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A highly recommended read."  
- *The Romance Studio*

All or  
*Nothing*

"Five blue ribbons! A fantastic book!"  
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Deborah Cooke

*writing as Claire Cross*  
USA Today Bestselling Author

THE COXWELLS

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# ***All Or Nothing***

by

Deborah Cooke

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*Some people will do anything for true love—even if they have to fake it.*

Jen Maitland had no use for handsome guys with easy charm—until she met Zach. He’s the perfect fake date to end her mother’s matchmaking scheme before it starts. Besides, he’d probably just use her and leave her like her ex-fiancé did. At least that’s what Jen tells herself. The only problem is that Zach isn’t as predictable as he appears...

Zach Coxwell hates commitment, but loves a challenge. Like the pretty bar waitress who turned him down flat for a date—only to invite him to her family’s Thanksgiving dinner. Zach knows he can make Jen smile—and he’s betting that he can unravel her mysteries—even if he has to do it over candied yams.

A tofu turkey, a sister who threatens to have Zach’s love child, the untimely appearance of a knitted avocado—and Zach’s discovery of her real motive—combine to turn Thanksgiving dinner into Jen’s worst nightmare. Zach, on the other hand, has the time of his life. And when he finally makes Jen smile, he realizes there’s one commitment he’s willing to make after all... but persuading Jen to believe him will take everything he’s got.

## Praise for *All Or Nothing*

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~ The Romance Studio

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## *All Or Nothing*

*All Or Nothing* was originally published under the pseudonym, Claire Cross.  
Deborah Cooke also writes as Claire Delacroix and as herself.

This re-release has had only minor corrections from the original text. It is essentially the same as the original print edition, although there are minor variations.

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Excerpt from *Love Potion #9*  
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Dear Readers;

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***All Or Nothing*** is the fourth and final book in my Coxwell series of contemporary romances. From the first moment I met Zach, I knew I had to tell his story—and I knew his romance would have to be an unconventional one. There's nothing typical about Zach, and less that's predictable. The trick was finding him the perfect romantic partner. I wanted someone to make him realize how lucky he was, and someone who would persuade him to make an effort instead of just accepting what came his way. Jen was the perfect match. She's creative, she also feels lucky, but she feels lucky because she knows what it is to be unlucky. At the same time, Jen has lost her stride. That's not unreasonable for a cancer survivor, but she needed some laughter and a good hard push to start living again. I love how the sparks fly between these two, even at their first meeting. Their banter reminds me of the dialogue in old movies, even though they are very contemporary characters. Of course, I particularly like how they push and prod each other, then make each other's dreams come true.

I haven't made any major changes to ***All Or Nothing*** and have republished it essentially as it was published in the first place. I did choose to republish the Coxwell series as Deborah Cooke books, since I now publish contemporary paranormal romance under my own name. I continue to write historicals as Claire Delacroix, so my Claire Cross time travel romances have been republished as Delacroix books.

I haven't published any contemporary romances since ***All Or Nothing***, although I still have a number of projects in process. Reviewing the Coxwell series for republication has reminded me just how much I loved telling these kinds of stories. They were both challenging to write and very satisfying. I've recently returned to a book that I put aside several years ago about two friends who epitomize the idea of opposites attracting. Their lives have gone in completely different directions, but in crisis, they return to each other, maybe because they understand each other so well. It's more of a women's fiction book with romantic elements than a pure romance, but if you liked the Coxwells, I think you might enjoy it too. I'm hoping to finish this book and publish it later this year. The working title is ***The Gingerbread House*** and it will be a Deborah Cooke book. Please keep an eye on my [website](#), [Facebook page](#) or [blog](#) for updates.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy reading Jen and Zach's story!

All my best—

Deborah

<http://www.deborahcooke.com>

“Are you gay?”

Jen glanced up from her toast. It was just before noon on a Friday morning and she'd thought herself alone in her mother's vivid yellow and cherry red kitchen. She had been considering the problem of how to knit the skin of an avocado so that it looked real, but any internal debate about the pebbly merit of moss stitch would have to wait.

Her mom, as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as Jen was not, was leaning in the doorway to the hall. Natalie had “that look”, the one that meant trouble.

A casual observer wouldn't have guessed that Natalie and Jen were related, much less that they were mother and daughter. While Jen was tall and slender with cropped dark hair, her mother was petite, curvy and possessed of what seemed to be several acres of corkscrew-curved auburn hair.

Jen's mother had found her niche in the 1970's and had decided to remain there for good. Natalie wore little round glasses, her jeans were worn, her sweater was hand knit (by Gran) and old enough to be embellished with many fuzz balls. She wore Birkenstock sandals all year around, baked the best whole grain bread, and persisted in starting earnest conversations with her children at unpredictable moments.

Jen had forgotten the earnest conversation bit when she'd accepted the chance to move back home two years before. She'd worked a double shift the night before at Mulligan's, was due in for the lunch shift today and her feet were still begging for mercy. She wasn't really up for having her soul searched, her chakras aligned, or the fiber content of her diet analyzed.

Again.

Jen tried not to show any of her frustration. She changed the subject instead of answering, a ploy that sometimes worked. “Hi Mom. The bread is really good this time.”

“Don't you do that to me,” Natalie said as she advanced into the kitchen. “I know you well enough to see you putting your shields up. I want you to be honest with me, Jen.”

“I'm not putting...”

“You *are*. I can see you closing off the world. You've always done it, but now you're better at it.”

Jen didn't know what to say to that so she ate her toast. She toyed with her knitting while she did so. It flopped on the table, not looking like much of anything since it wasn't yet stuffed. The pit of the avocado was done, because her plan was that the end result would look like an avocado cut in half. The round pit had been the easiest place to start. So, she had a purple golf ball with floppy frills around it and a lot of doubt.

Shouldn't the flesh be more yellow around the stone? Should she use more than one color of yarn? She could ask Teresa how to change from one color to the next gradually.

Jen's mom shook her head, which made her ringlets dance, then pulled out the chair opposite Jen with such purpose that she couldn't be ignored.

“Well, if you are gay, then you should know that I'm okay with it,” her mother said with the compassion that characterized these discussions. “I'd just like to know—assuming, of course, that you don't think that's too much of a personal thing to ask.”

So much for the diversion plan. Jen wondered at the timing of the question. “Why do you want to know? Shouldn't we have had this chat when I was sixteen?”

“I know, I know, and now your life is your own business, blah blah blah.” Her mother sighed and grimaced, then leaned closer. “But you might as well know, it's because I need to decide what to tell your grandmother about Thanksgiving. You know, she's always after me about whether you're bringing a date or not.”

“Just tell her no. It’s worked before.”

“Not this year.”

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“Gran saw some documentary on television and now she has this idea that maybe you’re gay and we’re hiding it from her.” Jen’s mother took a swig of her herbal tea. “She’ll love it if you are, I’ve got to say. She’s always insisted that I didn’t know anything about raising children, and you know that she won’t understand that being gay isn’t a lifestyle choice. It’s wired right in, we know that, but she’s going to think that you’ve gone and chosen to do this to annoy her or me, and that you can be persuaded to change your mind and be “normal” again, whatever the hell that is. I don’t even want to imagine that campaign.”

Neither did Jen. She ate her toast as quickly as she could, hoping her mother got lost on a tangent long enough that she could escape without answering the question.

The chances were slim, but it was worth a try.

“How many times have I told you not to wolf down your food?” Her mother fixed her with a stern glance, exactly the opposite of what Jen had hoped for. “I’m all for people expressing their own rhythms, but eating quickly only inhibits digestion. You, of all people, should be respecting your body’s natural needs.”

“Mom, I’m not sick anymore.”

Her mother sat back, smiling slightly as if Jen had said exactly what Natalie had wanted her to say. “Really? How would I be able to tell?”

“Check out my new hair.”

“Hair is only part of it. You mope around here like a ghost, or like a person with a death sentence.”

“I was a person with a death sentence.”

“*Was* being the operative word. Past tense, Jen. You’re better now, all better from what the oncologists say. Last I heard, your prognosis was excellent. You’re one year clear.”

“That’s what I heard, too.”

“So, when are you going to do something about it? When are you going to act as if you’re alive, Jen, instead of marking time until you die?” Her mother leaned her elbows on the table and regarded Jen earnestly. “When exactly do we get the old Jen back?”

Jen swallowed the last bite of her toast and picked up her plate. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said with a shrug. “I’ve got a job and I go to work almost every day...”

“And what about going back to college?”

“I’m not sure what I want to do yet.”

“What about traveling again?”

“I’ve already waitressed in sixteen countries. I’m good with that as a lifetime total.” That wasn’t true, and Jen knew it, but she wasn’t sure enough of herself to confess more to her mother.

Even if the woman had X-ray vision. She felt Natalie’s gaze following her and knew she wasn’t out of the kitchen yet.

“You used to have a lot of dreams and plans.”

Jen said nothing. Not knowing how long you were going to live had a way of short-circuiting long term dreams and plans.

Her mother tried another tack. “And what about your friends? What about Teresa?”

“I stay in touch with Teresa...”

“But you don’t get together any more. You don’t go downtown and hang out with her as much as you used to.”

“Teresa’s really busy with her job. She’s CFO now, you know.” Jen chose not to try to explain that she felt so out of step with her old friends. It was like Death was sitting on her shoulder, making her an unwelcome company among people busy being vibrantly alive. “And after all, I don’t care about

power shopping or speed dating.”

“Why not? That’s what women your age should care about: clothes and music and parties.” Her mother took a deep fortifying breath. “And men, Jen. You should be crazy for men. But you’ve shown no interest in men lately. Which leads me back to the question: are you gay?”

It took Jen only a heartbeat to see where this was going and how a little white lie could be useful. “Maybe I’m not sure.”

Her mother exhaled with impatience. “Then you aren’t. There’s no middle ground with sexual orientation. And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you are, anyway.”

It seemed that Jen’s inability to bend the truth was one constant in her universe. In a way, she was glad. “How would you know?”

“Hello. Don’t you remember who caught you kissing Mark Desilvo behind the garage on your thirteenth birthday party?”

“Maybe I was curious.” Jen glanced up. “Maybe he wasn’t very persuasive.”

“That would explain why you cried your heart out every night for three entire weeks when Drew MacPherson broke up with you to date Annemarie Schultz instead?”

“That was pride,” Jen insisted. She rinsed her dishes in the sink. “Drew didn’t break my heart.”

“Maybe it was Joel, then?” Her mother asked lightly, continuing before Jen could answer. “Or was it Steve?”

Jen caught her breath and was glad that she had her back to her mother. “You remember everything.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job.”

Jen pivoted to face her mother, feeling annoyed and defensive. “Is there a point to this? I need to get to work.”

Her mother shrugged. “I just asked you a question. Are you gay or not?”

“It seems as if you’ve worked that out for yourself already.” Jen dropped her mug and plate into the dishwasher, then let the door slam a bit more assertively than she’d meant to do. She felt like a cornered teenager, although that scenario was years behind her.

Maybe moving back home had stirred up a lot of old behavior patterns, like her mother meddling in her life and Jen resenting it. Unfortunately, waiting tables wasn’t going to be the key to her financial freedom anytime soon.

Not with those medical bills still unpaid. One of her chemo buddies—they’d had a similar schedule and had quickly realized they were both uninsured—had joked that if the cancer didn’t finish you off the debt would. Now that she was healthy, Jen found the dark joke less funny.

Her mother, meanwhile, persisted in the day’s theme of choice. “If you’re not gay, when are you going to start dating again?”

“Maybe never.” Jen strode to the door, wanting this conversation over ASAP. She picked up her avocado and her needles and decided that she could stop into that yarn shop on her way to work.

Her mother smiled the sweet smile that made people—other people—underestimate her. Jen folded her arms across her chest in anticipation of a direct hit to the heart.

It was too late to run for cover.

“Steve wasn’t worth the trouble...”

“Forget Steve.”

“Maybe you should forget Steve, Jen.”

Jen had to admit that there was truth in that, but she wasn’t going to admit it at this particular moment. “Do you want me to move out? Is that what this is about? Because I don’t have to get married to move out of here.”

“No, you don’t.” Natalie was annoyingly serene. “That was what I had to do, but you have a

thousand choices. If you want to move and you want my help in any way, you're welcome to it. But that's not what this is about."

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"You aren't going to tell me that I can't be happy without a man in my life, not you."

Natalie put her mug down on the table. "No, that's not what I'm going to tell you. We both know that I'm not a really great source of advice when it comes to men, at least when it comes to marrying them. I like men a lot and do think that they do add something to your life, but that's not what this is about either."

Jen held her ground. Running away probably wouldn't work. Her mother would follow until she'd had her say.

"What then?" Jen asked, hearing surly sixteen in her voice again. "What's it about?" She fully expected a lecture on being purposeful or finding herself or getting in balance again, so her mother surprised her.

"It's about being alone. I don't care who you're with, or for how long, I just hate to see you alone. Maybe lonely." Her mother smiled softly. "You're too wonderful a person, Jen, for me to keep you all to myself."

Jen said nothing. She stood there and kept her arms wrapped tightly around herself. She felt her tears rise and wondered how the hell her mother could always see right through her.

Maybe that was her job, too.

Natalie got up and came to stand beside her. She raised one hand to Jen's face and caressed her skin, her words as soft as her fingertips. "Look at your hair. It's come in all curly."

"I know. Might not last." Jen's voice was thicker than she'd expected.

"I thought for a long time that I'd never see you like this again."

"Yeah. Me, too." Jen met her mother's gaze and the compassion she found there eliminated her frustration.

Just like that. It was a trick of her mother's. Natalie knew how to give Jen's sucker heart a squeeze and she did it now.

Natalie sighed. "And I don't know what to say to you. I don't know what to advise you to do, or even if I should butt my nose into your business, but it seems to me that you're just counting off the days, Jen. You seem to have insulated yourself from the world in a way I don't understand." Jen dropped her gaze. "It seems to me that—I don't know—maybe you don't believe that you've got this second chance. Or that maybe you're afraid everything will be snatched away again."

Jen swallowed, painfully aware of what cancer had stolen from her. It hadn't been just her breast. It had been her optimism and her sense of the future and her confidence; all of those had been sacrificed to the knife.

Every night, she looked in the mirror and saw the scar that would never stop reminding her of everything that was gone.

Every day, she walked among people who had no idea what it was like to have the foundation of your world ripped away.

Much less to fear that it could happen again.

Her mother touched her chin, compelling Jen to meet her gaze again. "But you've got this chance, Jen!" she said urgently. "It's all yours. I don't want you to miss out because you're afraid to live."

Jen took a shaking breath and tried to make a joke. "So, I should find a man and get married and have babies? You sound like Gran."

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. I think you should get a date and have sex, lots of sex, because that will remind you that you're alive and well." Her mother grinned, looking young and mischievous. "I doubt your grandmother ever recommended that to you."

"No, I think I'd remember if she had."

“Sex is good therapy, Jen. I can recommend it on the basis of experience. An orgasm always makes me feel better about life, the universe and everything. And the ones you give yourself don’t have that same element of surprise.” Her mom smiled and returned to her mug, filling it from the teapot.

Jen had always suspected that other people didn’t talk so frankly to their mothers, and even after all these years of open discussion, her mother could still astound her. “So, Natalie’s tip of the day is that sex is better than masturbation?”

“Provided you orgasm, yes.” Her mother winked. “Get a date; you’ll see. Just let me know if you plan to bring someone home and I’ll make myself scarce.”

*Bring someone home.* Jen’s mind stalled on that concept. The thing was that she and her mother didn’t work with the same set of assumptions. “Mom, I’m not going to have casual sex in your house.”

“Then have formal sex. I don’t really need to know the details.”

“I mean, I’m not going to have sex with someone unless I’m in a serious relationship.”

Her mother sighed and frowned, then shook her head. “I should never have let your grandmother read you all those fairy tales,” she muttered, then looked up, her face pale and delicate within that halo of reddish curls. There had been a time when Jen had thought her mother must be an angel.

A thrice-married and thrice-divorced angel, with a child from each marriage and one son from before any of those marriages; an angel who was honest, creative, clever, and worked to her own unique moral code.

Maybe a naughty angel.

“Jen, this whole soul mate Mr. Right thing is a notion created by and encouraged by men to ensure that women remain virginal until they’re married, then chaste except when their husbands want something from them. It’s a notion that serves men, not women, and one that is—or should be—deader than a doornail. You can have sex with someone without an ironclad guarantee that you’ll be spending the rest of your life with him. Trust me. I know. Try it at least before you decide it doesn’t work for you.”

“Just because I can doesn’t mean I want to. I mean, what about sexually transmitted diseases?”

“You can spell condom: I know because I taught you.”

“When I was twelve.”

“It’s always better to be prepared.” Her mother rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Jen, I just want you to have some fun.”

“I am having fun.”

Her mother gave her a cutting look. “Do not lie to me.”

“Okay, maybe I’m not having that much fun. I just like to believe that I’m having fun. And I’m knitting up a storm. The avocado is my biggest project yet.”

Her mother heaved a sigh. “Lying to yourself isn’t any better than lying to me.”

“But it’s not that simple, Mom,” Jen said, feeling dragged into a conversation she wasn’t sure she wanted to have. “It’s hard to meet people, to meet men.”

“No, it’s easy to meet men. Your problem is that you’re trying to meet your so-called one and only, and you want to recognize him on sight.” Her mother came to her side again, and put a hand on her shoulder. “You can’t always tell a book by its cover, Jen, that’s all I’m saying. Just to mix our metaphors here, you need to get into the pool, if you’re going to prove that you can swim.”

“What if I don’t feel like doing any laps right now?”

“Then when will you?”

“Some day.”

“Prove it,” her mother said, challenge bright in her eyes. “Bring a date to Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Mom! I can’t just order up a date, like you order a salad.”

“You don’t have to marry him, Jen. Just bring a date, a man who is reasonably presentable, to

Thanksgiving dinner at your grandmother's. That's all."

"No, that's not all. I know you better than that."

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Her mother contrived to look innocent and failed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Bring a date or else what?"

Natalie grinned. "Or else I'll start fixing you up myself." Jen knew her horror at that prospect showed because her mother tapped the side of her mug with a fingertip. "There's a very nice, if somewhat hirsute, young man working at the Birkenstock store, for example. I understand he writes poetry..."

"Noooooooooooo!" Jen shouted and flung herself out of the kitchen, only half-joking. She heard her mother laughing, but knew that this was a threat her mother would act upon. Jen made an escape to work as soon as was humanly possible, though her mother still got in one last shot.

"Remember that boy at the natural food store? He's always asking after you..."

Oh no. Not the bass-player-whole-grain-aficionado who never cleaned his fingernails and wanted to walk to around the world to protest the living conditions... somewhere. No, no, no. Anyone had to be better than that. Anyone had to think more clearly than that.

Jen had to be able to find a date somewhere. She'd ask her older sister for help, just like she always did.

Cin would know what to do.

\* \* \*

Jen had one smidgen of time to call Cin before things got crazy. She'd taken a bit too long at the yarn store, seduced by a nubby dark green wool and silk blend that would make perfect avocado skin but which was shockingly expensive. After much deliberation, she bought it—she only needed one ball, after all.

So she scrambled at work to get her tables set. Mulligan's was still empty and her section was ready by five to twelve. Jen knew that the place would be packed by quarter past.

She asked the older waitress Lucy to cover for her and called, praying that Cin would answer quickly.

"Nature Sprouts. How can I help you?"

"Cin, I need your help big time. Mom wants me to bring a guy for Thanksgiving dinner at Gran's and she'll start fixing me up."

"Oh no!" Cin laughed and it wasn't a sympathetic sound. "Not the guy with the greasy little soul patch at the natural food store? Hasn't he left to walk to Chile yet?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. Cin, you've got to help me." Jen tapped her toe and watched the door swing open. Two guys came in and headed for the bar.

Not her section. She was free for another minute or two.

"Cin? I don't have a lot of time."

"No, you don't. It's next Thursday." Her sister was gleeful, instead of taking this seriously as Jen thought she should.

"Cin, this isn't a joke."

"You sure sound worried about it."

"I don't want to be fixed up. With anybody."

"You'd rather knit."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Okay, okay, no spinster-watching-the-world-go-by jokes from me. Hey, I have an idea. Remember how Mom hated Steve?"

“I am not calling Steve,” Jen said firmly. Why did she have to hear that jerk’s name so many times in one day? “I am not going to grovel for anything from that...”

“No, no, no. What I’m thinking is that you need to find a guy like Steve.”

“I don’t *think* so.”

“You don’t have to marry him, Jen. You just need to bring him to dinner once. Three hours, tops.”

“Just enough time for Mom to hate him. What’s your point?”

“That would be the point. Then you can lie—oh wait, I’m talking to Miss Truth. You’ll have to learn to lie, but it’s for a good cause.”

“You can’t lie to Mom...” Not for the first time, Jen was acutely aware of the differences between herself and her sister.

“Trust me, it can be done, but it’s a learned skill. And it’s worth it: if Mom hates who you’re dating, she won’t want to see him again. You can just pretend you’re happily dating the invisible man and threaten to bring him to family functions every once in a while.”

It made a dangerous kind of sense. “That sounds like something you would do.”

“Well, you did ask me for an idea. For what it’s worth, I think it’s brilliant.”

“But Cin, how can I be sure that Mom will hate a guy I bring home? You know how unpredictable she is.”

“As unpredictable as a trout rising to a fly,” Cin said wryly. “All you need to find is an uptight, handsome, conservative guy. Someone who comes from money and is hot to make a bunch of it for himself, no matter what he has to do to earn it. Mr. Success At Any Cost. Boston is full of them. It should be easy.”

Jen leaned against the wall of the waitress station, considering this. “You mean the kind of guy another mother would adore.”

“The very same. You know those ambitious types make her crazy, and corporate America is one of her hot buttons. Maybe you could find a lawyer—that would really send her to the moon.”

“I don’t know...”

“You did it once, little sister. You can do it again.”

Jen winced. “But wouldn’t I be using him?”

Cin laughed. “And this kind of a guy wouldn’t be using you? It’s pretty easily resolved, Jen: just don’t put out and in three dates—max—he’ll be forgetting to call you.”

“But I don’t know any guys like that.”

And Jen didn’t want to.

On the other hand, there was the prospect of a date with the guy at the natural food store.

Maybe she just needed the right motivation.

“Come on, Jen, you must have guys ask you out all the time: I mean, you work in a bar and you’re cute. Look at it this way: there’s no chance of you getting hurt, is there? I mean, you’re not going to make an emotional investment with a guy like that, are you?”

“No. Still it seems kind of mean.”

“You got a better idea?” Cin lowered her voice. “You should know that there’s a new guy working at the Greenpeace office. I’ll bet Mom knows him and, you know, he’s got to be just about your age.”

“And?” Jen clutched the phone.

“Be afraid, Jen. Be very afraid.” Another phone rang and Cin cursed under her breath. “Gotta go, sis. Just think about it.”

Jen hung up the phone, seeing the potential of Cin’s idea but filled with doubts all the same. After all, she’d missed out on the devil-may-care gene that both her mother and sister seemed to possess.

What was she going to do? Proposition some guy in this place? She’d probably lose her job.

Behind her, Lucy sighed. “No rest for the wicked, that’s for sure. Look, of course, they’re going to

sit in my section.”

Jen glanced up and saw the four guys heading for a front table. They were carousing together, laughing and joking, and three of them were in suits. They were all tall and buff, handsome and privileged, roughly Jen’s contemporaries.

“This town is full of them,” Lucy muttered as she grabbed cutlery out of the bin. “God’s own gifts certain the rest of us were born to serve them. As if I didn’t have eight tables of them last night, demanding this and that pronto.” She sighed again and gave Jen a look. “Just another day in paradise. You gotta be glad that you always get the back section: these flashy boys prefer it up by the window. They can check out the women.”

Which was really all Jen needed to know. “I’ll trade sections with you, if you like,” she suggested as if she didn’t really care where she worked. “I’d kind of like a change of scene.”

Actually, she felt like she was channeling her sister. Cin’s scheme wasn’t the kind of thing that Jen typically did but here she was, doing it.

“They’re cheap bastards, all of them,” Lucy confided. The four guys were already looking over and one was snapping his fingers. “No tips to speak of. You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll give it a try.” Jen took the menus from Lucy as the pushy one hooted for attention.

“Hey, how about we pool tips today and split them?” Lucy asked kindly. “I don’t want you to get ripped off for giving me a break.”

“Thanks. That’d be great.” Jen turned and marched for the table, hoping that just putting things in motion would be enough.

One of the suits winked at her. Maybe Cin’s plan would work out, after all.

The big problem, Jen realized en route to her new section, was that Jen didn’t possess her sister’s easy charm. Cin’s plan seemed to suddenly have serious flaws.

Well, one flaw, really.

It had to be executed by Jen.

\* \* \*

One thing Zach Coxwell could count on was his buddies. They showed up for lunch, dead on time.

There had been a time when the four of them had cut class to sit here, drink beer and watch women. It hadn’t been that long ago, at least not to Zach’s thinking, but his buddies had been transformed. Instead of students in jeans with haircuts made to last a few weeks too long, they wore Italian suits and shoes with leather soles. Their ties were silk and perfectly knotted: Trevor even wore a white shirt with French cuffs.

Zach, in his old uniform of polo shirt and jeans, felt underdressed. He slung his battered leather jacket over the back of a chair and knew he looked like an unemployed bum in comparison to his pals.

Which in a way, he supposed he was. And his pals were lawyers, because they hadn’t dropped out of law school, and they dressed for success.

But what did clothes matter? The fact that they had showed up in their old haunt reassured him.

He needed evidence that some things didn’t change. Zach had been killing himself for much of the last year, doing drudge work for no thanks and little benefit. Lunch with his old buddies had seemed like the perfect tonic. It might even motivate him to go back to law school, when he saw how much they enjoyed practicing.

Lunch had taken longer to set up than he’d expected, but hey, they all had day jobs now. As Scott had noted on the phone, needing to be somewhere sixty or eighty hours a week cuts into a guy’s leisure time.

The four shook hands after they scored a table by the windows. Zach noted with satisfaction that i

was their regular one, the one with the great view of the intersection on Mass. with the stiff cross wind. Skirts got flipped skyward there all the time. Zach settled in with anticipation.

“Scoring the best view?” Scott teased.

“Might as well.” Zach grinned. “It’s up to Jason and me now that you and Trevor are married.”

“A guy can still look,” Scott protested.

Jason nudged him aside. “Gimme the view, man. I know Anna’s work number if you get out of line.”

“Hey!” Trevor shouted in the general direction of the waitresses before he’d even sat down. He snapped his fingers imperiously. “Let’s get some service here.”

Scott tapped his watch, a fancy steel piece of work that must have set him back a pay check or two. “Good point. One hour for lunch and I’ve blown fifteen just finding a parking spot.”

“You could have walked,” Zach suggested, then was surprised when the other three laughed in unison. He was used to people laughing at his jokes, but that hadn’t been one. “It’s not that far,” he began but got no further before they laughed again.

“As if.” Trevor rolled his eyes and spoke as if explaining something simple to a slow child. “The whole point of driving a flash car, Zach, is to be seen in it.”

“Maybe it’s different if you don’t have to make the payments,” Scott said and the three grinned again.

Zach didn’t.

A tall waitress showed up beside the table then, with a fistful of menus. She was dark-haired and cute, if a bit serious. “Hi, welcome to Mulligan’s,” she said. “I’m...”

“You’re gorgeous,” Jason said, winking at her so boldly that Zach was embarrassed. The waitress looked at Jason as if he was a primitive life form come to torment her.

Jason grinned at her, apparently oblivious to her response.

“Look, we’re in a hurry,” Trevor said crisply. “I’ll have a San Pellegrino with a slice of lime. Do you have fifteen-minute-or-free lunch specials?”

“Yes, they’re right here on the back of the menu...”

“Is one a sandwich?”

“Yes, there’s a chicken club sandwich...”

“Great, fine, I’ll have that but leave off the bacon and mayonnaise and put it on whole grain bread. Salad instead of fries, vinaigrette dressing on the side.” Trevor checked his watch. “Twelve-sixteen. I’m counting.”

“Same for me,” Scott said, shoving the menu back across the table.

“Hey, we can spare a minute to hear her name,” Jason said smoothly.

“Missed your chance,” the waitress said, unimpressed by Jason’s suave charm. Zach stifled a smile. “What will you have? Time’s a-wasting, or so I’ve been told.”

Zach laughed, although this time he laughed alone. The waitress met his gaze, a wary twinkle in the depths of her dark eyes.

Jason sensed competition and moved closer to the waitress. “Hey, don’t cut him any slack. He’s been in jail this year.”

“Great. A felon in my section,” she said, then pointed her pen at Zach. “You pay cash.”

The other three thought this was funny. Zach didn’t smile and neither did the waitress, though she was watching him.

“I’ll have the club, too,” Jason said, trying again to draw her eye. “But I’ll have the bacon on mine.”

The waitress scribbled then glanced up at Zach.

“What beers do you have on tap?”

She listed about fifteen while Trevor drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Zach picked one from a local microbrewery, flipped over the menu and chose the burger with a salad.

“Thanks a lot, Zach,” Trevor said. “Twelve-nineteen and the order hasn’t gone anywhere.”

The waitress gave him a look that spoke volumes.

“I’m not in a rush,” Zach said to her. “So, don’t worry about bringing everything at the same time if it will hold them up.” She nodded. He smiled but she was already hurrying away.

“A pint of beer at lunch on a weekday!” Scott nudged Zach. “How long has it been, guys?”

“And in no rush.” Trevor whistled through his teeth. “There’s the life of leisure for you.”

“Why couldn’t my daddy have left me a trust fund?” Jason asked the universe in general and the three laughed together.

Zach straightened, not finding the reference very funny. It hadn’t quite been a year since his father had committed suicide and it would be a long time, he suspected, before he could take a reference to that man in stride. “Actually, I don’t have a trust fund..”

“Do the details really matter, Zach?” Scott interrupted him. “You were born on Easy Street and we have to bust our asses to get there. It’s that simple.”

Zach didn’t know what to say, which was something for the guy known in his own family to have an answer for everything. He felt a definite thread of hostility where there had never been one before and began to wonder whether he really could count on his buddies forever.

Or for much of anything.

“I’d forgotten how slow this place was,” Jason grouched. He grinned and shook his head. “Though it’s not like we had anywhere to go when we hung out here.”

“What a grubby joint,” Trevor agreed, brushing some crumbs from his seat. “I’d forgotten.”

“Me, too,” Scott agreed. “Who picked this place anyhow?”

“Me,” Zach admitted. “I thought it’d be like old times.”

Scott laughed. “It is that. Gives us a chance to see how far we’ve come, if nothing else.” He perched on the edge of his seat in his navy pinstripe suit and kept glancing down at the upholstery. “Anna will kill me if I send another suit to the dry cleaners this month.”

“Spending more than your wife on dry cleaning?” Jason teased. “That’s a feat.”

“I don’t like how she irons my shirts, so I’m already going there to take my shirts in.” Scott was a bit defensive and Jason went for blood.

“What, you got married and didn’t get a domestic slave out of the bargain?”

“Don’t let Anna hear you say that!” Scott said, then shrugged. “Besides, she says 100% cotton is too much trouble and I don’t like to wear synthetics.”

Trevor laughed. “Maxine won’t even try to iron mine. She showed me the ironing board when I asked her about it, and they’ve been going to the cleaners ever since.”

Jason eyed the pair of them. “Where do you take yours? I’ve yet to find a cleaner who gets it right. It’s the attention to detail that really makes it work...”

“So, wait, who does yours?” Scott asked. “Your mommy?” Trevor started to laugh.

“No.” Jason stared between them both, as if daring them to mock him. “I do my own.”

“Let me see the cuffs,” Trevor demanded. Jason slipped one arm out of his suit jacket and let the other two check out his workmanship.

Zach sat back and stared. The guys he’d hung out with would never have been so interested in which dress shirts, let alone how well they were pressed. Obviously, they’d been surreptitiously replaced by aliens and all he had to do to save his buddies was to find the pods.

He glanced under the table. No luck.

Trevor whistled in admiration as he examined Jason’s cuffs. “So, what do you charge? I’ll send you mine.”

“Dream on,” Jason said. “You can’t afford me.”

“What do you mean?” Trevor asked.

“You can dress up corporate practice at a bank, but you can’t take it to dinner.” Jason punctuated his comment with a sneer at Trevor’s cufflinks. They were costume jewelry, Zach had noticed that right away, but funky enough to be forgiven.

Trevor straightened his jacket cuffs so that his cufflinks were partly hidden, defensive in his turn. “We can’t all defend criminals with deep pockets.”

Jason wagged a finger at his friend. “Innocent until proven guilty. Let’s all remember the basics.”

“Where is that waitress?” Scott said, looking across the restaurant. “I don’t have all day to hang around this hole.”

The waitress brought the drinks then and Zach was glad to have a beer. If he drank it fast enough it might dull his sense of alienation. What ever happened to job satisfaction? His buddies seemed to be worried about stuff that didn’t matter.

“So, trust-fund-boy, got a wild adventure to share with us this month?” Trevor asked. The waitress glanced up from putting a dish of lime slices on the table.

“Yeah, something involving gorgeous models, naked except for their designer logos,” Scott teased.

“Fast cars,” Trevor added.

“Private jets!” Jason contributed.

“Bathtubs filled with caviar and champagne on the side,” Scott said wistfully, then shook his head. “Shit, I wanna be Zach Coxwell when I grow up.”

They laughed again and toasted him with their sparkling water.

The truth was somewhat more mundane: Zach had spent the past eight months executing his father’s estate, which had involved enduring a lot of appointments with dry-as-dust officials, copying documents, tallying inventories and visiting notaries. His father’s assets had been distributed in a thousand little stashes and it had seemed that every time he expected to be done soon, he’d found another. His mother had been little help, determined as she was to put her married past behind her, and his brothers had pretty much been ignoring him since his adventure in that New Orleans jail the previous winter.

Which he might have been willing to admit had been a major case of bad judgment, but no one in his family was giving him a chance to admit to anything.

Being the black sheep was proving to be lonely business.

“Maybe you could introduce me to your sister,” Trevor suggested. “Get me on the gravy train, too.”

“Afford some real cufflinks,” Scott muttered, but Trevor ignored him.

“You’re married!” Jason protested to Trevor.

“So’s my sister,” said Zach and the guys laughed. He wasn’t used to people laughing at things he said, not when he wasn’t trying to be funny. He inhaled some beer, hoping it would make him feel better.

The waitress shook her head minutely and left.

“Twelve-twenty-four,” Trevor called after her.

“And you still haven’t given me your number,” Jason added.

Zach began to wish he was sitting at another table. This plan to cheer himself up and find a plan for the rest of his life really wasn’t going well.

Jen had never been so glad to be getting rid of anyone as the guys at table twelve. What a bunch of jerks. At least she'd avoided the temptation to dump that side of vinaigrette down the front of the first loser's fancy suit. Her first impression had been the right one: she couldn't have asked one of them out, much less put up with one of them at Thanksgiving dinner for three or four hours.

She'd have to find another solution.

Maybe she'd knit herself a date. He'd be quiet, that's for sure.

They could be a close knit couple, ha ha.

The casually-dressed hunk seemed to be the most normal of them all, but the fact that he even hung out with them told her that they were four of a kind.

After all, they called him 'trust fund boy', which meant that he had money, lots of it. He'd eaten a burger and wore a leather jacket, which put him in the carnivore, planet-trasher, methane-dispenser category of men, no endorsement in Jen's view.

His pals said he'd been in jail, but she gave that less credit. Handsome rich guys never got busted, at least not for long. It had probably been a joke these three had played on him that had gotten him arrested.

With friends like that, a person didn't need enemies.

But then, they probably deserved each other.

Maybe she'd leave the country for Thanksgiving. Maybe she should date the earnest guy at the natural food store, strap on her Birkies and walk to Chile. She'd never waited tables in South America after all.

Jen brought separate checks to the table without even asking, because she guessed they'd be expensing lunch individually: splitting the tab from the outset on the computer would save her grief later. Also, Lucy had called it right, these types were always cheap: splitting the check meant that she might actually get some tip out of it.

As opposed to none.

Or as opposed to the very worst case, that of the cash left on the table being short of the total bill. That would mean that she'd get to pay up for them after they were gone. She watched the change and bills hit the table as the three suits bailed and tried to not conclude that their departure was too quick to be a good thing. She waited until they were away from the table, though, sick of the fair-haired guy without a wedding ring hitting on her.

She'd cover the difference to not have to take more of that.

The fourth guy, the comparatively normal one, was left alone to finish his beer. Jen moved quickly to count the cash left on the table while there was a chance of someone ponying up any outstanding difference.

"Catch you later, Zach!" shouted the one who had harassed her about the time.

"Twelve-fifty-one," Jen muttered as that jerk ducked out the door. With luck, he was gone for good. Zach laughed. "That's funny."

Jen looked at him with surprise. "I didn't think you'd hear me."

"It's okay, I won't tell." His eyes danced with mischief but Jen wasn't interested in making friends.

Maybe she did need a date but for a different reason than satisfying her mother: just being in the presence of a good-looking guy was making her heart beat faster. She could feel it thumping under her knitted prosthesis. It was the peach angora one with the Chinese good luck charm embedded in the stuffing, the first one she had knit.

Maybe this would be her lucky day.

Maybe she should count the money. To her relief, there was enough cash to cover and a ten per cent tip. Not a fortune, but she'd take it. She glanced up to find the last guy watching her. She knew that look. Her mother would have said that the universe was setting her up to make her move.

He was a carnivore. He came from money. He had the same smooth charm as Steve and the same expectation that the world was his oyster. He was a perfect candidate for the Plan.

Too bad her tongue had rolled itself into a knot.

He smiled ruefully. "Guess I was under-dressed for the occasion."

"It was lunch in a pub." Jen glanced over him. He was tall and sufficiently handsome that she didn't think it would much matter what he wore. Anywhere. He'd always look good. Maybe her age, maybe a couple of years older, he still looked like a university student. Maybe he still was, if his daddy was paying. Jen felt a tiny pang of jealousy, knowing she could have happily been an eternal student if the tuition bills hadn't gotten so scary. "I think you look okay."

He grinned at that and leaned closer, the sudden intensity of his attention making Jen want to bolt and run. "Thanks. We met in law school and haven't seen each other in a while."

Jen's ears perked up. A lawyer. Plus her mother hated anyone with a trust fund, as she believed such individuals to be incapable of work and unable to understand the realities of life.

Come to think of it, Jen had some issues with that—and the conspicuous consumption it implied—herself.

Never mind the Plan. She heard the ding of the bell in the kitchen, knew the meals for table eight were ready and chickened out. She pointed to the last bill on the table. "If you give me a credit card, I'll put that through."

"I thought I was supposed to pay cash."

"That was a joke."

"Then why didn't you smile?"

"Not my style."

"So I see." He pushed the bill back across the table toward her. "I'm not leaving yet. I'd like another beer, please."

Jen glanced toward the door where there was a small line of people waiting for tables. "Well, then could you move to the bar, please? I'll transfer your balance."

His smile faded. "Do you serve at the bar?"

"No. Murray, the bartender, serves all patrons at the bar."

He lounged back in his chair and gave her a wicked smile. "Then I'll stay here."

Jen's heart skipped a beat. "Why?"

"I like you." He squinted at the bill, where she'd written her usual thanks with her name. "Jen."

Jen glanced to the line again and back to him. He followed her gaze, but didn't budge. "Maybe you've noticed that there's a line of people who'd like to have lunch," she said, as politely as she could.

"So I see. I think I'll have a pint of the same, please."

Jen straightened. "But this is a table for four."

"So it is. And I'm sitting at it for the moment."

If he thought his confidence would persuade her to his view, he was wrong. Jen had been raised on a steady diet of Natalie's insistence upon social justice and his sense of entitlement annoyed her as nothing else could have done.

Who did this guy think he was?

Maybe she'd inherited her mother's perspective on rich jerks. Either way, she'd had enough of the guys at table twelve.

Jen braced her hands on the table. "Maybe you misunderstood me. This is a table for four people."

Four. No matter how you count it, you are one person. It is just before one o'clock on a Thursday, a very busy period for us which will last through two."

"So? I'll pay for the beer."

"Your friends said you have a trust fund, so let me explain a little bit of waitressing reality to you..."

"Hey, you were listening!"

"This is how I make my living and incidentally it's not a really great way to make a living. Because every buck counts, I need a full section for every meal. I need to turn tables as quickly as possible and fill them as full as possible or answer to Murray."

Zach followed her gaze to the bar. "He looks like a barrel of laughs."

"Here's your chance to find out. You want to hang out alone and drink, I'd prefer you did it at the bar. Please."

He gave her a charming smile which did nothing to aid his cause. "The tip will make it worth your while."

Jen bristled. She knew better than to believe anything a guy like this said. "As if," she retorted. "'Don't bet on the Bruins'. I get that one all the time. Or pennies in the bottom of the water glass. Ha ha. You guys are all such jokers. I'll move your tab and Murray will pull your beer at the bar." She pivoted and waved to Lucy, who was seating new arrivals. "I've got a table for four here, Lucy."

"Hey, but Jen..." He stood up, displeased with the situation and made a last appeal.

Jen had to look up, way up, but she wasn't intimidated. She was mad and the fact that he expected to charm her into giving him what he wanted only made her madder. "Move it. Now. The bar or the door. Your choice."

She supposed she shouldn't have been so surprised that he did move. Her mom always said she could be fierce.

She was surprised that he went to the bar, because she'd been sure he'd walk right out the door with her \$14.45 plus tip.

But that couldn't mean he was any different than his pals.

Just more stubborn.

It was too bad that she could relate to that.

\* \* \*

Okay, Zach's plan was showing serious weaknesses. He'd never had the sense before that he'd been left behind after the train had left the station, but that feeling had been unavoidable today.

His buddies had careers, wives, mortgages, car payments—or some combination thereof—and wads of suits. He'd known all of that, but this lunch had really made the differences clear. They had purpose—or at least obligations—and clearly weren't enjoying it. He hated how they'd been bickering about nothing and had no ambition to become like them. Why was it suddenly a bad thing to have come from money? Wealth sure hadn't made his life any easier, as far as he could see.

Zach had even—apparently—lost his ability to charm women somewhere along the line. Any idea of saving the day by chatting up the waitress was bombing out. He settled in at the bar with no clear plan, other than not doing what Jen expected him to do.

On principle. She thought he'd leave and he was going to prove her wrong. It was a start.

"You the guy with the pint?" the burly bartender—Murray—asked. He was in the middle of pulling a beer that looked less good to Zach than it might have.

"Yeah, that's me. I haven't paid for my lunch yet either."

"Right. Want it all together?"

“Sure.”

An older waitress came to the bar and plunked down her tray, sparing Zach the barest glance. “Two pints of Stonecroft and another gin and tonic.”

“You could crack a smile, Lucy,” Murray said. “Wouldn’t kill you and you might get better tips.”

Lucy snorted. “You could do us both a favor and put more beer in those glasses than foam. And do more than introduce the gin to the tonic this time—put some of it in there. The guy at twenty-two complained that the first one was too weak.”

Murray snorted this time, but he put a good hit of gin in the glass. “Undo a button, Lucy, and you won’t have to complain about your tips.”

“Huh. I didn’t think this was *that* kind of a bar.” Lucy swung her tray to her shoulder, winked at Zach and sailed off to her section.

Jen came to the bar then and ignored Zach thoroughly. She was still annoyed with him, he could see that, and although he knew better than to push his luck, he’d do it anyway.

It wasn’t as if he had much to lose.

“So, Jen, do you know why California has the most lawyers while New Jersey has the most toxic waste dumps?”

She spared him a glance and he sipped his beer. She sighed with forbearance as she waited for her drinks. “No, why?”

“Because New Jersey got to choose.”

Murray snickered. “Hey, that’s not bad.”

Jen, though, gave Zach a hard look. “Maybe one of you could explain to me why poisoning the planet is funny.”

Both men sobered. Zach sipped his beer. Murray put a martini and a 7-Up on the counter, which Jen claimed then sailed away.

“I’d count that as a strike,” Murray muttered. “Unless you’re trying to score points with me.”

“Sorry. You’re not my type.”

“Fair enough. You’re not mine.” Murray grinned. “So, know any other jokes?”

“All lawyer jokes. I kind of collect them.”

“Suits me. Lemme have ’em.”

“What’s black and brown and looks good on a lawyer?”

Murray scoffed. “A Doberman. Everybody knows that one.”

“Okay.” Zach settled his elbows on the bar, rising to the challenge. “What’s the difference between a vulture and a lawyer?”

Murray shrugged.

“The vulture doesn’t get frequent flyer miles.” Murray laughed, as if surprised, and Zach slipped into his usual rhythm. “What do you call two dozen skydiving lawyers?”

“I dunno.”

“Skeet.”

Murray snorted as he laughed, then wagged a finger at Zach. “I gotta remember that one. Come on, gimme another, kid.”

At least *someone* thought Zach was funny. “What’s the difference between a female lawyer and a pit bull?”

Murray pulled a beer for Lucy as he shook his head. “Dunno.”

“Lipstick.” The pair laughed, but Zach was on a roll. “Did you hear the one about the terrorist who hijacked a 747 full of lawyers?”

“No,” Lucy and Murray replied in unison.

“He threatened to release one every hour until his demands were met.”

Lucy and Murray laughed.

“He’s not bad,” Lucy said, then nodded at Murray. “Funnier than you.”

“Thanks a lot. Faster than you, too,” Murray retorted and Lucy hurried away. “Know any more?”

“What’s the difference between an accident and a calamity?”

“I dunno.” Murray braced a hand on the bar, his eyes sparkling as he waited for the punch line.

Lucy glanced over her shoulder as she headed back to her tables.

“It’s an accident when a bus full of lawyers goes off the road into a lake. It’s a calamity if they can’t swim.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Jen muttered, making an abrupt appearance in Zach’s peripheral vision.

“Murray, where’re my margaritas?”

“Coming, coming.”

“No crushed ice,” Jen added.

“Have you got something against lawyers?” Zach asked.

Jen shrugged. “No more than most people.”

“Phew!” Zach made a show of wiping his brow. “But then maybe I’ve got a loophole.”

“A loophole for what?” Jen faced him, a hand on her hip.

“For asking you out. You might go to a movie with me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m asking. And we’d have fun.”

She hesitated for a heartbeat, a hesitation that encouraged Zach, before she rolled her eyes. “Come on, Murray,” she said then. “Tick tock.”

Murray had a heavy hand on top of the blender, which was whipping the drinks. “The two women again? What’s this, their third?”

“Yowzer,” Zach said. “You put real tequila in those or just introduce the bottle to the glasses?”

“Very funny,” Murray grumbled good-naturedly. “Don’t push your luck, kid.”

“Those two are on a lunch of no return, that’s for sure,” Jen said.

Zach grinned. “I like that. A lunch of no-return.”

She gave him another of those hard looks. “A luxury for those with money and time to burn.” The tray with the margaritas was hefted to her shoulder and she was gone.

Murray and Zach watched her go, then the older man leaned closer. “Has it occurred to you, kid, that you’re not doing real well here?”

“Yeah. I noticed. You seem to be enjoying it.”

“Both the jokes and their reception.”

“Shouldn’t you be on my side? You know, support your own gender and all that?”

Murray snorted. “I’m on Jen’s side and don’t you forget it.”

Zach chose not to take offense at that. “So, you know the difference between a lawyer and a bulldog?”

“Nope.”

“A bulldog generally has the sense to let go.” Zach realized a bit too late that that analogy could have been applied to him in this particular situation, but he charged on. “How do you prevent a lawyer from drowning?”

“Tell me,” Murray said with a smile. “In this biz, I might need to know.”

“Shoot him before he hits the water.” Zach paused only a beat for the bartender’s laughter. “What do you call ten thousand lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?”

“A good start,” Jen interjected.

Zach jumped. He hadn’t seen her coming. “Hey, the punch lines are mine.”

“Then you need better jokes,” she retorted. “What do you call an honest lawyer?”

Zach searched his memory but didn't know that one. "I don't know."

"Me neither," Murray admitted.

"An impossibility."

Murray laughed. "I like that."

Jen leaned a hand on the bar while she waited for her drinks. "So, the devil visits a lawyer and offers him a deal. He says he can make the lawyer rich enough to afford everything he could ever want, give him three months of vacation every year, ensure he lives to be a hundred. In return, the devil wants the immortal souls of the lawyer's wife, his children and any grandchildren, to burn in hell for eternity. So, the lawyer thinks about this for a minute, then asks 'what's the catch?'"

Murray laughed so hard that he had to wipe away a tear. Even Zach found himself chuckling, but Jen, he noticed, never cracked a smile. She rapped a nail on the counter. "Murray, get it together and pull me those two beers, please."

"Yeah, yeah, coming, Jen, coming."

Zach sipped his own beer, then leaned forward himself. "So, a guy goes into a brain store..."

"A brain store?" Jen interrupted, her manner skeptical.

"Yes. A brain store."

"And where would be the closest brain store?"

"Just go with it," Zach said with some irritation.

"A brain store," Jen muttered and shook her head.

"This guy goes into this brain store to get some brain..."

"Of course," Jen said deadpan. "It's on my to-do list all the time."

Murray snickered. "Let him tell it."

Zach raised his voice slightly. "This guy goes into a brain store to get some brain and is confused by the prices, which are listed by occupation. 'How much is engineer brain?' he asks."

"These are human brains?" Jen demanded. "This would be a *human* brain store that he's shopping at?"

"Just go with it," Zach repeated.

"What's he going to do with what he buys?"

"I don't know. It's just a joke!"

Jen snapped her fingers. "You know, come to think of it, there's one of those places opening down the street from my mom's house. It's part of a national chain, a franchise of *human brain* stores."

Murray, apparently, couldn't stop laughing.

Zach didn't appreciate how Jen was mucking up his joke. Or stealing his thunder. He was the one who was supposed to make people laugh.

She wasn't even smiling.

He decided to ignore her. "'How much is engineer brain?' the guy asks and the guy in the store says it's three bucks an ounce. 'How much is mathematician brain?' he asks and the guy says it's four bucks an ounce. 'How much is lawyer brain?' he asks and the guy says it's a thousand bucks an ounce."

Murray whistled under his breath.

"Obviously a rare commodity," Jen murmured.

Zach gave her his best death glare for wrecking the punch line. "The guy in the store says it's a thousand bucks an ounce for lawyer brain. And the guy who came into the store is surprised. 'But why does it cost so much?' he asks and the guy in the store..."

"This would be the *human brain* store."

"... says 'do you know how many lawyers we had to kill to get an ounce of brain?'"

Murray nearly fell down laughing.

Jen gave Zach a pitying look. “Maybe there *should* be a national franchise of human brain stores.” She hefted her tray and was gone again.

“Ouch,” Murray said as he wiped away a tear.

Zach took another sip of beer and watched Jen serve her tables. She was polite, even charming, but she didn’t smile. Which was weird, when he thought about it. Waitresses always smiled. As Murray had said, it made for better tips. He was pretty sure Jen would have an attractive smile—she was pretty enough even when she didn’t smile. “Does she ever smile?”

“Not since...” Murray fumbled with his glassware. “Well, not any more.”

“Not since what?”

“Hey, the story’s not mine to tell.” Murray held up his hands. “I just pour the beer and sign the checks around here.”

“That’ll be the day,” Lucy said, slapping her tray on the bar again. She thunked a glass of water on the counter, shoving it toward Murray. There were pennies in the bottom of the glass. “Drain that and fish out my tip, will you? These kids are all soooooo funny.”

Having left a tip the same way once upon a time himself—and having thought it was hilarious—Zach busied himself with the rest of his beer. Come to think of it, it had been the beer that had made seem funny.

“Three diet Cokes. I punched it in a thousand years ago.”

“Coming, coming, coming.”

Zach pretended to watch the soccer game on the television over the bar while Murray and Lucy bickered amiably. He was surreptitiously watching Jen, intrigued and mystified by her.

He liked that she was quick with a comeback. It was more than her being cute: she was smart. (An okay, the brain store joke *was* based on a lame premise.) She had a bit of attitude, especially toward guys—no, especially toward guys with money. Trevor’s crack about Zach’s trust fund had really gotten her attention.

Maybe that was why she was needling him.

Even given her attitude, Zach was pretty sure he could make her smile. He’d cracked up Murray, hadn’t he?

Zach was looking for a challenge, and Jen the waitress might just be that.

\* \* \*

Lawyer jokes. Honest to God, how long had it been since she’d heard someone tell so many lawyer jokes? Jen rolled her eyes as she turned back to the bar and saw Trust Fund Boy still parked there, working on that pint. He was watching her and pretending not to, something that made her pulse leap a little bit.

But she knew better.

It ought to be illegal for a guy to be so handsome, that was for sure. And rich, too. Jen reminded herself that it was unlikely his daddy had made his fortune by saving rain forest.

The thing was that her mother would hate him. It was a gimme.

The problem was that Jen might not. She’d learned plenty from Steve about men who were used to getting what they wanted, even more about them knowing how to turn on the charm to, well, get what they wanted. She’d also learned from Steve how little emotional investment these kinds of men made even when they insisted otherwise.

How else would it have been so easy for Steve to toss her back once he’d discovered that she was defective merchandise? He’d obviously never given a damn about her personally, roses and pretty pledges to the contrary. She’d been a prize, though she wasn’t sure why. She just knew that her status

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