



### *Monday morning*

Stacy Temple, thirty-two, redheaded and pink of cheek, the very picture of health, if not happiness, lifted the pointed chin of her heart-shaped face and said, 'Suicide on a roll.'

She'd been waiting in line at the deli for over ten minutes, and had managed to apply full makeup and read up to page six of the *New York Post* before placing her order.

'Butter, too?' asked the man in the apron behind the chrome counter.

'No, thanks,' she said, turning the page of her paper.

'Oh, go ahead,' said the deli man. 'Two fried eggs with bacon and cheese on a roll? Why not add some butter to lube up your digestion?'

Stacy had been coming to this hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, crammed between two fifty-story silver towers on Park Avenue, for her weekday breakfasts for over a year. Never once had her conversation with the grill man varied from the usual pattern: her pleasantly

issued request, his grunt of acknowledgment, her barely audible appreciation, his forking over the food.

Thrown by the shift from their usual exchange, Stacy looked at the man who prepared her morning meal. He was twenty-four, twenty-five maybe, with wiry black hair. Greek? Italian? Mediterranean ancestry, but no trace of an accent. His round face rested solidly on a thick bull neck. He showed her his smile now, a wide one that spread across his face like the butter he was pushing. Chiclets for teeth. He vibrated with the nervous edge of a pent-up human animal, forced by financial necessity to flip eggs for strangers over a hot grill in New York City in July, seeking a bit of kindness on a Monday morning, a small, friendly exchange with a pretty girl to brighten the drudgery of the day.

She smiled back at him. 'That's very considerate of you to think of my digestion, but I'll pass. Thanks again.'

From beneath a black, bushy unibrow, the man winked. Then he winked with his other eye. And after that, he puckered his lips and made a 'kissy-kissy' sound.

Stacy Temple, redheaded and suddenly redder of cheek, gasped. Someone behind her laughed. She clutched her tote and the *Post* to her chest and exited as quickly as possible in kitten-heeled mules.

'And the worst part about it: where can I go for breakfast now?' Safely at her desk on a floor near the

top of one of those silver Park Avenue towers, Stacy cradled the phone on her shoulder, picked grudgingly at the dry bran muffin she purchased from the building's cafeteria vending machine, and scrolled through her e-mails.

On the phone, the impatient voice of her best friend, Charlie Gabriel, asked, 'Are you multitasking me? I hear clicking. And chewing.'

'I'm swiveling.' Guilty, Stacy turned her chair and attention away from the computer screen. Formerly a segment producer at NPR, she currently served as vice president in charge of merchandising and marketing for thongs.com, the on-line retailer of lacy intimates. Facing her north wall, the one lined with racks of flimsy, strappy things on hangers, bolts of red satin stacked on the industrial gray carpet, Stacy said, 'I felt violated.'

'Guys must hit on you all the time,' ventured Charlie.

'They don't.'

'You *are* low frequency,' he said. 'Every part of your body language communicates, "Don't look at me. Don't talk to me. Keep two hundred feet back." Your clothes mix the signals, though.' Charlie was high frequency. When they walked into a room together, any room, all eyes turned toward him and stayed there. It wasn't just his physical bearing (tousled blond hair; six foot six inches of tautness, red lips and otherworldly green eyes) that drew attention. His voice, baritone, bounced,

and the words he chose as effortlessly as a fish swims couldn't be discounted.

'Men can tell you're nonsexual,' he said. 'They can sniff that out. The faintest whiff of indifference to dick will lead a man to completely ignore, with disdain, the most gorgeous woman in the room.'

Stacy said, 'If I have such indifference to dick – which, by the way, would make a great title for your next documentary – why would the deli man hit on me?'

'Two possible explanations,' said Charlie. 'His olfactory sense – the means by which men can deduce a woman's sexuality – has been bacon impaired. And, two, he can tell that you are a celibate, and he wanted to rattle you for his personal amusement. It's a power trip. A petty form of sexual harassment.'

'Then I'm right to feel violated,' said Stacy. 'I reject the assumption that the entire world can smell sexual *inactivity*. Besides, I am not a celibate who reeks of disuse. It's just been a long dry spell. And stop saying the word *sex* or *sexuality* or *sexual*. It's not even nine o'clock.' Stacy checked her watch. 'I've got to go. Emergency meeting.'

'Miracle advances in thigh highs?' asked Charlie.

'Desperate search for the next big thing. I'll be pushing for a resurgence of the whalebone corselette,' she said.

Charlie, a former doctoral candidate in medieval studies (currently a movie reviewer for noir.com and an

aspiring documentary filmmaker), asked, 'You're selling armored vests?'

'That's a corselet,' Stacy corrected. 'A corselette is a rib-crushing encasement of Lycra that fits over a woman's body, cramming her breasts, belly and protruding hips into a compact, tight, saucy package. Think Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8*. In approximately ninety seconds, I will go into an eight-hour meeting to convince my bosses that this garment of magic and grace would be most appealing to the women of America, with silk rosebuds stitched into the cleavage well.'

'Then I'll be brief,' said Charlie. 'Just say yes or no. Are you coming to the screening tonight?'

'No.'

'Will I see you for lunch on Thursday?'

'Doubtful.'

'That's a no.'

'Yes,' she said.

'Do you find it ironic that someone who sells crotchless finery for a living never has the occasion to wear it?'

'I'm wearing some right now.' Actually, Stacy encased her own tight, saucy body in a knee-length, bias-cut skirt of thin gold leather, a baby-pink T-shirt and, underneath it all, tattered, worn-out white cotton bra and panties. Charlie had a lingerie fetish. He claimed he could spot a La Perla signature bra-strap hook beneath a wool sweater (he found thongs.com

merchandise to be on the sleazy side). He also had the most sex of anyone Stacy knew. Charlie had a battalion of lovers, some dating back to his high-school days. It seemed that once a woman had slept with him, she was compelled to return for more whenever she was between boyfriends or husbands (or bored with her boyfriend or husband). Stacy wasn't sure if Charlie's high customer-loyalty rate was due to his erotic mastery or his masterful availability. He was never involved for long. Women seemed to rotate into his schedule for several nights or weeks, and then rotate out, creating a vacuum that could only be filled by another fortnight fling. Cosmic forces at work, women resurfaced only when needed. There was no overlap. Stacy was the only female friend Charlie hadn't slept with. They'd met over a decade ago in college, when she'd kept busy sleeping with all of his friends.

Charlie said, 'You might want to reconsider the screening. Jason is going to be there.'

'Jason, the handsome, hairy man?' she asked. Stacy's other phone line rang. She swiveled back to her desk to check the caller-ID display. It was her boss's extension. The meeting must be starting.

Charlie laughed. 'He's hairy?'

Stacy pictured Jason at the blind lunch date Charlie had set up for them a few months ago. It'd been unseasonably hot that spring day and Jason had rolled up his shirtsleeves to just under the elbow. His forearms were covered with dark brown hair to his

knuckles. Thick like the jungle floor, his hair. Vines of it burst out of the V of his unbuttoned collar. As they had what anyone would classify as lively conversation (easy flow, broken pleasantly with laughter, the exchange of valuable insight), Stacy traveled the line from Jason's hazel eyes to his tiger mouth, straight to his hirsute hands. She imagined those hands around her waist, lifting her off her feet (mules dangling) and carrying her into the jungle where less hairy men with shotguns would come to rescue her.

'I have to go,' she said to Charlie. 'If I'm late, they whip me with underwire bras.'

'I wouldn't mind watching that,' he said. 'I'm sure Jason wouldn't mind, either.'

Stacy knew Jason liked her. He'd paid for their lunch, and called her a couple times over the next week. Apparently, as he'd told her in detail at their lunch, he was recently and happily free from an intense relationship with a French ballerina. She'd tortured him (in both the bad and good senses) on and off for several years. After one last 'I hate you, I love you, I hate you' fight (which apparently included the hurling of red wine, face slapping, ravenous French kissing and then 3.00 a.m. sobbing), Jason had decided to say a final adieu. Stacy had a hard time picturing Jason, a quiet, bashful man, pitching angry words and slices of runny Brie at a hundred-pound mademoiselle with a bun and a tutu. Then again, who knew where (or why) passion lurked?

‘I liked Jason. And I would have called him back,’ she said to Charlie. ‘But I was swamped. The job . . .’

‘Don’t blame the job for the fact that you reek of disuse,’ he said. ‘No wonder a wink from the deli guy sends you into a panic. Unwanted sexual attention – *wanted* sexual attention – is beyond your frame of reference.’

‘You are oversexed,’ she said. ‘And my frame is just a little rusty, that’s all.’

‘You’re past rusty, Stacy,’ he said. ‘You must be rusted shut by now. Two years without sex? How do you do it? And, let me weigh in on this, the deli man may be on to something. I share his concern for your digestion.’

‘It has NOT been two years,’ she said defensively. ‘Brian and I broke up six months ago.’ Stacy consulted her Palm III. ‘I can tell you the exact date. Here’s the entry. “Break-up dinner with Brian.” July twenty-third.’

Charlie asked, ‘You had sex with Brian the night you broke up with him?’

‘The last hurrah,’ she said.

‘So it’s been one week shy of a year,’ said Charlie.

Had it really been that long? Stacy rechecked the date. She couldn’t believe it. In college, she’d studied sex as if it were the ultimate liberal art. In her twenties, a dry *month* had seemed unendurable. And now, in her early thirties, she’d gone nearly twelve months *without even missing it*. How had she changed without even noticing it? Passion had been her life-force – with lust

in one's heart, there was no room for cholesterol. Disinterest in sex was . . . what? A sign of aging? A slow, downward spiral into withered lifelessness? Stacy felt a chill, a warning, in her flat, limp (cholesterol-clogged?) blood. She'd unwittingly put herself on a path toward self-destruction: lose interest in lust at thirty-two; die – childless and miserable – at forty-two. Charlie was right. Why on earth would any ordinary woman be that intimidated by a flirtatious deli man? Somewhere in the past year, she'd transformed. She used to be a normal adult female. And she'd become something else. But what?

'You're almost a virgin again,' said Charlie.

'Excuse me?'

'I read about it on [swerve.com](http://swerve.com). Born-again virgins. If you go for a year without sex, it's like you've renewed a lapsed membership.' Swerve.com was the website for all things 'intellectually erotic'.

'Is this official?' Stacy asked, horrified.

'I doubt you'll get a certificate in the mail.'

Stacy groaned. 'My virginity was hard enough to lose the first time.' The message light on her phone blinked, angry and red. 'This has been a deeply unsettling conversation.'

Charlie said, 'I'll tell Jason you couldn't make it.'

'No,' said Stacy. 'I'll be there. And don't you dare say anything to Jason about this. Tell him I was too shy to call him back. Or tell him I liked him so much it scared me. No, don't say that. Don't say anything.' She'd show

up unannounced, flip her hair around, touch his shoulder a few times, and invite him to her place after the show. He'd accept the invitation, they'd proceed to congress, and she'd correct her libidinous oversight tonight.

Stacy Temple was no virgin. And she would never be again. She hung up, grabbed her corselette samples and hurried toward her boss's office.