reached her arm across her body as far as she could. Then

she switched arms, but it all felt like the old Jane Fonda videos her mom used to watch in the basement and which had clearly never fostered any creative outpouring in her mother. Illy sat down with her legs crossed instead. Maybe just sitting cross-legged already counted as brain activating. She crossed her arms and put her hands on her opposite knees for good measure. This felt more like an artsy yoga pose, which was exactly what she needed.

Illy closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, envisioning herself as a successful published writer and trying to hear her intuitive inner voice. After a few seconds it seemed like her inner voice was telling her to get a snack. She knew this was more inner procrastination than inner wisdom, but her mother was always telling her to keep her sugar levels up so maybe it was intuition after all. She untangled her arms and legs, which were starting to get tingly anyway, and went to find some animal crackers.

Back at her desk, a bowl of crackers and a glass of lemon water—for cleansing the mind and body—at her side, she resumed the poised fingers position. Maybe she could write something terrible at first and then white out most of the words, leaving a really avant garde poem. But what if Jay or Sally asked her what it meant and she had no idea? And she had told everyone that she was working on a novel so bringing in a poem might make her look scattered and unfocused as a writer. She slumped lower in her seat and stared with desperation at her African violet. Considering all she did for them, the plants in her life were letting her down on the inspiration and encouragement front.

When her phone rang, Illy jumped up too quickly and knocked her chair over. She whispered a quick apology to Frank, the retired priest who lived below her and complained about the banging every time she wore shoes inside her apartment. Initially she'd felt guilty about interrupting his prayer time or something, but after he'd once admitted that he was addicted to online role playing games she'd figured he could just deal with the noise.

Illy grabbed her phone from on top of the fridge where she hid it from herself when she was writing.

“Hi Illy it’s Margaret. What are you up to?”

“Hey. Just doing some writing.” Illy stared at the crumbled animal cracker in

her hand and sighed. Who was she trying to kid? “Actually no, I should be writing but instead I’m just sitting here eating and day dreaming and wishing I could spend the afternoon researching celebrity pet names.”

“Oh Illy, why do you do this to yourself? You’re stressed about the Writers Club aren’t you?” Margaret didn’t wait for a reply. Even after just a few weeks, she already knew Illy pretty well. Illy wondered again how somebody so perceptive and interesting could spend her life as an underpaid receptionist to a monster. It was such a waste. Then she remembered that she was currently spending her own life drinking lukewarm lemon water and waiting for the phone to ring, and focused on what Margaret was saying.

“..need to just start typing for the fun of it. You do enjoy writing, remember? Or has it been so long since you’ve actually written something that you’ve forgotten?” Illy made a split second decision to forgive that little jab. She knew this was exactly the lecture she needed. “I’ll call back in two hours to hear what you’ve written. I don’t care what it is but you have to read it to me to prove its actual existence. Deal?”

“Yes ma’am,” Illy smiled. She knew some day she’d have to develop her own internal discipline, but for now she was so grateful for all these quirky brilliant women who did it for her. She needed a way to thank them. Oreo truffles seemed like a fitting option. “Bye, Margaret. Thank you. Say hi to the Wicked Witch from me” Illy hung up, smiled and walked back to her desk. She give a quick bow of acknowledgment to her plant club. “Fern, girls, don’t distract me. I’ve got work to do.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Illy felt buoyant as she knocked on Simon and Sally's door. She was wearing her favourite striped cardigan—the one she had salvaged out of her dad's thrift store bag and thought of as her portable comfort zone. June had convinced her to wear earrings, which she almost never wore because they betrayed her stance against beauty by adornment. But June had pointed out that Illy had a nose ring and wore bangle bracelets, so it was a false and hypocritical stance anyway. Illy shook her head just enough to feel the dangling wooden earrings graze her neck, invoked all of June's confidence, and watched the door swing open.

“Hey!”

Illy froze. It was Jay. He had both his arms stretched wide and a goofy grin on his face as though he was welcoming his favourite frat buddy into a keg party. Illy didn't know what to do. She stared at his forehead to avoid eye contact and racked her brain for one of the witty and mature greetings she and June had practiced. None were forthcoming.

“Uh...you coming in or what, Spacey Lacey?” Jay wiped at the spot on his forehead that Illy was staring at.

Had he really just called her Spacey Lacey? This was all wrong. “Actually, no. I was just checking to see if the meeting is on, which I guess it is, so I need to run back up to my place and grab my things. I'll be back.” Illy spun around and jogged down the hallway. She knew jogging was a little ridiculous but she didn't care. She needed to regroup.

As soon as she was in her apartment she dialed June's number. No answer. She tried Margaret. No answer. Where were her friends in her moment of greatest need? She tried tapping her shoulders with her arms crossed, brain

activation style. Breathe. Think. Tap.

What had just happened? She'd been feeling so confident, she loved the poem she'd written, and she was wearing great earthy earrings. How had one moment in Jay's presence morphed her into this pathetic puddle of awkwardness? Why had he answered the door anyway? And why had their first real interaction involved her being called Spacey Lacey? Breathe. Think. Tap.

Illy tried not to feel betrayed by her friends' silence at this moment. She realized that she already knew both June and Margaret were busy this evening and weren't in fact involved in a grand conspiracy to leave Illy alone and helpless. She tried to imagine what they would say to her. Margaret would be proud that she was tapping her shoulders and would tell her to follow her dreams or something equally cheesy but inspiring. June would roll her eyes, tell her Jay was the one who should be feeling like an idiot and remind her that she looked gorgeous. And her mother, if Illy would call her in this moment, which she never would, would scold her for being so silly and tell her to march right back down there and make some friends. And to bring snacks. *The truffles!* Illy was relieved that she'd actually forgotten something, grabbed the plate from the fridge, and attempted Writers Club Entry Round Two. Armed with chocolate and her mother's loving but stern voice ringing in her ears, she walked back down the hallway and knocked on the door one more time. She knew she could do this.

No one answered the door, so Illy stood there in the hallway a while, truffle plate balanced on her hand like a waitress. She never knew the right protocol for these moments. Should she assume they hadn't heard her knock and try again a little louder? Or take the closed door as a hint that now was not a good time and someone would come answer as soon as their opening guided meditation was over? But if she just stood at the door, it would seem like she was lurking around and eavesdropping. She had unintentionally done that too many times at other people's doors—thinking she was being polite by waiting before her second knock, while inside she could hear her neighbours shouting at each other about dishes and in-laws. One terrible time in university she'd even knocked at a classmate's door only to realize with horror that he and his girlfriend were having sex just inside the front door of their condo. Although she'd known the only logical thing to do was to escape

immediately and come back another time, she'd been frozen by the knowledge that she'd driven all the way across town to return the books she'd borrowed and didn't know when she'd catch him at home again. So she'd stood there on the doorstep, knocking gently in three minute intervals. They never did hear her and she eventually gave up, leaving the books in the mailbox which she realized later she should have done from the beginning. She still cringed every time she thought of it.

"Chocolate delivery?" Illy spun around. Penny Loafer Danny was standing behind her as though waiting in line to get to the door. She wondered how long he'd been standing there.

"Oh, hi. Well, yeah, sort of. Just waiting for someone to answer the door." Illy stared at the plate like an amateur candy ventriloquist.

"I think we can probably just go in." He reached around her and pushed open the door. "After you, Bearer of Chocolates." Illy smiled and walked in. It was a definite step up from Spacey Lacey.

As soon as she entered the living room, Illy began presenting the truffles around the circle like she was introducing a new boyfriend at a family gathering. They were a big hit and the plate was empty before Sally even began the meeting. Beaming from the success of her Make Friends Through Snacks strategy, and determined to not repeat the bean bag chair fiasco, Illy sat down on a metal folding chair between Dave and The Whistler. The confidence she felt from such a solid and elevated position was deflated a little by the fact that she couldn't remember The Whistler's name. She knew she should ask as soon as she sat down, but Dave and The Whistler were in the middle of a conversation about Monarch butterflies in the area, which Illy had always been fascinated by but never actually discussed with anyone. By the time the conversation had a lull in it, Illy knew she had passed the socially permissible window for asking someone's name. She'd have to ask Sally sometime when The Whistler wasn't around. It was her own inability to remember people's names that had instigated her habit of introducing herself too many times. She wanted to make sure no one else was caught in the awkward position of not being able to ask her name, so she tended to over-introduce herself. June said it made her sound ridiculous, but she did it anyway out of compassion for her fellow conversationalists.

“Welcome back everyone.” Sally looked around the room with such tenderness that Illy couldn’t believe she’d ever accused her of razor-laced bananas. She vowed to block the entire kickboxing encounter from her memory forever. Although Goth Terrorist Sally definitely did make a more interesting character than Friendly Nurturer Sally. Maybe she could make them alter ego twins or something.

“First, thank you to Ilia for the delicious chocolates.” She paused for some scattered applause. Illy chewed a hangnail on her thumb. “Tonight I’m hoping we can go a little deeper and actually offer some suggestions or critique of each other’s writing. All offered in a helpful spirit, of course. We’re trying to get better here, not competing for the Pulitzer. Who wants to go first?”

As she scanned the room, mentally predicting who would be the keen first volunteer this week, Illy noticed Jay slouched on the couch beside Simon. She had been in the room for more than ten minutes and had totally forgotten to notice Jay. She wasn’t sure if she should be proud of herself for the attractive aloofness this must have conveyed, or ashamed for not being more aware of the man who could possibly be her life long partner. Jay was clearly also going for the aloof look, although it was verging on rude indifference. His chin was down on his chest and his legs were splayed out in a V that seemed to take over half the room. He didn’t appear to have heard Sally’s welcome. What had happened to the enthusiastic Frat Boy at the door? Illy willed herself to look away and focus on what Dave was saying. He had been the first volunteer and was already reading from the young adult novel he was writing about two cats journeying through Morocco.

“Quick, Rashid, follow me! I smell a fish market...”

Illy tried not to roll her eyes. She knew she should listen so that she could offer some helpful criticism but she just could not take animal fiction seriously. She’d had a boyfriend in high school who insisted that *Watership Down* was one of the great literary masterpieces of all time, but after three pages of talking rabbits she’d returned the book to him, insisting that *The Velveteen Rabbit* was the last and only talking animal book she could take seriously and she’d leave *Watership Down* for pre-teen boys. Her boyfriend had just glared at her and held the book to his chest like it was in fact his

beloved pet bunny, and that was the beginning of the end of that relationship.

Dave finished his excerpt and the rest of the group began discussing the setting of his novel, debating whether Casablanca was too cliche and if she should risk using a lesser known city. Illy watched Jay who still hadn't moved. He wasn't even trying to engage in the conversation and looked like he might be asleep. He must have had a difficult night. Or maybe he was going through some emotional crisis that his societal conditioning didn't allow him to express in a healthy way. Maybe he and his girlfriend had broken up. Illy wished she could show him that she cared by at least giving him a sympathetic smile or head nod, but she couldn't very easily get his attention with his eyes closed. Maybe she could get up to use the bathroom and trip over his feet, just to determine if he really was sleeping.

She cleared her throat as an unassuming segue to getting up from the chair, and everyone turned to look at her. "Oh, I was just—" she paused, then leaned back. She may as well get this over with. "I was just going to read next if that's okay." Illy was worried that the Casablanca discussion hadn't been over since she hadn't been paying attention, but Dave had set down his notebook and was smiling at her so she figured it was safe to proceed. "I wrote a poem this time. Which I don't usually do, and I know I'm not a good poet or anything, but well, it was just sort of for fun." She was talking way too fast, which made her sound frantic and guilty, but she couldn't slow down. "It doesn't really have any profound meaning or anything, it was just, well, for fun." Illy begged herself to stop saying "fun." Also to breathe. Why was this all so difficult? She reached up to rub one of June's earrings like a lucky rabbit's foot, which made her smile and even take a breath. Jay still hadn't moved, but everyone else was looking at her and nodding like little Grandmas at her piano recital, so she unfolded her paper and began to read. "Stars on velvet, crystal breaking. Just another Thursday, the underworld's waking." She looked up to make sure everyone wasn't escaping for the bathroom. They were still there. She was doing it. She was reading a poem to a group of funky and interesting people and they were actually listening to her. She couldn't wait to tell June.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“So what about Jay? Did he ever move?” June was lying on Illy’s couch, waiting for Steve to pick her up for dinner with his parents and flipping through one of the old *National Geographic* magazines Illy had salvaged from her days working at the library. Illy was always amazed at how June managed to look totally stunning and totally comfortable at the same time. She was even letting her elegantly pinned up hair get squished into the couch cushions. Illy knew if she didn’t love June so much, she’d be consumed by raging jealousy.

“No, not really. He made a few sounds now and then. Laughed at Simon’s valkyries-”

“Were the valkyries supposed to be funny?”

“No, not really,” Illy admitted.

June looked up from the magazine, eyebrows raised. Illy avoided eye contact. She knew that June thought Jay wasn’t exactly pursuit-worthy, but she hadn’t ever met him. She didn’t know him like Illy did. Although Illy was realizing that she didn’t know him that well herself. She had really thought by this point they would have at least gone out for coffee, if not pledged their eternal love.

“Okay so it was an off night for Jay. We all have those, right? But everything else about the evening was so great. Everyone loved my Oreo truffles, they said nice things about my poem, and I stayed for almost an hour after, talking to Sally and Danny and The Whistler.” June looked up again. “I don’t know her name. I missed my name-asking window. But she whistles.”

June smiled, then dropped the *National Geographic* on the floor. “Where is

Steve? We're going to be late and I'm sure his dad will blame me for holding Steve back in every area of life." June laid her hand across her forehead Scarlett O'Hara style. June and Illy had watched *Gone with the Wind* every Sunday night of their grade twelve year and its influence lingered. "If I could only say something intelligent when we're with his parents they might realize that I'm not just a giggling idiot, but they always talk about 'the market' and their farm investments, so what am I supposed to say?"

"You giggle about their farm investments?"

"Well, chuckle politely and maturely. What else can I do?"

Illy had to laugh. Somehow June often managed to come across as timid and unintelligent, when really she was one of the funniest and smartest people Illy knew. Everyone in June's department recognized that she was one of the upcoming experts on Nellie McClung but early twentieth century prairie feminism just wasn't a topic that came up very often at dinner parties.

"Not to mention his mom only wants to talk about the books she's reading, which are always poorly written biographies about uninteresting people. Like the other day she was raving about the Dan Rather story and she even brought me a copy of a Gloria Estefan memoir." June stood up and put on her coat.

"Oh no, did you read it?" Illy lay down on the couch and pressed her head into the couch cushions. She was just so curious to see if she could actually pull that off and still have hair even half as cool as June's.

"Of course I didn't read it. Who has time for Gloria Estefan memoirs in her life? But now she'll ask me about it and I'll probably panic and say I read it and after ten minutes of giggling and talking about my childhood dreams of being a pop star, I'll be exposed for the lying brainless fraud that I am. I'm going to wait outside. We're really late. Bye!" She disappeared into the hallway, still rolling her eyes at the debacle awaiting her at the restaurant.

Illy lay on the couch for a few minutes, rubbing her head around for good measure. When she walked to the bathroom mirror she was disappointed, but not really surprised, to see that her hair was flat and frizzy and looked exactly like she'd spent the afternoon rubbing it into couch cushions. She sighed and reached for a scarf to cover up the mess, then stood in the bathroom realizing

it was Saturday night and she didn't have a single thing to do. She considered writing, but writing in the evening was so impossible. She always ended up either falling asleep in her chair or writing something that felt brilliant and inspiring at night but transmuted into self-indulgent nonsense by morning. Illy stared at the grey scum ringing the bathtub and knew that what she really should do was clean the bathroom, and probably her whole apartment. But even cleaning seemed more like a morning activity than an evening one. She needed the sunlight streaming in open windows and a big mug of coffee to really get in the cleaning mode, so it would have to wait. Apparently every responsible activity was best done before noon, which really made for very little available productive time. How in the world did other people get so much done?

Thinking about being productive reminded her of her mother, of course, and she realized she hadn't seen her mother in quite a while. She might even be missing her mother a little bit, which was a sure sign of extreme boredom or pending emotional breakdown. Without analyzing which was more likely in this instance, she grabbed her keys, blew a kiss to Fern and headed to her parents' house.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Standing on her parents' front step, Illy paused before she knocked. She could feel it happening already—that inevitable morphing into daughter-mode that occurred every time she stepped into her childhood home. Even before she stepped in, apparently. No matter how old or successful or confident she became over the years, it was only a matter of minutes before she was curled up on the couch under her favourite afghan, waiting for her mother to bring her a plate of chocolate chip cookies. She even drank milk when she was there, which she'd stopped doing years ago in adult-mode.

Although she always tried to resist the transformation, Illy decided that there was also something right about it. Something about life cycles and the long line of women stretching back behind her all the way to the caves, all of whom had been daughters themselves. Maybe it was okay to allow her mother to be her mother, just like her grandmother had been before that. Feeling empowered by the legacy of strong women-daughters in her past, Illy knocked. The handle was clicking before she'd even finished knocking and then there stood her mother, beaming like Julia Child had just appeared on her doorstep. Her smile quickly melted to a concerned grimace.

“Oh Ilia darling, why do you always wear that same old brown scarf in your hair?”

Illy’s Legacy Empowerment slithered to the ground leaving the all too familiar Teenage Defensiveness in its place. “Hi Mom. Happy to see you, too.” She walked past her mother, dropping her coat on a bench in the entry way, and flopped on the couch. Her father was sitting in his leather recliner, peering over a newspaper at the TV.

“Hi dear. Nice of you to stop in.” Illy knew he meant it, even though his eyes never left the screen. Years ago her father’s love for television and her

mother's aversion to noise had led to a weird compromise involving the TV volume continually set to mute. With the exception of half an hour of evening news, Illy's father had watched years and years of sports, sitcoms and full length movies on mute. It was quite impressive, actually, how much of the plot he was able to discern without the aid of dialogue. But it required a fierce concentration and so Illy forgave his lack of eye contact.

"Sorry Ilia, I didn't know you were coming or I would have made chocolate chip cookies. All I have now are these jam jams. Remember how you used to scrape the jam out of the middle with your teeth and put them back in the container?" Her mother had already poured the milk and was arranging the cookies on a little china plate. Illy reached for the grey afghan and resigned herself to her destiny. She knew she'd have to endure a long evening of question-coated criticisms, but it did feel good to be taken care of for a while. She settled in for the litany of cousin updates, most of whom were ten years older than her and she'd never met.

"So how's the book?" Illy's mother had set the china plate down beside Illy and was now perched on the edge of her chair like she was calling a meeting of the Ladies' Orchid Society to order.

"Sorry?" Illy had been staring at her cookie, trying to decide if it really might taste better if she ate the jam filling first. She definitely hadn't expected the Life Inquiry to begin this early in the evening. What about Caroline's cookbooks? "Which book?"

"Your book. You said you had a publisher who agreed to work on your manuscript, right? So how's the writing? Have you nearly finished your first draft?" She nodded at Illy, hands folded, as though giving her permission to go ahead and share all her accomplishments without fear of appearing boastful. Under all that straight-backed perching, Illy knew her mother genuinely cared about what was going on in Illy's life. If only she'd slouch a little and sweep the floors less. It would be so much easier to tell her the truth.

"Well..." Illy stared at her milk. Her father lowered his newspaper and studied her over his dollar store reading glasses. "Well, it's coming. Definitely coming. It's still in the early stages, but I've been gathering lots of ideas..." Illy tried to think of a recent idea she'd gathered. She'd mostly been

waiting for Jay to do something passionate and romantic, and had forgotten to pay attention to much else. She scraped a cookie across her teeth. She could feel her mother cringe across the room.

“And the publisher? Did he like it?”

Had she really told her mother that she already had a publisher? She had to stop doing things like that. Her mother had the kind of Rolodex mind that never forgot a word. She decided to pull out of the lie slowly, over the next few months or so. “Well, the editor that I met—it’s a woman—she turned out to be somewhat difficult to work with so I’m still deciding if that’s the route I want to take.”

“Sweetheart,” Illy’s mother leaned in to share a profound secret. “I don’t claim to know much about publishing, but when Auntie Joy was over the other day, she said that Caroline’s publisher is an absolute tyrant to work with, but Caroline just sticks with it because she knows that finding a publisher who will accept your writing is nearly impossible.” Illy noticed that her mother spoke like she was reading off a teleprompter. Illy wondered if she’d been practicing this speech before Illy arrived. “So maybe you need to be a little less sensitive and figure out a way to work with this woman. You do want to be published, don’t you?” Her mother uncrossed her legs and leaned back a little as a signal that her speech was over.

Illy sighed. She had to admit her mother’s advice was valid. The problem was that the willing publisher didn’t actually exist at this point. For someone who always considered herself a pretty honest person, she’d been finding herself caught in a lot of lies lately. That couldn’t be good karma. “You’re right Mother. I’ll try to work on it. And good for Caroline—what’s the angle of her new cookbook?” Back in safer territory, Illy reached for another cookie as her mother happily relayed the details of Fanny’s Fabulous Fondues. Her father’s gaze shifted back to an old MASH rerun. Illy could hear him chuckling at Radar’s silent escapades while her mother talked. Illy let herself snuggle into the security of their familiar roles, making a silent vow to do something productive in the morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Illy picked up the cell phone sales application that she'd been using as a coaster on her coffee table. She'd already cleaned the floors of her apartment and done twenty minutes of a Pilates video, so was feeling unusually productive. Maybe getting a part time job wasn't such a bad idea. The savings from her library job were disappearing at an alarming rate and it didn't appear that book royalties would be flooding in any time soon. Plus sitting at home all day wasn't really providing her with enough creative fodder for her novel. She hadn't written a word since her Writers Club poem and was feeling even more like a fraud than ever. Maybe a bit of structure and some exposure to the real world would kickstart her creativity. A cell phone kiosk in the middle of a shopping mall didn't seem like a hotbed of inspiration, but she didn't want to waste time scouring the city for jobs. Plus the mall was within walking distance, which would be a perfect way to exercise while mulling over her writing ideas.

She filled out the application, lamenting the fact that her jobs as a librarian's assistant and research assistant for a linguistics professor, although seeming professional and literary at the time, didn't really make for a spectacular resume. If only there was another word she could use for assistant. Research entrepreneur? Library administrator? Illy groaned. For an aspiring writer, she didn't have a very impressive vocabulary. She tried to smooth out the wrinkles in the paper while dialing June's number.

"Cell phones? Really?"

Illy licked her finger and tried to rub a coffee ring off the application. "I realize it doesn't sound like a very noble calling, but it's only temporary. To provide a little extra income while I keep writing. Do you really think it's a bad idea?"

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"I now call this meeting of The Help Illy Find a Life Committee to order." June opened up a box of donut holes and set it solemnly in the middle of the kitchen table. "First order of business, wine. Illy?"

"Yep, got it. Hang on." Illy jumped up to grab the bottle of cheap red wine she'd bought for the occasion. This was the first time June and Margaret had spent any time together and Illy felt like a nervous matchmaker. She wanted so badly for them to like each other, but seeing them sitting there in her kitchen she realized how different they were. Margaret seemed uncomfortable away from her desk and was tugging on her metallic blue eyelashes. June was mostly concerned with the donut holes, but seemed to be shifting into PseudoSnob Mode, which she'd been famous for in high school. It wasn't that she really was snobbish, it was just that occasionally her insecurities manifested themselves in a pursed-lipped silence which, combined with her gorgeous hair, always had an unfortunate snobby effect. It was one of the traits she lamented often, along with the ditzy giggling and her hairy arms, but so far it stuck with her.

Illy set out three small mason jars for wine glasses, wishing everyone would just relax. The meeting had been her idea. She had been so excited to introduce her friends and she really did need some drastic life coaching, so it seemed like the perfect plan. At this rate, though, it could be a long evening. She was glad she'd bought two boxes of donut holes.

"Thank you both for coming. I need help." Illy sat down at the table and poured wine while she talked. "As you both know, I'm pathetic. My life is spiraling to new lows of awkwardness and despair. I don't have a job. I'm in love with a man whom I've never talked to. I don't even have one chapter of my novel completed, and my house plants are dying." She paused. "This morning I even filled out an application to work in one of those little blue boxes in the mall selling cell phones. Please intervene."

She saw June and Margaret look at each other and smile. They may be total strangers and wary of each others' fashion sense, but they both understood

Illy's flair for melodrama and loved giving advice. Illy relaxed her shoulders and reached for the donut holes. Maybe this would work out after all.

"Okay. Let's start with a list." June shifted into business mode. Illy was relieved to see her lips were no longer pursed and she was making eye contact. Margaret had let go of her eyelashes and was reaching into her bag for a notepad and pen. "We'll go from smallest to biggest. First, the house plants. Then...which is most important to you—love, novel, or job?"

Illy rolled a donut hole on the table. "Well, the novel is the thing I care most about, even though I realize that most sane people would insist it's the least important."

"We're not concerned about the sane people. We're concerned about you." Margaret said, looking up from her list with a grin.

"Okay, then the novel is most important to me and the job is the least important, since technically I should be able to survive on my savings for another month or so. But I should probably at least start figuring out what my job options are. Love is somewhere in the middle, though that depends when you ask and how many soap operas I've been watching lately."

"Alright, so in order of ascending importance we've got Plants, Job, Love, Novel." June looked solemnly around the table. "Let Operation Illy's Life begin."

"I think we should start with the houseplants," Margaret was drawing an elaborate chart, "since that's an easy one. Isn't your mom a plant guru?"

"I guess so." Illy constantly fluctuated between being proud and annoyed at her mother, even when she wasn't around. Why couldn't she just appreciate all her mother's talents?

"So...couldn't you just ask her to come over and help you?" Margaret said each word separately like she was trying to teach Illy English.

"Well, yeah, but you know how she is, she just takes over and spritzes a lot and—" June and Margaret were both looking at her with unsympathetic sternness.

"Okay, okay. You're right. I'll ask my mom. She'll solve the plant problem

and Fern will get off my case.”

Margaret looked confused.

“Fern’s the one in the yellow pot by the window,” June explained. “She and Illy have a complicated relationship.”

Margaret smiled, then picked up her pen. “Perfect. Plant problem solved. Next, job. Do you really want to sell cell phones?”

“Aren’t you worried about all that radiation?” June looked genuinely concerned. “Steve’s uncle in Victoria has blisters in his palm shaped like his phone because he talks on it so much. June had a severe technology paranoia. She didn’t stand within three feet of a blender and had thrown away her microwave years ago. The worst part was having to wait in outdoor coffee shops while June asked the servers to drag a table away from the wi-fi router.

“Maybe he just has eczema. And I’ll be selling them, not talking on them all day.” Illy didn’t know why she was defending the cell phone job. She agreed that it sounded terrible. “And it would be easy, right? And pay well?” She didn’t actually know how well it paid but the people in the kiosk always looked happy and wore lots of jewelery so she figured the pay couldn’t be too bad. “And it’s got to be better than my job at McDonald’s.”

Margaret looked up from her chart. “You worked at McDonald’s? Aren’t you a vegetarian and devoted PETA member or something?”

“Yes, but—”

June interrupted. “No, please, let me tell this story. It’s my favourite.” She leaned towards Margaret like she was telling a ghost story at a campfire. Illy put her forehead on the table. June told this story at every possible opportunity.

“Illy was a McDonald’s prodigy. She climbed the ranks from Fry Girl to Drive Thru Master like a pro. But the pressure got to her.” June paused. Margaret was spellbound. Illy rolled her eyes at the table. “One particularly busy day she was taking orders in the drive thru, her manager was shouting at her to hurry up, the timers were dinging, the lady on the headset was

complaining, and Illy just broke down.”

“Don’t forget the Happy Meal toys,” Illy interjected, still face down. “They kept yelling that I was forgetting to give the Happy Meal toys.”

June was trying not to laugh by this point. “The cooks noticed that someone was punching a thousand dollar order into the drive thru register and got suspicious. The manager found Illy sitting on the floor, trying to close the register drawer, her headset lying beside her.”

“And the worst part,” Illy had lifted up her head by now, “was that he didn’t even say anything or ask what was wrong. He just grabbed the headset and started taking orders. I sat there a while, then wandered out the door and never went back. I still have the uniform in my closet, a reminder of the evils of fast food chains.” She sipped her wine. “I became a member of PETA the next day.”

By now, June was laughing so hard she choked on her donut, spraying icing sugar across the table. Margaret was trying not to laugh, but was snorting into her napkin. “Sorry, Illy, that sounds awful.” Another snort.

“It’s okay. You can laugh. It was pretty funny. Maybe not as funny as June finds it-” June had tears pooling up in her eyes. “But funny. And definitely one of the lows of my work experience. I think that’s why I’m still so scared to find a new job.”

June caught her breath and wiped the icing sugar off her chin. “Well, you could always apply at the phone place and see what happens. Like you said, there’s no pressure at this point, so that’s as good a time as any to be rejected.” Illy dropped her forehead back down on the table. “Not that you would necessarily be rejected. I’m just saying there’s no pressure.”

Illy looked up. “Okay. I’ll apply. But even if I get the job, I’m not necessarily taking it. And if the manager has peeling hands, I’ll run for the door.” She was relieved to have a plan. “Do they even have doors in those little boxes?”

Margaret shrugged. “Next item of business: Love. Give us all the details.”

“Well, you both know most of the details. Ever since Jay showed up at the apartment door with those mochas, I haven’t been the same. I’m sure that if

we spent any time together, we'd really connect. The problem is—" Illy paused. Even though these were her favourite people in the world, this whole Jay situation was a little embarrassing, especially when she described it out loud. "-the problem is that we haven't spent any time together and he doesn't appear to be aware of my existence. My only plan of action was the Oreo Truffles, and since they didn't win his heart forever, I don't know what to do next."

"Maybe a man who doesn't fall for Oreo Truffles isn't your kind of man?" Margaret was tugging on her eyelashes again. Illy wondered if she was trying to achieve some sort of lengthening effect or if she was just scared to offend Illy.

"It's true, Illy. Are you sure this is the guy you want to devote all your energy and emotional trauma into? Remember the Street Fighter?"

Illy sighed. She knew she should take her friends' hesitation as a gentle clue from the universe that Jay wasn't the one for her, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something to him. That if she let him slip through her life she might be missing something big. And he was just so romantic. Couldn't she expect a little romance every few years? "I admit the Street Fighter was a bad decision and that everyone around me saw it way before I did. But that doesn't mean I'm destined to fall for the wrong person forever, does it?

June looked doubtful. She stared at Illy like she was about to break the news that in fact she was destined to make terrible relationship decisions forever and her friends had registered her at the community convent. Illy was already offended.

Margaret broke the silence. "Well, why don't we approach Mocha Jay like the cell phones? Fully acknowledging that it might not be the greatest idea, why don't you give it one good effort without any pressure? That way at least you'll have tried and won't feel like you've forever missed your destiny."

Illy and June spoke at the same time.

"Perfect."

"Yep."

“Now we just need to establish a strategic plan.” Margaret flipped to a new page in her notebook. Illy’s fingertips began to tingle. Maybe this was going to work after all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It took half an hour to hash through the details of Operation Give Jay a Chance. The fact that Illy didn't know his last name or phone number made it tricky, but they established a strategy that could be put into action whenever Illy saw him next. She felt confident that OGJAC would help her to come across as confident and prevent any more jogging-down-the-hallway moments. Admittedly, she was a bit afraid that her current boldness might really be all the sugar and wine coursing through her veins.

After the donut holes were finished, the meeting migrated to the living room. Illy stopped to examine Fern's leaves. She'd been ignoring Fern for weeks out of guilt for the substandard care she was providing, but now that she had an intervention plan in place, she didn't feel so guilty. She rubbed a few leaves in apology for her absence.

"And now, the novel." Margaret pulled out a new sheet of paper. "Is there, in fact, a novel?" Margaret looked at Illy with a pleading look, like she wanted so badly to believe in the Tooth Fairy but was afraid her father was about to reveal it was all an elaborate hoax.

Illy knew that after months of dropping vaguely untruthful statements that made the novel out to be more than it really was, it was time to be painfully honest. She lay down on the hardwood floor and stared at the ceiling so she could avoid eye contact while revealing the disappointing truth.

"No. There's not a novel. But I desperately want there to be one. I really do have great ideas and I've been gathering details from my life that I can use. And I know, or at least I think, that I'm not a terrible writer. I just don't know how to start. I get so distracted and unmotivated, and anything that I have started to write sounds so cliche." Illy felt all her confidence draining onto the floor, pooling around her in a puddle of insecurity. Talking honestly about

her novel exposed her great failure, like her whole life was a farce and soon everyone would know it. She'd probably end up spending the rest of her days selling phones and buying lottery tickets on her coffee breaks. Maybe she'd marry the kiosk manager and they'd lie awake at night with their scaly hands lathered in Vaseline, trying to predict what colours the new Samsung model would come in.

The room was silent. Illy had finally posed a problem that even her optimistic and resourceful friends couldn't help her with. She broke the silence herself to save her friends the discomfort. "I guess I should just forget about it. It's a ludicrous dream anyway. There are millions of people writing novels who have time and talent and affairs with their agents and who still don't get published for the first fifteen years." She looked over at her beloved typewriter. It had been so faithful and eager, and she'd let it down. Maybe she could donate it to an inner city writing program and some underprivileged literary genius could type her way to fame and riches. Except what kid would want to type on an old typewriter when there were laptops and iPods floating around everywhere? Illy pictured herself huddled on the floor by the radiator with her typewriter on her lap, crying at General Hospital reruns for the next thirty years. She'd be like the old lady upstairs with the three foot braid who only left the building on Tuesdays. Maybe she'd have her groceries delivered to the door and the delivery boy would loiter around the front step trying to catch a glimpse of the Crazy Typewriter Lady.

"Illy?"

Illy opened her eyes.

"Are you hearing anything we're saying?" June sounded annoyed. Illy was still wondering how exactly online grocery shopping worked.

"Sorry, June. I was just thinking about what I should do with my typewriter and must have zoned out for a second."

"Illy! Listen to me. What's your biggest dream?"

That was easy. "To write a book."

"What's your favourite way to spend a day?"

“Writing.”

“Yes! You need to be writing!” June shouted as she threw up her hands and flopped back on the couch like she’d finally convinced the inquisitors that the earth was round.

Illy wasn’t convinced. “But what about the fact that I have nothing to show for months of supposed writing and I’ve managed to make enemies with the one publisher who I actually have a connection to?”

Margaret laughed. “Don’t worry about Louise. She treats everyone that way, even the writers she admires. Plus there are other publishers in the world, some of whom may actually be enjoyable to work with.”

“I think the real question isn’t if you should be writing but *what* you should be writing.” June was leaning forward again. Illy couldn’t believe her friends were still talking about writing like it was a viable life option.

“Maybe you’re having such a hard time making any progress because this isn’t really the novel you want to be writing. Like you’ve said a hundred times, you don’t actually know anyone who fits your idea of funky activist characters, and so far all you’ve got is Mocha Man Dylan, who, if I may be so bold, is a little cheesy.” June held her breath and grimaced at Illy, knowing she’d likely overstepped her life coaching friend boundaries.

But Illy was relieved. It was true. Dylan was cheesy. And the novel wasn’t working. And it didn’t appear that any dread-locked hippies were going to be entering her life any time soon. “You’re right.”

June let out her breath.

“You’re absolutely right. When I was just writing goofy short stories for my little cousins or the library newsletter, I loved it. I’d stay up way too late writing and show up at the library looking hungover but beaming because I’d had such a great night.” Illy remembered Margaret talking about fixing comma splices and playing the mandolin. She hadn’t felt like that about writing for a long time but was starting to remember that familiar combination of adrenaline and contentment that buzzed just below her skin.

June and Margaret were both grinning and looking smug at their coaching

victory.

“Goodbye, Dylan.” Margaret crossed something off her chart. “Goodbye novel.” Another line, this time with added flair. “And hello...what, exactly?” She looked up at Illy with her pen poised above the chart.

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve been set on this novel for so long that it might take me a while to shift to something new. I’ll have to think about it. Maybe a novel about something else. I’ve always been sort of interested in farmers’ wives who live in the middle of the prairies and slowly go crazy from all the space and laundry. Or maybe short stories, which are so much harder to do well, in my opinion, but provide such instant gratification. Who knows? Maybe I’ll write a poetry collection about girl friends and how they save your lives over and over.” Illy wished she could hug her friends, but they were both still settled into the couch and she had learned long ago to never attempt a standing couch hug. “Thanks, you two. You’re amazing.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Illy clutched her job application to her chest, stretching her cardigan to shield the paper from the rain. She had deliberately taken the bus to the mall to avoid this windy water-logged situation, but since she didn't take the bus very often, she wasn't sure which stop was the closest to the mall entrance. She had stood up too early, then immediately realized she was still two blocks from the mall. Unfortunately, by that point, she had committed. She strode off the bus, smiling at the bus driver, which was one of her karmic commitments even when the bus driver was grumpy or didn't look at her, and then skipped off the bottom step as though she was eager to get into all that invigorating rain. She bounced along the sidewalk until the bus pulled away, then frowned and pulled her cardigan across her chest. Her insecure weirdness drove her crazy.

By the time Illy got to the mall and found refuge in the food court bathrooms, she was already a failure. Her hair, which she'd spent twenty minutes fluffing and smoothing and arranging that morning, was plastered to her forehead like play dough noodles. The bottoms of her khaki pants were splattered with mud, and of course, against all common sense, she'd worn sandals that now exposed her wet, grimy toes. As she held the application under the hand dryer and avoided looking at herself in the mirror, she rehearsed witty greetings.

*Hi, nice to meet you. I'm wet. Nope. Hello, I was caught in the rain and would've called but didn't have a phone. Know somewhere I could get one?* Oh boy. This was bad. She stared at the yellow garbage can below the hand dryer and imagined herself throwing away the application, skipping the interview, and sitting in the food court with a Peanut Buster Parfait. Maybe she could try again on a sunnier day. After a pedicure.

But then she imagined calling June and Margaret and trying to explain how the state of her toenails had required ice cream and prevented her from

applying for the job. She felt their veiled disappointment trickling out of the phone and sliding down into her gut and she knew she couldn't do it. She owed it to them—and to herself—to at least give this job thing a valiant attempt.

Illy ducked her head under the hand dryer for a minute to dry out her bangs, then smoothed the now crispy application on the counter and took a deep breath. People applied for jobs every day. This was just a trial run with no real pressure. If things went dreadfully, she'd never have to see any of these people again. She pushed open the bathroom door with her elbow and continued the pep talk all the way down the wide hallway to the shiny blue kiosk.

“Simon?”

“Illy?”

The one scenario she'd never imagined was actually knowing one of the workers in the cell phone kiosk. “What are you doing here?”

Simon looked down at his name tag. “I work here. I'm the manager actually.”

“You're the manager?” She was slipping into Repeat Mode.

“Yep. Not the most illustrious job, but it's putting me through grad school. And I get to listen to Kenny G cover tunes all day while standing in a little blue box, so there are some perks.”

Illy smiled, then bit her lip. Maybe he really liked Kenny G. People's senses of humour were so hard to decipher.

Simon wiped an invisible smudge off the counter, waiting for Illy to say something. She tried to look nonchalant while rubbing her toenails with the bottom of her sandal and racking her brain for a good segue into her application speech. “Well, could I join you?” She pasted on her most charming smile.

Simon looked around the kiosk and was probably reaching under the counter for the security button. “Um, excuse me?”

Illy slid her crumpled, crispy application across the glass. “Sorry, I'm just

nervous. I came here to apply for a job. Are you hiring?” There. She’d said it all way too fast and could feel a soggy bang noodle falling in front of her eye, but at least she’d said it. The rest was up to fate.

Simon looked relieved that Illy wasn’t proposing an illicit affair in the janitor’s closet. “Really? You’re applying for a job? Do you know much about phones?”

“Well, no. Not much.” She wondered if she was morally obligated to reveal that she didn’t understand the most basic principals of phone signals. Or even how to turn on her Bluetooth for that matter. “But I’m friendly. And catch on to things pretty quickly. And I’m dying to discover how you get in and out of these boxes.”

Simon laughed. “You’re not the only one. There are always twelve year old boys lurking around with their Slurpies, trying to catch us in the act. You sure you don’t want to just join them instead?”

“Nothing against twelve year old boys or Slurpies, but I thought if I was loitering in the mall anyway and exposing myself to all that Kenny G, it might be nice to be getting paid.” Simon laughed again. Illy had made someone other than June—a guy nonetheless—laugh twice in one conversation. She took that as a good omen.

“Well, we are actually looking to hire someone part-time for afternoons and evenings, and truthfully most people who start here don’t have much experience.” Illy glanced at the other girl in the kiosk. She was talking to a customer and spinning her eyebrow ring with her fingers. She looked like she was fourteen. “But hey, if you’ve talked on a phone long enough, surely you deserve the title technician eventually.”

Now Illy laughed. “So do I need to do an official interview or anything? Maybe take a speed dialing test? Demonstrate my counter leaping abilities?”

“No, I think because I know you, I can skip the interview part. Just let me take a look over your application and pass it by the regional manager. I can call you with the verdict tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Simon, that would be great. Nice seeing you.” Illy turned from the counter and tried not to skip as she walked down the mall corridor. She had

just had a relaxed and funny conversation without committing any major social indiscretions, and quite possibly had gotten a job. This definitely qualified as a Peanut Buster Parfait occasion.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Illy sat at her desk and stared out the window. The balding lawyer with the orange house across the street was kneeling by the sidewalk, preparing his curbside garden for planting. Illy thought that a good gauge of the health and humanity of a neighbourhood was the number of gardens planted in the no man's land between the sidewalk and the curb, and it was the reason she'd chosen this apartment building in the first place. Seeing people planting geraniums and basil in that otherwise scraggly stretch of weeds gave Illy a comforting sense of hope in the universe. She vowed to do the same someday, though she was pretty sure hers would never be as lovely as the lawyer's. Maybe she could just plant Fern out there. She'd probably be happy for the fresh air and pollination opportunities.

Illy had called June and Margaret as soon as she'd walked in the door, drenched and glowing. She'd decided to skip the potential for another bus debacle and had walked home in the rain even though she knew it would ruin her sandals. Rain walking felt a lot more like an artsy movie moment when you weren't carrying paper and worrying about your hair. And when you had a job. Or at least great job potential.

Her friends had both been loyally ecstatic for her and asked her to repeat all the things she'd said that had made Simon laugh, then agreed to meet for a celebratory coffee after she heard from him the next day. Feeling inspired by her personal victories, Illy had decided to do some writing. So she'd prepared a cup of chai and a plate of animal crackers, ignoring the committee of snobbish writers in her brain who were raising their eyebrows at this decision, and sat at her desk. The rain had stopped, though water still dripped from the branches, catching the light that was just starting to break through the grey blanket of clouds. She was still watching the gardening lawyer and wondering what garish and jubilant colour he'd paint his house next, when

she saw Dave and Nancy walking down the sidewalk. Dave seemed to be lecturing Nancy for something and waving his hand around a lot. Nancy was lingering behind him, sniffing at the grass like a passive aggressive toddler. Dave tugged her leash and gestured some more. Illy felt a sympathetic affection for both of them. She wondered what their story was—how they'd met, how they spent their evenings. She realized she didn't even know what kind of work Dave did. She'd always just imagined him as Nancy's full-time partner.

Illy slid a new piece of paper into the typewriter and without stopping to think, or even sip her chai, she started typing. *Theirs was an improbable union.*

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“I’m so sorry I have to run. The show is probably already starting and I promised Steve I wouldn’t be late.” Steve’s brother played keyboard in a techno funk band that no one had ever heard of but had just won some prestigious indie music award. Illy didn’t know that people who weren’t in eighties cover bands still played the keyboard , but June insisted the band was actually pretty good. “You know I’m so proud of you and I’d love nothing more than to sit and drink coffee with the two of you for hours, but duty calls. Do I look like I’m trying too hard?” June was wearing a black mini dress with knee high leather boots and a lime green scarf around her neck. Illy was continually awed at the surprises June pulled out of her closet.

“You look incredible. Very techno funky. Give Steve’s dad a kiss from me.” Illy suppressed her laughter. June still had never established a comfortable level of physical interaction with Steve’s parents and alternated between hugging and shaking hands, depending on her mood. She’d even tried the European cheek kiss with his mom one time in a moment of desperation. Illy had laughed at that image for days.

“Bye! Love love!” June ducked out of the coffee shop. Life with her was a series of grand entrances and exits. Illy thought it was maybe the fact that she was always in a hurry that made June’s life seem so exciting. She made a mental note to test out the theory some time in her own life.

Margaret and Illy looked at each other over their coffee mugs. You always

needed a moment of silent transition after June left, a breath or two to remind yourself you weren't the one in a hurry.

Illy was about to comment on the comparative sex appeal of coffee versus tea when she noticed tears pooling in Margaret's eyes. "Hey are you okay? What's going on?" She'd never seen Margaret cry before. She wondered briefly if her purple mascara was waterproof, although thought there would be something rather poetic about metallic purple tear streaks.

"I'm depressed." Margaret looked at Illy with a hint of fear, as though pleading with her not to burst out laughing or dash out of the coffee shop. Illy just waited. After years of emotional revelation on her own part, she was pretty aware of the most helpful responses. Silence was one of the best. "Not truly clinically depressed, I don't think. But generally melancholy and discouraged, and well, depressed-ish." Margaret traced her finger around the rim of her mug. "I hate my job. Louise treats me like a peasant in her fiefdom. I've spent four years answering phones and filing my nails and I'm nowhere nearer to my goals than when I started."

Illy was surprised. She knew Margaret thought about being an editor, but she rarely complained about her job and Illy had assumed her editor dreams were just, well, dreams, and definitely for the distant future. She figured overall Margaret was content to put in her hours for a few years and play the mandolin in the evening. Illy silently asked Margaret for forgiveness, then handed her a napkin.

"Oh Margaret, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize-"

"No, I'm sorry." Margaret dabbed the napkin around her eyes. "This is supposed to be your celebration and I'm ruining it. It's just that seeing you so happy and actually heading somewhere with your life-"

Illy held up her hand. "Let's remember that the job I just got is selling phones. I'm not exactly climbing any corporate or creative ladder here." Illy had been so excited when Simon had called with the job offer that it had been nearly an hour before she thought about what the job actually was. A few weeks ago the news that she'd be working in a mall kiosk would have left her sobbing.

'Well, no, but you have a plan. And the phones will help you continue your

writing. I don't have a plan. Just a lifetime of boring phone calls and lonely coffee breaks stretching out endlessly before me." Margaret was shredding her napkin into tiny pieces and lining them up across the table. She wasn't crying any more, but the purple smudge around her eyes looked even sadder to Illy than her tears.

Illy knew that after all the amazing support and advice Margaret and June had given her over the last few weeks, she owed it to Margaret to do the same. But she couldn't come up with a single idea or hopeful angle on the situation. Instead she just stared at the skinny white napkin line and felt tears welling up in her own eyes.

"That sucks." It wasn't exactly a brilliant therapist response, but it was the best she could do in the moment.

"Yep," Margaret agreed. "It really sucks."

They sat in silence for a while, sipping their coffee and shredding more napkins.

"So do you think it's sexier if a man drinks coffee or tea?" Illy glanced up at Margaret across the table, her cheeks still streaked with tears. It wasn't that she was dismissing Margaret's dilemma. She just needed some time to think about it. She was pretty sure Margaret understood that, because she looked up and grinned.

"Definitely tea. Everyone drinks coffee, but it takes a man with courage to drink tea." She scoped out the coffee shop. "Green or Earl Grey would be best. Though I'd settle for a chai guy if I had to."

Illy sighed. She hoped Margaret wouldn't have to settle at all. Not for a chai drinker or for a mediocre career. Illy had some serious thinking to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Illy designated the next day Homemaker Day. She knew that sounded sexist and old-fashioned, but she didn't care. The point was that her new job started in two days and she needed to make sure her apartment was in order. This mostly meant sweeping under the couch, which she hadn't done in months and which she suspected was giving her itchy eyes, and grocery shopping. Although if she was feeling ambitious enough, might also involve calling her mother for plant care intervention. She decided to get groceries first, since she assumed the lines would be shorter in the morning. Illy had a grocery line phobia and always started to panic when the line behind her grew too long. She'd end up trying to hurry so no one would be impatient with her, but then would drop her wallet and forget her debit card pin number and end up sprinting out of the store, her groceries still piled by the cash register. And then she had to wait at least three months before returning to that particular store, which left her with few viable shopping options at any given time. So she usually skipped the bigger supermarkets altogether and just picked up what she needed from One Happy Stop, the little convenience store on the corner, where there were never any customers and the smiling lady behind the counter didn't speak English. It limited her meal planning to meals found in a can or a box, but so far had never involved a panic attack.

Today, though, Illy wanted to stock up and had even scribbled out a meal plan for the next week, so she would have to brave the supermarket and wanted to get there as early as possible. She considered picking out a sporty outfit like celebrities were always wearing when they were photographed getting groceries, but decided she didn't have time. Instead she pulled a hoodie from the laundry hamper, gave it a quick sniff, and threw it on over her pajamas. Her pajama pants were beige striped cotton, which she figured could pass as real pants, and might help her to stay relaxed throughout the

process.

The only part of the whole grocery shopping endeavour that Illy enjoyed was her shopping bags. One of her colleagues at the library had started a little sewing business in her basement and sold homemade shopping bags made from retro upholstery fabric that you could roll up in your purse. She had brought them for the Christmas party gift exchange and Illy had been the lucky recipient. It was the first time she'd gone home with a gift that wasn't porcelain or cross-stitched, and she was thrilled. Plus of course she knew that it was trendy and environmental to not use plastic bags. The only problem with that otherwise noble trend was that she no longer had plastic grocery bags to use for her garbage, and so she ended up having to buy new shiny garbage bags, which didn't seem any more earth friendly. And it was definitely more expensive than just re-using the ones from her groceries. It was another one of those situations where she wondered if she was living life out of the general knowledge loop—like how she didn't discover till her early twenties that you could pull that little red string to open up packs of Dentyne. All those years spent clawing at the foil with her fingernails, and no one bothered to share that helpful piece of general societal knowledge with her. And now the plastic bag dilemma. Were all those smiling canvas-bagged shoppers just pretending that they were living plastic-bag-free or was Illy missing something obvious? Cloth garbage bags? Loose garbage? She couldn't figure it out. But her reusable bags were definitely hip, so she stuffed them in her purse and walked to the store.

Illy had decided on one of the big shiny chain supermarkets with the wide aisles and sushi bars. There was another independent supermarket that was closer to her building, and theoretically that was the one she supported. She liked that it was locally owned and sold mostly organic food and that the cashiers all had dreadlocks. But the truth was that it smelled funny, like vinegar and incense, and felt a little cluttered. It was sort of like how she theoretically bought her clothes from the thrift store, but really preferred the crisp, organized rows of khakis at the Gap. It was rather demoralizing to realize that most of her principles were theoretical, but when she walked into the air conditioned supermarket with all that open space and those self-check price scanners, she cheered up. Surely there were other areas of life in which to be principled and socially conscious. She'd brainstorm with June sometime soon.

After she found a cart, Illy pulled out her phone to consult the meal plan list she had downloaded from one of those online planners that give you your meals for the week, the ingredients needed and where to find them in the big chain stores. The first free menu she found was a kid-friendly sample option, so the meals weren't exactly gourmet, but it felt great to be organized and not have to come up with her own meal ideas. She felt like a Homemaker after all.

Illy stared at the boxes of frozen French fries in the freezer section. She knew her mother would scoff at all that packaging and marketing and tell her to pick up a bag of real potatoes like people had been doing through the ages. But the sample menu listed a 750 gram box and she didn't know if that would be the same as 750 grams of actual potatoes. Plus her mother's option would involve a lot of scrubbing and peeling, which Illy didn't know if she'd have time for with all the writing she'd need to do before and after work. The rows of bright red boxes started to blur as she stared at them, paralyzed by her first big Homemaker Day decision. It was only when she heard a freezer door across the aisle slam with too much force that she was able to blink and look up. There, loading a pile of frozen lemonade cans into his cart, was Jay.

Illy immediately dropped to a crouching position behind the fry freezer. What in the world was Jay doing at a grocery store so early in the morning? Why was he buying so much lemonade? And how was Illy going to get out of the aisle without him seeing her? She lifted her head just enough to peer over the top of the freezer. He was still there, rearranging his drink cans. She ducked back down. Hoping that no one would come around the corner, Illy started to waddle down the aisle, being careful to keep her head below the freezer rim. She no longer felt like an authentic Homemaker. She reached the corner of the aisle and stood up. An elderly man with a cane was watching her with some concern, but she just smiled and started perusing the jars of baby food in front of her, peeking around the corner occasionally to track Jay's location. He still hadn't moved from the lemonade section. It was vital that she determine which direction down the aisle he was heading before she could plan her next move.

As she pretended to read the ingredients on a jar of pureed peas, Illy came to a number of worrisome realizations. She had left her cart and her phone by the French fries. She had neither brushed her teeth nor put on deodorant that

morning. She wasn't wearing a bra. And she had sworn on a box of donut holes to her dearest friends that the very next time she saw Jay, she would put Operation Give Jay a Chance into action. She put down the peas and picked up a jar of creamed asparagus. This was not unfolding as planned. She stared at the asparagus for guidance. Maybe she could make a run for the exit, go home, crawl into bed, and start over tomorrow, never telling her friends that this disastrous outing had occurred. Except then she'd still have no food in her apartment and would have broken her solemn vow to her friends and to herself, once again letting her insecurities keep her from the her goals. Maybe she could find her way to the deodorant aisle-

"Do you have a baby or something?"

Illy spun around. There was Jay, staring at her like he'd discovered her buying vials of blood in the vampire aisle. Apparently she had slacked on her location tracking. Illy laughed, but tried not breathe out too much stale morning breath, so it sounded more like a fierce nose blow. "Baby? No way." Another nose laugh. "I just like the creamed vegetables. Easier on the digestive system."

Jay was inching away. She wondered if it was the baby food thing or her various bodily odors. Regardless, her opportunity was slipping.

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask you—" She forgot to divert her breath. She thought she saw Jay grimace, although he'd been looking sort of uneasy the whole time, so it might not have been the breath. "There's this little coffee shop near my place that has poetry readings on Thursday nights. I thought since you liked to write poetry, you might be interested in going some time. With me. Or without me. Or whatever." *Stop talking. Breathe through your nose. Put down the asparagus.* She couldn't figure out how to put down the asparagus without appearing like she was ending the conversation, so she continued to hold it near her face in ingredient-reading position and waited for Jay's reply. At the moment she was actually hoping he'd say no, he hated poetry, and she smelled funny and was too weird for him, then push his lemonade cart down the aisle and out of her life forever. At least that would've been honest. And leave her to finish her grocery shopping in peace.

Instead, he seemed to be reveling in the moment—her awkward pose, her embarrassing outfit, her nose snorts. "Well, Spacey Lacy, are you asking me

out on a date?" He grinned. She tried to grin back, lips closed, arms clenched to her side. "I never thought you'd ask. You always seem so snobby and preoccupied, which I thought was such a shame for someone so pretty. Sure, I'll come to your weird poem night. What time should I show up at your building?"

"Um, eight, I guess."

"Cool. Enjoy the mushy green stuff."

Illy watched him push his cart down the aisle, then smiled. He thought she was pretty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Pilates class started at 6:30 so Illy showed up at 6:10, determined not to repeat her belly-dancing intrusion. Unfortunately the instructor hadn't arrived yet so Illy leaned against the locked glass doors and tried not to make eye contact with the lady sweeping inside. She dug her fists into the pockets of her hoodie and kicked at an old gum wrapper on the sidewalk. She was starting to realize that life for her was a series of timing misjudgments. How did other people do it so effortlessly?

Illy was excited about this Pilates class. She had adamantly refused to attend any more belly dancing lessons and hadn't even set down her gym bag when she walked into a Zumba class the previous week. There was way too much bouncing and shouting and hip thrusting within the first three minutes for her comfort level. But she'd watched some Pilates videos online and it seemed like the right workout for her. Lots of stretching and breathing and perfect abdominal muscles, which was exactly what she needed. She was hoping for maximum muscle tone and graceful posture with minimal bouncing. Or sweating, if possible.

June, who tried new exercise regimens with wild and eager abandon, and who somehow seemed to pick up the skills by just walking into the room, happily agreed to join her. She had likely already done yoga that morning and gone swimming at the YMCA in the afternoon, but never wanted to miss an exercise opportunity. Even before she'd discovered the marshmallow consistency of the back of her thighs, she'd had the physical discipline of Illy's mother. Illy was hoping that eventually she'd absorb some of that motivation swirling all around her.

By 6:35 Illy and June were lying on their sides, propped up on one elbow, in the back corner of the studio. The class was a lot fuller than Illy had been

imagining an evening class would be, and the other women all seemed to know each other. Illy was glad June was with her. If she'd been on her own, she probably would have kicked that gum wrapper all the way down the block at the sight of those chatty, tanned women with their cool yoga pants and hand-painted Pilates mats.

"Breathe to your core. Remember your body is a perfect breathing machine."

Illy tried not to snicker. She just could never take exercise instructors seriously. She tried to block out most of the breathing instructions to avoid another hyperventilating mishap, and stared at all the back tattoos of the women in front of her. There were a lot of dragon flies and infinity signs. Some long scroll quotes. Some of them were quite beautiful and Illy wondered if she should go ahead and get a back tattoo, maybe a typewriter or a quill. Or both, symbolizing her deep commitment to the act of writing. Maybe just knowing they were permanently etched into her skin would give her the regular discipline she needed to write more regularly. Then again most of the women in the room looked older than her so she had probably missed the window of back tattoos being cool. All of these women had probably gotten theirs five years ago while she was still working up the courage to get her nose ring.

"Now stretch your toe to the ceiling, feeling your spine lengthen and your energy channels open." Illy quickly swung around to her other side so that her head was close to June's then lifted her leg. There was no way she could lift her foot anywhere near the direction of the ceiling, so lifted her leg a few inches from the floor and concentrated on her energy channels instead.

"So I saw Jay at the grocery store," she whispered to June.

"What? Did you talk to him?" June really did look like a perfect breathing machine. How did she do that?

"Of course I did. I wouldn't break my solemn donut oath to OGJAC."

"Now rest. Breathe. Feel your core contract and release with deep life power." The instructor was staring directly at Illy. Illy lowered her whispering volume.

"We're going out. On a date." Deep breaths. Core power. This was actually

an exercise regime she could handle. She felt her abs strengthening already. “And he thinks I’m pretty.”

June opened her eyes and raised her eyebrows at Illy, giving her a “Well, good for you” sort of look. She was clearly impressed. The class sat up and crossed their legs. Illy scooted even closer to June. “He’s obviously been noticing me all along. I think this is the turning point in our relationship I’ve been waiting for.”

The instructor lifted her arms straight overhead. “Now reach, reach, reach. Listen to your body. Now twist, twist like cold taffee.”

Illy dropped her arms out to the side and whacked June on the shoulder. “Sorry.” She scooted back to her spot and twisted, feeling elegant and toned. Maybe true exercise was more about letting the energy flow through your body than exerting yourself too hard. This felt much more natural and effective than running or bouncing. She reached and twisted the other direction, even allowing herself to concentrate on her breathing for a while. Pilates was clearly the exercise approach she’d been waiting for.

“Did you learn anything about Jay from his grocery habits? Any weird items in his basket we should be worried about?”

“Maybe. He was buying an alarming amount of frozen lemonade concentrate. It didn’t seem normal. But I was too busy waddling past the baby food to do a lot of judging.”

June’s eyes widened at Illy in alarm. Grocery store waddling was definitely not part of the OGJAC strategy.

“Don’t worry. He obviously didn’t notice or care because he said yes to the poetry night, which was the main objective. Though from now on I’m wearing a bra to the grocery store.”

June was about to respond to this when she paused and looked around the room. “Hey, Illy,” she whispered as they all leaned to the left. “Do you notice anything about all the other women in here?”

They leaned to the right. “The back tattoos?”

“No. Look at their bellies.”

Illy could only see the backs of most of the women. She waited till they all stood and turned into a half lunge. And then she saw The Bellies.

“Now put one hand on your heart and one hand on your growing baby. Lunge. Feel the core power flowing to your baby with every breath.”

Illy burst out laughing, then quickly bit her lip as a few of the women glared at her, hands gently rubbing their pregnant bellies. The exercise approach that she'd finally been able to handle was Prenatal Pilates.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Margaret was laughing so hard, water kept spraying out of her nose.

“And so there we were, feeling so fit and in shape since we could actually keep up with all the other women, who just happened to be eight months pregnant.” June was laughing too. They were all gathered on the floor of Illy’s living room around a bowl of popcorn. Illy had called Margaret after they’d slipped out of the Pilates class during the break, and Margaret had been happy to abandon the *Downton Abbey* rerun she’d been watching to hear all about their latest misadventures.

Illy chuckled a little but inside was sulking. She really had thought she’d found an exercise class that she could enjoy and commit to. She considered just attending the class anyway and letting the other women assume she was in the early weeks of her pregnancy. Although that could obviously only last a couple months at most.

“Oh Illy,” June of course could see through her fake chuckle. “Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll find another class we feel comfortable in.”

“Maybe Step Aerobics for Seniors?” Margaret still hadn’t stopped laughing.

Illy had to smile. You just couldn’t sulk long when someone had water spraying out of their nose. And she was glad to see Margaret so happy. Ever since the coffee shop confession, Illy had noticed Margaret didn’t laugh much. “Okay. So it was slightly pathetic. And I’ll obviously never be the exercise guru my mother has groomed me to be. But I am walking to work every day, and I’ve been consistent and committed to it for two straight days now. So there’s hope.” She tossed a piece of popcorn into her mouth. One of the least emotionally damaging legacies her street fighting ex-boyfriend had left her was an addiction to evening popcorn. Every evening he had faithfully

turned on his favourite gangster rap album, pulled out his grandmother's cast iron pot, and made the fluffiest popcorn imaginable, the old-fashioned, shake over the stove way. Illy hadn't understood why anyone would go through that hassle when the bags only took two minutes in the microwave, but after they'd broken up she'd found herself craving his popcorn every night around nine o'clock. So she'd invested in a big pot and soon was hooked. It felt so pioneer-like and wholesome, and besides the fact that it made her gassy, really was the perfect evening snack. Margaret and June showed up for it as often as possible.

"And how's it been going? " Margaret mumbled through a mouth full of popcorn. "The work part, I mean, not the walking."

"Well, it's only been training so far, so it's pretty boring. I'm reading lots of phone manuals and lurking behind the real sales technicians like their socially maladjusted cousin. But everyone's really nice and it's sort of fun watching all the people in the mall." Illy wiped her finger along the bottom of the bowl. Streetfighter had also introduced her to the glories of real butter. "I think people are afraid that if they look at me I might lock them into a Vulcan mind meld and coerce them into buying thousand dollar phones, so they pretty much avoid looking in my general direction. It's like having unlimited staring opportunities. Plus we have a cappuccino maker under the counter."

"Wow. Not bad at all." June seemed to have temporarily forgotten about the radiation component.

It was true. The job was turning out better than Illy had expected. Simon was being ultra-friendly and helpful. He and Sally had even set a little plate of fudge outside her door congratulating her on her first day, which Illy didn't know people in modern urban centres did any more. She assumed she could discard her mother's warnings against ever eating any homemade or unwrapped food gifts from non-family members. Brownies from her new boss and fellow writing club members seemed to belong to a different category than razor-laced apples and cyanide cookies at Halloween. Plus it felt good to have a reason to change out of her pajamas before lunchtime. She'd even plucked her eyebrows that morning, a grooming event usually reserved for blind dates and hair cut appointments.

"But enough about me. Really. I appreciate all your concern and vested

conversation interest in my life over the last few weeks, but now can we shift the focus for a while? I think we'd all agree I'm self-absorbed enough as it is. Margaret, have you had any revelations about how to escape from your job?"

Margaret's smile vanished. She rolled a popcorn kernel between her fingers and sighed. "No. Nothing."

Illy immediately regretted her question and looked at June with pleading eyes. June was the wise resourceful one. Surely she had a plan. Or at least some encouragement that could wipe that awful hopelessness off Margaret's face and get her laughing again. She could tell June was thinking hard. She was rubbing under her chin with her thumb, which Illy knew meant she was feeling for stray hairs that needed to be plucked. June was dreadfully embarrassed when she'd discovered Illy knew that's what she was doing and swore to never do it in front of other people again, but when she was completely absorbed in her thoughts, she did it unknowingly. It was always comforting for Illy to see. Both because it was one of those glimpses into another human's imperfections that made her feel less alone in her own weird insecurities, and because it meant June was thinking really hard and would probably have a solution to the current problem within minutes.

Except this time she didn't. She just sat there rubbing her chin while Margaret picked at the popcorn kernels in the bottom of the bowl, then suddenly stood up. "I should go. It's getting late. Thanks for the popcorn and the laughs." She smiled at Illy, though Illy could tell it was more of a don't-worry-about-making-me-feel-awful-about-myself kind of smile than a genuinely happy one. Which of course made Illy feel even more awful.

"I should go too," June said as she pulled on her sweater. I'll walk with you to the bus stop."

They all gave each other quick hugs and promised to meet for Evening Popcorn again soon. Illy went to the window and watched her friends disappear down the sidewalk. Hours later, lying awake in her bed and staring at the street light patterns reflecting through her blinds, she could still feel the helplessness settled deep in her gut.



The next morning, Illy crammed one last t-shirt into the washing machine and leaned on the lid till it clicked. She knew her mother would faint if she saw how full Illy packed the machine, but she just couldn't justify another three dollar load for a couple of t-shirts. She added extra detergent to compensate. Besides, her mother would also faint if she knew Illy didn't separate her colours and whites, do any pre-scrubbing or even own dryer sheets,, so Illy banished her mother's presence from her psychological laundry space altogether.

Illy hated the basement laundry room. It was dark and musty, and she could smell the hockey equipment mouldering in the tenants' storage spaces that lined the wall. She always wondered why people couldn't wash their hockey equipment more regularly, but when she'd suggested the idea to some hockey players in her Intro Psychology class, they'd looked at her with shock and then burst out laughing. Apparently there was some sporty magic contained in all that rotting sweat and padding. If she ever married someone who played hockey, she'd make him sign a pre-nup agreement regarding the location of his hockey bag. She realized it would probably be in the laundry room storage space. He'd have to be in charge of laundry.

Illy hurried to the door, eager to get back to her writing and to breathe fresher air. Just as she reached for the handle, the door swung open and knocked her shoulder. She gasped in an overly dramatic fashion since she'd been holding her breath, and scowled at the unintentional offender. It was Crazy Killer Man.

She hadn't seen him in weeks, and almost didn't recognize him without his leather jacket. He was wearing a white undershirt and baggy sweatpants—the Laundry Day Uniform—and seemed almost normal until they made eye contact. Then he glowered at her with the panic of a criminal caught crouched over a car battery, and dashed across the room, throwing his clothes into an empty machine before he'd even come to a complete stop. Illy watched him for a moment, fascinated and terrified, then slipped out the door, holding her aching shoulder.

Back at her typewriter, Illy was still thinking about how weird and scary

Crazy Killer Man was. She wanted to describe him for Margaret, who was always asking about the people in Illy's building. Margaret lived in a little bungalow in the suburbs and longed for quirky neighbours, even though Illy tried to convince her that most of the people in her building went well beyond quirky. Crazy Killer Man might persuade her. Illy started typing a description of an ex-convict hiding out in the basement of an unassuming apartment block who hid pistols in his jacket pocket and studied maps of downtown, waiting till just the right moment to whack people with doors.

After a minute, she stopped typing and read the description she'd written. It sounded like a really cliche comic book character. She tore out the paper and looked out the window, remembering the man's grey sweat pants, the pink bottle of fabric softener that lay on top of his laundry basket, the way his hair curled over his ears. She tried again. Leonard missed his wife before he even opened his eyes. Her absence was a presence lying beside him that he could smell in the sheets and hear in that immense morning silence.

Two hours later Illy was still writing. She'd developed an affection for the man she'd named Leonard—his conscientious laundering and his jittery grief. Margaret would like him too, would probably tell Illy to make him muffins or something. Illy finished her paragraph and stacked up the first few pages of his story. Maybe she could make a copy on her way to work and give it to Margaret as a little Happy Wednesday present. She still had no solutions for Margaret's job dilemma, but she could at least drop off a goofy story to cheer her up. And maybe a chocolate bar. Sometimes the most you could do for your friends was just show up in the middle of all the despair and bring some snacks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The buzzer rang at 7:53. Jay was early. Illy had never pegged him as an early kind of guy. She made some quick mental readjustments to make room for this unexpected character trait while kissing a square of toilet paper. Wearing lipstick was always a tortuous affair. She was never quite willing to commit to the appearance of lipstick, but her lips were so pale and beige without it. So she'd apply and smear and blot and reapply until her lips looked blurry and swollen, at which point the buzzer would ring and she'd swear off lipstick forever. It was a tedious cycle.

The buzzer rang again. Early and a multiple buzzer—the myriad of things she was discovering about this man without even seeing him. She pushed the speaker button. "Hi. I'll be down in just a sec." Illy thought it was wise to make him wait on the sidewalk instead of inviting him up, which had the potential for so many disasters. Plus it allowed her to do a general appearance scope without anyone watching. No food in the teeth. Hair mostly normal. Pants zipper secure. She smacked her lips one last time then blew kisses to Fern and the girls. "Wish me luck. He might be my destiny!"

Jay was leaning against a tree with his arms crossed. Illy thought he looked like he might be pouting about having to wait outside, but when he saw her he grinned. "Hey, hey. Ready for a night with the beatniks?"

Illy wasn't sure how to answer that. She noticed with some despair that Jay was wearing the kind of nylon sports pants that snapped up the sides and light-reflector runners. If it wasn't for the beatnik comment she'd have wondered if he'd misunderstood the invitation.

"Um, yeah. How are you doing?"

"Awesome. I've got a hot date and I'm going to listen to some crazy poems."

What could be better?"

Illy hated that any positive allusion to her appearance outweighed his other annoying comments, but it did. She couldn't remember the last time someone had described her as hot, and it made her feel buoyant and brave. "Lucky guy. Let's go."

The coffee house was getting full. There were a lot of black clothes and scarves and laughter over the general din of the espresso machine and jazz music. Illy loved this kind of evening. The people, the coffee, the poetry. She almost never understood a word of the poems, but the whole place had such a creative and friendly energy to it that she kept showing up and letting the poetry absorb through her skin. A few people that she recognized from other poetry nights smiled and waved, but with a few friendly nods, Illy headed straight for an empty table in the back corner. She realized with a pang of guilt that she was nervous about what sort of comments Jay might make, though he seemed more subdued in the coffee shop, which was a relief.

They sat down at the table and looked at each other. Illy relaxed her shoulders. She was on a date at a poetry event with a good-looking guy, one who actually did write poetry himself, a fact that she kept forgetting. This was exactly what she'd been dreaming of for months.

Jay, on the other hand, seemed to be tensing up. He was drumming the table with his fingers and staring up to the left, a sure sign, June had once informed her, that a person was lying. Illy didn't know if it counted as an ominous sign when the person wasn't saying anything, but he definitely seemed uncomfortable.

"So, do you want a coffee? Their lattes are great. And their espressos are supposedly excellent, if you're an espresso drinker. They always make my heart start palpitating, or at least I imagine they might, so I try to avoid them." He was still looking at the ceiling behind her. She kept going. "I do love the little mugs though, so I'm trying to find a socially acceptable drink alternative that still uses espresso mugs." She paused. This was going to be a really long night if he never spoke or looked at her. There was only so much meaningless coffee chatter she could generate.

"I'll just have a Coke. Thanks."

Illy's moment of relief that Jay was speaking was soon overshadowed by distress at what he'd said. A Coke? Did that mean he didn't drink coffee? But what about the mochas? Illy wasn't prepared for this kind of crisis so early in their relationship. Coffee drinking—no, deep coffee appreciation—was right up there with sense of humour and trimmed toenails on her list of non-negotiable partner traits. You couldn't get up to watch the sunrise or make quiet eye contact over the morning newspaper with Coke. She couldn't imagine you could enjoy an evening of poetry reading very well either, if it wasn't with coffee.

Before Illy could interrogate Jay on his caffeinated drink preferences, thus determining if the relationship should be severed immediately, the server showed up to take their order.

"Coke please. Extra ice." Jay was still tapping his fingers. Illy winced.

"I'll have a triple latte, please." She tried to overcompensate for Jay's order, although she already regretted the trips she'd have to make to the bathroom that night. Thankfully, the server didn't display any signs of overt disdain for Jay's order as he walked away. "So. Here we are." Illy looked across the table at Jay, the handsome man she'd daydreamed about for so many hours, the inspiration for her romantic, though literarily disastrous, character Dylan., the ultimate goal of OGJAC. So much time and mental energy had been invested in this person whom she suddenly realized with a wave of panic, she didn't know a single thing about. The one fact she'd been secure in was his love of coffee, and now even that surety had evaporated before her eyes. She couldn't think of anything to say to him since she had no idea who he was or what he was interested in. She tried to buy herself some time. "Who would have thought?" Illy winced again. Rhetorical questions were never the best time buyers.

Jay nodded and looked grim. "Who would've thought."

Oh no. He was a repeater. They were going to get caught in a conversational vortex with no means of escape. Illy tried to channel Margaret's great questioning skills. "So, tell me about yourself. What do you do? What are your interests? Who exactly is Jay..."

"James. Jay James."

Illy didn't know if he was clarifying his full first name or if James was his last name. Or the second part of a compound first name. How was it possible that even his name was an awkward moment? Illy could feel herself getting sleepy, which was a bad sign. She had the terrible habit of avoiding tense or awkward situations by falling asleep and often found herself leaning her head back and closing her eyes while her mother confronted her or she watched embarrassing scenes in romantic comedies. Her eyes were feeling very droopy.

"Well, I work for my brother doing large-scale plumbing. I play racquetball. I like to play around with some small investments." No response at all registered on Illy's face. "Like stock trading kind of stuff. Nothing huge."

Plumbing. Racquetball. Stocks. Illy knew on a logical level those were all reasonable and honourable interests, but she couldn't imagine a more boring list. She felt trapped in a terrible game show where you had to talk for a minute—no, three hours—about the topics that bored you the most.

Thankfully her latte arrived at that moment so she could regroup and get a caffeine boost. She gave her sugar scooping the attention of a Masonic ritual.

The problem was that when Jay had mentioned his list of interests, his eyes had actually lit up. His fingers relaxed, he looked directly across the table, and he seemed ready to engage on a lively and personal level. She couldn't let him down.

"Racquetball?" Illy forced her eyes to widen a little like she'd just discovered she and Jay had gone to the same elementary school. "Is that the one with the net?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Margaret licked tzatziki sauce off her fingers. “You talked about racquetball?” Illy could tell she was trying not to laugh. At least Illy’s embarrassing life provided Margaret’s own respectable life with comic relief.

“Well, he did at least. Pretty much the whole evening.” Illy and Margaret were sitting in their favourite booth at the Greek place. Illy had intended to spend the day writing since she had the day off work, but all morning she’d just been replaying the events from the night before in her mind and wasn’t getting any writing done anyway. Margaret, of course, was thrilled for the excuse to escape the office for her lunch hour.

“What about the poetry?”

“That’s the worst part. Someone would be up there reading a really profound or personal poem and Jay would suddenly lean in like there was some emergency situation unfolding on the sidewalk and he’d tell me about the four day tournament he and his college buddy once played in.” Illy bit into her falafel. “It really was painful. And embarrassing. He’s not exactly a quiet whisperer.”

“Oh Illy, I’m sorry. So are you done with Jay forever?”

Illy stalled and chewed a while. She had once heard that you should chew every bite a hundred times for ultimate digestive benefit, but she’d never understood how that was physically possible. Whenever she was trying to avoid conversation, she’d start counting her bites. Her personal best was fifty-three.

Margaret waited patiently. She knew about the chewing thing and that it meant Illy was stalling, but she didn’t take it personally. Margaret really was

the best listener Illy had ever met.

"Well, no. We're going out again this weekend." Illy peered over her pita with a grimace, bracing herself for Margaret's reaction.

"What? You just didn't get enough of all that stimulating conversation?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous. It's just that as we walked home, he put his arm around me like we were so comfortable and connected, and he said how much he'd enjoyed the evening and wondered if I wanted to go to a movie this weekend, so I said yes." Illy closed her eyes. She knew what was coming.

"A movie?" Margaret nearly shouted through her mouthful of pita, then looked around the restaurant and dropped her voice. "A movie? May I remind you that one of the first things I ever learned about you was that you thought movies were the most unromantic dates ever and you would rather live a life of dreary isolation with a household of chinchillas than spend it with a man who thought movies were a romantic date option?"

Illy set her falafel on her plate and propped her chin in her hands, feeling defeated. "I know, I know. You're right. I hate movie dates. But the general population finds them normal and enjoyable, so I figured it would be polite to go for now and share my weird opinions later. It's not like he can jump straight to mocha deliveries when we hardly know each other."

Now Margaret put down her pita and crossed her arms. Illy braced herself again. "So that's what this is all about. You're holding out for Jay to bring mochas to your door, and you're willing to endure movie dates and plumbing conversations to get there. Oh Illy." She unfolded her arms and leaned in with a pained look on her face, like her daughter had just informed her she was dropping out of school. "I thought he didn't even like coffee."

"I don't know that for sure. I just know that he ordered a Coke last night. Obviously he must like coffee because of the mochas, right?" Illy still had her chin cupped in her hands and was fiddling with her ear lobes. "It's just that I know he has all that romance in him somewhere and I'm trying to give him the opportunity to let it out. It doesn't have to be mochas, exactly." The unspoken irony of it all was that Illy didn't even like mochas herself. They were always too sweet and left a powdery feeling on her tongue. She didn't

think now was a good time to inform Margaret of that little glitch. “It’s the idea of the mochas, all that thoughtful spontaneity and charm. It’s got to come out sometime, right?”

Margaret didn’t look hopeful. She had picked her pita up again and was trying to slurp up a stray onion.

“Look, the point of OGJAC was to give Jay a chance. That’s all I’m doing. If after a couple weeks we’re still replaying glorious racquetball moments or watching double features at the cheap seats, I’ll give up. I promise.”

Margaret rolled her eyes, but smiled. “I really should get going.” She stuffed the last bite of soggy pita into her mouth. “Louise awaits.”

“But wait, we talked about me and my pathetic romance the whole time again. What about you?”

“Nothing to report, believe me. Louise asked for double cream in her coffee today, which was unusual. Some rejected wannabe writer asked me to read his manuscript for him. I’m experimenting with a more square shape for my fingernails.” Margaret was pulling on her cardigan. “The joys and sorrows of life as a receptionist. Thrilling, hey?”

“Are you going to read the manuscript?” Illy had a personal fondness for rejected wannabe writers.

“I doubt it. He left it on my desk even though I expressly asked him not to. I’ll probably use it as scrap paper and then have to concoct an elaborate lie when he returns to receive my profound editorial advice.”

Illy grinned. Margaret was a lot more insightful than she gave herself credit for. Illy hoped some day she’d realize it.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Margaret’s eyes lit up. “That Leonard story—I loved it. It was touching and funny and so, so believable. I’ve been reading it over and over.” Margaret dropped a few bills on the table and was walking backwards out of the restaurant while she talked. “Can I read another one sometime? It definitely beats the outdated *Home and Garden* magazines I usually read. See you soon!” She stepped through the door and blew a kiss through the glass.

Illy reached across the table to pick up the leftover lettuce on Margaret's plate. She had written something that somebody actually enjoyed. It felt even better than she'd imagined.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Illy resisted the urge to spin in her swivel chair. She knew it was unprofessional but it was so hard to maintain professional appearances when no one had even looked in her direction in two hours. She looked at the sales people in the stores across from the kiosk. Most of them were standing near the entrances of their stores, staring out into the mall like hungry goldfish. Mall work in general was boring enough, but on the really slow days, it felt like a slow torturous death. Without any customers you started to notice the flickering of the fluorescent lights, the lack of windows, the smell of stale popcorn and cleaning detergent. Illy considered organizing a mutiny. She could gather all the other pale, withering mall workers to storm the Dairy Queen, then march out with their Blizzards into the parking lot to see the sky and breathe real air. It would be a victory for mall workers everywhere.

“Simon says you’re not supposed to spin.” It was the eyebrow ring girl, staring at her from across the kiosk. It took all of Illy’s resolve to not say, “Simon says touch your nose.”

“Sorry.” Illy slid off the chair to avoid all temptation. She wondered if her co-worker was keeping track of how many bathroom breaks she’d taken. Probably, since she mostly just stared at Illy from the corner, her daunting opponent in a never ending Simon Says tournament.

Illy was about to risk the reproach and make a dash for freedom, when she heard a familiar voice behind her. “Hello there!”

“Mom?”

“Hi Sweetie. Just coming to check on my favourite cell phone girl.” Her mother always called her Cell Phone Girl these days which sounded to Illy like a cheesy pin-up model in an electronics magazine. Turn to page fourteen

to see this month's Cell Phone Girl.

"Well, here I am. Bored but employed. I think I might be developing a tic in my right eye from the fluorescent lights. Can you see it?"

"Oh, Ilia, always the drama queen. I was just on my way home from the gym and thought I'd buy you a quick coffee or something. Come on." She turned to Eyebrow Ring. "I'm her mother. We'll be right back"

Apparently mothers were the Get Out of Jail Free card, because the girl just shrugged and climbed onto Illy's swivel chair. Illy wondered why she never sat on her own. There must be a chair hierarchy Illy hadn't figured out yet.

It felt great to be walking in a straight line instead of just around and around the little box like an unfortunate lab rat. It even felt great to be with her mother, who at least could provide some news from the outside world.

"So what's new with you?" Illy worked to keep up with her mother, who sped through life like a professional speed walker.

"Well, I've been working more lately, which has been nice." Illy's mother worked as a casual nurse at a mental health hospital. She mostly took night shifts since the patients were sleeping and the nurses could all play canasta and take turns napping in the soundproof isolation room. The part Illy could never figure out was how she could work all night and then spend the day cleaning and exercising. Apparently she never slept. Maybe Illy's need for ten hours of sleep was a genetic compensation for her mother's sleeplessness. In fact most of Illy's traits seemed to be some sort of reverse compensation from her mother—her messiness, her lack of discipline, her disdain for all things exercise related. Whatever happened to the natural repetition of heredity? The only thing she could think of that she'd received biologically from her mother was a cellulite-free gene. At least she hoped she had it. She'd always thought her mom had such great smooth legs because she exercised obsessively, but after her grandmother's knee replacement surgery, Illy had seen a glimpse of her eighty-eight year old grandmother's legs, and they were as smooth as a supermodel's. In that one area at least, she seemed to have received the blessing of the gene gods, since her sedentary life and mass chocolate consumption had so far not been able to produce one dimple on her thighs. She wondered if that was something she should thank her

mother for. Or her grandmother.

“...which is making me feel like a million dollars, though the enemas are a nuisance.”

“Sorry, what?” Illy jogged a little to catch up.

“This new health regime I heard about from your Auntie Evelyn. It’s from India, I think. Your father and I aren’t eating any sugar, dairy or wheat, and we start each day with a cup of lime juice and olive oil. It’s really quite invigorating.” Illy’s parents were suckers for every possible alternative health program. Their pantry was stockpiled with energy shakes and colon cleanses and obscure mineral supplements. Illy was sure health-related pyramid scheme representatives traded her parents’ address like the Golden Fleece.

“And what did you say about enemas?”

“Well, that’s the annoying part. You have to give yourself an enema every other day. And once a week with coffee.”

“You give yourself coffee enemas?” They were really outdoing themselves this time. Illy wondered if Auntie Evelyn was playing an elaborate joke.

“They’re great for your system. Like I said, I’ve never felt better. You should try it, Ilia. Evelyn says most of us have build-up the consistency of paint lining our intestines. And with the way you eat, I wouldn’t doubt it.”

Illy took a deep breath. Here it was. The moment in every conversation she’d had with her mother in the last ten years when she had to decide if she’d be offended and annoyed, regressing to one word answers and eye rolls, or if she’d let the offensive comment slide and remain engaged. She decided to let this one go. Her mother was buying her a drink after all.

They sat down in the food court with their drinks. Illy had decided on a chai latte since she could get coffee for free from the kiosk, and her mother had hot water with lime juice. Illy was just relieved she hadn’t asked for a shot of olive oil.

“How are the plants?” Back to safe territory.

“Great actually.” Illy’s mother had been thrilled when Illy had asked her to

stop by for a short plant tutorial. Illy had taken notes about watering amounts and name brands of plant food. Though even during the tutorial the plants had perked up, beaming under all that loving attention. “I don’t know what you said to them when you were over, but their mood has changed dramatically. They’re all looking bright and chipper and like they’ve forgiven me their botanical grudges. I can’t thank you enough. Though I expect you might need to come for follow-up sessions pretty regularly.”

Illy’s mother looked relieved at the invitation. Illy suspected she hadn’t been told all the real plant secrets and that her mother withheld just enough information to maintain their three way codependency cycle. Now that Illy no longer needed her mother for Algebra help or rides to the mall, her mother had established a new area of need. Illy figured plant care was one of the least psychologically damaging fields of co-dependency so she didn’t push the issue. She, her mother and her plants were all mostly comfortable with the arrangement.

“And, have you been seeing anyone?” Her mother stirred her lime water in feigned nonchalance.

Illy paused. She hated to even bring up Jay’s name because she knew her mother would be asking about him on a weekly basis for the next six months at least. Not to mention inviting him for dinner and Canasta nights. But it had been so long since she’d had a real life guy to talk about and she knew it would bring her mother so much joy to have news to share with her sisters.

“Well, sort of.”

Illy’s mother looked up from her water with suspicion. It was obviously not the answer she was expecting.

“His name is Jay. I met him at a writing club. He’s a plumber—the kind that does plumbing systems in big buildings—and he’s really nice. We’re going out again tomorrow.” Illy thought it best not to mention the movie thing. Everyone in Illy’s life knew about her anti-movie-date stance and there was nothing her mother enjoyed more than pointing out the inconsistencies in Illy’s quirky principles. Like the time she found a Wal-Mart bag in Illy’s closet after years of defaming the store as the destroyer of all things good and holy. Her mother bought her random items from Wal-mart for months,

finding the whole situation hilarious. Illy still cringed when she and her mother passed a Wal-Mart. Some things were best left unmentioned.

“Well, well, well.” Her mother examined Illy’s face like a CIA interrogator. Illy wondered if she should look up and to the left just to throw her off. “A nice writing plumber. He sounds right up your alley.”

Illy wasn’t sure if that was a joke or a sign of just how desperate her mother thought she was, but she held her tongue. She was the one who had chosen to disclose Jay’s existence. Now she’d need to let her mother have her heyday with it.

“That’s wonderful, dear. When will we get to meet him? You could both come for dinner on Tuesday. I’ll be done my stretch of night shifts.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll wait a while till we broach the whole family dinner thing. We’ve really only gone out once so far. Maybe we could come in a month or two if things are still going well.” Illy’s mother looked deflated. “But I could come Tuesday, if I still qualify for the invitation on my own.”

“Of course, dear. We’d love to have you.” She said this like Illy was the porcelain kitten door prize that she was pretending to be thankful for.

“I really shouldn’t stay too long. I’ve already used up my allotted break time and I’m pretty sure that girl in the kiosk is keeping a little black book of my indiscretions to pass on to head office at an opportune time.” She didn’t feel bad for the abrupt cut off. Her mother had never been one for long rituals of pleasantries. Illy regularly found herself staring at the phone mid-sentence, realizing her mother had already said goodbye and hung up.

“Not to mention all the sales you might be missing.” Her mother set down her empty mug. She was the fastest hot drink drinker Illy had ever seen. Illy had spent most of the conversation blowing on her chai and swirling it around with the lid off to cool it down. It was still nearly full. Her mother, on the other hand, downed boiling drinks like shots of tequila, which seemed to Illy to defeat the purpose of hot drinks altogether. “Thanks for joining me for a few minutes. It was great to see you.”

Illy looked at the smile on her mother’s face and knew that she was being sincere. Somehow fifteen minutes of enema and dinner invitation

conversation really was meaningful for her mother. All that fast-paced walking and drinking and discussions about diet were her own weird love language. Illy smiled back. “You too. Thanks for the drink.” She gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

“Have fun on your date. What are you two doing?” Her mother was already speeding away.

Illy paused and watched this woman who remained such a mysterious phenomenon but whom she could feel in her very bones. “We’re going to the movies,” she called out after her. Her mother had given her so much. Illy may as well give her this one small joy.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was one of those gorgeous early summer days that made just being outside feel like an extravagant outpouring of grace. The sun was warm, the air was cool, the leaves and flowers, all new and shiny, were as spectacular as a Matisse painting. Illy sat on the front step of her building and admired a crabapple tree that was covered in pearly white blossoms. She remembered how her grandmother used to watch for the crabapple blossoms every spring and at the first sign of a flower would always say, “I can smell the jam already.” Later in fall Illy would gather pails full of crabapples from her grandmother’s tree for the long-awaited jam, but for Illy it was the blossoms, signaling the arrival of summer, that were the best part. She’d spend hours lying beneath the branches and staring up at the delicate white flowers, imagining she was a Japanese princess.

Illy arranged some of the fallen white petals into a flower pattern on the sidewalk. This time she had her keys with her and was relieved to just soak in a few of the sun’s warming-up-for-summer rays without having to enact any phony arrival ritual. She had been writing for a while that morning—an honest, self-deprecating account of her first encounter with Simon and Sally that she was planning to slip under their door as a thank you for the fudge—and thought she’d allow herself the luxury of some petal art therapy. She added a few stalks of grass to her design.

Illy imagined covering the whole sidewalk with white and green flower designs as a surprise to her neighbours, but the breeze kept blowing the petals around and it just wouldn’t have the same effect with scotch tape. *I tape crabapple petals (white as teacups) to the sidewalk for you.* There was a poem in there somewhere, though she wasn’t enough of a poet to do it justice. Maybe late at night after a couple glasses of wine she could give it a try just for fun. Her high school English teacher used to make his students

write poems with their eyes closed to unleash their wild inner poets. Illy had loved the bizarre torrent of words that filled her pages and sounded like they were written by a brave stranger. Maybe she should try it for the crabapple poem.

She looked up from her sidewalk art to see the Maniacal Whistler getting out of her car. The woman moved gently like she was trying not to wake a sleeping baby on her back. After she pressed the door shut, she leaned against the car and stared back down the street where she'd just driven. Illy looked at the sidewalk. Watching felt like an intrusion somehow, even though she couldn't tell why exactly. Eventually the woman walked towards the building, still moving in that silent underwater way.

"Those are beautiful." Illy started a little at the sound of the woman's voice. She looked up and noticed thin glistening lines drawn down her cheeks. She remembered the butterfly poem from that first Writers Club meeting.

"Thanks. I was just wishing I could make them stay so everyone could enjoy them as they walked up. But at least you're seeing them." Just then a gust of wind blew the leaves off the sidewalk. "Or saw them."

"Nothing ever stays." The woman continued to look down at the bare sidewalk. Illy tried not to get fidgety in the silence, although she wasn't sure where to look. She decided on the same spot of sidewalk the woman was watching. Then to her surprise, the woman sat down beside her.

"Can I join you? I'm not quite ready to face an empty apartment." She started to collect petals and small leaves and placed them on the sidewalk like a Buddhist monk creating a mandala.

"Of course. Please. There can never be too much petal art on the sidewalk, as I always say." Illy winced. She sounded so trite.

But the woman only gave a slight smile and nodded. "I couldn't agree more." They sat there side by side for a while, Illy making the same daisy shapes over and over both because she loved them and because she couldn't imagine any other shape to make. The woman beside her laid her petals down in elaborate swirling patterns, and when the breeze blew and Illy tried to pin down as many of her daisies as she could, the woman just watched her beautiful design blow away and started again. "Irene died today."

Illy was pretty sure she had no appropriate response to a statement like that, made by a stranger on the front step of an apartment building, so for once she didn't say anything.

"I just couldn't figure her out. Her death seemed so conflicted and confusing but I don't know why." Illy watched the patterns emerging in the petals and leaves that the woman placed rhythmically around her feet as she spoke. "Her family was there and her priest, and they all seemed so loving and attentive, but there was this undercurrent of...I don't know what. Something more than sadness."

Illy let her daisies blow away, then started gathering little pebbles into lines and piles as she listened. They sat there like that for a long time, the woman who was no longer the Maniacal Whistler talking about Irene's life and children and fear of the dark. Illy, mesmerized and still, eavesdropping on something holy that she didn't want to disturb. Then, without warning, the woman placed one last leaf at the edge of her design, right beside Illy's bare toes, and stood up.

Illy looked up at her and squinted against the sunshine. She just had one question.

"Sorry, before you go, what's your name?"

"Pam." She turned and unlocked the door.

"Thank you, Pam."

"Thank you too, flower lady."

The door swung shut. Illy stared at the petals for a long time without moving.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“What kind of meat is it exactly?”

“Well, it’s beef, I’m pretty sure. And it’s in roundish pieces.” Illy was staring at a styrofoam tray of wet raw meat sitting in the middle of her table. She had bought it on a whim at the grocery store because she knew people ate whole pieces of meat all the time and she was feeling grown up and professional. She figured it was time to branch out beyond pepperoni. It wasn’t until she unwrapped the plastic and saw how very animal-like it was that she realized she had no idea what you actually did with big slabs of raw meat. She had called Margaret.

“Like steaks?”

“I don’t know. Is every roundish piece of beef a steak or does it have to be a certain part of the cow? I think the package said it was fillet or something. Can it be fillet and steak?” The meat stared back at her, taunting and accusatory. She thought wistfully of the rows of pepperoni in the deli section. Pepperoni was so neat and impersonal.

Margaret laughed. “Look, the easiest thing is to just melt a bunch of butter in your pan and fry the meat on both sides. It doesn’t need to be cooked to a crisp or anything. A little pink inside is fine, but enough so that it’s not still bleeding.”

“Bleeding? Are you serious? How do people have any appetite after preparing this stuff?”

“It will be delicious, I promise. And if you want to, after you take the meat out, you can add some cream to the pan and it will mix with all the butter and fat to make a sort of gravy.” Margaret was a wealth of unexpected

knowledge. “What are you eating it with?”

“Um, a fork? Or a steak knife?” Illy wasn’t sure what the correct answer was.

Margaret laughed again, though this time Illy thought she could hear some eye rolling thrown in. “No, I mean potatoes or pasta or what?”

Illy hadn’t thought that far. “I have a bag of fries in the freezer. Probably those. I wouldn’t want to go overboard on the gourmet stuff so early in my steak-eating career.”

“Or on the vegetable stuff, apparently.”

“Exactly. I’ve always found that a good steak is best enjoyed without too many other nutrients or fibre. It takes away from the cave dwelling feel.” They were both laughing by this point.

“Before you delve into your carnivorous banquet, I thought you might be proud to know I read through the manuscript.”

Illy couldn’t imagine which manuscript Margaret was referring to. “Sorry?”

“The sniveling wannabe writer, remember?”

“Oh, of course. Good for you. Every pathetic writer deserves at least one read-through by someone on publishing house property. How was it?” Illy held the phone to her ear with her shoulder while she scrounged through her cupboard for a good meat-frying pan.

“Not bad actually. Not great, but readable and brimming with potential. I actually hope he does return for it so I can tell him that. When he left the office he looked so discouraged. Although at least I didn’t have to rescue him from the bathroom stalls.” Margaret loved reliving their awkward but auspicious meeting. She always said coaching Illy off the bathroom tiles was the first important thing she’d done at her job.

“I hope he returns too. I’m sure you’d give him great advice.” Illy settled on a pot since all her frying pans seemed too small. She wouldn’t tell Margaret.

“Though if you end up eating falafel together, I might get suspicious that you’re operating an undercover crisis prevention program for Louise’s victims.”

“Well, it’s working, isn’t it?” Another laugh. Illy thought Margaret sounded happier than she had in weeks. “Enjoy your mystery meat. Let me know how it turns out. Don’t forget lots of salt and pepper.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you later with the play by play.” Illy hung up the phone with her customary moment of gratitude for such helpful and brilliant friends, and dumped a big square of butter into the pot. Then a little more. She figured everything tasted better with more butter.

She had just slid the meat off the styrofoam into the pot when the door buzzer rang. Her first thought was that it was Jay. She couldn’t tell if the wrenching in her stomach was excitement or dread. Hoping that the meat could look after itself for a minute she ran to the intercom. “Hello?”

“Hi Illy, it’s me.” June sounded melancholy.

Illy buzzed her in, then ran to check on her beef, even though of course she had no idea what she was actually watching for.

“Are you frying meat?” June’s voice picked up as soon as she walked in the door. She loved meat in every form. Also fried things in every form. She had once told an ex-boyfriend that she wanted to dive into the fry vats at Burger King and swim through all the grease with her mouth open, or something equally gross and dramatic. He’d been unable to see the June-esque humour in the statement and had never kissed her again. Illy assured June that it was a sure sign he wasn’t right for her anyway.

June dropped her bag on the kitchen table then peered over Illy’s shoulder. “You really are. What’s the weird occasion?”

“No occasion. Just trying to be a regular meat-cooking adult. Do I look convincing?” Illy poked at the meat with a fork. “And if it turns out to be edible, do you want to join me? I even have fries on offer.”

“Wow. I’d love to. I had no idea this is how you secretly spend your evenings. I need to drop by more often.” By this point June had gently taken the fork from Illy’s hand, picked a spatula out of the drawer, and was flipping the meat. Relieved at the help, Illy sat down at the table.

“Why are you here anyway? I thought you were going out with Steve.”

“I was. But the magical romance of Steve and June has met its first real challenge.” She pulled the fries out of the freezer and poured them onto a baking sheet. Apparently this time she was willing to forgo the added grease factor of deep frying. Illy watched with envy the ease with which June tossed the fries with oil and slid them into the oven. Granted it was only fried meat and frozen French fries, but she made everything look so easy, while Illy had been mentally preparing herself for the ordeal for days. “I’ll spare you all the teary details, but basically Steve chose to go to some function at his parents’ country club that I wasn’t invited to instead of going out with me. I cried and complained and accused. He defended and complained and accused. It wasn’t pretty.”

Illy felt bad for June, but there was something encouraging about hearing that she and Steve were arguing. Their relationship really had sounded way too perfect most of the time. “Sorry. That sucks.”

“Thanks. It’s not really that big of a deal. More of a rite of passage than a true crisis. Do you have ketchup?”

The food was delicious, although Illy wondered if it would have tasted as good if she’d done it herself or if it was thanks to June’s intervention. Between mouthfuls they talked about Steve and his aristocratic parents and the comparative value of waxing your legs at home versus the spa. June insisted the self-wax kits were the cheaper, simpler option, but every time Illy had tried one she’d ended up frustrated, sticky, and demoralized. And still pretty hairy. She’d rather pay the extra money.

“So you never told me about your big movie date yesterday.” June raised her eyebrows at Illy.

“That’s because it was basically a non-event, as movie dates always are. We met at the theatre in the afternoon, bought some snacks, then sat beside each other for two and a half hours. I think he fell asleep. Then I had to rush off for my evening shift at the mall like Cinderella, except without the magic or the glass slippers or the romance.”

“Sounds brutal. What did you see?”

“A new indie French film. That was the highlight of the whole affair. I found it incredibly beautiful. Jay on the other hand found it—and I quote—‘one of

those boring artsy flicks where nothing ever happens.’ I think he was at least holding out for Juliette Binoche to appear in a bikini or something.” Illy sighed. This wasn’t turning out to be the dreamy romance she’d been imagining once the real Mocha Man entered her life. Though it wasn’t all bad. Jay was comfortable to be with, unpretentious, and good looking. And he seemed to like being with her. Maybe she had unrealistic expectations.

“Maybe you have unrealistic expectations,” June mumbled through her steak. Illy had to smile. When they were in high school, Illy and June had spent hours trying to guess what card the other one was holding or what colour she was thinking about, convinced that they had some sort of telepathic connection. The experiments never proved their hypothesis, but Illy wasn’t dissuaded. She had heard of people who could see energy streaming between everybody in various colours and quantities. She was pretty sure the energy between her and June must be a torrent of colour. The energy between her and Jay, on the other hand, was probably more of a measly grey thread. She sighed again.

“Do I? Please tell me. Are wildflower bouquets and morning newspapers with coffee just a figment of my media-influenced brain? Do I need to abandon them forever in favour of a respectable life of matinees and evenings in front of the computer with a Coke and my stock-trading husband? Or is Jay really a bit of a dud who used up his whole store of brilliance before I met him and whom I should now politely eliminate from my life forever? Please be totally honest.”

June set down her fork and looked at Illy for a while. Illy knew she was determining how totally honest a friend was required to be in this situation. “Well, yes, I think your expectations are probably a little unrealistic. Most real life relationships aren’t unending *Sleepless in Seattle* moments jostling each other for space in the day.” June paused to gauge how Illy was taking this level of honesty. Apparently she felt she could turn up the intensity. “On the other hand, Jay may be a bit of a dud.”

Illy resisted the urge to defend him. She’d asked for honesty. Now she needed to bear it.

“I haven’t actually met him myself, of course. But you’d think that not having met him would leave me with an idealized image of a really hilarious

Brad Pitt type. Or at least a doting Jazzy Jeff.” June had to be the only person on the planet who held DJ Jazzy Jeff up as a romantic ideal. She’d been a *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* addict. “But you’ve never really described one personal trait or encounter that sounds all that attractive, or at least not like a good fit for you. And if your descriptions are already this dismal in the first weeks of your relationship, I’d hate to hear what you’d say after you’ve attended his family gatherings or shared a bathroom for a while.” June tilted her head to the side and looked at Illy like a nursing home resident she’d grown to love. “But maybe you’re seeing something I’m not, since you’re the one who’s actually spent time with him. And if you think he’s great, or even potentially great, then go for it. Just introduce us soon so I don’t have to worry too much.” June picked up her fork and reached for the last piece of meat. “You’re a smart one, Ilia. I know you’ll figure this out.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Illy blew on her chai and watched a fly buzz against the window. Another morning with nothing to do but write. Ever since she'd abandoned the non-existent novel, she'd enjoyed these writing times so much more. There was no pressure, no big dream of book signings and newspaper reviews to live up to. She'd even stopped picking out inspiring writing outfits. Most mornings she stayed in her pajamas, with her high school gym class sweatshirt nearby for unexpected visitor emergencies. And although she still felt a little guilty every time, she had even stayed in bed and written on her laptop a few times. She couldn't decide if she felt like she was betraying her typewriter or her aunt or herself, but regardless, she tried to keep the laptop sessions to a minimum. She still did the chai and animal cracker thing, though, since it felt good to have some rituals, and it was such a comforting combination.

Of course there was always the question loitering around behind her shoulder of what exactly she was working toward. The various stories, vignettes, and even a few poems she'd written in the past few weeks were scattered around her desk like newly hatched chickens whom she had much affection for but weren't really doing much but running in circles and tripping over each other. She could hear her mother's polite but accusatory voice asking what she was accomplishing with all these wasted hours, and the truth was, she didn't really know. They didn't feel wasted to her, but they weren't especially focused or productive. She was thankful for her job at the mall which she could always fall back on during her imaginary conversations with her mother, the daily rehearsals for the real conversation she knew was coming, especially after the thrill of Jay's existence wore off and her mother settled back into her adoring but slightly disappointed view of Illy.

A blur of colour moved outside the window. Illy leaned over and squinted to see between the leafy branches of the elm tree. It was the gardening lawyer,

wearing a lime green visor and gardening gloves, kneeling over his sidewalk plot, two empty ice cream pails by his side. He moved with such tenderness, like he was digging a small grave. Illy remembered Dave telling her once that the guy defended big corporations from environmental lawsuits, which Illy thought must be one of the most dishonourable careers imaginable. He always stood out on his driveway at the most unusual times smoking a cigar and staring at his lawn, and whenever he waved as she walked by, she ignored him, her little part in standing up for the environment. But watching him there with his garden and his funny bright hat, she wished she hadn't been quite so rude. She wished she'd been waving at him for years so that by now they were old friends and she could jog over there to help him dig up his onions while he told her stories about the garden his mother used to plant.

Illy set down her chai and started to type. *Dear Mr. Lawyer with the tangerine house and the lemonlime visor. I think that if someone's life can be described with fruit colours, he must be doing something right. My greatest fear is that my own life could be described in shades of automobile parts.*

She told him about how his garden made her feel like playing opera in the mornings and how she thought Fern was a little jealous of his gossipy giggling peonies. She told him how every spring she waited until he'd painted his house before she started wearing flip flops. And she apologized for all the nonwaving, all that friendly energy he was sending out into the universe that she just sucked up like a grouchy black hole of misguided superiority.

She typed four pages to the Gardening Lawyer and when she finally signed her name at the bottom, she looked out the window. He and his pails of vegetables were gone. Although the rows where he'd been digging looked tidy and carefully tilled, it made her feel lonely, like someone she had known long ago had died and she hadn't realized how important they had been to her until she heard the news.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Are you sure it’s not too cold for this?” It was late, almost 11:00, Illy guessed, and she, June and Margaret were walking on a dirt path along a river, lit only by the moonlight that slipped through the branches overhead. It had been a warm day, but now there was a chill in the wind coming off the river and Illy was realizing she should have worn more than the tank top and jeans that had seemed perfectly adequate a few hours earlier.

“Let me guess, you didn’t let your jeans dry all the way after you washed them.” June grinned at Illy. It was true. Illy had the terrible habit of wearing her favourite clothes when they were still damp. She just didn’t have that many great jeans. “But not to worry; I was expecting you might complain about the cold, which is why I brought these.” June stopped and set down her backpack. She pulled out a plastic shopping bag and held it above her head like a triumphant Santa Claus.

Margaret and Illy looked at each other and waited. You just never knew what weird surprise June might be excited about. “These, my dear friends, are my gifts for you. I’ve been working on them with my Grandma for months.” She pulled out piles of mittens and hats and scarves, all knitted with a mismatched rainbow of colours.

“You knit these?” Illy pulled on a purple and orange striped hat with a yellow pompom. It reminded her of the old hats her dad used to wear on hunting trips.

“Yep. With my Grandma. It’s hard to tell which ones I made, since hers are sort of crooked because she’s eighty-five and arthritic, and mine are sort of crooked because I’m not very good. But they’re not lacking in loving intentions.”

“Or colour. June, these are amazing!” Margaret had put on mittens in two different shades of pink and was wrapping a turquoise scarf around her neck. By the time they had donned all their handmade treasures, Illy had forgotten about her cold jeans and felt brave and eccentric.

The outing had been June’s idea. She and Steve, who Illy was beginning to suspect was nerdier than June let on, had figured out that today was Margaret’s second Jupiter birthday or something, and June thought it was the perfect excuse to plan an outing. She and Illy had prepared potato soup in tall thermoses and a loaf of crusty bread from Margaret’s favourite bakery. They’d surprised Margaret at her house after she’d already gone to bed—June was insistent it needed to be dark so they could see the stars, which meant a late night at this point in the summer—carrying birthday cards decorated with planets. Although she was confused about the science behind the event, Margaret quickly agreed to join them on their Jovian birthday adventure. Even Illy didn’t know where they were going. June insisted she had something she wanted to show them and had driven to a park outside the city.

They continued their walk along the river, admiring the way the moonlight turned the leaves a sparkly silver, and trying to recite moon poems.

“Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon—” Illy began. “I can’t remember the rest. And why did the cow jump over the moon anyway?”

“I don’t think nursery rhymes are meant to stand up to logical analysis,” Margaret laughed. “How about this one?” She paused, then in a small clear voice began to sing, “I see the moon and the moon sees me. I see somebody I want to see. So God bless the moon and God bless me, and God bless somebody I want to see.” She stopped singing, and then, so quietly Illy had to turn her head a little to hear her over their footsteps, she said, “My dad used to sing that every time we saw the moon. It always seemed like a magic spell to me.”

Illy looked over at her friend. Margaret didn’t talk about her family much. She had mentioned once that her parents had divorced when she was young and neither of them seemed to be much of a presence in her life. Her siblings lived somewhere out west. That’s about all Illy had picked up in all the

months of knowing Margaret. It had never occurred to Illy before this moment that Margaret must be lonely. She realized Margaret had never talked about cousins or old university friends or grandparents, and she lived in that little house in the middle of the impersonal suburbs. Illy imagined Margaret as an isolated bubble, revolving slowly in the sky just above the crowds and traffic and families around her.

But at this moment, all that pastel yarn wrapped elaborately around her, laughing at June's made-up moon poem, Illy thought Margaret looked truly happy, like she was connected to something, even if it was just a trio of yarn-happy nerds, celebrating a planetary birthday.

"Okay, here we are." June was nearly squirming with excitement. Illy wondered what complicated scheme she had concocted. She hoped Steve's brother's techno band wasn't going to appear out of the forest. Or a stripper dressed up like an astronaut.

June spread a denim patchwork quilt on the ground and pulled out the thermoses. Her mom had made that quilt out of June's old jeans when the girls were in high school and June had been mortified by it. It was only the summer after their graduation when June's mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer that June pulled it out of her closet and started using it at every possible occasion. By now it had been a couple years since her mom had died, and Illy always felt a little weird sitting on the blanket. If it was hers, she probably would have packed it away forever, wanting to preserve it and the memory of her mom exactly as they were. But June didn't seem to worry that the quilt was fading and stained. She loved any excuse to use it, and really Illy knew that June's mom would be so proud to know how many picnics and folk festivals and camping trips that quilt had been a part of. And she'd love that they were eating homemade potato soup on it by the river. Illy sat down and rubbed a frayed edge between her fingers.

June made an elaborate presentation of their soup and bread, and Margaret raved and fussed over it like a toddler's fingerpaint art. They ate in silence for a while, slurping the soup and watching the river.

"So, June, this is all perfect and beautiful, but where was the surprise exactly? Or are we still waiting for something—Jupiter to appear on the horizon maybe?" Illy dunked her bread in her soup.

June laughed. “I’m afraid I couldn’t find Jupiter in a well-labelled diagram of the solar system. No, the surprise is there.” She pointed at the river.

“The river?” Margaret was as perplexed as Illy.

“Not just the river. Right there. At the bend.” June’s voice wavered a little. Illy realized she was hurt that they hadn’t noticed it already. “Don’t you see where all those rocks are piled up across the river making all those tiny waterfalls? I found this place on a jog a few weeks ago and have been waiting for the right occasion to share it with you. I call it Fairy Falls since it looks like a thousand fairy-sized waterfalls. I thought it was so beautiful.” June looked like she might cry. Illy had rarely seen her so emotional. June was usually the stoic or the clown, not the teary one.

The three of them watched the water sparkle and splash over the rocks. Illy couldn’t believe she hadn’t noticed earlier how beautiful it was.

“June, it’s magical.” Margaret was beaming. Illy wondered if her eyes were a little watery or if that was just the reflections from the river. “Thank you for showing me how to notice something so exquisite that on my own I would have totally missed. I can’t imagine a better Jupiter Birthday present.”

“She’s right, June. It’s amazing. And way better than an astronaut stripper.” June and Margaret both looked at Illy, then burst out laughing.

“Don’t worry, I’m saving that for your birthday.” June tore off three more pieces of bread and passed them around. Illy tugged her hunting hat lower over her ears. The wind was picking up, but Illy didn’t want to mention it. This moment was way too good to complain about.

“So, I have an idea and I need your advice.” Margaret was still watching the waterfalls. “Ever since I read that guy’s novel a while ago, I realized how much I enjoyed it—the reading, I mean, not the novel. I liked figuring out where the plot had gaps and which characters felt flat. And of course, there were so many comma splices to point out.”

Illy winced. She kept forgetting to look up what a comma splice was.

Margaret paused. “There’s a job opening at Hartfield House for a line editor, which is basically a real job doing what I did for that guy, and I’m thinking

maybe I'll apply." She clenched her eyes shut for a second, then opened one a tiny bit, peeking out to see how her friends were reacting.

Illy and June both had their mouths wide open. "An editor?" Illy nearly shrieked.

"That's awesome! You have to do it, Margaret, it's perfect." June leaned over and hugged Margaret, who had relaxed and opened her eyes.

"I'm not really qualified for it, but I read a lot and was always good at writing and grammar, and I've been soaking in all those publishing fumes for years at Hartfield House. Surely that should count for something, right?"

"Absolutely." Illy was thrilled. Finally Margaret could escape that dreadful reception desk and do something she loved. "You'll be amazing. Do you think you'll get a nice office? Does it pay well? Will your name be on the books when they're published?"

"Whoa. Slow down. I haven't even seen the application form yet. I'm hoping to have a resume together by the end of the week." Margaret popped the last piece of bread crust into her mouth and smiled at her friends. "An office would be nice," she mumbled through the bread.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Illy had her hand on the light switch. Eyebrow Ring had her hand on the corner of the counter that lifted up to become the kiosk door. They both were staring at the intercom speaker on the ceiling, waiting for the proclamation from the mall gods that the stores were closing and they were liberated from their box. She knew Simon would not be impressed that they'd put away all the display phones and shut down the computer before the stores were technically closed, but it looked like Eyebrow Ring was in a hurry too and not about to report their misdemeanour this time. Illy knew she should really refer to her co-worker by her real name, and it should have been simple to do since they wore name tags. The problem was that Eyebrow Ring clearly had a stockpile of name tags because she was always wearing a different name. Early on, Illy had called her Sarah a few times feeling it was a pretty safe assumption since her name tag said Sarah, but then the next time they'd worked together she'd been Lotta. It was all rather weird and confusing, although secretly Illy was a little jealous. How fun to be able to try on different names according to your mood. Not to mention the fascinating study you could do on how people treated you differently according to your name. She wondered if there were certain names that got Eyebrow Ring the most sales. Probably not Lotta.

“So are you flipping the switch or what?” The girl currently known as Allison was glaring at Illy across the counter. Apparently she’d missed the announcement. She turned the lights out then set the security alarm. SarahLottaAllison waited till Illy had grabbed her bag, then they both did the elaborate escape and lock-up ritual necessary to avoid setting off the alarm. Illy hadn’t even finished turning the key before Eyebrow Ring—it really was the simpler label—disappeared around the corner.

Illy took off her name tag and pulled out her ponytail as she hurried toward

the exit. She and Jay were meeting for coffee—or Coke—at a little cafe near the mall. She was surprisingly excited. They hadn’t seen each other in a while and Illy had been compiling a mental list of his likeable qualities. She was determined not to give up on an otherwise great guy because of her unrealistic expectations. She liked to think Fairy Falls had been a turning point for her, her moment of epiphany when she’d realized that she was always looking for something sensational when the real beauty was right before her eyes, just a little smaller and less garish than she’d been expecting. Jay was the first benefactor of her new enlightened approach to life.

The first thing she noticed when she saw Jay sitting in the cafe was that he was already half done his Coke. Then she noticed he was wearing a thick silver necklace with his v-neck t-shirt. She felt her enlightenment crumbling. Did men still wear necklaces like that? And v-necks?

Illy sighed and flopped down in the chair across from him.

“Hey Illy. What’s the matter? Tough night for the cell phone industry?” He slid a mug across the table toward her. “I ordered you a latte. With brown sugar. I figured you’d need some immediate nourishment after all those hours in the blue box.”

Illy was shocked. He’d ordered her a drink and knew exactly how she liked it. He was being thoughtful and maybe even verging on romantic. “Thanks, Jay. That was super sweet of you.” If she tilted her head up a little, she could look at his eyes without seeing the chain. She took a sip of the latte, which was lukewarm by this point, but still delicious, and smiled at him. “So what’s new?”

Illy studied him while he talked—something about a big new project at work that was giving him lots of overtime pay—and tried to imagine spending the rest of her life looking at his face. His features were a little lopsided and his eyebrows were definitely more unruly than she’d prefer, but he had a gentle and easy look about him. Kind eyes. Well-proportioned nose. Nothing sensational, but the new Illy wasn’t looking for sensational. She decided she could handle the face. But the conversation was another matter. How was it that with some people conversation came so easily and was so interesting, even if it was just about stretch marks or Oscar nominees, while with other people it felt like mild torture, like her blood was being drained through a

syringe in her foot? Jay, unfortunately, usually fell in the syringe category, although she couldn't figure out why exactly. Whatever the reason, it didn't seem fair that mind-numbing conversation should have to be part of her realistic expectations pledge.

Jay appeared to be finished with his work story and was chewing the ice from his Coke, then spitting the crushed pieces back in the cup. Illy knew this was her opportunity to raise the interest factor on the conversation to a more fascinating, or at least tolerable, level.

She took a deep breath. "Hey, if you could eat supper in any country in the world, where would you go?" These were her favourite kinds of questions. Sometimes she lay awake at night thinking of quirky questions, just so she'd have a good stockpile if she ever found herself at a boring dinner party. She figured this qualified.

"What?" Jay spit out another mouthful of ice shards.

"It's just a hypothetical question. Like, where's your favourite kind of food from, but you actually get to go there to enjoy it."

"But not really?"

"Well, no, you don't really get to go there right now. I'm just wondering where you would go if you could." This definitely wasn't counting as the great conversation she had intended.

"Do I have to pay for the meal? And the airplane?" To his credit, Jay was genuinely trying to understand the question; he just was missing the entire point.

"No. It's hypothetical—Look, I'll go first. If I could eat a meal in any country, I would go to..." The truth was Illy had already thought of at least six different countries she'd love to visit for the food. She also spent her nights preparing answers to her questions. "Japan. Grocery store sushi is already delicious. I can't imagine what it must taste like in Japan."

"Not to mention all the free fortune cookies," Jay added.

Illy wasn't sure if that was meant to be a joke, but she really hoped it was and chuckled a little as a sign of confidence in his knowledge of the world. "How

about you?”

“Mexico, I guess, for a huge pile of nachos and great beer. And really hot salsa.”

Illy nodded in tacit agreement, even though she was pretty sure the kind of nachos Jay was imagining weren’t very authentically Mexican. She wondered if he chose Mexico because he was still concerned about paying for the airfare.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Illy smiled at the lady behind the One Happy Stop counter who was piling pennies in neat stacks. Her slender fingers flitted back and forth with delicate efficiency, as though playing a tiny stringed instrument. Illy could hear her humming something under her breath and wondered what her story was. What combination of hopes and losses and good luck—or bad—had brought her to this morning, stacking pennies in a muggy corner store? Illy wished she could talk to her, ask her where she was from and if she had a family and whether the song she was humming was as sad as it sounded. But she couldn't ask any of those things, since, as far as Illy could tell, the woman's English vocabulary consisted only of numbers and the most basic greetings.

Illy hooked a plastic shopping basket in her elbow and headed for the canned food section. Her gourmet resolve had dwindled after the steaks, and she was mostly back to pepperoni and canned corn. As she reached for a can, she heard a wheezy cough behind her, the kind that made old men spit into their handkerchiefs. She cringed and turned to see just how close the coughing had been and whether she'd need to wipe off her jacket. Reaching for a tin of instant coffee was the Tuesday Lady from upstairs. Illy had never seen her so close up, but couldn't imagine there were that many women in the neighbourhood with grey braids that hung nearly till their knees. She looked even older than Illy was expecting, with glassy grey eyes and splotchy skin, cracked and peeling like a layer of old paint.

“Oh hi!” Illy nearly shouted with enthusiasm. She had finally been meeting so many of her neighbours and felt buoyed by the sense of community she was developing. This was her rare chance to get to know Tuesday Lady, maybe build enough of a connection that she could offer to drop by sometime with groceries or flowers.

The woman coughed again and Illy willed herself not to back away from the little specks of phlegm that flew in her direction. “Who are you?” The woman’s voice was low and gravelly. She reminded Illy of a scrawny dog backed into an alley corner, snarling at an attacker.

Illy dropped her voice. “I’m Illy. I live in the same apartment block as you, I think. You’re on the third floor at Harrison, right?” The woman clenched her basket with both hands and looked passed Illy at the canned vegetables. “I’m in 2A if you ever need anything. I’d love to help.”

The woman turned from the rows of cans and glared at Illy. She smelled like old cigarette smoke and dryer sheets. “I’m. Not. Your. Project.” The woman pushed out each word through her pale chapped lips like it was its own sentence. Then she turned and walked slowly down the aisle, still clutching her basket in front of her as though she was pushing an imaginary shopping cart.

Illy felt her eyes filling with tears. She grabbed some pepperoni and a carton of milk, then stared at the piles of pennies while she paid for her groceries without even greeting the lady behind the counter. Illy could still hear the sad humming as she pushed open the door and stepped into the bright afternoon light. Her sunglasses were in her bag somewhere but she didn’t bother pulling them out. She felt jittery and panicked, like someone had just tried to grab her purse or she’d witnessed a car accident. She tripped over a crumbling corner of the sidewalk, grabbing a tree branch to steady herself. She stood there a while, holding the branch, trying to slow down her breathing and figure out why she felt so hurt and shaken. The lady hadn’t whacked her with her shopping basket or threatened to have her arrested, so it couldn’t really be fear that Illy was feeling. It was just that look in the woman’s watery grey eyes, the stiffness in her withered lips that held so much venom and offense when Illy had been trying so hard to be kind. She defended herself for a while, convincing the imaginary jury in her head that she had been brave and generous and that the Tuesday Lady had responded with inexcusable rudeness. She relayed the details of the encounter to the group that now had expanded to include her mother and June and Margaret and most of the Harrison tenants—the phlegm specks and the canned corn and her warm cheery greeting. But the members of the jury didn’t rush to console and praise her. They mostly looked bored. Illy didn’t blame them.

She dropped her case and stared at the sky for a while. It was that dark unlikely blue that kids chose for their crayon drawings of the sky. The dark branches and green leaves of the elm trees crossed across the sky in an intricate pattern. Illy remembered how as a kid she used to lie on the snow under trees just so she could see the pattern of their branches against the sky. She realized that at some point over the years, she'd become a sidewalk watcher—paranoid about slipping or tripping or stepping on gum. Her breathing slowed as she stared at the lacy designs. She thought of Tuesday Lady's wrinkled face and the old maple tree on her grandparents' farm that had the most delicate branches. Her panic settled into a sadness at all the crisscrossed skies she had missed over the years.

When she got home she walked straight to her kitchen. Earlier that morning, in an unexpected burst of domesticity, she had baked her favourite cappuccino muffins, and although she'd eaten way too many when they were still warm, there were a few left. Without allowing herself to over-analyze her actions, she set the muffins on a paper plate and scrawled a quick note on a serviette. *This is not pity. This is an apology.* 2A.

Illy could smell cigarette smoke seeping under the door as she set down the plate. She knocked, then hurried down the stairs.

Later at her desk she began to write a description of bare branches and the sky and the sound that the snow used to make under the hood of her jacket no matter how still she lay. She wrote about that numb stretch of skin between the bottom of her jacket and the top of her long johns and how she squinted her eyes so that the branches filled up her entire view. When she was done, she rolled the paper back to the top. *For the Tuesday Lady.* She knew she'd probably never show the piece to the woman, but it still felt like the truest title.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Can you meet for Greek today? It’s sort of urgent.” Margaret’s voice was tense. Illy wondered if Margaret was upset at her about something.

“Of course. When should I be there?”

“Maybe thirty minutes? And invite June too. I have to go. Louise is coming.” Margaret hung up before Illy could say goodbye. She felt slightly consoled that June was invited too—at least Margaret was upset at them both, although she couldn’t come up with any recent offendable encounters. She called June, who said she’d try to come by at least for a few minutes between classes.

When Illy arrived, Margaret was already slouched into a corner booth, a pile of balled-up serviettes on the table in front of her. Her face was streaked with turquoise mascara. It didn’t look as poetic as Illy had imagined it should—more smudged and watery like a week-old bruise. Illy slid into the booth.

“Margaret, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Margaret stared at the soggy serviettes. She looked up at Illy for a second, but that just triggered a new round of tears, so she looked back down without saying anything. Illy felt tears gathering in her own eyes, even though she didn’t know what she and Margaret were crying about. Thankfully June arrived in that moment, breathless as usual.

“Whoa, what’s going on, you two? What have I missed?” She squeezed in beside Illy, gathering her hair into a pile on her head and fanning the back of her neck.

Illy shrugged her shoulders and mouthed, “I don’t know.” They both turned to Margaret.

“I applied.” Margaret’s voice was small and distant. Teardrops were gathering on her jawline, but she didn’t bother wiping them. “I applied and I didn’t get it. That’s all.”

Illy was shocked. She’d never considered the possibility that Margaret wouldn’t get the editing job. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

June reached across the table and squeezed Margaret’s hand. “Oh, Margaret, I’m so sorry.” They sat like that for a while—Illy staring blankly at the table, Margaret dripping shimmery green teardrops onto the Formica, June holding Margaret’s hand. The server walked up to take their order but turned away without saying a word at the sight of all that emotion.

“I submitted my resume a few days ago,” Margaret was whispering. “But I didn’t tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise. So this morning Louise called me into her office.” Margaret stopped and reached for another serviette. Illy and June waited without moving. “And basically lambasted me with a hundred reasons why I wasn’t qualified to be any sort of editor and probably never would be. After all those years of hearing her tear into other people, I should have been prepared. But I wasn’t. I started crying by Reason Number Three.”

“You’d think she could have taken that as a cue to ease up a little,” June interjected. Illy and Margaret looked at each other. June had obviously never met Louise.

“Eventually the phone at my desk started ringing and Louise just looked at me like I was shirking my duties and proving her right in all her insults, so I left. That was an hour ago. I haven’t stopped crying yet.”

The server appeared again, standing silently a few feet from the table. June pushed the closed menus toward him. “We’ll have three pitas. Extra tzatziki. And three Cokes.” The skinny boy looked relieved that he didn’t have to speak. He grabbed the menus and darted away.

Illy still didn’t say anything. She watched her friend across the table, tears spilling steadily over her eyelashes like an IV drip. These were her most helpless moments. She wanted so badly to do something, to make a list or plan an act of retribution involving Louise’s pets or at least pass a brownie across the table. But there was nothing to do but fiddle with the serviette

dispenser and cry a little and wait with Margaret in all that swampy despair.

They still hadn't said another word by the time their pitas arrived. June passed them out and they all unwrapped the white paper slowly and at the same time. It had the feel of a solemn ritual to it, the three of them enacting the same ceremonial parts they'd done countless times before. At first Illy wondered if eating was insensitive, and she was hesitant to take a bite. But then she saw June and Margaret pick up their pitas and it didn't feel like an act of callousness, so Illy started eating too, glancing up at Margaret occasionally, who gave her little nods to assure her it was okay.

It wasn't until the last bits of lettuce had been gathered in small piles and eaten and the drips of tzatziki had been wiped off their chins that Margaret finally spoke. "Thanks you two." Her face still had that blurry, bruised look to it, but her voice was a little louder and she didn't look quite so much like a shivering castaway. "I should probably get back to work. Wouldn't want to add tardiness to my list of unforgivable traits."

"I should go, too." June had already dropped some coins on the table and was putting on her sunglasses. "I give a lecture in twenty minutes and I still haven't completely decided on the topic." She stood up and opened her mouth as though about to say something more, but instead leaned over to kiss the top of Margaret's head before turning and rushing out of the restaurant.

"Bye, Illy. Thanks again." Margaret stood up, slid her money across the table and smiled at Illy. She took a deep breath like a kid about to jump into a pool and then walked away.

It wasn't until she stepped out of the restaurant that Illy realized she hadn't said anything in response to Margaret's news or even given her a hug. She wondered what exactly Margaret kept thanking her for. She walked down the sidewalk a while, trying to remember to look at the sky occasionally, even though the bright sunlight stung her eyes, and savoured the sharp taste of onion in her mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The buzzer rang as Illy dumped a bag of chips into an empty ice cream pail. She had invited Jay over for the evening. He had asked her out three times in the last week and she'd been working every time so she figured it was her turn to show some initiative. As she wiped her hands on her sweats and headed toward the door, she realized she hadn't even thought about what she looked like. She made a quick detour past the bathroom mirror and laughed aloud when she saw herself. She was wearing the ratty sweatshirt and sweats she'd put on that morning to do an old aerobics routine she found on Youtube. Her hair was lying limp and scraggly across her shoulders in precisely the wet-mop look that kept her compulsively tying her hair up. She wasn't sure if she'd even brushed her teeth that morning. Not exactly her usual get up for a romantic evening with a handsome man. She couldn't decide if this was a sign of her deep and meaningful connection with Jay that allowed her to be so comfortable with him, or a sign that she just didn't care enough to put forth much effort. She squeezed some toothpaste into her mouth out of courtesy and grabbed an elastic from the window sill to pull her hair back. The buzzer rang again. She pushed the enter button with her elbow while she fixed her hair.

"Don't judge me, girls," Illy warned her plants. "Not all of us can just spray water over ourselves and look lush and gorgeous." She hurried back to the kitchen. She hated the awkward greeting at the door, especially at the stage she and Jay were in, where she wasn't sure if she should hug him or kiss him or just sweep open the door like a butler. It was way easier to just call from another room. "Come on in, I'm in the kitchen." Illy picked up the chip pail and opened the fridge as Jay walked into the kitchen. "Hey there. Make yourself at home. I'm just getting a few things." She noticed with relief he wasn't wearing the silver chain, then remembered what she was wearing. She

was in no position to judge appearances.

“Hi. Great to finally see you.” Despite her full hands and strategic fridge position, he leaned around the door and kissed her cheek. “Can I help with anything?”

Illy had to smile. It was just the right gesture. Jay was way more comfortable with social conventions than she was. “Yep, grab some ice for our water, would you?”

They sat on the living room floor, the bowl of chips and a plate of Oreos on the floor between them. Illy had been looking forward to these snacks all day. She grabbed a handful of chips and shook them into her mouth the way her Dad always did. It drove her mom crazy and little chip crumbs always fell everywhere, but Illy didn’t mind. She loved noticing the quirky little ways she was like her Dad.

“So what’s new?” It was how she always started her conversations with Jay. He usually had some work story or racquetball victory to relay which let her relax for a while before needing to come up with another conversation topic. She reached for more chips and leaned back against the couch.

“Well, actually, there is something I want to talk to you about.” Jay stared at the Oreo in his hand. Illy’s head suddenly felt light and wobbly like it did when she used to smoke Marlboros with the Street Fighter on the fire escape. She wasn’t prepared for a serious relationship conversation and hadn’t been expecting it yet, not over chips and Oreos. Not in her sweats. Surely he wasn’t going to propose, but what could it be? Invite her on a roadtrip to meet his parents? Ask her to move in with him? She closed her eyes to steady her head and waited.

“I think you’re really great, Illy. You’re fun and pretty and interesting.” She peeked at him through her eyelashes. He was still studying the Oreo like a rare coin. “But I was wondering if maybe we should stop seeing each other.” He jammed the cookie in his mouth and looked up at her.

Illy opened her eyes in disbelief. Jay was breaking up with her? She suddenly wished she really was smoking so she could buy some time and enjoy the floating sensation for a while. She reached for more chips instead.

Jay wasn't sure what to do with her silence. "Please don't be hurt. Like I said, I think you're great. I just don't know if we're great, you know? Like if we're a very good match."

Illy tried to sort through the emotions clamouring in her head. She was definitely a little hurt. Like when she hadn't been chosen for the part of Annie in her high school musical, even though she knew she was a terrible fit for the part. Rejection always stung no matter how inevitable and logical it was. And she was sad, because Jay was becoming a comfortable part of her days and she knew she would miss him. And she was immensely relieved, like someone had finally pulled the sliver out of her finger that she'd been too cowardly to do herself.

She smiled at Jay, a sad sort of resignation smile. "I think you're right." She watched him for a while as he chewed his ice, clearly feeling as relieved as she was. "Too bad, though, hey? We're both such great people."

Jay laughed and spit the ice shards back in his glass. "Yes, we sure are. But you should find yourself someone a little more beatnik-ish. I don't think I understood a word of those poems at the coffee house. And I don't have any black-rimmed glasses."

"And you definitely need to find someone who plays racquetball. And preferably knows the difference between stocks and bonds." They both laughed and reached for more chips.

After a few minutes Jay stood up. "I should probably go. I'm sure you have some writing to do. Or incense to burn or something."

Illy knew he was trying to be affectionate. She passed him his jacket and walked with him to the door. "I do have one question."

Jay paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"What ever happened to the girl you were dating in this building before we met?"

Jay tilted his head to the side. "In this building? I've never dated anyone here before. I hadn't even stepped foot in the building before Dave bribed me at the bar one night into coming to that writing club thing with him." He leaned

over and kissed her again on the cheek. “Goodbye, Ilia. Good luck.”

Illy stared at the door after it clicked shut, then burst out laughing.

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“So he’s not Mocha Man anymore?” June was confused.

“No. He never was. Remember how I never actually saw Mocha Man that fateful morning?” Illy’s phone was lying on the bathroom sink as she leaned toward the mirror and studied her pores. Using speaker phone in the bathroom resulted in an unfortunate echo, but this conversation was too important to just text. “When I saw Jay at the Writers Club I just assumed it had to be him because of his voice or how he looked or something. But it wasn’t. All this time I’ve been waiting for a morning coffee delivery from a poor guy who doesn’t even like coffee. Or mornings for that matter.” Illy squeezed a blackhead on her chin. “I think working in the mall is bad for my skin. My pores look terrible.”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say. About Jay, I mean. I have lots to say about your pores later. Are you sad?”

Illy studied her reflection for a moment before answering. “No. I don’t think so. Well, maybe a little. I’m sad we didn’t have a better connection. But I’m not sad that he ended it. I think we both felt a bit like we had better things to do with our time.”

“This is definitely the most wise and serene you’ve ever been after a break up. Am I not even going to get the benefit of donut hole therapy?”

“As long as you don’t mind if I’m not sobbing, I’m always up for donut holes.” Illy inflated her cheeks for a better view. “I think I need one of those magnifying mirrors that my mother uses to pluck her eyebrows.”

June laughed. “Don’t do it. There are some things you really don’t want to see that closely. I’ll come by tomorrow with donut holes and a great facial cleanser. You’ll feel like a new woman.”

“Thanks, June. You are a constant source of unexpected expertise.”

“I’m honoured you think so. See you tomorrow, and glad you’re doing okay.”

Illy ended the call and stared at the face in the mirror. She noticed that the wrinkles at the edges of her eyes were deepening. When she was little she used to run her fingers gently over those same wrinkles on her mother’s face. Her mother had once told her that while everyone slept, fairies drew those lines around the eyes of the people who laughed the most. Illy had gone to bed dreaming of the day she might have her own fairy lines.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Blank. The page in the typewriter was blank. The grey sky outside the window was blank. Her mind was blander than blank. Uberblank? Illy couldn't even come up with a better word than blank. All she wanted in the world was to lie on her bed with her laptop and look at celebrity gossip sites. Or even clean the bathroom. Anything but stare at the blank page and feel like a creative failure. She knew that this was a test. These were the moments that separated the real writers from the poser writers, but she really wasn't in the mood for being tested. She was in the mood for dark chocolate and photos of movie stars caught without makeup. She glanced at her watch. It was only 9:30 in the morning. She had promised herself she would write for at least five hours today. Lying in bed the night before, this had sounded like a heavenly proposition. As she'd faded in and out of sleep she'd come up with all sorts of ideas for quirky and profound pieces she would write. At the moment, though, she couldn't remember any of them except a dialogue between two cashiers, hidden in the names of food they said aloud as they scanned groceries, which had seemed innovative and hilarious at midnight but now was embarrassing at best. She checked her watch. 9:34.

Illy tried to negotiate with herself. If she could fill one page—it didn't even matter with what—she could go get a piece of a chocolate bar. After three pages, she could take a thirty minute internet break. She started typing. For a while she recorded the dialogue she could overhear from the intercom at the front door, thinking maybe she could compile it into an artsy poem with lots of spaces like e.e. cummings. After a few lines of "Yo" and "Yep," she abandoned that idea. Cummings may have been able to do something profound with that and a few innovatively placed question marks, but she was pretty sure she couldn't. Then she tried some stream of consciousness writing, not letting herself stop for five minutes. She even closed her eyes for

good measure, but when the five minutes were up and she read what she'd written it wasn't even close to coherent, let alone artistic. Illy groaned and stood up. She hadn't written a full page yet, but she figured the chocolate bar might help stimulate some original thought, so quickly renegotiated her self-contract. On the way back to her desk, half a chocolate bar in hand she studied Fern. Fern was looking remarkably chipper in the grey light. Her leaves were a bright tropical green and reaching outward in a strangely perky manner.

"Really? You're feeling perky on a day like this?" Illy was resentful. "I thought plants needed sunlight and cheery greetings to thrive." She was considering plucking a few of Fern's leaves just to bring her down a notch, when something outside the window caught her eye. Some sort of strange creature was coming down the road. Illy's first thought was of a pterodactyl. She watched as it neared her apartment, then laughed. It was Lesbian Kayaker from upstairs, carrying her kayak over her head. Illy figured she must have just been kayaking in the river that ran through downtown and was walking home, though that seemed like an awfully long way to walk with a kayak on your head. The kayak wobbled a little and when the woman set it down on the grass in front of the apartment building, Illy saw that she was dripping wet. Her hair and clothes were plastered to her skin and rivulets of water ran down her face. It was though she had just emerged from the river moments earlier and hadn't even bothered to wipe the water out of her eyes or wring out her hair. Illy watched, fascinated, as the woman sat down on her kayak, then swung her legs up over the front and lay back, her hands behind her head. She closed her eyes and smiled as though she were lounging on a Caribbean beach instead of perching on a wobbly kayak under a cloudy city sky.

Illy's first instinct was to be embarrassed for the woman. She looked so weird and vulnerable lying out there in the middle of the lawn on that out of place boat. Not to mention her limp and waterlogged hair. But then Illy looked at Fern and back at the woman and realized everyone else was busy being content and enjoying life while she lurked around trying to project insecurities on them. It was a terrible habit. She looked back at the Kayak Woman and silently asked for forgiveness, vowing to eliminate embarrassment as one of her default settings.

Illy watched her there for a while, thinking of mermaids and not being embarrassed and that Lady of Shalott poem she had tried to memorize in high school. She was pretty sure there was a modern legend waiting to be written about a mermaid emerging from a river in the middle of a city, then winding her way through the streets on some sort of quest, but Illy was also pretty sure she'd never be able to do it justice.

She sat down at her typewriter anyway and started typing. Urban Mermaid. Wet and free and mythic. Teach me.

Illy had written two pages of the mermaid monologue when there was a knock at her door. Her first thought was that Kayak Woman had somehow sensed Illy's spying and was coming to demand she destroy what she'd written. But a glance out the window confirmed that the woman was still balancing on her beloved kayak. She looked like she may have fallen asleep. Illy walked to the door, preoccupied with admiration for a woman who could allow herself to fall asleep on the front lawn of an apartment building. She opened the door to find Dave, leaning against the door frame looking weepy and crumpled.

"Dave?"

He didn't respond. He was staring at the ceiling and biting his upper lip. Illy realized he was trying not to cry.

"Dave, what's going on? Do you want to come in?"

"No thanks. I—" He bit his lip again. Illy noticed dark circles under his eyes and wondered if they had always been there or if he hadn't slept in a very long time. She had never really studied his face before, always distracted by Nancy and the relational drama of the moment. Now as she watched little pools of moisture gather at the outer corners of his eyes, she realized that after living across the hall from him for years, she really knew almost nothing about Dave at all.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm moving out."

"Moving? Why? Where?" Illy had come to accept Dave's presence as a permanent fixture in her apartment life. True, she loved to complain about his stomping up and down the stairs, but it had never occurred to her that he

might leave.

"I lost my job a couple months ago and have been having a tough time with the rent. Just got my notice today." He looked down at his hand, clenched around a flimsy grey paper.

"Whoa, Dave. I'm so sorry. I...I don't know what to say." What Illy wanted to ask was where in the world Dave would go if he couldn't afford the rent. There weren't many apartment blocks with lower rent than Harrison. But she was too scared to hear the answer so she didn't ask.

"No problem, I just wanted to let you know." Dave was looking up again. He jammed the eviction notice into his pocket. "Thanks for all the help finding Nancy. She's always liked you the most of all the tenants."

Illy smiled. She liked Nancy too. "I'll miss her. And you. Good luck." Illy wasn't sure what else to say so just stood there a while watching Dave chew on his lip. Then suddenly he looked her in the eye, gave a feeble attempt at a smile, and turned away. Illy watched him disappear into his apartment, forgetting all about mermaid legends.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“It’s all so unfair.” Illy wiped her nose with the back of her hand and chewed a chocolate donut hole. She didn’t bother trying to hide the streak of snot smeared down her arm. This was all part of the teary donut hole session June had been expecting, though it had nothing to do with Jay. “Why does everybody have such miserable lives and why can’t I do a single thing about it?” Tears dribbled off her jaw. June passed her a serviette but Illy just started shredding it into little pieces. “Margaret is so amazing but she has a crappy job and a terrible boss and no hope for anything better. And Dave has no work and nowhere to live and how is he going to take care of Nancy, let alone himself? And the crazy Tuesday Lady is lonely and angry and Pam just watches people die all day and everyone’s going through the motions, but it all sucks.” Illy slammed the serviette pieces onto the table then looked up at June through watery eyes, pushing her lower lip out like she used to do when she was a kid and felt like the whole world was ganging up on her.

June didn’t say anything. She just looked at Illy and nodded a little, proving once again that she was the absolute best person to have around in an emotional crisis. She waited while Illy pressed her palms into her eyes.

“I just want to do something, you know? Fix something for someone. But I’m so helpless and pathetic and self-absorbed.”

June smiled. “No, my dear Ilia, you are not self-absorbed. No self-absorbed person would spend their evening sobbing into a box of donut holes about a neighbour losing a job.” June got up to get the coffee pot and poured Illy another cup.

“Okay, just helpless then. And a little pathetic. Can’t I fix everything? Or at least something?” She dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into her mug then watched the swirling coffee as she stirred. It reminded her of Pam’s blossom

patterns on the sidewalk so she kept stirring.

“Maybe life isn’t about fixing.” June was staring into her own coffee. They stayed like that for a while, watching the patterns in their coffee, June’s words floating between them.

Finally Illy sniffed and reached for another donut hole. “Okay. Then how about my pores? Can we at least fix them?”

June looked up and smiled. “Yes, your pores we can fix.” She reached down into the grocery bag at her feet and pulled out two bottles.

“Olive oil? And what’s that one—” Illy reached for the smaller bottle. “Castor oil? Isn’t that what desperate pregnant women take to induce labour?”

June laughed. “Maybe. But you won’t be drinking it. You’ll rub it on your face.”

“On my face? Oh June, I’m pretty sure the last thing I need is more oil on my skin.”

June was already opening the bottles and pouring them into a bowl. “Believe me. This works.”

Illy watched her friend concentrating on her oil concoction, relieved to have a project to focus on. She wished all of life’s solutions were so simple.

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Illy grabbed her grey jogging hoodie from the closet in the front hall. A single accusatory spiderweb attached it to the closet wall. It had been a while since she’d gone jogging. She immediately began an internal defense against the laziness charge—there had been the yoga classes after all, and all that stretching—but caught herself and rolled her eyes. Once she’d started noticing her imaginary dialogues, they’d grown tiresome pretty quickly. She’d named them Pre-Think and Re-Think and noticed that almost all of her

thoughts fell into these two categories. What in the world did normal people think about if they weren't constantly preparing for an imaginary conversation or reliving an old one? She wondered if that was the kind of thing she could ask her mother. She'd never considered her mother's thought patterns before, since she was too busy arming herself for potential attacks on her cleaning or dating habits when they were together.

Illy pushed the front door of the building open and closed her eyes as the cool morning air rushed across her face. She loved that moment. Once she'd been standing there with her eyes closed, basking in all that crisp freshness when a man tried to enter the building. He'd just squeezed by her, pushing her aside with his elbow like she was a low-hanging branch, which of course had knocked her off balance. She'd never had very good balance with her eyes closed. So there she'd sat on the front step, more annoyed at the violation of her fresh air enjoyment than embarrassed, wondering who could have been in that much of a hurry that he'd actually shove someone out of the way. She'd never figured out who it was since her eyes had been closed and he'd rushed by so quickly, although she'd always suspected Crazy Killer Man. But since her newfound affection for him, and his rechristening as Leonard, she'd absolved him of guilt. It was probably a repair man.

The whole experience hadn't managed to put an end to her exit ritual, especially early on these summer mornings when the air wasn't yet heavy with heat. She figured those few closed-eyed breaths did more for her well-being than all the jogging that followed. She was just about to step onto the sidewalk when something in the entrance caught her eye. She stopped the door and turned back inside. There by the mailboxes was a wire rack displaying small softcover books, the size of the old Archie comic collections she used to buy from grocery store aisles as a kid. Illy picked one up. The front cover was a photo collage of old doors with *No Entry* typed across in block letters. She flipped through the book. It looked like a collection of poems, although none of them had titles, so she wondered if it was maybe one long poem.

Illy couldn't imagine who would have left a pile of poetry collections by the mailboxes, but it felt like a serendipitous start to her morning. She was trying to decide if she should carry one with her on her jog or wait to take one when she returned, when she saw a yellow sticky note on the side of the rack. *For*

more copies, see Sally. 2B. Illy grabbed the sticky note and jogged down the hall to 2B. It was only after she'd knocked with great enthusiasm that she remembered it was still 7 a.m. She winced and waited, jogging in place so she could count this as exercise time. The door opened a moment later, and there stood a blinking Sally, wearing a vintage yellow Girl Guides t-shirt and flowered pajama pants. Illy couldn't believe people actually looked that cool when they were sleeping. She needed to rethink her pajama wardrobe.

"Oh Sally, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." Sally just blinked and Illy wasn't sure if she even recognized her. "It's just that I saw the display of these little books and this note—" She held out the sticky note like a hall pass. "And I just had to know, well, what is it?"

"The sticky note?" Sally yawned.

"No. The book. Is it a poetry collection? Did you write it? Are they for sale?" Illy stopped jogging.

Sally laughed, an amused but kind-hearted laugh. "Hey, do you want to come in? I can put on some coffee and tell you all about it."

A few months ago Illy would have been too embarrassed to accept an impromptu invitation, especially from someone whom she'd just woken up, and would have made up an excuse about her heart rate or something. But she remembered her promise to the Kayaker to not be embarrassed and decided to trust Sally's kindness. "Sure. Why not? I'm not getting much exercise jogging in the hall anyway."

Sally smiled and stepped back to let Illy into the apartment. "Simon's still sleeping. He'll probably emerge when he smells the coffee. Come on in."

Illy sat down at the little round table in the kitchen. The tabletop was a collage of black and white photos.

"This is so cool." Illy ran her fingers over the smooth glossy surface. "Did you buy it like this?"

"No. Decoupage. I'm a bit of a decoupage addict. Those are all pictures of my and Simon's parents and grandparents when they were little." Sally was sounding more awake now. She set two miniature mugs on the table. "Do you

mind drinking out of these? Simon has a thing for espresso mugs and we're sort of used to using them all the time."

"No problem. I love those mugs." Illy was still staring at the tabletop, amazed at Sally's creativity. Amazed that people put time and energy into making old formica tabletops into art.

"So, the chapbook." Sally set a French press on the table, filled to the top with thick dark liquid. It looked like really strong coffee and Illy hoped Sally would offer cream.

"The what?"

"The chapbook. That you picked up in the entrance?" Sally sat down across from Illy. "You wanted to know about it?"

"Oh yeah. Of course. I just didn't know that's what it was called. Did you write it?"

"No, it's a little dark for me. Lots of poems about suicide and heroin and stuff. It's just the latest book my brother published and he asked if he could put a pile in our building." She slowly pushed down on the shiny silver knob at the top of the French press. Dark specks of coffee grinds spun behind the glass like tiny floating seeds. Illy remembered watching seeds float from maple trees like helicopters when she was a kid and wondered if there were any maple trees in this neighbourhood. When had she stopped noticing helicopter seeds?

Sally was still pressing the filter down with gentle concentration. Illy felt like she should bow her head or something, but instead just watched and felt the relief of unapologetic silence. When the grinds had settled, Sally filled the miniature mugs with coffee, right to the rim. No room for cream. Illy decided she didn't mind.

"So your brother works for a publishing company? Is he going to publish Simon's book?"

"No, it's nothing that official. He just does chapbooks, little poetry collections or rants or whatever by some of his friends in university. They're usually pretty weird. Why are you asking? Do you have a secret collection of

anarchist poems you're planning to distribute to the masses?" Sally raised her eyebrows over the espresso mug. Her eyebrows were full and dark, much too wild by popular magazine standards. Illy thought they looked regal.

"Not exactly. But I'm starting to get an idea. I'm sure it's ludicrous, but... Can you tell me, well, everything?"

CHAPTER FORTY

The seasons were changing. Illy noticed it first in the smell of the air, that hint of fall in the morning when the world still looked like summer would go on forever. But in a matter of weeks—days?—suddenly everything was different. The elm leaves were that perfect creamy gold colour that took Illy by surprise ever year, like she'd stepped into a magnificent King Midas legend. A gust of wind lifted the dry leaves from the sidewalk and she remembered imagining the trees were laying down their leaves as a royal carpet just for her. She repressed the urge to skip. Then changed her mind and did skip, just a little. These days she almost couldn't bear the beauty she saw everywhere she looked. The leaves, of course, which were extravagant in their loveliness, but also the glow behind the blue of the sky, the elaborate design in the foam of her latte that morning at the neighbourhood coffee shop, the mischievous smile of the guy behind the counter with the stilted English and the thick moustache. She was starting to feel like the universe was throwing her a surprise party but couldn't quite keep the secret.

It had only been a few weeks since her discouraged donut hole session with June, when Illy couldn't find a shred of happiness or hope anywhere, but something had changed. She wondered if she should feel guilty about how happy she was feeling. It wasn't like anything had changed for anyone else. Margaret was still trapped and undervalued. Dave was still unemployed. People everywhere were still lonely and depressed and suffering. She stopped and touched the bark of a tree planted by the sidewalk, felt its bark, thought about her father telling her to listen to trees. None of that terribleness made any sense, but somehow she was sure that trying to be gloomy about it wasn't going to help. She pressed her fingers deep into the grooves of the bark, felt the roughness and the beauty, and gave herself permission to be happy for now. She thought maybe she was noticing the goodness on behalf of her

friends who were having a hard time doing it themselves.

Illy nearly jogged the last few blocks back to her building. Now that she had a plan there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day for writing. Whenever she'd sit down at her computer—the typewriter just couldn't keep up—she could barely stay focused on one idea and rather skipped from one piece to another, editing the various poems and stories she'd been working on, then suddenly starting a new document to jot down another idea.

A pile of boxes on the sidewalk by her building shattered her giddiness. Nancy was sitting on top of the boxes looking confused. Illy walked over and stroked her behind the ears. "Hey Nancy. Big changes these days, hey? Don't worry, sweetie, it's going to be okay." Nancy closed her eyes as though basking in the reassurance of Illy's voice.

"Hi Ilia. Sorry for the mess out here." Dave stepped out of the building holding a coffee maker and a tangle of wire hangers. He had the same confused look as Nancy. Illy wished she knew how to reassure him. There were so many gaps in the set of useful responses bequeathed by society. What to say when somebody died was one. And comforting lost and lonely neighbours on their moving day was another.

"So today's the day? Leaving the Harrison flock for brighter pastures?" Her attempt at humour sounded hollow, but Dave managed a small grin.

"Guess so. I hope the rest of you can cope without us." His voice broke a little as he set the hangers on the ground beside the boxes.

Illy thought about how easy it would be to make a quick exit, but then remembered Margaret's tears at the falafel shop and reached down to pick up Nancy instead. She was learning that sometimes the most caring thing was to just stay put, right in the middle of the discomfort. Nancy purred.

"Um, Dave? Do you have a number where I could reach you? I'm planning a little apartment event and would love for you to come, but I don't have the details yet. Maybe I could call you?" She looked down at Nancy's butterscotch fur while she talked, not sure if she was overstepping her bounds as a former neighbour.

"Sure. I don't have a phone right now, but you could probably reach me at

my brother's number. Or at least he'll know where to find me." Dave opened up one of the boxes and scrounged around a while till he found a pen, then jotted down a number on the back of an old receipt. He passed Illy the paper, then reached for Nancy. "See you around, then. Good luck with your book."

Illy wished she could stay and help somehow or at least tell Dave how sad she was that he was leaving, but she realized she'd been dismissed. "Yeah, see you later. Bye Nancy." Illy paused, but Dave was bent over a box, trying to jam in the coffee pot with one hand while Nancy squirmed in the other. Illy turned to the door and reached in her pocket for her keys, wondering what she'd been so happy about just minutes earlier.

When she entered her apartment she saw that she had a voice message from her dad waiting on her phone, which she'd forgotten to bring with her on her walk. She played the message while untying her shoes. "Hey sweetie, give us a call when you get in. Mom got some news from the doctor today. Don't want to worry you, but...well, just call when you get in." Illy leaned against the door frame. Outside her window, leaves fell like snowflakes. They looked brown and brittle in the grey light. Illy closed her eyes and tried to breathe.

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"Any sign of a promotion coming your way?" Illy's mother was leaning back against the beige couch cushions with a slouchiness that was uncharacteristic of her. Illy thought she looked gentler without her usual angles.

"I hope not. The only position I could move up into is Simon's and I'd way rather work for him than for myself. But can we please not talk about my lack of ambition right now? I'm here to talk about you. What exactly did the doctor say?" Illy glanced at her father who was sitting on the edge of a wooden chair near the couch. She couldn't remember ever seeing him sitting anywhere in the living room other than in his leather recliner. Her mother's angularity seemed to be leaching into him. Neither of them spoke.

Illy tried again. "Is she sure it's cancer? Could there have been some mistake? Can you get a second opinion?"

Illy's mother closed her eyes and attempted a smile. "Oh Ilia. Please don't worry about me. I'm sure I'll be fine. Your Auntie Evelyn is researching all sorts of natural regimens that will probably make me healthier than ever." She opened her eyes and looked at Illy. "Really, I'll be fine. Try not to worry."

Illy wondered at the irony of this perpetual worrier trying to convince her daughter not to worry. Worry was a family legacy. And now, for the first time that Illy could remember, there was something legitimate to worry about and her mother looked genuinely relaxed. Illy wasn't sure how to feel. She looked to her father for guidance but he was watching his wife's face, searching for direction of his own. She'd never imagined her father as someone who needed cues for his emotions.

"Okay. I'll try. Glad you're feeling okay." Illy had been expecting a longer interrogation of her romantic life, or at least her plants' wellbeing. She'd been at her parents' for less than ten minutes, but already felt like her mother was ending the visit. She waited a few more seconds, giving her mother the chance to recall some quirky family anecdote or suggestion for Illy's cleaning routine, but none came. Illy stood up and walked to the couch. She leaned down to kiss her mother on the forehead, exactly like her mother had done to her for a lifetime of goodnights. "I'll be back Thursday, okay? Get some rest." She turned to her father and almost kissed his head too, but felt like that might be condescending somehow, an admittance that he wasn't doing well. "Bye Dad. Call me if you need me." Her father didn't move. Illy turned before the tears slipped down her cheeks, something shifting behind her ribs.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Slivers of paper decorated the floor around the coffee table like low-budget confetti. Illy was trimming the edges around a magazine cut-out with a concentration that made her skull hurt. No matter how carefully she cut, the corners were never straight, which she was sure indicated some subconscious imbalance, or at least an inherent lack of artistic ability. It was the reason her quilting aspirations hadn't survived a week in university. Straight cutters didn't know how easy they had it. The fact that she was assembling her chapbook with scissors and purple glue sticks was ridiculous in this age of publishing programs and graphic design geniuses, but Sally assured her that they could scan in her handmade creation, giving it an unpolished folksy feel. Illy wasn't quite as confident as Sally, but really had no other option, so she kept cutting. The truth was that when she stopped berating her lack of computer skills and kindergarten style of operating, she really enjoyed these hours of cutting and gluing. The physicality of it was therapeutic and felt like creating in the truest sense of the word. She cut the word 'papyrus' out of a magazine article and added it to the pile of possibility scraps on the coffee table. Illy jumped when the door buzzed, causing her scissors to slip and cut right into a great picture of an old lamp post. She set the scissors down and hurried to the intercom.

"Yes?"

"It's us. And it's cold." June sounded like she was jogging. Starting in early September, the cold was June's main preoccupation.

Illy laughed and pushed the button. It had been weeks since she'd seen Margaret and June, and although she was hesitant to give up productive work time, she knew that being with her friends would be good for her soul. She sank into the couch and watched the door, eager to witness the swirling

energy that followed June into a room. She heard Margaret's voice before the door even opened, then in rushed June, rubbing her hands together and hopping from one foot to the other.

"But June, this is a lovely fall day. How in the world do you survive winter?" Margaret entered the apartment in that understated way she moved that almost escaped detection, especially when in the same sphere as June's bustling activity. Margaret hadn't known June through a winter yet, and although Illy had never considered before how much the seasons affected relationships, there was no doubt that you got to know June in a whole new way once the weather dipped below freezing.

"I don't know how I survive. This year I may not, if it's already this cold in September." June kicked off her boots but left her hat and scarf in place, then sat on the couch and leaned into Illy, tucking her legs under her. "How are you, stranger? Living the hermetic writer's life?" She noticed the piles of paper scraps on the coffee table. "Or composing ransom notes?"

"Nothing that thrilling. Just working on my Great Mystery." Illy really wanted to keep her chapbook a secret for now, and had only given her friends vague hints as to the project she was working on.

"Ahh, the Great Mystery. When will it be revealed to the masses?" Margaret sat on the floor and wrapped her arms around her knees. Illy wished Margaret didn't try so hard to disappear.

"Soon, I promise. But first I want to hear about you. What's been going on? And do you need coffee?"

June stood up. "Yes, please. Lots of coffee. And Oreos, if possible. I'll get it while you catch up with Margaret." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Illy looked at Margaret. She'd learned that Margaret was best approached with a bit of silent space. Most people didn't have the patience to sit through any silence at all, which was why they missed much of who Margaret was. Illy winced a little as she realized she had spent most of her life filling up space with unnecessary words, terrified at the awkwardness of pauses. She listened to her breath and remembered a teacher she'd had in junior high who said his favourite pastime was breathing. He probably wasn't nearly as crazy as she'd thought he was at the time.

"I have nothing to report, just so you know. No grand promotions, no personal breakthroughs with Louise, no handsome new waiters at the falafel place." Margaret wrinkled the corners of her eyes as though she was trying to smile, but her mouth remained unconvinced. "I have, however, been spending lots of time with my mandolin, whom I find infinitely more enjoyable than Louise or waiters, so life isn't too gloomy."

"I've never heard you play the mandolin." Illy paused. "Actually I don't even know exactly what a mandolin is." Illy grimaced with embarrassment at this admission, though she was also relieved, since she'd been nodding and murmuring at Margaret like a mandolin expert for months. It had felt like an insult to Margaret's passion to ask for a description of the instrument that she loved so dearly, but she realized it was probably more insulting to pretend.

Margaret laughed, a loud and bubbling laugh that took Illy by surprise. "Really? You don't know what a mandolin is? Oh Illy, every day with you is an adventure in the unexpected. And the great thing about you is that you admit it. How many people live their lives pretending to be experts on subjects they know nothing about?"

Illy thought it was gracious of Margaret not to mention that Illy had been doing exactly that ever since they met. Margaret unwrapped her arms from around her knees and held them in the air as though holding an instrument. "This, my darling, is a mandolin. This long part here is the neck. As you can see it's a bit thicker than, say, a banjo because the mandolin has eight strings. That's what gives it its full sound." Her fingers glided back and forth along the imaginary wood with such conviction that Illy almost believed it was there. "Here are the frets, of course, so you know where to put your fingers, and down here is the beautiful curved back of the body. This one is made of maple." Her fingers moved like water. "And this is how the mandolin sounds." She held up an invisible pick and then began to play the imaginary instrument with tender concentration. Illy was mesmerized. It felt like magic to be watching the silent music being created, a glimpse into a fairy tale. She noticed June leaning against the living room door frame, holding a coffee mug, staring at Margaret's fingers.

When Margaret plucked one last imaginary string, nodded, and slowly set the invisible instrument on the floor, Illy remained still. After a moment she

smiled and said, “Now I know what a mandolin is.”

June walked into the room and sat down on the couch. “I loved that, Margaret. I hope someday I get to hear the music too, but for now, just watching you hear the music was wonderful enough.”

Margaret didn’t say anything, but she smiled at June and didn’t pull at her eyelashes or check for hangnails. Illy had never seen her so peaceful.

“I think I actually might have an opportunity for you to do a real performance soon, but I just can’t tell you about it yet. Would you maybe consider it?” Illy held her breath and waited for Margaret’s refusal.

“Another Great Mystery? Now you’re an undercover concert planner or something? Oh, Illy, what in the world are you up to?” Margaret’s eyes were wide and sparkling. Illy exhaled. That wasn’t a refusal.

“I promise, promise, promise I’ll tell you soon. Please just let me keep it a secret a little longer. I’ve never actually orchestrated a surprise that worked. This may be my only chance.”

June laughed. “It’s true. Illy tried to throw a surprise birthday party for her mom every year in high school and it flopped every time. Her dad would let the secret slip—”

Illy interrupted. “My dad is morally opposed to secrets.” More bubbling laughter from Margaret.

“—or her mom’s friends would email her to ask when the party started, or something. It was disastrous.” June looked at Illy with sympathy and amusement.

“Finally by grade twelve my mom went through the whole charade out of pity for me, complete with feigned obliviousness and shocked squeals at the door. A month later the guilt overtook her and she admitted she’d known all along. I haven’t attempted a big surprise since.” Illy paused. She wondered if she should abandon the Great Mystery. What if it turned into another of Illy’s Giant Flops?

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” June and Margaret both saw the shift in Illy’s posture. June grabbed Illy’s hands. “You may not abandon the Great Mystery. This is

not your mother's birthday. This is not going to flop." June was in stern lecture mode. "I'm sorry I brought up the parties, but you cannot give up now. This is something you have to do."

Illy raised her eyes to look at June, but maintained a slight pout. She didn't love being lectured. "You don't even know what the Great Mystery is. Maybe it's a really terrible idea."

Margaret spoke up. "Maybe it is. But probably it isn't. I've never seen you as excited about anything since I met you. And I know that if you gave it up, you'd regret it forever."

It was true. Illy didn't want to give it up, even if her insecurities were staging an internal mutiny. She relaxed her mouth. "You're right. Sorry for pouting. I wish you two could move into my brain and oust the reigning commentators. I could use a better fan club in there."

"What's the fun of a fan club if you can't have snacks?" June opened a crumpled bag of Oreos. I think I'd prefer to stay out here and just lecture you more often. "

Margaret reached for an Oreo. "Speaking of lectures, how's work going, June? What are the joys and sorrows of the academic life?"

June rolled her eyes and began to describe a student who sat in the front row and Skyped his girlfriend during one of her lectures. Illy watched June and Margaret laughing and dropping cookie crumbs on the floor. She knew there was one more piece she had to write. But what language had words to describe all of this?

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Hey, Mom, how are you feeling today?” Illy glanced at Fern. “Hang on—before you answer, I’m going to put you on speaker. I think Fern and the girls are missing you.” Illy pushed a button and held the phone above the plants. “There, go ahead. How are you feeling?” Silence. “Mom? You still there? I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, darling, still here. Just needed to sit down to catch my breath.” Illy exhaled and rubbed one of Fern’s leaves for moral support. “I’m doing okay. A little tired. Haven’t finished all the vacuuming yet.” Her mom’s voice sounded small and distant. Illy thought of a bottle floating away with the tide, an old letter curled up inside. She pushed the speaker button again and pressed the phone to her ear. “Oh mom, why are you vacuuming? Nobody cares if there’s dirt on the carpet—which I’m sure there isn’t anyway. Please just lie down.”

“Illy, the floor needs vacuuming.” Her voice was stronger, angry. Illy felt the familiar clench of hurt feelings in her chest and then closed her eyes and inhaled. A fragile insight flickered through her mind. “Sorry, mom, you’re right. I forgot you always vacuumed on Wednesday. Just take some breaks, okay?” Illy swallowed the emotion creeping up her throat. “Hey, about these plants, do you think it’s too dry in here now that it’s fall? Do they need a humidifier or something?”

“They shouldn’t.” The anger in her mom’s voice was gone, but so was the distant floating sound. “My plants have always been fine all winter. Maybe just water them a little more often.”

“Okay, I’ll try. Though you may need to remind me. And did Dad tell you about Friday? Do you think you can make it?”

“Yes, he told me, though I don’t know why it’s such a big secret.” Illy could picture her mother rolling her eyes. “We’ll be there. But now I should get back to my vacuuming, sweetie. Thanks for calling.”

“Good talking to you, Mom. Thanks for your plant help.” Illy set down the phone. Her face was wet with tears. She hadn’t realized growing up and grieving were so painfully intertwined.

She picked up a pen and a magazine scrap off the floor, then sank into the couch. Without thinking, she began to write. *She vacuums on Wednesdays. Sets the world right with elegance and horsepower.* Illy wrote for half an hour, covered seven torn magazine pages, and cried the entire time.

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“Special Delivery!” Sally’s voice called through the door. “And hurry up, this is heavy.” Illy ran to the door and flung it open. Sally was beaming over a large cardboard box. “I think these may belong to you, my dear author friend.”

Illy took the box from Sally and savoured the weight of it in her arms. “Sally, can you believe it? A box that’s actually heavy with my very own words.” She rubbed the sides of the box like a long-lost kitten. “I haven’t just been wasting all these months eating animal crackers. There’s a box!”

Sally laughed and leaned against the door frame. “Of course you haven’t been wasting your time. You don’t need a box to prove that.”

“Oh, but I do. My thoughts are so flighty and elusive and this box...this box is so weighty and real.” She resisted the urge to kiss the box. Or Sally. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Sally. You’re amazing. You’ll be here by seven, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Sally started down the hall, then called back. “I slipped a little good luck gift in the top. See you tonight!” She disappeared into her apartment.

Illy closed the door and brought the box into the living room. She set it in the middle of the floor and then stepped back and smiled. A box of her words. She felt shaky and light-headed, stunned by the reality of that brown cardboard. For a moment she considered calling June or Margaret over to open the box with her to make it a real celebration. Then she realized it didn't need to be public to be legitimate. This was her own private accomplishment and she could celebrate on her own. She sat down by the box and opened the top flaps. The first thing she saw was a bunch of bananas with a small note taped to it. *Congratulations to our favourite pretend kick boxer. (This time we hope you'll accept our bananas)* — S+S.

Illy laughed and peeled a banana. She took a bite and then lifted a booklet from the box. The front cover was an old photo of an Amish barn raising. Pasted over the barn was a picture of Harrison Apartments, and in typewriter script across the bottom were the words, *A Peculiar Kinship*. She lay on her stomach and opened the book. It was photocopied on white printer paper and stapled down the middle. Not exactly a glossy hardcover published in New York, but Illy didn't care. She hadn't done this for money or big impressions. She peeled another banana and read every word.

When she was done, she placed the book back in the box and sat cross-legged on the floor, breathing in the smell of ink and the feeling of something unfamiliar expanding in her spine. She stood up and walked over to her laptop, turning on her favourite Ella Fitzgerald album, hoping Frank the Downstairs Priest would forgive her for the volume this one time. As the music filled the apartment, she began pushing the furniture around, propping up pillows, gathering candles. She grinned and swung her hips to the rhythm of Ella's voice, feeling poised and beautiful, like the heroine in a really great movie. Illy wasn't sure what kind of movie would dedicate a scene to the lead character cleaning up her apartment, but she didn't care. She didn't even pause by the window to check if anyone was watching her from the sidewalk. The once familiar feeling of teetering on the edge of embarrassment with every step seemed like it belonged to a different person. She realized that the new space along her spine was the deep knowing that at this moment she was doing exactly what she was meant to be doing, that all the hours of her life had led to this moment of placing a tea light candle on the windowsill. She hummed along with Ella and headed to the bathroom. Even heroines sometimes had to pluck their eyebrows.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

June arrived with two bulging grocery bags and four orange daisies wrapped in cellophane. She dropped the bags on the kitchen table then held the daisies out to Illy with a slight grimace. “I know that four scrawny daisies seem like a pathetic offering, but you know how florist shops always send me into an ethical crisis. All that money and plane exhaust to ship in gorgeous roses from Holland or Peru or wherever they come from, to sit shivering behind a frosty window and pretend they’re a natural phenomenon.”

Illy was grinning. June had convinced her long ago to never waste money or integrity at a florist, and the fact that she’d even entered that den of ecological iniquity on Illy’s behalf was a sure sign of love.

“But I wanted to get you something because I know this is a big night for you, even though I still don’t really know why.” June glanced around the kitchen. “I’m a little worried you’re unveiling a secret husband from Bali or something, in which case orange daisies seem totally inadequate—”

Illy took the flowers from June. “Thank you, June. These are perfect for the occasion and I’m hugely flattered that you would sacrifice your principles on my behalf.” She reached under the sink for an empty wine bottle, unwrapped the cellophane, and jammed the daisy stems into the bottle. “Now come meet Raju.”

June laughed. “First let’s put some water in that bottle. Wouldn’t want the poor things to die on their first night after all they’ve been through.”

There was a knock at the door. Illy left June to tend to the daisies and went to open the door. Margaret was standing in the hallway holding a black instrument case and a bag of taco chips.

“So, here we are.”

Illy glanced down the hall.

“I mean me and my mandolin. I think this is the first time I’ve taken it out of my house since I bought it. It feels like I’m introducing my imaginary friend to kids at school.” Margaret looked down at the black case.

Illy was afraid Margaret was regretting the decision to come and would turn and leave, hiding away with her mandolin forever. “Well, I, for one, can’t wait to meet your imaginary friend. I’ll introduce her to my imaginary husband.” She took the chip bag from Margaret and gave her a hug. “Come on in. June’s in the kitchen tending to her moral dilemma.”

Margaret opened her mouth to ask something, then just smiled and walked towards the kitchen. Illy started to close the door, then saw Simon and Sally coming down the hall, carrying gift bags and bottles of wine.

“Seriously, you two, you already gave me bananas. You did not need to bring all this.”

Simon laughed and kissed Illy on the cheek. “Humour us. My cell phone salespeople rarely launch books in their spare time.”

“Well, I’m not exactly launching—” Simon ignored her and went into the apartment.

Sally widened her eyes at Illy. “So, this is it! How many people are you expecting?”

“I don’t really know. I invited everyone in the building plus some other friends, but I think most of the people here think I’m a wacko and are afraid I’ll lecture them on litter or something, so maybe no one will show up.”

“Perfect. More wine for us.” Sally disappeared into the apartment.

Illy paused in the empty hallway, breathing in the familiar marijuana-radiator smell. She waited for the first signs of hyperventilation or at least her token heart palpitations, but they didn’t come. She smiled at the empty stairwell, then went to the kitchen to join her favourite people in the world.

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By 7:30 the living room was packed. Illy leaned against the door frame and watched all the continents of her life collide. Her mom, looking withered but brave, was sitting beside Sally on the couch, talking about muffin recipes. Pam was leaning back in the rocking chair, telling June and Steve and Zoe, the Urban Mermaid, a story that had them laughing aloud and spraying bits of taco chips into their serviettes. Jay was sitting on the floor beside his new girlfirend, a quiet girl with espresso skin and glasses who Illy thought looked like a nerdy supermodel. She liked her already. Dave, Simon, Margaret, Illy's Dad, even Leonard—whose name Illy had discovered was really Armando, and who was as gentle and tragic as she'd imagined—they were all there in the same room, like the best and weirdest sort of club. Illy was disappointed that the Tuesday Lady hadn't come. She'd been so optimistic as she'd slipped the invitation under the door, sure that a friendship was still in store for them, but Tuesday lady was clearly unconvinced.

Illy walked over to Margaret, who was listening to Dave tell a group of people about Nancy's new relationship with a Siamese Cat.

"Are you ready to start?"

Margaret clenched her eyes shut, then nodded. "I guess so. Can I just start without any introduction? Like just play quietly while everyone keeps talking?" Her eyes were still shut.

"Sure. And Margaret?" Margaret opened her eyes. "Thank you." Illy gave her a quick hug then nudged her in the direction of her mandolin, propped up beside a chair in the corner of the room.

Margaret sat down in the chair, picked up her mandolin and pick, and without even taking a breath, began to play. Her hopes of blending into the hum of conversation were dashed by the second measure. The voices hushed as though on cue and everyone turned to watch Margaret's long fingers ripple over the mandolin strings. Illy held her breath. The music somehow managed to be playful and sorrowful at the same time. Illy didn't know if she wanted

to dance or cry. After a few minutes she forced herself to look away from Margaret and studied the other faces in the room. No one was moving. Illy exhaled. Margaret was doing it. She was playing her mandolin in public and it was gorgeous. The evening, the writing, the chapbook, it was all worth it just for this moment.

When Margaret plucked her last note, it hovered in the stillness without embarrassment. Margaret looked around the room with a small smile, not avoiding anyone's eyes, not trying to disappear into the corner. Illy's mom was the one who started clapping and soon the room was filled with applause and shouts of "Bravo!" and "Encore!" Margaret's smile grew bigger, but she didn't move, just soaked in all that wild affirmation of who she was.

When the clapping finally stopped, she cleared her throat. "Thanks everyone. Thanks a lot. That was way more fun than I ever expected. But now it's Illy's turn." Margaret set her mandolin in its case and mouthed "Good luck" to Illy.

"Margaret, that was amazing. Please play for us again later." Illy paused. She realized she hadn't put any thought into what exactly she was going to say to all these people gathered here for the unveiling of her Great Mystery. She took a deep breath and tried not to chew her upper lip. "So, a year ago, I was pretending to write a novel." Illy avoided her mother's eyes as she said this. "I wanted to write a big, brilliant Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel about life in a funky downtown apartment. And I kept waiting for the characters to show up in my real life. I knew exactly who they should be." She smiled at Sally, who looked like she was watching her daughter at her first violin recital, proud and nervous. "But they never showed up. Instead all of you showed up. And you were way better than the characters I was waiting for—" There was a knock at the door. "Hang on, I'll be right back." Illy hurried to open the door, hoping it might be the Tuesday Lady. Instead, it was a middle-aged balding man in a grey windbreaker.

"Hi. Are you Ilia? I'm Edward. I think you invited me to an event here this evening?" It was only when Illy smelled a whiff of cigar smoke that she realized this was the Gardening Lawyer from across the street. She hadn't recognized him without his bright visor.

"Yes, yes! So glad you made it. Please come in." She reached out to shake his hand. "I'm Ilia. So happy to meet you."

Edward seemed surprised but pleased at her enthusiasm.

“I’m just in the middle of an awkward speech, so feel free to grab a drink from the kitchen and then come squeeze into the living room.” Illy watched Edward move toward the kitchen, baffled at the fact that this man, whom she’d spent years despising from a distance, was pouring himself a glass of wine in her apartment. She walked back to the living room, feeling immense gratitude. Simon was in the middle of a story about a disgruntled customer, but he stopped as she walked in. “You were saying?”

Illy laughed. “I don’t know exactly what I was saying, but what I meant to say was thank you. Thank you for being better than my cheesy imaginary characters. Thank you for being brilliant neighbours and friends and family. And thank you for showing me—though you didn’t even realize it—who I am. I’m not a novelist, at least not yet. I’m just this really lucky person living in the middle of this really spectacular web of people. So this is for you.” Illy reached for a chapbook that she’d hidden on the bookshelf behind her and held it up.

“What is it, dear?” Illy’s mom looked worried.

“Well, it’s not a cookbook. Sorry, Mom.” Illy’s dad chuckled. “It’s...well, it’s hard to explain, so I think I’ll just read a bit of it, if that’s okay.” She opened the book to the first page and started to read. She knew if she looked anyone in the eye she’d slip into Shaky Teary Voice, so she stared at the paper as though it was going to save her, and she read. She read the piece about Pam and the flower petals, the story of Leonard, the letter to the Lawyer. She read her poem about her mother, though it felt like her ribcage might crack as she read it, and she read the paragraph she’d written about Jay when she still thought he was Mocha Man, which was embarrassing, but made everyone laugh.

Illy didn’t mean to read the entire book. She’d thought that she would read a few short excerpts and then spend the rest of the evening chatting with her friends, letting them read the book on their own. But she couldn’t stop. It felt like she was introducing her best childhood friends to her new favourite adult friends, these words that she’d spent so much time with, saturated with so many of her secrets and deepest truths. The room was silent. No one stood up to get more wine or leaned over to whisper when she paused for breath.

Instead they leaned in and nodded and smiled grateful smiles, as though they were having a late dinner with a really great date. So Illy kept reading. About Tuesday Lady and the Urban Mermaid and a short skit about meeting Simon and Sally on the front steps.

When she got to the last page, she paused for a while. "This one is for June and Margaret. It's called The River. It's totally inadequate, but it's an attempt at saying thank you."

She read the poem, the one that had been so difficult to write, the one that left her aching for words that hadn't been invented. When the poem was over, she looked up for the first time since she'd opened the book. Her mom and June both had tears on their faces. Pam had her eyes closed. It was Jay's girlfriend who whispered, "Wow." Then Dave started clapping and the others joined him. They clapped and clapped while Illy grinned and took deep happy breaths.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Two hours later the living room was still full, voices and bodies blending into the late night softness that wine and laughter and music spread over a room like watercolours. Margaret had played so many songs that after the fourth call for an encore she insisted her fingers would bleed if she played another note. In an uncharacteristic moment of public attention, Illy's dad had made a speech about Illy and how her sixth grade teacher had noticed her way with words and how proud he was of her tonight. Edward told stories about his travels in the Arctic, and Illy knew she'd been wrong about nearly everything about him as she heard the tenderness in his description of sickly seals and children in fishing villages. Conversations and laughter and comfortable silence wound through the room like river currents.

Illy was quieter than usual. She had shared enough words this evening and enjoyed the relief of watching and listening, feeling no pressure to guide or carry the conversation. She wondered about the contentment that had settled deep in her abdomen. It didn't make sense really. As she looked around the room, she had to admit once again that nothing had changed. Her mom was still sick. Dave still had no job and no real home. Pam would wake up tomorrow to watch someone die. Margaret was still underappreciated and doing menial work. Everyone in the room was still carrying too many sad and difficult things. And yet Illy didn't feel frantic about fixing all the problems. Maybe it was the wine she'd had, but at this moment it seemed like maybe this laughing and crying and pouring each other drinks was even better than fixing each other's problems. Maybe just the assurance that someone else knows you and is willing to listen to your words and silences is enough to carry you through another scary day. Illy closed her eyes and listened to the sound of Margaret's laughter across the room.

"So what's next for Harrison's writer in residence? Maybe a novel about

aliens moving into the basement apartment?” Dave sat down beside Illy and offered her a bowl of chips.

“Well, I’m debating between aliens and suburbanites. They both have great dramatic potential.”

“Maybe the suburbanites could turn out to be the aliens.” Dave looked solemn, trying to work out the plot as he reached for more chips.

Illy laughed and raised her wine glass. “To the great downtown alien novel. You’re invited to the book launch one year from tonight.”

Dave raised his glass. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

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“Louise didn’t even let him past the waiting room.” Margaret swiped a fry through the tzatziki drips on her plate. “He was sitting there with this monstrous pile of pages on his lap that he must have been writing since he was thirteen, and she just walked up and said, ‘Do you always show up at meetings chewing like a cow?’ Then she turned and walked back into her office.” Margaret popped the fry in her mouth, then mumbled around it, “The poor guy just sat there, stunned, wondering if his little piece of Dentyne really just cost him his future.”

“Yikes. I guess I should count myself lucky I made it through introductions.” Illy peered at Margaret over the foil wrapper of her gyro. “Did you comfort him at all? Hand him your Louise Recovery pamphlet?”

“I tried. We chatted a while. He was actually not as shaken as most. Turns out his novel is about nomadic musicians in northern Africa. It’s pretty interesting. “

“You read it?” June was trying hard to work on lecture notes while she ate her salad, but was having a difficult time ignoring the conversation.

“Well, I started it.” Margaret paused and ate a few more fries.

“Wait—are you blushing?” Illy put her gyro down with wide eyes.
“Margaret! You’ve fallen for Dentyne Guy.”

Margaret pursed her lips and tried not to smile. “I have not. I’m just helping him out.” Then she grinned. “Over dinner tomorrow.”

June squealed and put the cap on her pen. “A date with a writer musician? If this works out, you may have to forgive Louise for all her awfulness. If she’d been any kinder, you’d have missed your destiny.”

“Destiny might be a little optimistic at this point, but yes, I’m looking forward to the evening.” Margaret leaned back against the red vinyl booth and smiled at her friends. “I promise to give you a full report.”

“I can’t wait. Speaking of reports, any thoughts on your next writing project, Illy?”

June and Margaret had both loved Illy’s chapbook. June had insisted that the writing was some of the best she’d ever read and that the whole thing was bursting with ideas for novels. Illy wasn’t sure she wanted to use any of those pieces for a different book. It felt like taking back her gift, or using her friends for her own gain.

“Well, Edward—the lawyer guy across the street—was telling me about some terrible stuff going on with logging companies and fishing villages up North. I can’t get it out of my mind, so I’ve been thinking maybe I could write about that.” Illy poked her straw at the ice in her Coke. “Not a novel, but maybe an article for the paper or our neighbourhood association or something. It seems like more people should know about what’s going on, and Edward really is an expert on it all, so he’d be a great resource.” Illy watched the bubbles stuck to the inside of the brown plastic cup. They kept sliding into each other and joining into bigger bubbles. “And I know it sounds ridiculous, but I really might try to write a little cookbook. With my mom. I was thinking it might be fun to write down all the recipes floating around in her head that she’s been using all these years. If nothing else, it would be a good excuse to hang out with her.” Illy heard her voice start to shake, so she sipped her Coke.

June and Margaret watched her with tenderness. They knew all about shaky voices and being scared for the people you loved. And they knew that the

only true and helpful response, the one great act of courage required of them, was to keep showing up to eat olives and onions, and to pass the silver serviette box when the tears slipped through.