



It all began with a wedding. My little sister Becky and I, along with a few cousins and friends, had been brushed, buffed and polished to perfection that morning at our favorite salon on the Upper East Side. Vows had been written and rehearsed, something blue had been borrowed, and, as I stood on the altar, watching my baby sister prepare to promise forever to a man she'd known for a year, I couldn't help feeling a bit like I was the something old to her something new.

'Rebecca, do you take Jay to be your lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?' asked the priest, gazing down at my sister.

'I do,' she said softly.

Her fiancé, Jay, echoed her vows as he looked at my red-headed sister, whose pale, freckled skin looked perfect swathed in the silk of her ivory Carolina Herrera dress.

Just as the priest was moving on to his next line, something serious about the vows of forever, I heard a low mumbling from the front row of the church. I tried to

block it out, knowing full well what it was. *Not now*, I thought. *Please, not now*.

But the mumbling got louder.

And then it took on the distinctively raspy Irish brogue of my grandmother.

‘What’s this?’ she asked loudly as my dad tried in vain to shush her. ‘Is that little Rebecca getting married?’

A mumble ran through the church as my grandmother’s voice rose and floated through the congregation. Becky turned around, glanced at Grandma and then looked at me in horror. I shrugged, helpless. What could I do? I was standing at the altar, several long yards away from the front row of pews. And clearly, Dad wasn’t having much luck shushing her.

‘Mum!’ I heard my father whisper desperately. ‘Shh! It’s Rebecca’s wedding!’

‘Rebecca, you say?’ demanded my grandmother loudly, her Irish brogue sharpened around the edges by a lifetime of smoking addiction. She coughed to punctuate her question. ‘Rebecca? But Rebecca’s the younger one! What about Cat?’

I closed my eyes briefly, hoping that perhaps my father would have the good sense to drag his mother from the church. But of course this was an Irish Catholic wedding – a wedding in our large Connelly clan, no less – and how complete would it be without a little disruption from my grandmother?

‘Yes, Mum, Rebecca’s the younger one,’ Dad whispered soothingly. ‘You know that. Let’s talk about it after the ceremony, okay?’

There was silence for a second, and I thought with a

slice of hope that Grandma had agreed to delay their little chat. Slowly, I let out my breath, and I could hear the small swoosh of others throughout the church doing the same. Becky shot me a look of tentative relief and turned back to Jay.

The priest had just opened his mouth to continue when Grandma piped up again, her loud, raspy voice punctuating the still air of the church.

‘But where’s Cat?’ she asked. I glanced around nervously, wondering if I should respond. ‘Where’s *Cat*?’ she repeated, more loudly this time.

‘She’s just there, Mum,’ my father said. I could hear the weariness in his voice.

‘Where?’ Grandma demanded. ‘Not the one in the white dress, then?’

‘No, Mum, that’s Rebecca,’ Dad said as Grandma continued to scan the church wildly.

I looked from side to side nervously. Perhaps if I ignored her, she’d just disappear. I held my breath and tried counting backwards from ten, a trick that had often worked to calm me down when I was a little girl. *Please, God, I said, Please make Grandma stop talking.* After all, this was a church. He had to listen to me here, didn’t He?

But instead of quieting down, Grandma began insistently repeating my name. ‘Cat?’ she asked raspily, her voice rising. ‘Cat? Where’s Cat? Cat, dear?’

Gradually, her voice drowned out Dad’s protests. I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing for the deluge of words to stop. When I cracked them open a few seconds later, Becky was staring down at me, her cheeks flushed with color.

‘Do something!’ she whispered urgently. ‘Please?’

I braced myself, took a deep breath and turned around.

‘I’m here, Grandma,’ I croaked. My voice seemed to echo off the cold stone of the altar.

‘Cat, dear!’ Grandma exclaimed, her face lighting up. ‘I hardly recognized you, love! You’re wearing a dress! And you’ve done your hair!’

A small ripple of laughter ran through the church.

‘Er, yes,’ I said. ‘Listen, do you think we could discuss this later, possibly? Rebecca’s in the middle of getting married, and we’re causing a bit of a disruption.’

‘But that’s what I wanted to talk to you about, dear!’ Grandma exclaimed, coughing once again to punctuate her words. One slim, bony hand flew to cover her mouth, and the other smoothed down her kelly green dress, the one she wore to every family wedding, despite the fact that it had gone out of style approximately fifty years ago.

I glanced at my father. Dad, towering over his mother at six foot one, was staring at me helplessly with eyes full of apology.

‘Everything’s fine, Grandma,’ I soothed. ‘Let’s talk later.’

‘But Cat!’ Grandma exclaimed. She paused to cough violently while Dad rapped on her back. ‘Cat, dear!’ she resumed, after the coughing fit. ‘Your sister is much younger than you! And now she’s getting married? What about that nice young man you were dating, dear? Dennis, was it? Did you screw it up?’

A fresh wave of snickers ran through the church as I felt my mouth dry out, as if someone had filled it with a handful of cotton balls. The room began to swirl around

me – just a little, not as if I was about to pass out, but the way it does sometimes when you're dreaming.

That's it! Perhaps this was all a dream. Of course it was! I mean, in what kind of twisted world did a thirty-four-year-old woman attend her twenty-nine-year-old sister's wedding and have her grandmother ridicule her in front of a hundred and twenty friends and family members? Obviously, this was some sort of devious trick on the part of my overactive imagination.

Just to be sure, I pinched myself. Hard.

Ouch.

Right. Well. Evidently this was a *deep* sort of dream, the kind in which a pinch didn't always work. So I pinched harder. Still nothing. I turned to glance at Rebecca.

'This isn't really happening, is it?' I whispered. 'I mean, this is obviously some kind of nightmare brought on by my subconscious reaction to you getting married before me, which, by the way, I'm *very* happy about. Right?'

Becky looked at me strangely. 'Noooo,' she said slowly. 'We're all very much awake. Now please, Cat! Do something!'

'Right,' I muttered, horror finally beginning to set in. 'Um, Grandma,' I said gently. 'Let's talk after the ceremony, okay? I promise we can have a full discussion about just how grandly I've screwed up my life. Okay?'

My father was bent toward Grandma, trying to shush her, but it was clearly too late. She had something to say, and she was going to say it.

'I just don't understand, dear!' she said loudly, pushing my father away with surprising strength. 'You're not ugly.'

'Thanks,' I said, glancing around at the faces of the congregation, some amused, some horrified.

‘You’re not a dimwit,’ Grandma continued.

‘Thanks,’ I repeated through clenched teeth.

‘I’m sure you’ve held on to your virtue, if you know what I mean,’ she said quite seriously. She winked and added in a theatrical whisper. ‘I’m talking about *the sex*.’

‘Er,’ I said, my face turning bright red. The snickers in the church seemed to get even louder, and Father Murphy cleared his throat. I closed my eyes for a moment, wondering about the odds of spontaneous combustion, which sounded like a lovely idea at the moment.

‘So what’s the problem?’ Grandma demanded after I had not, in fact, burst into flames on the spot. I glanced from side to side, seeking some escape, but of course there was none.

‘Um,’ I began again.

‘You’re nearly an old maid, dear!’ Grandma chirped as I contemplated how nice it would be to simply die on the spot at that very moment. She paused. ‘You’re running out of time!’ she shrieked suddenly, flapping her arms above her head like a demented bird. And then, just as quickly, she sat down in the pew, smiled sweetly at me and waved, as if we hadn’t just had a lengthy, revealing exchange in front of all my sister’s wedding guests. ‘Hello, dear!’ she said brightly after a moment. ‘When did you get here?’

The congregation sat in stunned silence for a moment until Father Murphy cleared his throat again.

‘Um, right then,’ he said awkwardly. ‘That was, um, enlightening. Now if we could just return to the wedding?’

Becky glanced down at me with concern in her eyes and mouthed, ‘Are you okay?’

I nodded, forced a smile and mouthed back, ‘Of course!’

But the truth was that I was mortified, disgraced and humiliated, all to the umpteenth degree. But I’d felt that way before Grandma even opened her mouth. After all, when you’re six weeks away from turning thirty-five and your little sister has found the man of her dreams while you’re remaining steadfastly single after yet another emotionless breakup, it’s difficult not to feel like a failure. Even when you’re so happy for her that you could burst, there’s always a little voice in the back of your head that sounds suspiciously like your grandmother, asking, ‘What’s wrong with you? Why doesn’t anyone love you?’



That was a silly question to ask, of course. When you got right down to it, I had plenty of people who loved me. My dad did, of course, and Grandma. And since Dad was a first-generation Irish-American, I had the requisite seven uncles, five aunts and several billion (okay, twenty-five) cousins on his side alone. And then of course there was my only sister, Becky, my best friend in the world.

I suppose our close relationship was unusual, especially given our six-year age gap. But our mother – a fiery, temperamental Italian woman – had left us without so much as a note just a week and a half before my twelfth birthday, and major events like that have the effect of bringing people together. Dad had fallen apart for that first year or so, and it had been up to me to keep things together.

I had quit the soccer team, my ballet classes and my dream of playing the trumpet in the high school band, and I'd become, in effect, an adult before I was even a teenager. I'd taken Becky to all her lessons and classes, cooked meals for the three of us every night and even kept the apartment clean when Dad worked overtime. I hadn't minded; I had always figured it was my job.

Then our mother came back, a few months after I turned seventeen. And she'd expected to pick up just where she left off.

She'd been there for my senior year of high school and for Becky's sixth grade year. She had lived in an apartment just down the street at first, and she and Dad went out on dates with each other, and seemed to be falling in love with each other again. Becky, who had been too young to truly feel abandoned the first time around, had been thrilled when she came home. I'd felt the opposite; in the five years she'd been gone, I'd grown to hate her for leaving us.

So when she returned, I kept waiting for her to break our hearts again. I wanted to strangle my father every time he'd shrug helplessly and say in that deep brogue of his, 'But Cat, girl, she's my one true love. And she's your mum. Can't you give her another chance?'

She moved back in with us three months after coming back. And every day, I waited for her to leave again. I knew she would. I knew it in the core of my soul.

And then, one day, she did. But not the way I thought.

She died. A massive heart attack at the age of forty-nine.

And for the second time in my life, I'd been left by my mother. But this time, it was for good. And it wasn't her fault, which was the hardest part of it to wrap my mind around. I couldn't hate her for leaving this time. But I could hate myself a little for failing to let her back in when I still had the chance.

Dad sank into depression. Becky locked herself in her room and refused to talk to anyone. And I quietly changed my plans to go off to UCLA for college and

instead stayed at home to go to NYU. When I'd graduated with my degree in accounting, I'd taken a job at a tax firm in the city. I'd been there ever since, old reliable Cat Connelly.

It was better that way. I could take care of Dad and Rebecca. And that's what I did. It was in those next several years that the three of us grew inseparable. We had all been changed by Mom's leaving. Dad had learned that sometimes you have to let go of the people you love the most. Becky had learned that there would always be people there to take care of you.

And me? I learned to trust my instincts and to know that even the people who are supposed to love you can leave you one day for no reason at all.

'I miss Mom,' Becky whispered to me a few minutes after we'd sat down for dinner at her reception at Adriano's Ristorante on the Upper West Side.

'Yeah?' I asked noncommittally.

She made a face at me. 'Don't do this, Cat,' she said. 'Not today.'

'Do what?' I asked innocently.

'The Mom thing,' she said.

Becky remembered all the good things and revered our mother. It was the one thing in our lives we'd never been able to see eye to eye on.

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled. 'I won't.'

Becky looked at me for a moment and nodded. 'Thank you,' she said. She took a deep breath. 'It would have been nice for her to be here. I think she would have been proud.' She paused again and added, 'She would have liked this.'

‘Yes,’ I agreed after a moment. ‘I think she would have.’

I meant it. The reception was beautiful. Not that I’d expected it to be any other way.

The Roma ballroom at Adriano’s, Becky’s favorite Italian restaurant, was packed to capacity with Becky and Jay’s family and friends. Exposed brick walls gave a warm, intimate feel to a room dotted with high-backed chairs covered in clover green, and the fireplace in the corner crackled brightly, lending a glow to one end of the room while crystal chandeliers bathed everything else in soft light.

While most of the wedding guests continued to eat and chat, I got up and walked to the back of the room, where I’d left my tote bag tucked under the gift table. I pulled out my camera, one of my most prized possessions. It was a Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ50S, the only major purchase I’d made in the last five years, a thirty-fourth birthday present to myself last year, and I’d meant to use it more. In fact, I’d spent many mornings wandering my neighborhood, photographing people in their normal environment, sitting on their brownstone stoops, walking their dogs, taking out the trash. I’d caught couples arguing down the block, mothers fixing the collars of their young children’s jackets, grandchildren helping elderly grandparents out for a stroll. I somehow felt most in my element when I could capture the world inside my lens, anonymous, unobserved, blending into the scenery while life happened around me.

I had taken Becky’s engagement photos, and she’d loved them, but she told me not to worry about shooting the wedding. ‘That’s why we hired someone to take

pictures,' she'd said. 'Just relax for once, okay?' I had agreed at the time, but with Becky fully absorbed in Jay, I couldn't resist sneaking in a few shots. I knew she'd appreciate them later. Becky loved having her picture taken, and she looked more beautiful tonight than I'd ever seen her.

'Hey, kiddo,' Dad said, coming up behind me and squeezing my shoulder after I'd shot a few dozen frames. 'How you doing?'

I turned around and lowered the camera. He looked so handsome in his dark suit, his crisp white shirt and his clover green tie that perfectly matched my maid of honor dress. I smiled. 'Good,' I said. 'This is beautiful, isn't it?'

'I thought you were on camera suspension for the wedding,' He winked. 'Bride's orders.'

'I couldn't resist,' I said. 'She looks beautiful, doesn't she?'

He nodded and we both looked at Becky for a moment. 'Listen, kiddo,' my dad finally said. 'I'm sorry about your grandmother.'

I shook my head. 'It's not your fault,' I said. I swallowed hard. 'I just hope Becky's not too upset.'

My father fixed me with a stern look. 'Your grandmother humiliated you in front of over a hundred people, and you're just worried about your sister?'

I glanced away. 'Whatever.'

A few minutes later, after I'd put my camera reluctantly away, I headed toward the bathroom to touch up my makeup. I was stopped by well-intentioned aunts who told me 'Your time is coming, dear,' and, 'You look beautiful today. Don't worry about what your grandmother said,' and cousins who said things like 'That color

is great on you!’ and, ‘When are *you* getting married?’

I smiled and gave the appropriate responses, issued the proper excuses. I’d almost made it safely to the back of the restaurant when my cousin Melody, a tall, plump woman with bad hair, stopped me with a firm, icy hand on my arm.

‘So where’s Dennis?’ she asked, her eyes boring into mine. Melody was just a year older than me, but we’d never been close. She lived just outside Boston, like most of my relatives. She had been married for a decade and was heavily pregnant with her sixth child.

‘He’s not here,’ I said, not wanting to get into it. I smiled pleasantly, hoping that could be the end of it, and began to walk away. But she maintained her death grip on my arm.

‘Why not?’ she asked with a syrupy smile. Sweat glistened at her brow and threatened to smear her heavy-handed makeup job.

I’d thought that the story had already made the rounds of the Boston Connelly clan. But perhaps Melody had somehow missed it. Or maybe she was just trying to rub it in. ‘We broke up, Mel,’ I said through gritted teeth.

She looked at me for a minute. I could have sworn that there was a little bit of satisfaction in her expression. She always had been competitive with me. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, Cat,’ she cooed. ‘It must be tough to be dumped at your age.’

I took a deep breath. I knew she was trying to get under my skin. I also knew it would be better to walk away. But I felt like I needed to defend myself. ‘I wasn’t *dumped*,’ I said. ‘I broke up with him.’

Real shock crossed her face this time. Then she laughed. 'Oh, come on, Cat,' she said. 'You don't have to say that. It's all right to be broken up with. It happens to all of us.' She paused and smiled. She patted her pregnant belly. 'Well, not me, obviously.'

'He *didn't* break up with me, Melody,' I said. 'He just wasn't the right person for me.'

'You can't be serious.' Her eyes looked like they were going to pop out of her head. 'You had a man who loved you,' she recapped slowly. 'Who made a good living. And you dumped him because you didn't think he was right for you?'

'Yes,' I said.

'You're thirty-five,' she said flatly.

I cleared my throat. 'Well, I will be in a few weeks.'

She ignored me. 'Don't you think you're running out of time? I mean, really!'

I took another deep breath and tried not to react. This had, after all, been the general reaction of everyone I'd told. Apparently, when you were thirty-five, you were supposed to hang on for dear life to anyone who happened to show the slightest bit of interest in you. It seemed that in everyone else's opinion, I'd been damned lucky nine months ago to land Dennis Zcenick, a mild-mannered senior-level accountant who worked at the same firm as I did.

'He just wasn't right for me,' I repeated calmly. I swallowed hard again. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom.'

I yanked my arm out of her meaty grip and strode quickly away, hating that I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

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In the bathroom, all three stalls were full, so I stood in front of the mirror for a moment and splashed cold water on my face. If I could make it past my grandmother's humiliation at the ceremony, surely I could brave Melody's superiority without crying, right? I dried my face, took a deep breath and studied my reflection, trying to steady myself.

The face looking back at me in the mirror looked as out of place as it always had at family gatherings. Whereas my sister was the spitting image of my father and his Irish clan, I looked like a carbon copy of my Italian-born mom. Becky was a petite five foot four, while I towered over her uncomfortably at a long-legged five foot nine. Where Becky's hair was curly and carrot-colored, mine was pin-straight and dark brown. Where her alabaster face was sprinkled with pale freckles that my father always called 'pixie dust,' my pale face was devoid of any such magical sprinklings, save for a tiny beauty spot just below my right cheekbone. My dad always said it was eerie, because my mother had had the same single mark in the same place on her face. Where Becky's eyes were brilliant and blue, mine were a stormy green, just like my mom's had been. Without Mom around I looked like I had just dropped out of some alternative Italian universe into my dad's perfect little Irish world.

And on days like today, when my self-confidence was flagging anyhow, I wished I could look at my own reflection and see something comforting. But instead, all I saw was a face that was, with each passing year, becoming more and more like that of my mother, a woman who couldn't be trusted, a woman who didn't know how to love.

‘Get a hold of yourself, Cat,’ I whispered to my reflection as I gave myself the evil eye. I took a few deep breaths. I was just about to turn and leave when I heard a high-pitched voice come from the middle stall.

‘You sort of have to feel sorry for her.’ I thought I recognized the shrill tone as belonging to my cousin Cecilia. I cocked my head to the side and listened, wondering who they were gossiping about now. I started to smile at myself in the mirror. Honestly, they never stopped. My cousins were, in effect, a bunch of little old ladies in thirty-something bodies.

‘I don’t,’ said another voice, which I was fairly sure belonged to another cousin, Elinor. ‘She’s had every opportunity in the world. Who’s she waiting for, Prince Charming?’

‘Apparently, Cat thinks she’s better than the rest of us,’ said a third voice, which I was sure belonged to my cousin Sandy.

I started, the smile falling from my face. They were talking about me?

‘Too good to settle down with any of the perfectly good guys she’s thrown away,’ Elinor chimed in.

‘I don’t know,’ said the voice from the middle stall. ‘I mean, maybe she’s just all screwed up because of her mom, you know?’

‘Oh, c’mon,’ scoffed Sandy. ‘You can only blame your problems on a dead mom for so long. It’s pathetic. The way she dumped the most recent one? That Dennis guy? It’s terrible.’

‘Seriously,’ said the one I thought was Elinor. ‘She’s running out of chances.’

One of the toilets flushed, snapping me out of my

horrified trance. I glanced quickly from side to side. The last thing I needed was to be caught eavesdropping on a humiliating conversation about myself.

Before I could think about it, I yanked the bathroom door open and ducked back into the hallway, hoping none of my cousins noticed. I glanced around quickly. On one end of the hallway was the door to the men's room. At the other end, there was the entrance back into the restaurant. I sure wasn't going back there yet; all I needed was to face a room full of a hundred and twenty judgmental faces while tears still prickled threateningly at the back of my eyes. The only other option was the restaurant kitchen. Heart pounding, I looked from side to side and quickly made my decision. Just as the bathroom door behind me started to open, with the voices of my gossiping cousins seeping out from behind it, I took a swan dive toward the swinging doors across the hall.

I landed in the entrance to the kitchen with a crash, flat on my face. I narrowly missed knocking over a stack of mixing bowls and a table full of utensils, but I wound up in a pile of flour that had escaped from a big sack on the floor. As I stood up, blushing, and began to dust myself off, a few cooks looked up at me with mild curiosity but went quickly back to stirring, chopping, kneading and whatever else they were doing, as if diving maids of honor were a regular occurrence there. I took a quick step to my right, so that I wouldn't be knocked over by the next waiter to bustle through the swinging doors, and looked around to get my bearings.

The kitchen was huge, much bigger than I would have expected. The walls were a sterile white, and stainless steel pots, pans and mixing bowls seemed to hang

from every surface. A small team of washers-up ran hot water over plates and piled them into massive dishwashers, while several white-frosted young men and women in chef's hats seemed to be an assembly line chopping vegetables, tossing pizza dough, spreading sauce and cheese and sliding raw pizzas into a massive wood-burning oven in the far corner of the room.

I was half hidden behind a giant rack of hanging fresh pasta, and the cooks who had seen me enter seemed to be fully absorbed in their work once again. I was forgotten, invisible.

I backed up a few more paces and sat shakily down on a barrel in the corner. I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes, trying to collect myself.

I'd been so sure about my decision to leave Dennis. At least, I'd told myself it was the right thing. But had I made the biggest mistake of my life? I held my head steady, trying to stop the wave of an approaching migraine. Maybe the relatives were right. Maybe I was being foolish and much too picky. After all, all my friends were married, and now my little sister was too. Was I condemning myself to a lifetime of being alone?

A moment later, I was snapped out of my self-pitying trance by a deep voice above me. 'You must be Cat.'

I jerked my head up, surprised, and saw a man in a suit and tie staring down at me. He had unruly dark brown hair that seemed at odds with his buttoned-up appearance, and boyish dimples that didn't seem to entirely fit on a face with crow's feet around his pale green eyes and smile lines like parentheses at the corners of his mouth.

I just stared at him for a moment, not quite sure how to respond.

‘Maybe,’ I said finally. ‘Who are you?’

‘Michael,’ he said, extending his hand formally. I stared at it for a moment but didn’t shake it.

‘Michael?’ I repeated. He’d said it like the name was supposed to mean something to me.

‘Yes,’ he said. He grinned and glanced around. ‘You’re in my kitchen, actually.’

‘*Your* kitchen?’

‘Yes,’ he said simply. He raked a hand through his thick hair, making it stick up at even stranger angles.

I looked him up and down and narrowed my eyes. ‘But you’re not a chef.’

He laughed and held up his hands defensively. ‘Well, not professionally, anyhow,’ he said.

‘And you’re not the restaurant manager,’ I said. ‘I’ve met him.’

‘Right again,’ he said mysteriously. He arched an eyebrow at me and offered his hand. I took it reluctantly and stood up. As I did, I was surprised to realize that, even in heels, I was still shorter than him by a few inches, which meant that he had to be at least six foot two.

‘So what are you talking about?’ I asked. I was running out of patience.

‘This is my restaurant,’ he clarified once we were face to face. ‘I mean, I own it.’ He was studying me with an amused expression. ‘You’re tall,’ he added.

I sighed. ‘Yes, you’re the first person to have ever pointed that out.’ I paused and added, ‘Your restaurant? Your name is Michael, but you own a restaurant named Adriano’s?’

He laughed again. ‘It’s named after my father, who ran a restaurant in Italy with his brother before he died. Is that acceptable to you?’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘So,’ he said after a moment, looking amused, ‘do you want to tell me what you’re doing back here?’

I felt a little color rise to my cheeks. I did look pretty foolish. ‘Well,’ I said slowly. I didn’t know where to begin. ‘I’m the maid of honor in the wedding.’

Michael smiled again. There was something about the way his green eyes danced that made me melt a little. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘I was sent to look for you.’

‘You were? By whom?’

‘The groom. He said you vanished, and he was worried. Actually, come to think of it, so am I. Or is hiding among the olive oil barrels some strange new wedding tradition I’m not aware of?’

I laughed, despite myself. ‘Yes, the hiding always precedes the cutting of the cake.’

‘Ah, I see.’ He looked at me closely. ‘So do I have to guess what’s really wrong? Or do you want to tell me?’

I looked down and felt the smile fall from my face. ‘No,’ I mumbled.

‘No?’ Michael repeated.

‘I’m totally okay,’ I said.

‘Of course,’ Michael said. ‘Women who are totally okay are always sneaking away to hide in my kitchen.’

I rolled my eyes, but I didn’t say anything. After a moment, Michael sat down on one of the barrels and motioned for me to do the same. I paused, glanced from side to side, and reluctantly followed suit.

‘So it’s your little sister’s wedding?’ he asked after a moment. ‘How much younger?’

‘Five and a half years.’

‘Is that why you’re upset? Because she’s getting married before you?’

I looked up sharply. ‘What? No!’ I took a breath. ‘I mean, she’s my sister. I’m nothing but happy for her.’

‘Of course,’ Michael said slowly. He was looking at me like he didn’t quite believe me.

‘I’m really not upset about that,’ I insisted. ‘I mean, I’m *so* not ready for that, you know?’ I paused and took a deep breath. I didn’t know why I was telling him all this, but I didn’t seem to be able to stop once I’d gotten started. ‘It’s just that my grandmother made a scene in church, and everyone keeps asking where my boyfriend is and what’s wrong with me that I’m about to turn thirty-five and I’m not married yet,’ I blurted out.

I looked at him miserably. He raised an eyebrow.

‘And?’ he asked.

I stared. ‘What, now *you’re* asking me why I’m not married yet?’

He laughed. ‘No, I’m asking you where your boyfriend is.’

I narrowed my eyes at him again. I hesitated, then mumbled, ‘I broke up with him a month ago.’

‘Hmm,’ Michael said instantly. ‘Why?’

‘Is that any of your business?’ I asked, bristling.

Michael shrugged. ‘Probably not.’ But he seemed to be waiting for an answer.

I glanced down at the barrel I was sitting on and took a deep breath. ‘Fine,’ I said. I thought about my answer for a minute. ‘He just wasn’t the right guy,’ I said. ‘I liked him, but I didn’t love him. And I’m pretty sure I never could.’

‘Okay,’ Michael said. He looked interested.

I took a deep breath, looked down at my lap and continued. 'He was good on paper. We should have fit. I guess I thought that if I stayed with him long enough, maybe I'd fall in love, you know? But it doesn't work that way.'

'No,' Michael agreed. 'It doesn't.'

I looked at him again, then back down. 'It just seems like everyone wants me to settle, you know? Like I'm about to turn thirty-five, and I apparently just turned down the best chance I had at getting married.'

Michael was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, 'No matter how pleasant he was, would you really want to spend the rest of your life with someone you're not in love with?'

'No,' I said softly.

'Then you did the right thing,' Michael said. 'And who cares if you're thirty-five?'

I rolled my eyes. 'Everyone, apparently.'

'Yeah, well, that's stupid,' Michael said. 'No offense to any of your family and friends. But thirty-five is just a number.'

I shrugged.

'You want to hear another number?' he asked.

I looked up, wondering what he meant.

He smiled and continued. 'Sixty. Or, if you're lucky, sixty-five or seventy.'

'What?'

'The number of years in the rest of your life,' he said. 'By that count, you're only a third of the way through, right? Do you really want to spend the second two thirds of your life with someone you *know* isn't right for you?'

I smiled. 'No.'

‘Okay, then. Now we’re getting somewhere.’

Our eyes met, and for a moment, I couldn’t look away. I had this sudden, crazy, overwhelming feeling that there was something more between us than there should have been. I held my breath without meaning to, and I had the distinct feeling he was holding his too.

And then, just as quickly as it had started, the moment was over. I blinked and took a deep breath. He coughed and looked away. And Becky chose that moment to come bursting through the kitchen doors in a cloud of ivory silk.

‘Cat!’ she exclaimed, her eyes alighting on me. She glanced at Michael and looked confused. ‘Hi,’ she said warily.

‘Hi,’ he responded cheerfully, as if this was the most normal situation in the world. ‘It’s the new Mrs Cash! How’s the reception going?’

‘Um, it’s good,’ Rebecca said. She cleared her throat and looked at me. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked. Her eyes darted to Michael and then back at me.

I smiled. ‘I’m fine. Michael here was just helping me out with something.’ Becky still looked confused, so I added, ‘This is his restaurant.’

Becky just looked at me. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘I met with him last month about the food. A meeting *you* skipped, by the way, because you were supposedly too busy with some accounting emergency.’ She looked back and forth between us. ‘What on earth was he helping you with in the kitchen?’

I opened my mouth to reply, but Michael answered for me. ‘Your sister was just asking me about various olive oil varieties,’ he said quickly. ‘I was just explaining the difference between virgin and extra-virgin.’

I stifled a laugh. Becky still looked suspicious.

‘Okay. But maybe you could rejoin the wedding now,’ she said, ‘considering you’re the maid of honor. Maybe you could find out about olive oil later?’ Now she just looked annoyed.

‘Yes, of course,’ I said quickly. ‘Sorry.’

I turned to Michael and smiled. ‘Thanks,’ I said. He smiled and I added, ‘For the lesson about olive oil.’

‘I hope it made you feel a little better,’ he said. Then he glanced at Becky and back at me. ‘About olive oil,’ he added.

I grinned. ‘Thanks,’ I said again. I turned to follow Becky, who had already flounced out of the kitchen, muttering to herself. But Michael’s deep voice stopped me before I made it to the door.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘If you want to talk olive oil again, maybe we could have dinner sometime.’

My heart was thudding suddenly. I looked at him in surprise. I didn’t think it was my imagination that he looked a little nervous.

Before I could stop it, a voice that didn’t sound like my own said, ‘That sounds great.’

‘Like Monday?’ he asked.

I took a deep breath. ‘Monday sounds fine.’

‘Good,’ Michael said. He smiled at me as I scribbled my name and number on a piece of paper. He glanced at it before slipping it into his pocket. ‘I’ll call you, Cat Connelly. It was nice to meet you.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. I shook my head and smiled. ‘You too.’