



‘**H**ow about a honeymoon *en famille*?’

I hate it when Dad Two uses foreign words.

‘What does that mean, Whitman?’ I asked.

He twirled spaghetti around his fork and smiled. ‘We’ll go with you.’

‘You mean like chaperones?’ I let out a choked-sounding laugh and looked over at Dad One, my other dad, my real dad, to see if he was in on the joke.

He wasn’t. The expectant look on John’s face as he gnawed on a piece of crusty Italian bread told me he hoped I’d say yes.

The old worrying fear that I was about to be trapped or tricked by the dads stirred in my gut. It was a side effect from childhood, from a time when I wasn’t old enough to say no and the dads always overwhelmed me.

‘Not chaperones,’ Whitman said. ‘More like guides.’

‘On my honeymoon.’ It sounded weird, even to me.

‘I don’t think so.’ I smiled nervously, looking from one dad to the other. ‘I don’t think Tremayne would be comfortable with it.’

‘Darling, the man’s been living in a *tree* for three months.’ Uh-oh. Dad Two was starting to get impatient. ‘I’ll bet he’d jump at the chance for a free vacation in a luxury wilderness resort.’

My ears perked up when I heard the words *free* and *luxury*.

‘We could go on all sorts of off-road expeditions.’ Whitman raised a pee-colored pinot something or other to his lips. ‘I know, let’s call Tremayne and ask him right now.’

I grabbed that cute little Finnish phone from his hand. ‘No!’

‘Afraid he’ll say yes?’ Whitman held out his hand and twiddled his fingers until I returned the phone.

John the peacekeeper stepped in. ‘She doesn’t want to, Whit. Let’s just forget it.’

‘Why?’ Whitman said, clearly befuddled.

‘Because it’s just too *weird!*’ I couldn’t think of a word that really expressed it. I tried to keep my voice low and the hot little-girl flush from rising to my cheeks.

Whitman, of course, wouldn’t keep his voice down. He turned up the volume, the better to be heard by everyone around us. ‘What is so *weird* about two *fathers* joining their only *daughter* and her new *husband* on their *honeymoon*?’

The thin, sour, sauerkraut-blonde girl at the next table glanced disdainfully in our direction. She must have heard. Now she knew. *I was the daughter of these two men.* The bitch, all in Prada, flattened herself to table level and began

whispering to her dot-com fiancé – or maybe she was talking to that huge diamond engagement ring he'd given her.

Tremayne doesn't believe in rings. Rings, he said, are symbols of capitalism. (Since his bankruptcy, he's been very down on capitalism.) So instead of that beautiful platinum-and-diamond ring that appears regularly in my dreams, floating just out of reach like a helium balloon, I got one made out of ink, skin, and pain. I paid for the tattoo myself since Tremayne doesn't have a paying job.

Whitman pressed on. 'If you weren't so glum and unimaginative about everything, a four-way honeymoon could be fun.'

I rolled my eyes.

'You never *think*,' he said. 'All you do is *react*. Against anything I say or suggest.'

'Parents. Don't. Go. On. Honeymoons. With. Their. Kids.' I tore off a hunk of bread and eyed the big sweet slab of butter.

'Is there a rule?' Whitman asked, raising his eyebrows. 'Is there a law inscribed somewhere on the Holy Tablets of the Boring Middle Class that says, Thou shalt not accompany thy daughter on her honeymoon?'

'Whitman, drop it,' said Dad One. I could tell he was nervous because he was compulsively realigning the silverware, dishes, and glasses, calibrating everything on the table to some orderly pattern in his head. Daddy's an architect.

'Yeah, drop it,' I chimed in.

'Drop it? What am I, a dog?' Dad Two turned slowly from Dad One back to me. He spoke as though I were

retarded. ‘Look, honey, I know it’s difficult for you, but let’s be practical here. You don’t have a penny to your name. Am I correct?’

I sat tight-lipped, wishing with all my might that you could still smoke in restaurants.

‘You’ve just declared bankruptcy. At age twenty-five. Am I correct?’

I refused to answer.

‘You’ve been married twice – even though I happen to know you were happier as a lesbian—’

‘Ha-ha.’

‘—and you’ve never been on a honeymoon.’ His voice softened. ‘That’s something every girl should have at least once in her life. Even if she’s *not* married. So this time around we’re offering it to you.’

‘But it’s not a honeymoon if you two come along!’

‘There’s no honeymoon, period, if we don’t.’ Whitman let out a sigh. ‘Look, honey, we’d love to send you off on a romantic trip to a luxury resort where you get fabulous spa treatments and pampered like royalty. But the truth is, I lost my shirt in the dot-com crash. We just can’t afford it.’

‘Then how come you can go?’ I asked.

‘Because your dad is the architect and they’ve invited him out for the gala opening. And I snagged a juicy little assignment to write the place up for *Travel* magazine.’

‘So where do me and Tramayne fit in?’ I asked.

‘Tremayne and I,’ Whitman corrected. ‘Well, I knew this place would do anything to get in *Travel* magazine. So I pulled a prima donna.’

‘A what?’

‘I said I needed to bring along my assistants, to help with the story.’

‘You demanded,’ Daddy said.

‘I demanded,’ Whitman said, ‘and they agreed. So now you and Hubby Three can come along with us. I even got you your own suite.’ He let out a sudden snort of laughter. ‘You didn’t think we’d all be staying in one room, did you?’

Oh, I loved that word – *suite*. ‘I don’t know what I thought. This is the first I’ve heard about any of it.’

‘A free honeymoon,’ Whitman whispered emphatically. ‘Think of it. Free. All you have to do is pretend you’re my assistants. Does that really sound so awful?’

‘You mean we have to, like, carry your luggage?’

‘No, you don’t have to, like, do anything. Except pretend you’re taking notes.’

‘It’s a scam, in other words.’

My comment took him aback. ‘It’s a *present*,’ he said with wounded dignity. ‘For *you*.’

‘And there’s the other part, too,’ Daddy reminded him.

‘Yes, but I wouldn’t *dream* of asking your darling ungrateful self-centered daughter to celebrate something with *us*. God forbid.’ He rose abruptly and strode off to the men’s room, leaving us in the dust of his melodrama.

‘Celebrate what?’ I asked my dad guiltily.

Daddy took my hand and stroked it. ‘We’re getting married, too.’

‘What?’ Tears popped into my eyes. ‘Daddy!’ It took me a minute to recover from my sentimentality and think clearly. ‘But how?’

‘Well, it’s not the same as being married married, but it’s all we’re allowed.’

‘That registry thing?’

He nodded. ‘It has no legal bearing on anything. But we thought it would be a nice idea to celebrate our twentieth anniversary by getting Dped.’

‘Dped?’

‘Domestic partnership.’

‘I want to be there. When are you doing it?’

‘The first day it’s possible. July first.’

‘Oh.’ The timing made me suspicious. I wondered if Whitman had chosen that date in order to overshadow my ceremony on the Fourth of July. The dads were being remarkably cool about my upcoming wedding. They didn’t talk about it and hadn’t offered to help with the preparations.

‘That date’s all right, isn’t it?’ Daddy’s always extra solicitous when Whitman isn’t around.

‘Sure. Why not?’

‘Back-to-back ceremonies,’ he said. ‘Honeymoons together. Kind of fun.’

I let him pull me close and kiss me on the cheek. I wanted to lie back right there in the restaurant in front of everyone and be cuddled in his arms. But I was as rigid as my old skateboard. The sauerkraut blonde couldn’t keep her eyes away. She was confused. I can always tell when they’re confused. She couldn’t place me, peg me, pigeon-hole me. Maybe Ms. Prada thought now that I was Daddy’s girlfriend or his wife. I closed my eyes and let him cuddle me.

‘Who all’s going to be at your DP ceremony?’ I asked.

‘Just a few close friends.’

‘Are you going to invite Mom?’

He tensed. 'I'll think about it.'

A tall, handsome man with thick sandy-brown hair, sharp blue eyes, and a long, straight nose appeared at the far end of the dining room. Whitman. Daddy's lover and my faux pa. He smiled at us over the heads of the diners. It was only a naughty-little-girl fantasy, but I imagined him seething with jealousy. Wanting me for himself.

In actual fact, the one who was seething with jealousy was Ms. Prada at the next table. Don't ask me why. I didn't do anything to make her fiancé stare at me like that.

After my fancy-ass dinner with the dads, I drove my dying Toyota back over to the east side where my mom lives. I wanted to be with her, but I didn't know why.

It had something to do with the dads getting married. I felt kind of anxiously protective, as if I were the mom and Mom were the little girl, and I had to break some potentially traumatic news to her. If the dads didn't invite her to their DP ceremony, she'd find out about it and be devastated because she was left out. But if they did invite her, she would make up some excuse not to go because she'd feel humiliated in front of all their friends.

Twenty years the dads had been together. Which meant it had been twenty years since Dad left Mom. Which meant it had been twenty years since my own life had taken that fateful turn. A jumble of memories suddenly swelled up in front of me, like those wafer-thin sponges that expand in water. Whitman used to buy me one at Zabar's every time I visited them in New York.

Christmas and my birthday, those were always the big events. One of my earliest memories is being with Mom

and Dad on Christmas morning in the big Victorian house with a fire roaring in the fireplace and what looked like hundreds of presents under the tree. It was the first time I understood the meaning of Christmas (toys, all for me) and the pretty stuff that went with it: the giant tree hung with glass balls and strung with white lights, vases of fresh-cut holly, cards, cookies, ribbon, the special incense that my mom would burn. Carolee just loved to decorate for Christmas. I was wild with excitement as Mom presented me with box after wrapped box, laughing as I tore off the paper and hauled out dolls, stuffed animals, games, clothes, candy and books. At some point in my rampage I was so idiotically, incandescently happy that I ran over and jumped into Daddy's arms. He held me the way I liked to be held, suffocatingly close, squeezed tight as a swaddled papoose. My mom stopped laughing and said tenderly, 'Oh, look at all that lovin'. Can't I have just a little?' And I said, quite deliberately, as Daddy rocked me in his arms, 'No. I hate you.'

My first Christmas alone with Carolee was an unwanted memory, but I found myself reliving it as I drove east toward her house. It was during the Big Change, after Daddy moved out of the big beautiful Victorian house. For months nothing had been clear to me. Daddy still lived in Portland but was talking about moving to New York. Fear gnawed at me day and night. I couldn't figure out why he'd left us and I was terrified that he would move away forever. Mom went from being happy to being a sobbing wreck. Without Daddy the house felt disjointed, scary, empty. That Christmas, as I came down the wide oak stairs wearing my Big Bird slippers and Wonder Woman cape over flannel pajamas, it was not Daddy I saw but Mom's

support group. I stopped dead in my tracks. The smell of coffee and pot wafted up to my nose. ‘Merry Christmas, sweetheart,’ Mom called out as I stood there staring down at them. ‘Santa’s left lots of presents for you.’

I could see the presents, but I knew she was lying about Santa. ‘Is Daddy here?’

One of her friends muttered, ‘No, your asshole daddy is not here.’

‘He’s not an asshole,’ I shot back, hotly defensive, ‘*you* are.’

They coaxed me downstairs with the lure of sweets and joys beyond measure. Only I felt dry and empty, like someone had pulled the plug and my bubble bath of happiness had drained away.

Then there was that birthday with Daddy. That’s what he and Mom both told me it was going to be. But it wasn’t just with Daddy. As Daddy pulled up to the big house, I saw Whitman in the front seat of the BMW. That had to mean something important, but I didn’t want to know what it was. I was sick with tight-lipped apprehension as Daddy took my hand and led me down to the car. Whitman smiled out the open window. ‘You remember Whitman?’ Daddy said, opening the *back* door of the BMW.

I shook my head. Whitman laughed. I felt panicky.

‘Whitman’s coming with us today. For your birthday.’

‘I don’t want him,’ I whispered.

‘Well, honey, he’s going to be with us today,’ Daddy said in a low firm voice.

I started to squirm as Daddy buckled me into a seatbelt. In the backseat. I *always* rode in front, next to him. ‘No!’

‘Venus—’ That tone. I hated that ‘you have no choice’ tone.

I looked anxiously back toward the big house, but it seemed to mock me, mock my fear. I saw Mom standing upstairs, in the front turret, her arms crossed. Then she disappeared.

Whitman turned around and smiled at me. ‘Happy birthday, Venus. I brought you a present.’

I calmed myself sufficiently to snatch the beautifully wrapped package he held out.

‘What do you say, honey?’ Daddy prompted.

I thought for a moment before answering. ‘Fuck you,’ I said.

I didn’t know what the words meant, but I’d heard Mom’s support group using them. And they seemed to have some magic effect because Whitman’s eyes opened so wide I could see his contact lenses. He stared at me for a moment, then said, ‘You’re welcome,’ and turned back around.

Birthdays in Portland were for little girls who lived at home with their overloving lesbian moms. Birthdays in New York were for ‘The Fabulous Miss Venus Gilroy’ (as Whitman called me) who flew off all by herself four times a year to spend a week with her handsome dad and his handsome lover in their cramped Manhattan apartment. When I was in New York, I rarely let on that I was having a good time, but fun did seep into those always-too-short visitations. One birthday they took me to the Rainbow Room, where I drank Shirley Temples and danced with Daddy on the revolving dance floor and Whitman never once butted in. Another time they took me to lunch at

Windows on the World and we all had foie gras on toast. New York birthdays were one big, new, scary, shivery delight after another: an opera, a concert at Lincoln Center, a show at Radio City Music Hall. A new dress from Bloomingdale's, shoes from Bergdorf, a winter coat from Saks. And when I'd get back to Portland with all my shopping bags and looked at the stuff my mom had given me for the same event, I could barely suppress my disdain. Sometimes it actually seemed like the dads knew me better than my mom did.

I pulled up in front of my mom's dinky little house ('Early Crackerbox,' I once heard Whitman describe it) and sat there, smoking and listening to my old Black Garters tape. Black Garters was this awesome all-girl garage band that lasted about a year. JD, lead singer and lead guitar, gave me the band's one and only demo tape when we were lovers. Her singing voice was a hoarse, croaky rasp of anger.

*Mommy! Daddy! Where are you?
I'm fucked up, man, but you are too!
You say you love me.
You say you care.
You say all kindsa shit,
But you ain't really there.*

I just sat there in my incredibly messy car (Whitman had once likened it to a hamster's nest) thinking about my mom, my dads, and me. If you eventually turn into your parents, no matter how hard you try not to, which one of the three was I doomed to become?

*

Long ago, back in the mists of the '80s, even before my dad left us, I realized that I could twist Carolee, my mom, around my little finger.

It's kind of horrifying, in a way, to realize how much power you can have over another person. What intrigues me about Whitman, for instance, is that I have zero power over him. Back when I was five, Whitman and I would get into stupid fights over things like who got to sit next to Daddy in the front seat of the BMW. I always won. But it was because Whitman let me. He could afford to because he had the real power, and we both knew it. He had Daddy.

And Carolee didn't. Not anymore.

When Dad left, all Carolee had was her 'support group' – this huge congregation of women bitching their way through the pain, of wrecked dreams and fractured lives. My mom was the focal point, the good witch doomed to stir the cauldron of unconditional love until she keeled over from the fumes.

She was a size eight back then. She was my size, and my age, which is too freaky to think about.

They came, all those women, because Carolee had the biggest heart and the nicest house and the largest alimony check. Back then we lived in a huge old Victorian that Daddy had turned into a showplace. Some of Mom's endless women friends hung out there so much they had their own rooms. 'You could almost call 'em boarders,' my grandma sourly observed, 'if they ever paid any rent.'

During the year they were separated, Daddy continued to pay the mortgage and all the bills. And after the divorce, Mom had alimony for three years and child support until I

was eighteen. So she didn't have to work back then, except to take care of every freeloading sob sister who showed up at our door.

I took advantage of her like everyone else. I got everything I wanted because my own mother was afraid of me. If I didn't get my way I turned into Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*. It worked every time.

Until one day I made the mistake of calling my mom a 'fucking bitch' in front of my grandma. Mom let out a weird noise and started to cry. But Grandma's hand shot out and slapped me so hard I went blank with terror. And in that moment of shocked blankness, Grandma, furious in a way I'd never seen before, leaned down and said through her new dentures, 'Don't you *ever* call your mother that again, young lady. Do you understand?'

I nodded dumbly. It was the first time in my life that I'd been disciplined, and it was overwhelming.

'When you say that, it means you have no respect,' Grandma hissed. 'You should always respect your mother because she does her best for you.'

Respect. Like that old Aretha Franklin song. Mom with her big hair deserved R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

But then the dynamic changed and Mom began sucking me into her confidence. Every night she drank a bottle of red wine, drew me close, and told me all the scary non-fairy tales that turn bratty little girls into fucked-up women. What she didn't know was that her life was territory I didn't want to explore. It was dark and scary and lonely in that forest. There were horrible monsters hiding behind every tree.

Daddy had been her one fairy tale come true. A young

hot-shit architect, he plucked her from the receptionist's desk, married her, and introduced her to a world of high-flying affluence that just about wrecked them both. Mom had just divorced her first husband, a Sixties radical who got busted for selling LSD at UCLA. Dad had just been divorced by a mysterious Italian woman who ran off after she became an American citizen.

John gave Carolee this short, fabulous life. Then he took it away. She wasn't Cinderella after all.

Mom never blames anyone for anything. She's chronically unable to express hatred and anger. She tried to understand where her husband was coming from. She even tried to support his decision to leave her for a man. But other betrayed women in her support group kept telling her how awful Daddy was, how selfish. Under their influence, Mom began ragging Daddy constantly. Never to his face, because she was afraid of him. She did it in private, to me.

I began to see Daddy in a very different light, one that made me resent him for what he was doing to us. His side of the story didn't matter because he was the one who fractured our fairy tale.

Then Carolee got into this weird competition thing. If Daddy was gay, and dating a person of the same sex, then she would, too. God knows there were enough lesbians in the nonstop cotillion passing through our beautiful old house.

Only Mom didn't get a Whitman. She didn't get a rich handsome younger man who spoke foreign languages and wrote travel books.

She got Jerri. A possessive, alcoholic dyke who spent

her life spinning the same ugly brown clay mug over and over on her potter's wheel. I never could see what the attraction was. Mom was so pretty. Jerri was thirty years older, with short-cropped gray hair and false teeth that looked too big for her mouth. They met at one of the endless garage sales Mom and her friends were always throwing.

Their affair lasted about two years. Jerri was subtly abusive when sober, insanely jealous and violent when drunk. One night she hauled off and belted my mom across the face. It was true-blue black-and-blue physical abuse. One woman smacking another. I saw it with my own two eyes.

But Mom didn't even have the balls to order Jerri out of the house. All she could do was politely ask the cunt to leave.

It was so different when I was with Daddy and Whitman. They had this breezy affability with one another. They were full of secret looks and jokes. I resented their happiness because I knew it didn't include me. And I couldn't figure out why they were so happy. There was no sign of physical affection between them, no terms of endearment spoken. Whitman wouldn't allow it. When my eagle eyes caught Daddy trying to stroke Whitman's ass or pull him into an embrace, Whitman always cut it short. Once I heard him whisper, 'Not in front of her.'

Her.

That was me.

It was all very complicated. But it was what I knew. It was my life.

Mom, the former receptionist, doesn't answer the phone much anymore. She can't say no to anyone, no matter what they're selling, so she filters calls. I pulled out my old cell phone, so outdated and clunky that nobody even wants to steal it, and called her from my car. 'It's me. Pick up if you're in there.'

She was on the line instantly. 'Where are you, sweetheart?'

'Outside.'

She drew back the curtain. 'Lock your car if you're coming in, sweetheart. There's been a lot of gang activity lately.'

A moment later she unlocked the three locks, drew me in, and quickly relocked the door. 'I heard gunshots last night,' she said.

Mom was wearing black polyester lounging pants with an elastic waistband and a long, flowing robe with a pattern of silvery lines in the weave. Thanks to some really bad fashion advice she had new glasses with white, laptop computer-size frames. The one thing she never gave up was her big hair, still piled high atop her head and dyed a shade of red you only see in early Technicolor.

The house was stuffy because she'd had the windows painted shut. One of her doctors told her she might be allergic to dust, so now air filters and deionizers hummed in all four rooms.

She muted the old black-and-white movie playing on her VCR. Bette Davis, with big gluey tears in her eyes, was pleading with some guy for something or other. Mom's a real Bette Davis freak. Back when she smoked and drank, she used to do bad Bette Davis imitations at parties.

She gingerly embraced me, afraid to pull me too close because I smelled like cigarette smoke. One of Mom's doctors told her she might be allergic to it. This was after years of smoking two packs a day and inhaling down to her toenails.

'Well, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?' she asked, using her gentle 'what did you do in day care today' voice.

I shrugged and collapsed onto her overstuffed sofa.

'Is something wrong?' she asked warily.

I shook my head.

'Do you need money?' She started for her purse.

'That's not why I came over.'

'You're all dolled up, sweetheart. High heels and everything. You look bee-you-ti-ful. Did you just come from someplace fun?'

I kicked off the red stilettos that were killing my feet. 'The dads took me out to dinner.'

'Oh?' She moved closer. I was her only source of information about the glamorous private lives of the dads. 'Where?'

'Gianicolo.'

'Oh? I haven't heard of that. Is it new?'

'It's this fabulous new Italian restaurant over in the west hills. Everything's gray and black-and-white marble. Except for this blue wall of water.'

'Was it expensive? How much was the bill?'

'A hundred and fifty-four with tip. For three entrées and three Caesars. I had a dessert and we all had espresso. And wine.'

'Who paid?'

'They split it.'

'Was the food good?'

'They were raving.'

'The dads were?'

'*Mm-hm.*' I waited a second. 'They're getting married.'

'The dads are?' She didn't so much sit down as drop into the chair beside me. 'You mean like a commitment ceremony?'

'That county registry thing. Domestic partnership.'

'Well,' she said, 'isn't that nice.'

'Did you know they've been together for *twenty* years?'

'Yes, sweetheart, I'm aware of that.'

'That's longer than anyone I know. Straight or gay.'

Her eyes stole over to the television screen.

'They invited me and Tremayne to go on our honeymoon with them.'

Mom cocked her head, like a bird who's just heard a worm, and slowly rose from her chair. 'Would you like some passionflower tea, sweetheart?'

'Ick, no.'

'I'm afraid I can't offer you very much. I'm off coffee, pop, wine, off everything but natural herb teas and pure spring water. Carla' – her nutritionist – 'thinks I might be allergic to wheat. Gluten. And of course I'm lactose-intolerant.'

I didn't want details but dutifully asked if she was feeling any better.

'Well, sweetheart, I've been ill for a very long time, you know. I just didn't know it. And nobody's been able to figure out exactly what it is.'

Lose a hundred pounds, turn off the Bette Davis movies,

and get out of this house once in a while, I wanted to shout. But didn't. 'Should we go on a honeymoon with the dads?' I asked.

'Well, sweetheart, it depends on what you want.'

Out of the blue I just blew up. 'Can't you ever just give me one solid piece of advice? My whole life it's always been up to me to decide everything. And it's like I never make the right decision.'

Mom was on the verge of tears. Breathing hard to fight down her panicky agitation. 'Well, we learn from our mistakes,' she said wobbily.

'Then why do I keep doing the same stupid things over and over again?'

'I don't know where you're coming from, sweetheart. Did you have a fight with Tremayne?'

'No, but it pissed me off that he wouldn't even go out to dinner with me and the dads. They invited *us*. It was supposed to be a kind of special prewedding kind of dinner thingie for *us*. For me *and* Tremayne.'

'A celebration.'

'Yeah. But he wouldn't dress up, so I just told him to stay at home.'

'Are you having second thoughts about marrying Tremayne?' Mom asked.

'Well, the first two turned out to be duds, didn't they?'

'Maybe three will be your lucky number.'

To smoke, I had to stand outside on her teeny front porch. Mom stayed inside, behind the screen door, seated and listening like a priest in a confessional.

'Sometimes I think I have, like, absolutely no ability to judge character,' I said, trying to blow my smoke away. The

breeze blew it right into the house. Mom coughed. ‘It’s, like, I’ll believe anything a guy tells me.’

‘Well, you essentially trust people, sweetheart. You assume they’re always telling the truth.’

‘They act one way when they want to fuck you and then turn into something else afterward.’

‘Tremayne seems more . . . *intelligent* than either Sean or Peter,’ Mom observed. ‘Or JD for that matter. But he seems shy. He doesn’t share a lot.’

‘He doesn’t trust people.’

‘Oh. Well, when you lose your trust—’ Mom said vaguely.

I flicked my cigarette out toward the street and lit another. The caffeine from that last double espresso at the restaurant zoomed through my veins. I wanted to be out on a dance floor. I wanted to be happy. I wanted never to end up like Mom.

Tremayne was sleeping when I got home. He’d left all the candles burning, which meant he wanted to make love.

Once he came down from that tree, after spending three months in it, it’s like that’s all he wanted to do. It never got boring. Tremayne said he loved my body, and he proved it every time we fucked. I faked orgasms with my first two husbands. I didn’t fake them with Tremayne. I never fantasized that he was Ethan Hawke or Leonardo DiCaprio.

But tonight I was still pissed off with him for not going out to dinner with me and the dads. I crouched down beside the futon and looked at his sleeping face, the wispy goatee, the long eyelashes, the oh-so-kissable lips. His warm, earthy smell seeped up from the tangled bedclothes.

I thought: This man will always tell the truth. This man will never compromise his principles. This man will never wear cologne (maybe not even deodorant). This man is dedicated to being natural.

All that was good.

Then, suddenly, I had a glimpse of the future. Our future. I thought: I will never see this man dressed up in a drop-dead suit. This man will never shine at one of the dads' big parties. This man will never take me out to a hip restaurant or on a trip to Venice. This man will never play the status game, so we'll never have a pretty house or a cool car or stainless-steel appliances. This man is part Teflon: He won't let my middle-class fantasies stick to him.

Tremayne was an alternative media star when I met him. He was famous because he'd spent three months living in a tree in the Siskiyou Mountains of southern Oregon. It was a grove of old-growth redwoods that some lumber company wanted to cut down.

He joined a group called Arbor Vitae. This group did everything it could to stop the logging. They spiked trees, damaged equipment, and chained themselves to tree trunks. Then Tremayne volunteered to actually live in one of the oldest and largest of the threatened redwoods. The lumber people were so pissed off with Arbor Vitae they wanted to kill everyone in the group. Especially Tremayne.

Living 180 feet up in a tree was the kind of publicity stunt that Tremayne knew would draw attention to the cause. He looked like a movie star when he was on the

news. Like Brad Pitt without the jaw line. A local station covered the story and I just happened to see it one night when I was at my mom's. Then a local indie rock station started a weekly 'Tremayne in the Tree' story, asking him how he was doing and what was new. His life was, like, totally surreal and fascinating.

When his tree-sit was over, the tree-man who called himself Tremayne came to Portland. He got more publicity when he joined an Animal Liberation Front demonstration in front of a big animal research facility. Tremayne Woods, movie-star-cute hero of environmental causes and animal rights, was in the news again. You listened to his stories of animal cruelty because he was so incredibly sexy.

But he still had to go through the bankruptcy thing because he'd been living on plastic for two years and his creditors were hunting him down.

There are so many bankrupts that the proceedings are held with groups of ten at a time. Tremayne and I met as my group was coming out of the bankruptcy courtroom and his group was going in. It was, like, ordained. The minute I recognized him I knew I'd marry him. We weren't shy with each other at all. It was, like, we both instantly understood that we wanted to be together.

The one thing I wasn't quite prepared for was how short he was. He looked a lot taller on TV.

'How was the judge?' he asked. 'Did he sentence you to debtor's prison for the rest of your life?'

'No. It went just like the lawyer said.'

'I don't have a lawyer,' he said. 'I'm doing it all myself.' He held up a copy of *Bankruptcy for Dummies*.

‘I used a kit for my recent divorce,’ I said, all smiley, making sure he saw I wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

He looked me up and down, slowly, his eyes licking me up. I felt a hot stirring in my crotch.

‘What did the judge let you keep?’ he asked.

‘My car. I suppose because it’s not worth anything.’

‘I don’t own a car,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to contribute to global warming.’

‘You’re Tremayne Woods, aren’t you?’ I had to make sure.

He smiled and cocked his head, pleased that I’d recognized him. ‘And who are you?’

‘Venus Gilroy.’

‘The goddess of love. Here in bankruptcy court.’

‘I hate money,’ I said.

‘But you have such beautiful assets.’

A warm shudder ran through me. ‘Not anymore.’

‘Oh yeah?’ he said quietly. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘The judge wiped out my debt, but he wiped out my credit, too. It’s cash-only for the next seven years.’

‘Those weren’t the kind of assets I was talking about, Venus.’ He kept his voice low, intimate, like he was sharing a secret with me.

In the hot, focused beam of his eyes I felt like kindling just starting to catch fire. My clothes were burning away. ‘If you’re interested,’ I said, ‘I could show you my spreadsheet.’

We both stood there, staring at one another, not wanting to break the magic bubble.

Someone should write a book about what it feels like to fall in love at first sight. It’s a weird, almost dangerous

feeling. Nothing and no one else matters. It's like looking into a wild river. You know that it's there, just waiting to suck you away in its dark, powerful current. All you have to do is jump.

I would have run away with Tremayne Woods that minute if he'd asked me to.

'They like it when you sound contrite,' I said. 'In court. Like you've learned your lesson.'

'I learned my lesson all right,' Tremayne said. 'Too bad it was the wrong one.' There was a kind of mocking defiance in his voice and cocky manner.

'You don't think we're supposed to learn from our mistakes?'

'I don't make mistakes,' he said.

'Everybody makes mistakes.'

'Everything I do, I do for a reason,' he said. 'Where's your car parked?'

'Not far.'

'You want to drive me to the homeless shelter when I'm out of here?'

I didn't know if he was joking or not. 'You don't live in a homeless shelter.'

'Are you inviting me to move in with you?'

The river was waiting. I closed my eyes and jumped in.

The fact that we'd met in bankruptcy court always seemed kind of crazily romantic to me. Now an irritating little voice whispered: 'This man has no money and no credit cards. Like you, he doesn't know how to make money or keep money. He'll never be able to support you; you'll probably end up supporting him.'

And did I really want a life committed to environmental activism? A life dedicated to saving trees instead of roaring around in a gas-guzzling SUV?

I looked down at my tattooed engagement ring, wondering why I'd even asked him to marry me. Because if I was brutally brutally honest, Tremayne Woods had nothing to offer except the best sex I'd ever had in my life. He staked a claim on my body the first time we made love. When sex is that good, it has to mean something.

As I crouched there, petting him and wondering about our future, he opened one nut-colored eye and stared at me. Brushed his fingers along my cheek. 'Why you crying, babe?'

I shook my head. I really didn't know why I was blubbering. Sometimes life and who you are and what you want and what you end up with just seems like too much. Or too little.

Confusing.

Underneath all my doubts I did love him. The question was, why? He was strong but tender, with a secret vulnerability that made me want to take care of him. He was committed to something in a way I never had been. He seemed to exist in a larger picture, a larger world than mine.

'Come to bed.' He sat up and slowly began to undress me.

The futon was all warm and ready, just waiting for me to slide in between the sheets.

'How was dinner with your dads?' Tremayne asked as he slowly unbuttoned my blouse.

'I wish you'd been there.'

He pulled off my blouse and rested his head on my breasts. 'Mmmm. So warm. This is my dinner.'

'They were so disappointed,' I said. And let out a sigh as he moved up and began nuzzling my neck. 'It was supposed to be a celebration.'

'I hope you had a good time,' he said, squatting behind me. He brushed my hair to one side and gave the back of my neck little love bites.

'I may as well tell you now,' I panted.

He reached around and popped my breasts out of the sexy little black French bra I'd found on sale at Victoria's Secret. 'Let's not talk. Let's just suck.'

He pulled me down to the bed and slid his tongue into my mouth. I had a sudden fear that my breath stank of coffee and cigarettes and the meat that I told him I didn't eat anymore. 'You'll laugh,' I said, pulling away.

'Okay.' His lips slid up into an anticipatory smile.

'They want us to go on our honeymoon with them.'

Tremayne scratched his chin.

'To some wilderness resort. My dad was the architect. Whitman's writing about it. It would all be free.'

'What resort?'

'I think it's called Pine Mountain.'

'Pine Mountain Lodge?' He propped himself up on an elbow. 'Your dad was the architect for that?'

'You've heard of it?'

'Yeah. It sounds familiar.'

'We'd have our own luxury suite,' I said. 'There's a spa. It would all be free.'

Tremayne suddenly leapt off the futon and headed for the computer. He was completely naked. I had a flash of his

hard, tight little buns. I could hear the mouse clicking, the sound of the keyboard being tapped, the hushed shrieks and boings as he connected to the Internet.

He was always doing that. Sometimes in the middle of a conversation he'd raise a hand and say, 'Wait a minute, I've got to check something out.' Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and see him sitting there in the dark, his body washed by the gray light of the computer screen.

'So I'll tell them no,' I said.

He was clicking away, reading something. 'Who?'

'The dads. I knew it was a crazy idea. Whoever heard of going on a honeymoon with your fathers?'

He stopped clicking, read a little more, and then looked at me. 'Call them right now,' he said. He pointed to the telephone. 'Tell them we'd love to go to Pine Mountain Lodge.'